

But fireworks, says Blevins, don't appeal only to "off-kilter, small-town characters" who've memorized "instructions for building a bomb using only duct tape and a box of sparklers." Their attraction is widespread. In 2002, the pyrotechnics industry earned more than \$725 million, most of it on the 3rd and 4th of July, when 90 percent of sales take place—some, no doubt, above the Mason-Dixon line, but the majority below.



*Enjoying a dangerous but cherished right down South.*

Blevins believes that the pyrotechnics industry has its roots in Jeffersonian ideals: Fireworks in the South are "populist and Protestant—taking the goods, and the dangers, directly to the people, no interceders needed." At the fireworks stand, many southerners probably think more of the Dixie Thunder, the

Battle of New Orleans, the Nuclear Meltdown, the Cape Canaveral, and the Enduring Freedom than they do the Founding Fathers. Still, for them the smell of burnt saltpeter and the roar and rumble of the Dixie Thunder—whether in July or December—are the peculiar sensations of home.

EXCERPT

*Ready, Set, Read.*

*Fifty years after the introduction of television . . . the number of titles published worldwide each year has increased fourfold, from 250,000 to 1 million—from 100 books for every million humans to 167. A book is published somewhere in the world every 30 seconds.*

—Edward Tenner in *The Boston Globe* (April 25, 2004)

PRESS & MEDIA

*Getting Iraq Wrong*

"Misperceptions, the Media, and the Iraq War" by Steven Kull, Clay Ramsay, and Evan Lewis, in *Political Science Quarterly* (Winter 2003–04), 475 Riverside Dr., Ste. 1274, New York, N.Y. 10115–1274.

Last summer, with (1) no Iraqi weapons of mass destruction unearthed, (2) no clear evidence found of any link between Saddam Hussein's regime and Al Qaeda, and (3) world opinion decidedly against the U.S.-led war (which was then official-

ly over), 60 percent of Americans were still in the dark about one or more of those three facts. Were the news media falling down on their job—or were Americans not paying attention?

Apparently, they were paying attention,

but it mattered a great deal what they were paying attention to. Surveys conducted for the University of Maryland's Program on International Policy Attitudes, with which the authors are associated, showed that a narrow majority of Americans who said they got their news chiefly from the print media got none of the three facts wrong. Not surprisingly, those readers who said they paid close attention to the news were more inclined to get those facts right.

That wasn't the case, by and large, with the 80 percent of Americans who got most of their news from radio or television. In fact, among viewers who said they chiefly relied on Fox News (which set the theme for its war reporting with an American flag in a corner of the screen), the level of misperception *increased* the more closely they watched. For example, 80 percent of the close watchers thought that clear evidence had been found linking Iraq to Al Qaeda. Only 42 percent of

more casual Fox viewers got that idea.

Overall, 80 percent of Fox viewers got at least one of the three facts wrong. Other networks did not produce sparkling results either. The viewer "failure" rates: CBS, 71 percent; ABC, 61; CNN, 55; and NBC, 55. Among the small minority of Americans who got their news chiefly by watching PBS or listening to NPR, only 23 percent did not have all three facts straight. So the quality of news coverage did matter. Some news organizations, the authors say, failed "to play the critical role of doggedly challenging the administration" in power.

And news coverage wasn't the largest factor involved in misperceptions. People who said they intended to vote this year for President George W. Bush were 3.7 times more likely than others to misperceive at least one of the three facts. One explanation: Bush and other high officials made statements that could be construed as encouraging the misperceptions.

## *Stop the Presses?*

"My Times" by Howell Raines, in *The Atlantic Monthly* (May 2004),  
77 N. Washington St., Boston, Mass. 02114.

Is the day nearing when *The New York Times* will be no more? That prospect—and not the scandal over reporter Jayson Blair's deceptions that led last year to Howell Raines's resignation as the paper's executive editor—is one of the more interesting subjects of this much-noted article.

When Raines took the helm of the *Times*, six days before the events of September 11, 2001, the paper's circulation had fallen by 100,000 or more from its early 1990s peaks of 1.8 million on Sundays and 1.2 million on weekdays. (Roughly a third of the papers are distributed in New York City, another third in the rest of New York State, New Jersey, and Connecticut, and the balance in the other 47 states.) Readers and potential readers—40 million of them, by one count—had become "smarter, more sophisticated, and broader in their range of curiosities and interests than the *Times* had," writes Raines. Though he assumes that newspapers will one day migrate entirely to the Web, the rivals he seems to fear the most all exist cur-

rently on paper; they include not just traditional daily competitors such as *The Wall Street Journal* but publications as various as *The New York Review of Books*, *The Economist*, and *Entertainment Weekly*.

In the top spot at the paper, Raines saw himself as a "change agent," and he engaged in a titanic struggle with "the newsroom's lethargy and complacency," its chronic slowness in anticipating the news, and its indifference to competition. The *Times*, he argues, remained strong in traditional areas, such as foreign-affairs reporting, but about culture, social trends, and business it had become stultifyingly dull: "One of our dirty little in-house secrets was that even we, who were paid to read it, often couldn't hack the Sunday paper."

The fall of the twin towers sparked a "magnificent" months-long effort at the *Times*, but the "culture of complaint" among certain segments of the staff was unrelenting. (Raines contributes some bitter complaints of his own about entrenched