

By Dave Barry

It was a year of Hope -- at first in the sense of "I feel hopeful!" and later in the sense of "I hope this year ends soon!"

It was also a year of Change, especially in Washington, where the tired old hacks of yesteryear finally yielded the reins of power to a group of fresh, young, idealistic, new-idea outsiders such as Nancy Pelosi. As a result Washington, rejecting "business as usual," finally stopped trying to solve every problem by throwing billions of taxpayer dollars at it and instead started trying to solve every problem by throwing *trillions* of taxpayer dollars at it.

To be sure, it was a year that saw plenty of bad news. But in almost every instance, there was offsetting good news:

BAD NEWS: The economy remained critically weak, with rising unemployment, a severely depressed real-estate market, the near-collapse of the domestic automobile industry and the steep decline of the dollar.

GOOD NEWS: Windows 7 sucked less than Vista.

BAD NEWS: The downward spiral of the newspaper industry continued, resulting in the firings of thousands of experienced reporters and an apparently permanent deterioration in the quality of American journalism.

GOOD NEWS: A lot more people were tweeting.

BAD NEWS: Ominous problems loomed abroad as -- among other difficulties -- the Afghanistan war went sour, and Iran threatened to plunge the Middle East and beyond into nuclear war.

GOOD NEWS: They finally got Roman Polanski.

In short, it was a year that we will be happy to put behind us. But before we do, let's swallow our anti-nausea medication and take one last look back, starting with. . . .

JANUARY

. . . during which history is made in Washington, D.C., where a crowd estimated by the Congressional Estimating Office at 217 billion people gathers to watch Barack Obama be inaugurated as the first American president ever to come after George W. Bush. There is a minor glitch in the ceremony when Chief Justice John Roberts, attempting to administer the oath of office, becomes confused and instead reads the side-effect warnings for his decongestant pills, causing the new president to swear that he will consult his physician if he experiences a sudden

loss of sensation in his feet. President Obama then delivers an upbeat inaugural address, ushering in a new era of cooperation, civility and bipartisanship in a galaxy far, far away. Here on Earth everything stays much the same.

The No. 1 item on the agenda is fixing the economy, so the new administration immediately sets about the daunting task of trying to nominate somebody -- anybody -- to a high-level government post who actually remembered to pay his or her taxes. Among those who forgot this pesky chore is Obama's nominee for Treasury secretary, Timothy Geithner, who sheepishly admits that he failed to pay \$35,000 in federal self-employment taxes. He says that the error was a result of his using TurboTax, which he also blames for his involvement in an eight-state spree of bank robberies. He is confirmed after the Obama administration explains that it inherited the U.S. Tax Code from the Bush administration.

Elsewhere in politics, a team of specially trained wildlife agents equipped with nets and tranquilizer darts manages, after a six-hour struggle, to remove Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich from office. He is transported to an undisclosed swamp, where he is released into the wild and quickly bonds with the native ferret population.

On a more upbeat note, the nation finds a new hero in US Airways Capt. Chesley Sullenberger, who, in an astonishing feat of aviation, manages to land a US Airways flight safely in the Hudson River after it loses power shortly after takeoff from LaGuardia. Incredibly, all 155 people on board survive, although they are immediately taken hostage by Somali pirates.

In entertainment news, an unemployed California mother of six uses in-vitro fertilization to give birth to eight more children, an achievement that immediately catapults her to a celebrity status equivalent to that of a minor Kardashian sister. But even this joyous event is not enough to cheer up a nation worried about the worsening economy, which becomes so bad in . . .

FEBRUARY

. . . that Congress passes, without reading it, and without actually finishing writing it, a stimulus package totaling \$787 billion. The money is immediately turned over to American taxpayers so they can use it to stimulate the economy.

No! What a crazy idea THAT would be! The money is to be doled out over the next decade or so by members of Congress on projects deemed vital by members of Congress, such as constructing buildings that will be named after members of Congress. This will stimulate the economy by creating millions of jobs, according to estimates provided by the Congressional Estimating Office's Magical Estimating 8-Ball.

Despite this heroic effort, the economy continues to stumble. General Motors, which has sold only one car in the past year -- a Buick LaCrosse mistakenly purchased by an 87-year-old man who thought he was buying a power scooter -- announces a new four-part business plan, consisting of (1) dealership closings; (2) factory shutdowns;(3) worker layoffs; and (4) traveling backward through time to 1955.

The stock market hits its lowest level since 1997; this is hailed as a great investment opportunity by all the financial wizards who failed to let us know last year that the market was going to tank. California goes bankrupt and is forced to raise \$800 million by pawning Angelina Jolie.

The Obama administration's confirmation woes continue as Tom Daschle is forced to withdraw as nominee for secretary of Health and Human Services following the disclosure that he, too, failed to pay all of his federal taxes. He blames this oversight on the fact that his tax returns were prepared by Treasury Secretary Geithner.

The Academy Awards are a triumph for *Slumdog Millionaire*, which wins eight Oscars, only to have them stolen by Somali pirates.

In sports, the Pittsburgh Steelers win the Super Bowl, defeating some team in a game that we have all completely forgotten. Michael Phelps is suspended from competitive swimming following publication of a photograph clearly showing that he has gills. Baseball star Alex Rodriguez admits that from 2001 through 2003 he used steroids, which he claims he got from Treasury Secretary Geithner.

And speaking of shocking disclosures, in . . .

MARCH

. . . an angry nation learns that the giant insurance company AIG, which received \$170 billion in taxpayer bailouts and posted a \$61 billion loss, is paying executive bonuses totaling hundreds of millions of dollars. This news shocks and outrages President Obama and members of Congress, who happen to be the very people who passed the legislation that authorized both the bailouts and the bonuses, but of course they did that during a crisis and thus had no time to find out what the hell they were voting for.

To correct this situation, some congresspersons propose a 90 percent tax on the bonuses, followed by beheadings, followed by the passage of tough new financial legislation that nobody in Congress will read or understand.

In other economic news, the CEO of GM resigns under pressure from the White House, which notes that it inherited the automobile crisis from the Bush administration. GM is now essentially a subsidiary of the federal government,

which promises to use its legendary business and marketing savvy to get the crippled auto giant back on its feet, starting with an exciting new lineup of cars such as the Chevrolet Consensus, a ``green" car featuring a compressed-soybean chassis, the world's first engine powered entirely by dew, and a 14,500-page owner's manual, accompanied by nearly 6,000 pages of amendments.

Businessman Bernard Madoff pleads guilty to bilking investors out of \$65 billion in a Ponzi scheme, forcing the Obama administration to withdraw his nomination for secretary of commerce.

The annual observance of Earth Hour is observed with one hour of symbolic energy conservation as hundreds of millions of non-essential lights and appliances are turned off. And that's just in Al Gore's house.

In sports and entertainment news, former NFL great Lawrence Taylor, appearing on *Dancing With the Stars*, accidentally rips off his partner's arms during the cha-cha competition. The judges award Taylor 453 points out of a possible 30, citing his ``energy" and ``proximity."

Abroad, North Korea, in what many observers view as a deliberate act of provocation, calls Domino's and, posing as the United States, orders 23 million pizzas delivered to Japan.

International problems continue to dominate in . . .

APRIL

. . . as leaders of the world's powers, looking for a way out of the worsening world economic crisis, gather in London for the G-20 summit, which ends abruptly in a violent argument over the bill for the welcoming dinner. A short while later, in what many economists see as a troubling development, the International Monetary Fund moves into a refrigerator carton.

In other international bad news, North Korea launches a test missile that experts say is capable of hitting Hawaii, based on the fact that it actually hits Hawaii. The United States swiftly pledges to issue a strongly worded condemnation containing ``even stronger words than last time."

On the domestic front, the struggling Chrysler Corp. declares bankruptcy, but its CEO confidently predicts that the company will come back ``bigger, better and stronger than ever" thanks to its 2010 product line, spearheaded by the all-new Dodge Despair.

The big health story in April is the rapid spread of swine flu, a dangerous new virus strain developed by the makers of Purell. Public anxiety over the flu increases when Vice President Joe Biden, demonstrating his gift for emitting

statements, declares on the *Today* show that he would not recommend traveling by commercial airplane or subway. A short while later, White House spokesperson Robert Gibbs assures reporters that he is ``not aware of any `Vice President Joe Biden.' "

In another embarrassment for the White House, New York is temporarily thrown into a panic when Air Force One flies low over Manhattan for a publicity photo shoot. Responding to widespread criticism, Gibbs notes that President Obama inherited Air Force One from the Bush administration.

On a more positive note, an American ship captain is dramatically rescued from Somali pirates by a team of Navy SEAL sharpshooters, who are immediately hired by *Dancing With the Stars* to assist with the judging of Lawrence Taylor.

Speaking of drama, in . . .

MAY

. . . the finale of *American Idol* produces a shocking outcome that sends shock waves of shock reverberating around the planet when the winner turns out to be - - incredibly -- that guy singer, whatshisname, despite the fact that the overwhelming favorite was that OTHER guy singer. Congress vows to hold hearings after reports surface that, of the nearly 100 million votes, 73 million were phoned in by ACORN.

But the big political drama takes place in Washington, where David Souter announces that he is retiring from the Supreme Court because he is tired of getting noogies from Chief Justice Roberts. To replace Souter, President Obama nominates Sonia Sotomayor, setting off the traditional Washington performance of Konfirmation Kabuki, in which the Democrats portray the nominee as basically a cross between Abraham Lincoln and the Virgin Mary, and the Republicans portray her more as Ursula the Sea Witch with a law degree. Sotomayor will eventually be confirmed, but only after undergoing the traditional Senate Judiciary Committee hazing ritual, during which she must talk for four straight days without expressing an opinion.

In crippled U.S. auto giant news, General Motors announces a new business plan under which it will fire everybody but Howie Long, who will continue to make what GM calls ``some of the most popular commercials on the market." Meanwhile Chrysler, looking to the future, invests \$114 million in an Amway distributorship.

On the international-tension front, a meeting of the United Nations Security Council to discuss possible sanctions against North Korea is forced to adjourn hastily when the council chamber is penetrated by a missile.

In sports, Helio Castroneves wins the Indianapolis 500, although his victory is somewhat tainted by the fact that all 32 of the other cars were hijacked by Somali pirates. Major League Baseball suspends Dodger slugger Manny Ramirez for 50 games after his urine sample explodes.

But all of these stories suddenly seem unimportant in . . .

JUNE

. . . when pop superstar Michael Jackson dies, setting off an orgy of frowny-face TV-newsperson fake somberness the likes of which has not been seen since the Princess Diana Grief-a-Palooza. At one point experts estimate that the major networks are using the word "icon" a combined total of 850 times per hour. Larry King devotes several weeks to in-depth coverage of this story, during which he conducts what is believed to be the first-ever in-casket interview; this triumph is marred only slightly by the fact that the venerable TV personality apparently believes he is talking to Bette Midler.

On the economic front, California is caught on videotape attempting to shoplift 17,000 taxpayers from Nevada. General Motors files for bankruptcy and announces a new sales strategy under which it will go around at night leaving cars in people's driveways, then sprinting away.

In political news, the Minnesota Supreme Court, clearly exhausted by months of legal wrangling, declares Al Franken the winner of *American Idol*. Meanwhile the governor of South Carolina, Mark Sanford, goes missing for six days; his spokesperson tells the press that the governor is "hiking the Appalachian trail," which turns out to be a slang term meaning "engaging in acts of an explicitly non-gubernatorial nature with a woman in Argentina." The state legislature ultimately considers impeaching Sanford, but changes its mind upon discovering that the lieutenant governor, who got into office through some slick legal maneuvering when nobody was paying attention, is Eliot Spitzer.

Political news continues to dominate in . . .

JULY

. . . when Sarah Palin unexpectedly announces that she will not complete her term as elected governor of Alaska, explaining, in a prepared statement, that she has a hair appointment. Asked by reporters if she plans to seek the Republican presidential nomination, she replies, "You leave my personal life out of this." Elsewhere in state politics, the FBI arrests pretty much every elected official in New Jersey on suspicion of being New Jersey elected officials.

On Independence Day the nation takes a welcome break from its worries to celebrate in traditional fashion with barbecues, parades and -- as night falls -- spectacular aerial North Korean missile detonations.

In government news, top Washington thinkers, looking for a way to goose the economy along, come up with the "Cash for Clunkers" program, under which the federal government provides a financial inducement for people to take functional cars, which are mostly American-made, to car dealers, who deliberately destroy these cars and sell the people new replacement cars, which are mostly foreign-made. This program, which was budgeted for \$1 billion, ends up costing \$3 billion and is halted after a month. The administration declares that it has been a huge success, which everybody understands to mean that it will never, ever be repeated. With this mission accomplished, the top Washington thinkers are free to train all of their brainpower on the nation's health-care system.

President Obama becomes embroiled in controversy when, commenting on the arrest of Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. by Cambridge Police Sgt. James Crowley, he states that the police "acted stupidly." This comment angers many in the law-enforcement community, as the president discovers the next day when his motorcade is cited for more than 3,000 moving violations. To resolve the situation, the president invites both Gates and Crowley to the White House for a "beer summit," which is described later by White House spokesperson Gibbs as "very amicable" except for some "minor tasing."

Speaking of conflict, in . . .

AUGUST

. . . President Obama, in the first serious test of his presidency, announces that he will send U.S. troops to rescue Democratic members of Congress pinned down in town hall meetings by constituents firing hostile questions concerning the administration's health-care plan, which turns out not to be wildly popular outside of the immediate Capitol Hill area. The president dismisses concerns that his health-care agenda is in trouble, observing that "there's something about August going into September where everybody in Washington gets all wee-wee up." White House spokesperson Gibbs explains that the "vast majority" of the wee-wee was inherited from the Bush administration.

In foreign affairs, former president Bill Clinton goes to North Korea to secure the release of two detained American journalists who purely by coincidence happen to be women. Fidel Castro, after nearly a year out of the public eye, appears on the popular Cuban television show *Bailando con Cadáveres* ("Dancing With Corpses").

California, in a move apparently intended to evade creditors, has its name legally changed to "South Oregon."

In an alarming technological development, hackers shut down Twitter, leaving a desperate and suddenly vulnerable America with no way to find out what the Kardashian sisters are having for lunch. The Federal Emergency Management Agency urges the nation to ``remain calm" and ``use Facebook if you can." Twitter service is eventually restored, but most of the estimated 875 million thoughts that went untweeted during the outage will never be recovered, making it the nation's worst social-networking disaster ever.

Speaking of disruptions, in . . .

SEPTEMBER

. . . President Obama, speaking on health care before a joint session of Congress, is rudely interrupted by Kanye West, who grabs the microphone and declares that Beyoncé has a better health-care plan. No, wait, sorry: The president is rudely interrupted by Republican congressperson Joe Wilson, who shouts ``You lie!" Wilson later apologizes for his breach of congressional etiquette, saying, ``I should have just mooned him."

With public support for the administration's health-care plan continuing to slip, the president orders U.S. troops into Fox News, then goes on a media blitz, appearing, in a three-day span, on *Meet the Press*, *Face the Nation*, *Meet the Nation*, *Face the Press*, *Press Your Face Against the Nation*, Letterman, Leno, Judge Judy, Iron Chef and *Dog the Bounty Hunter*. The president also delivers a back-to-school speech to the nation's students, telling them to work hard and get a good education. Fortunately, thanks to the vigilance of the talk-radio community, many parents realize that this is some kind of secret socialist code message and are able to prevent their children from being exposed to it.

In international news, Iran shocks the world by revealing the existence of a previously secret uranium enrichment facility. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad insists that the uranium will be used only for ``parties." United Nations nuclear inspectors note, however, that ``Mahmoud Ahmadinejad" can be rearranged to spell ``Had Jammed a Humanoid" and ``Hounded a Jihad Mamma."

On the international-finance front, leaders of the world's economic powers gather for the G-20 summit meeting in Pittsburgh, where, in a rare display of unity, they vote unanimously to fire whoever is responsible for selecting their meeting sites.

Speaking of questionable site selection, in . . .

OCTOBER

. . . the International Olympic Committee meets in Copenhagen to choose whether Chicago, Rio de Janeiro, Tokyo or Madrid will host the 2016 summer

games. Chicago is considered a strong candidate, but despite personal appeals for the city from President Obama, First Lady Michelle Obama, Mayor Richard Daley, Oprah Winfrey and the late Al Capone, the committee -- in an unexpected decision -- votes to hold the games in Pyongyang, North Korea. The head of the IOC insists that the decision was ``made freely and without coercion," adding, ``for the love of God please abort the launch."

On a happier note for the White House, President Obama wins the Nobel Peace Prize, narrowly edging out Beyoncé.

In the Middle East, hopes for peace soar when Iran announces that it will allow U.N. inspectors to visit its nuclear-enrichment facility. Hopes plunge soon after when the inspectors report that they were taken to what appears to be a hastily abandoned kebab stand with a hand-painted sign that says ``NUCLEAR ENRICHMENT," as well as what the inspectors describe as ``numerous health-code violations."

In Afghanistan, U.N. investigators raise questions about the recent national election, noting that a third of the votes cast for President Hamid Karzai came from Palm Beach County.

On the celebrity front, a remorseful David Letterman confesses to his stunned audience that he has been hiking the Appalachian Trail with female staff members.

But the big story in October, the story that grips the nation the way a dog grips a rancid squirrel, is the mesmerizing drama of a silver balloon racing through the blue skies above central Colorado, desperately pursued by police, aviation and rescue personnel who have been led to believe that the balloon contains O.J. Simpson.

No, that would have been great, but the authorities in fact have been led to believe that the balloon contains 6-year-old Falcon Heene, the son of exactly the kind of parents you would expect to name a child ``Falcon." It quickly becomes clear that the boy is not in the balloon, and the whole thing is a hoax perpetrated by attention-seeking reality-show-wannabe idiots. In other words, nothing really happened, so naturally the media go into a weeklong Category 5 frenzy so intensive that Larry King is forced to temporarily interrupt his ongoing postmortem coverage of the Michael Jackson funeral.

Speaking of attention-seeking reality-show-wannabe idiots, in . . .

NOVEMBER

. . . a Washington couple, Tareq and Michaela Salehi, penetrate heavy security and enter the White House, a feat that Joe Biden has yet to manage. As details

of the incident emerge, an embarrassed Secret Service is forced to admit that not only did the couple crash a state dinner, but they also met and shook hands with the president, and they ``may have served briefly in the cabinet."

In other White House news, the president, in a much-debated post-Thanksgiving decision, announces that he is sending U.S. troops into the electronics departments of 1,400 Best Buy stores to prevent Black Friday shoppers from killing each other over flat-screen TVs. Hours later the president withdraws the troops, calling the situation ``hopeless." Press Secretary Gibbs notes that the president inherited Black Friday from the Bush administration.

Attorney General Eric Holder announces that, to maintain the principle of due legal process, alleged Sept. 11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed will be tried in federal court in New York City, but as a precaution, ``he will be executed first."

In sports, the New York Yankees, after an eight-year drought, purchase the World Series. But the month's big sports story involves Tiger Woods, who, plagued by tabloid reports that he has been hiking the Appalachian trail with a nightclub hostess, is injured in a bizarre late-night incident near his Florida home when his SUV is attacked by golf-club-wielding Somali pirates.

In science news:

- The Large Hadron Collider is restarted after a 14-month delay caused by squirrels stealing the particles.
- Elated NASA scientists announce that they have discovered ice on the moon, although their excitement fades when they calculate that getting it back to Earth will cost \$185 million per cube.
- Researchers from MIT and Harvard announce that they have sequenced the genome of a horse. They are arrested when police discover that ``sequencing the genome" is the scientific slang equivalent of ``hiking the Appalachian trail."

In a troubling economic development, the U.S. dollar, for the first time in history, falls below the lentil.

Speaking of troubling, in . . .

DECEMBER

. . . President Obama, after weeks of pondering what to do about the pesky war situation he inherited, announces a decision -- widely viewed as a compromise -- in which he will send 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan, but will name their mission ``Operation Gentle Butterfly."

On the economic front, the nation's unemployment rate remains stubbornly high as it becomes clear that the \$787 billion stimulus package has created a total of only eight jobs, all in the field of highway-construction flagperson. Looking for solutions, the president hosts a White House ``jobs summit" attended by political, business and labor leaders, as well as 23 Portuguese tourists who got lost while trying to visit the Washington Monument and somehow penetrated White House security. Meanwhile, in what is believed to be the largest Craigslist transaction ever, California sells San Diego to Mexico.

On the environmental front, Copenhagen hosts a massive international conference aimed at halting manmade global warming, attended by thousands of delegates who flew to Denmark on magical carbon-free unicorns.

In the Middle East, U.N. nuclear inspectors become suspicious when Iran attempts to ship to Israel, via UPS, a large crate labeled ``HARMLESS ITEMS -- DELIVER BEFORE TIMER REACHES 00:00."

There are other troubling year-end developments:

- In a setback for U.S. interests in Central America, voters in Honduras elect, as their new president, Rod Blagojevich.
- The International Space Station is taken over by Somali pirates.
- In sports, roughly 40 percent of the U.S. bimbo population announces that it has at one time or another hiked the Appalachian Trail with Tiger Woods.

Also, as the year draws to a close, the Centers for Disease Control releases an urgent bulletin warning of a new, fast-spreading epidemic consisting of severe, and in some cases life-threatening, arm infections caused by ``people constantly sneezing into their elbow pits."

But despite all the gloomy news, the holiday season brings at least temporary relief to a troubled nation -- especially the children, millions of whom go to sleep on Christmas Eve with visions of Santa in his reindeer-powered sleigh flying high overhead, spreading joy around the world.

With a North Korean missile flying right behind.

Try not to think about it. And happy New Year.