

**THE BLOG****Once in a Lifetime**

By Marty Kaplan

12/30/2008 09:25 am ET | Updated May 25, 2011

I don't know about you, but I've had it up to here with once-in-a-lifetime events.

Katrina was once in a lifetime. The 2004 tsunami was once in a lifetime. This past year's wildfires were the worst blazes in living memory. Every other month seems to bring an epic rain or snow that is said to be the storm of the century. And don't get me started on the polar ice cap.

George W. Bush, the worst president in American history, will turn out to be, God willing, once in a lifetime, as will the officially sanctioned use of torture by American interrogators, the subjugation of the Justice Department by a bunch of right-wing twenty-something hacks, and the grotesque intervention of Congress into the Terry Schaivo case. If Dick Cheney isn't once in a lifetime, there is reason to doubt the existence of divine mercy.

The depth of the unfolding recession, for those who did not experience the Great Depression, is now forecast to be once in a lifetime. Bernie Madoff's breathtaking Ponzi scheme is - one can only hope - once in a lifetime. The demise of Lehman Brothers, founded in 1850, is once in a lifetime, as will be the extinction of Levitz, the 97-year-old furniture chain, and (as is plausible) of Dodge (b. 1914) and Kmart (b. 1962).

Until this recession, India and China were poised to overtake the U.S. economy, which would surely constitute a once-in-a-lifetime development, like the fall of communism, tobacco, butter, girdles and Esperanto.

The impending deaths of the print newspaper, the network evening news and the television networks themselves - like the prior deaths of the buggy, vaudeville and silent movies - are bound to be experienced as once in a lifetime. The demises of slide rules, typewriters, Polaroid instant cameras and VHS tapes each marked the end of an era. TV Guide is going the route of Colliers, The Saturday Evening Post, Look and Life; when either Time or Newsweek folds, its surviving competitor will doubtless send it off with a once-in-a-lifetime obit.

September 11th was once in a lifetime, unless you lived through Pearl Harbor. It is wishful thinking to imagine that the malicious explosion of a nuclear device is not in the world's foreseeable future, and if, kinahora, that happens, it will surely be labeled - optimistically - once in a lifetime.

On the upside, the election of a black American president is totally without precedent, and it is not inconceivable that a woman will eventually follow him to the White House, though if it's Sarah Palin, she stands a decent chance of wresting worst-ever laurels from Bush.

My discomfort at being crowded by this surfeit of once-in-a-lifetime happenings is partly about hype, and mostly about mental hygiene.

The mainstream news media have no vested interest in proportionality. With so many things competing for our attention, the only way for media-owning corporations to capture our eyeballs is to inflate everything to Armageddon dimensions. Every lurid local crime becomes a national melodrama; every flare-up on the planet is depicted as a precursor to World War III; every scandal is Watergate, or something else-gate. We are inundated with the Ten Worst This, and Ten Best That, while long-simmering atrocities truly deserving of notice, like Darfur or the tuberculosis pandemic, barely make it onto the radar screen.

No wonder the world has the jitters. We are daily assaulted by so much hyperbole that it is nearly impossible to know what is important any more. It is undeniable that we live in a time of big change, but if we did not also live in a time of big media, I am not convinced that we would experience our lives as a relentless onslaught of cliffhangers, crises and catastrophes.

To every thing, Ecclesiastes tells us, there is a season, but you wouldn't know it from the media, which know only one season, which is BREAKING NEWS. Real life has natural rhythms; it plays out on many stages, from the personal and private to the public and historical. But the culture of THIS JUST IN homogenizes those differences. Its imperative is to monetize our attention, and the easiest way to do that is to see as much as possible through once-in-a-lifetime lenses.

I don't mean to diminish the pain of the economic meltdown, or the significance of climate change, or the symbolic breakthrough of the Obama inauguration, or the dizzying transformations being wrought by technology. But it does no good for us as citizens if everything is as screamingly urgent as everything else, and it does no good for us as people if our nervous systems are constantly being bombarded by superlatives. How can our leaders set priorities, how will we ever agree on trade-offs, if public discourse only consists of capital letters? How can we linger in the intimacies and mysteries of existence, how will we truly know what's worth caring about, if shock and rupture is the only language our culture knows how to speak?

*This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you'd like.*

**Follow Marty Kaplan on Twitter: [www.twitter.com/martykaplan](http://www.twitter.com/martykaplan)**



**Marty Kaplan** 

USC Annenberg professor and Norman Lear Center director