

# And While You Were Gone...

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(Note: At a time when the nation rejoices in the homecoming of our soldiers, let us reflect on one of the letters welcoming them home.)

DEAR SOLDIER, It used to be that when you went to war, you stayed away for years, and life went on, and you were left behind. This war thumped loudly past, and is over. But, we were moving quickly too, even if no one really noticed, since all the cameras and conversations were pointed in your direction. Consider this a scrapbook of the moments we both missed.

We made some discoveries. Scientists managed to produce a perfect copy of the muscular dystrophy gene in mice. A study by the American Bar Association found that white males get the best car deals. Some biblical scholars concluded that Jesus never said about 80% of the things the New Testament says he said. A retired Wisconsin couple learned that the oil painting that had hung in their living room for 30 years was a Van Gogh. And as it turns out that if you run a mile and a half every day, you get fewer head colds.

Democracy skipped and stumbled and blundered along its puzzling way. Nobody in Washington could think or talk of anything except the war, but the states pursued their own parochial obsessions. Tennessee lawmakers banned the release of more than 24 nonbiodegradable balloons by any one person, in order to keep bits of rubber from choking the fish. Ten state senators in Washington proposed that the eastern part of Washington (state) be allowed to secede and form a new state called Lincoln. "Lincoln was a great emancipator," said one of them, "and we want emancipation from Seattle." The Colorado House decided that you could be sued for making derogatory comments about foods.

The war didn't cause the recession, but it took most of the blame. Thirty states are deep in debt and considering everything from taxing income to taxing pretzels. Eastern Airlines, Continental and Pan Am all filed for Chapter 11. In January alone, 232,000 workers lost their jobs. In Minnesota the Teacher of the Year for 1990 was laid off.

Stamps now Cost .29 (cents).

While your Patriots were knocking Scuds out of the sky, we found some new toys of our own. Sanyo has a voice-operated car-stereo system that will swap CDs or summon a radio traffic report on command. Sharp has a new microwave with a built-in blender that will mash potatoes while they cook. Fidelity Electronics came out with a wristwatch that doubles as a biological clock by telling you the best time of the month to get pregnant. It sells for \$59.95.

The patent office ruled that a smell, like a name or symbol, can be trademarked, which came as a relief to the makers of a scented embroidery kit in the shape of a skunk.

War abroad did not make us any more peaceful at home. A man in New York City was acquitted after he cut up his

girlfriend for throwing him out of her apartment and served her stewed finger to the homeless in Tompkins Square Park. The jury decided he must have been crazy. Police in Florida hunted down a roadside serial killer—a 34-year-old blond who had signed a movie deal for her story before the charges were even brought. Westchester County, N.Y., is hosting the "Fatal Attraction" trial, in which a besotted schoolteacher is charged with murdering her lover's wife, and having tryst with him in a parking lot afterward.

The folks at CNN became part of the family. But every now and then we needed some relief, something sweet and harmless. *Bambi* was the year's best-selling video, and the crowds at Disney World fell off only slightly. The biggest star of the season was a 10-year-old kid you never heard of, whose movie, *Home Alone*, made studio heads cry—especially the ones who turned down the script. Gary died on *thirty-something*, but Nancy survived her cancer, and Bart Simpson passed all his courses.

Vanna White got married, and so did Tom Cruise, Meg Ryan and Dennis Quaid (those last two to each other). Jane Fonda and Ted Turner are engaged. Danny Thomas and Margot Fonteyn died. James Brown was paroled.

Oprah, who was fat when you met her and thinner when you left, is fat once more, and swears that she will never diet again. Donald Trump used to be rich, but his emirate is currently under siege by creditors.

McDonald's now serves packets of raw carrot sticks.

We still read the sports pages, but we tried to avoid the war imagery to describe third-down situations. Roger Clemens became the first \$5 million baseball player, and Pete Rose was barred from the Hall of Fame. George Foreman will soon be fighting for the Heavyweight Championship, and Sugar Ray Leonard has retired. We think he means it this time.

We may have buried the Vietnam-era mentally, but we have resurrected its style: beehive hairdos are back, and day-glo minis, and beads. It is now possible to spend \$60 on a necktie that displays the contents of a man's medicine chest or a collage of bus transfers.

You will find signs that you're returning to a different country than the one you left in August: proud, resolute, united and overwhelmed with national purpose. You will be lavished with honors, medals and ribbons, streets named after you, Desert Storm ice cream flavors. You who wrote to us of your fears of coming home should not worry. No one will spit on you. You will not be called baby killers, and we promise that you will not grow old holding a sign in a subway station: I'M A VETERAN. CAN YOU SPARE SOME CHANGE?

There is much more, and you have some amazing stories to tell. Put your feet up. We have all the time in the world.

Welcome home.

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