

Century Marks

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Do-nothing Congress: In the past six years, congressional oversight of the executive branch of the federal government has practically disappeared, say Norman J. Ornstein and Thomas E. Mann (*Foreign Affairs*, November/December). The Republican-dominated Congress has been reticent to criticize a Republican president—former majority leader Tom DeLay said oversight isn't necessary when the president is from your own party—and the Bush administration has been uncooperative in responding to hearings. Besides, congressional members are preoccupied with raising campaign funds. Typically, no votes in Congress occur before 6:30 p.m. on Tuesday or after noon on Thursday. "The current 109th Congress is slated to have the smallest number of days in session in our lifetimes, with fewer than 100 in 2006," the authors conclude.

Jewish case against torture: In 1999 the Israeli Supreme Court outlawed the use of torture. A previous commission had allowed its use in some cases, but security services used the exemption to apply torture more broadly. Living daily with the threat of terrorism, Supreme Court judges recognized that they were tying the hands of the Israeli government, yet this is what their consciences told them they must do, they said. This ruling fits with a key principle of Jewish law, according to Rabbi Edward Feld, which is "the need to honor all living beings." Says Feld: "What is being

argued for here is the sacredness of the life of the suspected criminal.” Indeed, “the treatment of the criminal becomes the norm of how we treat everyone” (*Theology Today*, October).

Liberal evangelical theology: Liberal theology has long been thought dead, laid to rest by other schools of thought, including neo-orthodoxy, postliberalism and liberation theology. In recent decades it has been largely confined to the academy. Nevertheless, Gary Dorrien, author of a three-volume history of liberal theology, argues that it is alive and well, and he cites a long list of contemporary theologians who embody liberalism, characterized by use of reason and critically interpreted religious experience rather than external authority. Dorrien contends that if liberalism is to break out of the halls of academia, it needs to join two heritages which influenced liberal theology in the first half of the 20th century: the Enlightenment-modernist heritage that affirms the authority of modern knowledge, the continuity between reason and revelation, and the values of humanistic individualism and democracy; and the evangelical heritage, which affirms a personal yet transcendent God, the authority of Christian experience, the divinity of Christ, the need for personal redemption and the importance of Christian missions (*CrossCurrents*, Winter).

Coming attractions: Thanks in part to Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*, Hollywood has discovered that the 43 percent of Americans who attend church on Sunday like movies but are looking for something more uplifting than the usual film fare. *The Nativity Story*, released on December 1 (with a premiere at the Vatican), is an example of a film dealing with religious themes—the birth of Jesus, in this case—which attempts to be realistic and nonpreachy. Others include *One Night with the King*, the story of Esther, and *Facing the Giants*, a football movie written by two Georgia Baptist ministers. Like *The Passion*, *The Nativity Story* is being marketed through Bible study guides and sample sermons, special screenings for pastors and special rates for group viewing (*Time*, November 20).

Formative acts: Cornelius Plantinga Jr. asks: “Do you think God can form us and our children with a few table prayers and a weekly church service? Can God do this when pop culture is forming us the rest of the time?” He wonders what parents are thinking when they buy TV sets for the bedrooms of 10-year-olds, allowing for hours of unsupervised viewing (*Calvin Theological Journal*, April).

There ought to be a law—against it: About 1 billion people in the world live in slums. According to a United Nations document, “The urban poor are trapped in an informal and ‘illegal’ world—in slums that are not reflected on maps, where waste is not collected, where taxes are not paid, and where public services are not provided. Officially, they do not exist.” In the next 20 years the number of slum dwellers is expected to double. The Millennium Development goals are projected to improve the lives of only 100 million slum dwellers by 2020 (*New Yorker*, November 13).

Durable books: Electronic devices designed to store and display books have not caught on with the public. The latest device is the Sony Reader, introduced this fall. Priced at around \$350, it can store 80 books, with access to a library of 10,000 books, and it emulates the look of a real book. But not even the makers of the Sony Reader expect real books to be eclipsed any time soon. Books have been around for at least 1,600 years, and their basic format has not changed much in all those years: numbered and bound pages with text on both sides, with some kind of cover. The Sony Reader is likely to be outdated in 10 years (*Boston Globe*, November 15).