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Snap! Crackle! Pop!

2007 started with a flurry of promises. But then the bubble burst. BY JOHN COOK

If the past 12 months have a unifying thread, it is the total breakdown of our once-reliable institutions. It was the year that everything broke.

Of course, it began as a season of action. In January, President Bush announced a troop surge he promised would finally put Iraq back on track. Forget about the last four years, this time it would be different: He would hand

the keys to General David Petraeus and let our well-oiled killing machines have at it. No more partisan bickering, no more squabbling over troop levels. Like Vincent Vega and Jules Winnfield in *Pulp Fiction*, Bush had made a bloody mess, and Petraeus was the Wolf who would make it go away. All he needed was 25,000 more bodies.

But things did not work out as planned. Eight months later, during his congressional testimony in September, we learned that this deadly serious Petraeus guy kind of had a lisp, needed Michele Malkin to defend him when moveon.org mocked his name, and managed to reduce the level of violence in Baghdad only to the extent that there are fewer people left to kill.

And what about the Democrats? Tough-talking Nancy Pelosi inherited the speaker's gavel in the U.S. House of Representatives, signaling the handover of congressional power to a party that had been elected with a mandate to end the war. "The American people rejected an open-ended obligation to a war without end," Pelosi said in her first address as speaker.

But by the middle of next year, we will have the same number of troops there as we did last year. Regardless of one's political position, wouldn't it have been nice if either Bush or Pelosi had accomplished *something*?

Alas, even our villains couldn't keep their shit together. Homeland Security director Michael Chertoff, who rivals Max von Sydow in the creepy bad guy department and has the actuarial bearing of a man who does not play games, revealed himself to be an intellectual klutz in July, telling the *Chicago Tribune* that, while he had no evidence, he had a "gut feeling" that Al Qaeda would strike over the summer. His colleague, Michael McConnell, the director of national intelligence, did Chertoff one better in August, offhandedly admitting to the *El Paso Times* (circulation 73,000) that the nation's telecommunications companies had been helping the government eavesdrop on U.S. citizens

after all—a fact that the government's own lawyers had spent months arduously maintaining was a state secret so sensitive, its potential disclosure constituted grounds for dismissing a class-action lawsuit. *Oops!*

But it's not just our political and military machinery that has gone awry. If any professional class deserves its reputation for clear-

Even the machinery of Hollywood image-management, once so precision-tuned it kept Rock Hudson straight and Marilyn Monroe sober, has seized up, giving us the sagas of Lindsay Lohan, Britney Spears, and Anna Nicole Smith. There was a time when, in each case, bribes would have been paid, favors would have been exchanged, and secrets would have been kept.

Smith would have been pronounced dead from a previously undiagnosed blood disorder. Lohan would have been sequestered at a studio chief's Montana ranch until she dried out. Spears would have come down with the flu sometime after the rehearsal and prior to her performance at the MTV Video Music Awards.

Nothing worked this year. Astronauts got drunk, took up weapons, and drove around in diapers. The Blue Angels crashed in April. A bridge in Minneapolis—all it had to do was sit there—fell into the Mississippi in August. The ground beneath Manhattan's Grand Central Terminal exploded in a 15-story-high torrent of steam and mud in July. The University of Michigan's fifth-ranked Wolverines lost to the Appalachian State Mountaineers, 34 to 32, on the opening weekend of the college football season. Katie Couric, the beloved \$15 million-a-year woman who was supposed to resurrect the *CBS Evening News*, did a face-plant. Even our fearsome enemies took a powder. As of this writing, the closest thing to an attack on the West that Al Qaeda could pull off in 2007, Chertoff's gut notwithstanding,

was a car crash and failed self-immolation at an airport in Scotland, of all places.

Ultimately, 2007 will be remembered as a lost year, a year in stasis. Ushered in with a wave of ambitious resolutions, it's the year we swore we'd get it right for a change—remember our friends' birthdays, learn to play guitar, pay off the parking tickets on time. Instead, we gained 15 pounds and caught up on *Sex and the City* reruns, while Iraq (like the new guitar we bought) gathered dust in the corner. **B**



This year, even our villains couldn't keep their shit together.



ALL FALL DOWN

(Clockwise from top left) Un-Dependable astronaut Lisa Nowak; the under-stabilized Minnesota bridge; Hollywood casualty Anna Nicole Smith; CBS sourpuss Katie Couric; backpedaling House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

eyed, cutthroat proficiency, it's hedge fund managers—or so we thought. There are billions at stake in the decisions they make; surely they are serious people? Well, no. Their affinity for insanely abstract financial instruments has come to mean, somehow, that we are on the verge of a recession because your neighbor missed last month's mortgage payment. Goldman Sachs's Global Equity fund, to choose a single example, shed a billion in value over the course of one week.

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