

# Major Events of This Millennium

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By

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I heard it again on the radio today, "Only 637 days left until the year 2000. The next millennium will bring us - blah - blah - blah . . . "

Well, I'm sorry, but the next millennium doesn't begin until January 1, 2001. I was taught a long time ago that if you take care of today then tomorrow will take care of itself. Eugene Gough, the big rabbit of Hoptown High, drilled into me, many years ago, that we must learn from the past.

When I was a student in school, I was better in Science than I was in English. That means I could tell you how many legs a centipede had, but I couldn't spell it.

I also had a love of and was better at History than Math. That means I knew what the War of 1812 was, but I didn't know what year it was fought. I do know we were once involved in a conflict called the French and Indian War. It was one of those confusing wars as to just who the participants were. (Such as the War of the Roses -- a war actually fought between the Petunias and the Geraniums). The French and Indian War basically pitted the Colonists, the British, and the Washington Redskins against the French and the Cleveland Indians. We won, in spite of being on the same side as soldiers who wore kilts with heaven only knows what beneath them. With her defeat, probably from too much Cajun cooking, France gave the Louisiana Territory to Spain, who eventually gave it back

to Napoleon, a well known three flavored ice cream.

In 1803, our new government was 16 years old and being a typical teenager was prone to violent mood swings, extreme growth spurts, and not being able to keep a dollar in its pocket. President Jefferson, with a theme song of "*Movin' on up . . . . to the East Side*", wanted to buy the Louisiana Territory, which at that time consisted mostly of trees, swamps, cayenne pepper, and Huey Long. James Monroe, fresh from inventing the shock absorber, bartered with France and got the land for 15 million dollars. (The President then organized an expedition and appointed Harry Sears and Bill Roebuck to lead it. However, they quit just west of St. Louis to build a general store so history only records the exploits of their understudies, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark). Because this purchase included parts of Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas, historians would later refer to this period of the rapid growth of the United States as the *Manifest Dustiny*.

As you can see, I get much more enjoyment out of history than I do from speculating about what the next millennium will bring us, even if its beginnings are going to be celebrated a year early. With this in mind I hope you will indulge me while I attempt to select the most significant events or discoveries of the current millennium as it winds to a close.

I certainly don't want to be presumptuous and am not attempting to insult you by offering a lesson in History, but I hope to challenge you by asking that you compare these and other events to see which you think may have had the greatest impact on mankind.

My choices are in no particular order, and are based on how many people the event may have affected, how daily life was changed after its occurrence, and by my own personal whims. I admit to having relied heavily on the lists of others with some editing and editorializing on my part. I might add that I will be deeply disappointed if there are not additional suggestions offered, either seriously or with your tongue planted firmly in your cheek, during the comments portion of our meeting. And so I begin my ramblings.

The 200 year Christian campaign to reclaim Jerusalem and the Holy Land from the Muslims brought about Europe's greatest military and commercial expansion since the fall of the Roman Empire. It inspired a wealth of art and literature. It was also a bloody episode and an indicator of the many ethnic strifes to come.

Supposed relics from the era of Jesus, the Holy Lance, John the Baptist's remains, and the Shroud of Turin, unearthed in Jerusalem proved to Western Christians that the city belonged to them. From the moment



Pope Urban II called for the First Crusade in 1095, zealots literally plundered their way toward Palestine, slaughtering unbelievers, including thousands of European Jews, along the way. In 1099 the Christians took Jerusalem, but battles continued throughout the Middle East until the Muslims regained the city in 1244.

Despite the military outcome, Europe gained much from the Crusades. Mining and manufacturing were revived. New trade routes opened and served as conduits for Eastern imports and knowledge that enriched the West. Silk, spices, gunpowder, and algebra all traveled along these new routes. This being the month of April, it should be noted that the idea of the income tax also traveled to the Western World along these trade routes.

I believe the Crusades are the most significant event during this millennium. The Crusades opened the doors of Europe to trade, science, knowledge, exploration, and eventually the questioning of the status quo. Without the Crusades, Western Civilization would not have developed for hundreds of years. Several of the remaining events that I shall mention actually had their roots planted within the rebirth brought about by the Crusades.

Of all the millennium's technological advancements, the most far

reaching started just prior to the age's midpoint. Throughout history the ability to read and write had been confined to very small elite groups of priests, nobles and scribes. However, during the 15th century, a literate middle class arose in Europe. When this middle class's thirst for knowledge soared, inventors sought ways to mass produce the written word. When a German goldsmith succeeded, he unleashed an information epidemic that rages even to this day. Johann Gutenberg designed a new kind of press to print words based on the press used to squeeze olives. He came up with an alloy of lead, tin, and antimony, and a precisely calibrated type-mold to pour it into. He created a smudge resistant ink of lampblack, turpentine and linseed oil. Each page of his first run of 200 Bibles took a worker a day to set, but once the type was in place the rest was relatively easy.

Gutenberg's method spread across Europe very quickly, and by 1500 there were more than a half a million printed books in circulation. These included religious works, Greek and Roman classics, scientific texts, and Columbus's report from the New World. An acceleration of the Renaissance was only the first by-product of Gutenberg's printing press. Without it, the Protestant movement might have died on the table of its creation as well as the industrial and political revolutions of the upcoming centuries.

Oddly enough, Gutenberg got none of the glory. His brainchild bankrupted him, and in 1455 a creditor took over his business and little more is known of this inventor because he never put his own name in print.

Another of the greatest events of our millennium was accomplished by a man who also died a failure. Christopher Columbus tried four times to find a route to Asia by sailing west across the Atlantic. When his quest ran aground on another continent he simply insisted that Cuba was part of China.

After setting sail in August and sailing for 71 days, only the cries of "Tierra, tierra!" ended the threats of mutiny. He thought the native people "simple, naturally good, and easy to conquer," until they resisted. Then things got ugly. His governorship of Hispaniola became his low point when an outburst of gold fever accompanied by the enslavement and slaughter of the native people sent him home in chains for mismanagement.

Ideas, goods, deadly diseases, and African slaves followed in the wake of his crossing. And while he may have literally stumbled on a "New World," his adventurous spirit played no small role in creating a new civilization.

Had Columbus not made his discovery, it is almost certain that

others, John Cabot perhaps, would have soon followed. The issue here is not who made the discovery but what was discovered. The discovery of the New World opened the eyes of Europe to wide scale colonization. The success and failure of these colonial policies most certainly led to what we today call a global civilization.

Martin Luther was tortured by the anxiety of his own sinfulness. How could the Vatican promise forgiveness of sins in exchange for contributions? Didn't the powers of mercy and redemption belong to God? Finally, unable to control his skepticism, Luther nailed his "Ninety-five Theses" to the door in Wittenberg, Germany. His criticism of papal policy stressed the inward, spiritual character of Christian faith. It denounced those who would pay fees to avoid embracing the cross and to share privately in the suffering of Christ. It rejected the notion that Catholic doctrine and canon law could have the authority of scripture. Though the Vatican moved quickly against Luther and formally excommunicated him in 1521, he would not contradict his own conscience.

When the Edict of Worms declared him a political outlaw, his anticlerical message was taken up by others. As the laity moved against monasteries and their landholdings; as priests began to marry; as princes and other powers joined against the Holy Roman Empire; and as bishops

came to be appointed by secular authorities, the Reformation was begun in earnest. Political authority, for the most part, would never again be fully subject to the dictates of a distant clergy. The future map of Europe would be determined by the nationalism that still dominates landscape of the world today.

If we were able to literally look back over the years we would find a column of black smoke splitting this millennium. Those who lived before the Industrial Revolution could not have imagined what the world would someday look like, much in the same way that we can scarcely envision a time without its conveniences and ills.

The tinkering of a mathematical instrument maker at Glasgow University to improve a steam engine which pumped water out of the coal mines started it all. James Watt patented a new version of the steam engine in 1769 that saved 75% in fuel cost. Soon his improved engines powered coal mines and textile mills, plus railroads and ships that carried the new technologies to the continent and the New World.

Earlier, for example, Britain had been an agrarian nation, but by 1870 70% of the Britons had moved to the cities, living mostly in slums where overcrowding, poor sanitation, and outbreaks of typhus, cholera and dysentery were common. Factories producing iron belched smoke. Mines

and quarries scarred the earth.

The post-revolution family was also changed. Women and children as young as six were exploited by the factory bosses. For the upper classes, the result was an elevated quality of life. Rapidly expanding prosperity, combined with the new cost efficiency of machines, gave bankers, entrepreneurs, and merchants wealth and riches on an unprecedented scale. A middle class of managers grew more educated, enjoyed better health, more leisure time, and greater mobility. Even the lower classes could afford better and cheaper products. Despite attacks on the machinery and the way of life it brought about, the revolution has continued to gather steam.

In times not too far removed from ourselves, disease was thought to be caused by evil spirits or as punishment from God. The connection between sickness and germs remained a secret until the mid 1800's when experiments revealed that infectious agents could multiply within the human body. Louis Pasteur concluded that microorganisms were also present in the air. He isolated microbes responsible for fermentation and disease in silkworms. However, it wasn't until 1876 that a German scientist, Robert Koch, showed that specific bacteria caused specific diseases. His work with anthrax and tuberculosis established the germ

theory of disease and had immediate implications for diagnosis and treatment. The report of his 1882 discovery of the microbe that causes TB proved the disease's infectiousness and a link between a given organism and a specific disease.

The teamwork of Pasteur and Koch ushered in the science of microbiology and led to advances in immunology, sanitation, and hygiene that have done more to increase the life span of humans than any other scientific advancement in the past 1000 years.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights . . . ." Today most governments of the world at least pay lip service to these truths. However, before July 4, 1776 when the Continental Congress adopted "the unanimous declaration of the thirteen united States of America," no nation had been founded on such principles. When penned by a 33 year old Virginia delegate, the Declaration was meant to explain, after a year of war, the American Colonies' break from Great Britain. The document listed the offenses of King George III, ranging from restriction of trade to the use of foreign mercenaries. More important, it laid out the concept of natural rights - borrowing heavily from the British philosopher John Locke - that would form, in the words of the Continental Congress

President John Hancock, "the Ground and Foundation" of the U.S. government.

The Declaration was more than just one country's manifesto. It spurred Latin Americans to sever ties with Spain and the French to overthrow a king. Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh paraphrased it when he defied France. And its assertion that all men are born equal moved more than just males. When the U.S. women's suffrage movement was launched in 1848, its founders modeled their declaration on that of Jefferson.

In any accounting of the millennium's monsters, first place must go to the ruler who made genocide a multinational industry, Adolph Hitler. The scale of his enterprise boggles the mind: freight trains carrying Jews to human stockyards from across Nazi occupied Europe; victims worked to death, shot, or gassed; corpses incinerated or processed into soap; gold teeth harvested for the coffers of the Third Reich. Hitler's megalomania sparked the Holocaust and history's most destructive war. The preparation for both began the moment he became Germany's chancellor in 1933.

World War II began in 1939. Six years later, the Axis countries were defeated; some 17 million combatants and 60 million civilians were dead. Within that horror lay a new benchmark of evil. Six million Jews and nearly as many other "undesirables" were systematically slaughtered.



I concluded my list at eight events which, arguably, have had the greatest impact on mankind during the past 1000 years. Due more to the restraints of time than to a lack of additional meaningful events, I have not listed many significant inventions of this century, simply because I have yet another presentation due before the end of this millennium.

As I conducted my research for this paper, I was amazed by the number of significant events which have had major impacts on the world as we know it. Small and seemingly unrelated happenings that came together as the years passed to create major events which have shaped our world. With few exceptions, even William Turner will be hard pressed to find a direct "Hopkinsville Connection," or Jim Love a connection to his beloved "Cubbies" or someone who lived down the street in South Elgin, Illinois.