

27 July 2002

Dear everyone,

This was going to be our Christmas letter but I never quite got to it in 2001. In any case, I didn't have much to say at the time.

The news¹

Our applications for permanent resident status, commonly known as the *green card*, were approved early last year, after 2½ years of filling in forms, standing in lines at the Immigration and Naturalization Service and then waiting. This means we can now apply for jobs wherever we like without worrying about work visas, stay as long as we like and we can go through the fast lane (actually, the not-so-slow/I-still-might-get-my-connecting-flight lane) when re-entering the US. What we can't do, in order of increasing disappointment is vote, work for a defense contractor, join the Marines, represent the US at the Olympics, or run for President.

Lan made a rushed trip to Australia in July last year when her father was very ill. She was hoping to make it to the hospital in Adelaide to see her father while he was still alive but unfortunately was just an hour and a half too late.

A happier visit was the one we both made in April. It was, of course, too short but it was wonderful to catch up with those of you we were able to see. One downside of working in the US is that most workers only get 2 weeks of holiday each year. We also had our 10-year wedding anniversary while we were in Adelaide.

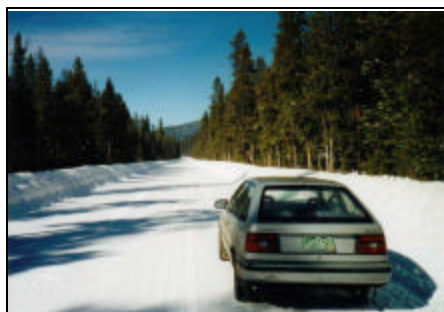
Lan started a new job with American Express when she came home as the previous job at Avaya was leaving her exhausted and the company was (and still is) in serious financial trouble so it didn't seem wise to stay. I'm still at Premier Data, where I've been since I got a work permit 2½ years ago. I'm still waiting on those stellar salaries that the computer industry promised but I've learnt a lot and most of the people there are very nice.

Some of my favorite people came to visit last July: Lan's sister Le and her two children Viet and Catherine. Being mid-summer, there wasn't a lot of snow about but we had a great time anyway with the highlight perhaps being the day we spent at the rodeo in Cheyenne, Wyoming which included a display by the Air Force Thunderbirds.. They had a l-o-n-g ride home from Denver though. Their travel agent had booked them to travel Denver to Los Angeles via *Cincinnati* (look on the map next page and see where it is!) so they could join their trans-Pacific flight.



Air Force Thunderbirds display team.

Early this year, Russell, a friend of mine from childhood came to call. There was lots of snow to show him. Since the road through the Rocky Mountains National Park was closed for winter, we debated whether it was even worth going but I have never seen the park look so enchanting.



Rocky Mountain National Park with snow-covered roads. Beautiful. Incidentally, our car is still running but it is getting tired, having recently passed 140,000 miles (or 225,000 km which sounds worse). It makes noises that worry me but I can't identify and has started blowing smoke. I considered converting it to electric but it would cost more than replacing the engine and transmission. We'll get a new car very soon.



It was very cold for a week in February turning fountains into ice sculptures. The tallest mound is about 5m high.

I finally finished my "associate degree" at the community college but I've given up on getting a real qualification, at least for the moment. I completed three subjects at the University of Denver but they were only prerequisites to enter their Masters program that is essentially the same as the Bachelors degree in Computer Science but with the maths and science removed. However, I was finding it increasingly difficult to study material I knew I would never use, such as

assembly language, when there was so much to learn that can be used immediately.

I normally think that following sports is a complete waste of time but I make an exception every four years for the World Cup. To paraphrase someone speaking about playing for the English national championships, *soccer is not a matter of life or death; it's more important than that*. With that in mind, I enjoyed watching the World Cup coverage—in Spanish! The ABC network had the rights to broadcast the games in America but they showed it live on cable TV only. Few Americans care and indeed in the first Sunday newspaper after the tournament started, coverage began on page 20 of the sports section following the baseball, basketball, golf, ice hockey, NASCAR, tennis, water polo, cricket, camel racing, darts, clay-pigeon shooting, fly-fishing, darts and Scrabble. OK, I lied about the cricket but you get the idea. Thanks to the huge Latin-American community though, the Spanish-language network Univision showed all the games on free-to-air TV. Their commentators *really* get into the game.

Colorado, along with much of the US and Mexico, has suffered drought with the result that forest fires have been early and fierce this summer. Denver was shrouded in smoke from nearby fires in early-June, much the way Sydney was last Christmas/New Year.

For no apparent reason, my skin problems have got out of control these last 9 months. I've had eczema since I was born but it was manageable. Unfortunately the only thing that is really effective is a drug that also rots out your insides if taken long-term, so I have the choice of falling apart from the inside out, or the outside in. For the last three weeks my face appeared sunburned and the skin kept falling off which looked and felt terrible. It suddenly got better this weekend, so I hope it stays that way.

New Orleans

On two occasions last year, we were victims of customer service as defined by United Airlines but we were duly compensated with travel vouchers that enabled us to fly almost for free to New Orleans. We spent four days in this culturally diverse and strategic city over the Memorial Day long weekend at the end of May and can say that we were pleased to visit once but never want to go back again.

The French arrived in 1718 to found *Nouvelle Orléans* so they had a port near the mouth of the Mississippi and since they already owned a good chunk of Canada, they claimed everything in between. Thrilled with their new possession, the French government set about boosting its population by giving prisoners one-way tickets to the new colony.

¹ To be followed by sport and weather

Sydney residents might notice some parallels at this point. Free settlers eventually came too and the city prospered shipping sugar and cotton from plantations where the labor was imported—from Africa in slave ships.



However, in 1763 the city's residents were dismayed to learn that in a deal between the European powers, France gave all its land west of the Mississippi, including New Orleans, to Spain. New construction was then in the Spanish-colonial style.

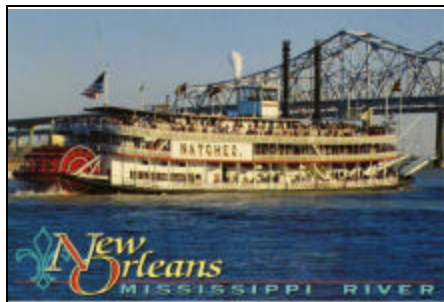


St Louis cathedral was completed 1794 but the Spanish style was changed in the 1850s with the addition of steeples. The man on the horse is Andrew Jackson, leader of the American forces in the Battle of New Orleans and later, America's seventh president.

In another re-alignment in 1802, France got Louisiana back again but immediately sold it to the new United States. Big trouble arrived in 1812 in the form of a fleet of British warships. The British were still displeased with America's declaration of independence and aimed to regain control. In the *Battle of New Orleans*, the British tried to take the city but the Americans were able to drive them back. Given the slow communications, both sides were unaware that a peace treaty had already been signed thousands of miles away.

The city really took off when steamboats were introduced after 1810 allowing cargo to

be shipped up the Mississippi rather than just floated down it. All the products of the interior flowed out through New Orleans and manufactured goods flowed the other way.



We took a short trip on the steamboat Natchez which has a very fine functioning steam engine. Rain falling over nearly half the US ends up in the Mississippi River and flows under the bridge in the background.



Wealthy merchants and landowners built elegant homes such as this one in the Garden District. I was amazed at the proximity of the rich and poor in the city—the Garden District is on one side of Jackson St. and there is a slum on the other. Cross the river from the CBD and tourist areas and there is another slum.

I mentioned in an earlier letter after visiting a plantation in South Carolina that the house was nothing like *Tara* in *Gone with the Wind*. Throughout the South, plantations were destroyed during the Civil War and in any case, owners generally lived in town, not on the land. *Nottaway*, not far from New Orleans, was an exception on both counts.



***Nottaway*—as big as *Tara* only real. Many of the rooms once had a fine view of the Mississippi but now have a fine view of a 40ft/12m levee bank which is not as attractive but has the practical benefit of holding back the occasional flood.**

One of the Union commanders had been a guest at the house and knew the slaves there

were treated well, so he ordered a Union camp be set up on the riverbank adjacent to the house. Passing gunboats would know not to fire on it and passing troops would not burn it. An Australian now owns it!

The city fell on hard time after the Civil War ended in 1865. The plantations could not afford to pay their former slaves a proper wage and railways across the West reduced the need for riverboats. Eventually though, the river was dredged allowing huge barges to go north as far as Minneapolis and tourists started coming—at first in small numbers and now in enormous herds. At times I had the impression there were more of us than there were local residents.

There is a huge lake to the north of the city and a bridge across it! It looks to me like a “pork” project—some congressman won Federal money to build a bridge, even if there was not much on the other end.



Bridge to infinity as far as you can tell. It is 24 miles/38km long! From the middle you can't see either shore, as the surrounding land is flat and low.



Sorry. I can't explain this except to say it is Lan standing in front of a plastic fish dressed as a policeman swallowing someone in convict attire.

September 11 and all that

The day of the attacks started normally enough. I dropped Lan off at her office, turned on the radio and then drove on to my office a few miles away. It was only half an hour after the first plane hit the World Trade Center and the normal program had been interrupted but it was clear that nobody had a clue what had happened. At work a little while later, someone told me that a plane had crashed into the WTC and I asked if it was foggy in New York. It wasn't. You may be aware that a bomber got lost in heavy fog in 1945 and flew into the Empire State Building.

Obviously, it soon became clear that the crashes were not accidents. It was a horrific event and it is beyond imagination what it must have been like for those trapped on the upper floors to feel the building give way beneath them. Still, it is amazing that the carnage was not worse. The last official toll I saw was 2830 killed, a very small fraction of the buildings' full occupancy. It is a great credit to the architects that both buildings withstood the initial impact and stayed up for two hours allowing most to escape.

While is debatable whether the attacks could have been prevented, it was disappointing to hear the head of the NSC say at a press conference months later, *"I don't think anybody could have predicted that these people ... would try to use an airplane as a missile."* Given that Japanese kamikazes had pioneered the technique, I thought it would be especially appropriate to fly a plane into a Japanese whaling ship as a protest but I hadn't thought of hijacking an airliner to do it. Other people have though and it has actually been attempted twice before, both in 1994. One was an Air France jet bound for Paris, hijacked before it left the ground in Algeria². The plan was to fly into the Eiffel Tower but the plane landed in Marseilles to take on extra fuel allowing French commandos to storm the plane. The other was in America. Read the amazing but largely unknown story of FedEx flight 705 at www.suite101.com/article.cfm/history_of_flight/79391

The attacks brought out both the best and worst of America. The out-pouring of generosity after the attacks was unbelievable both in cash donations and offers of all help imaginable. I thought of donating blood but when I called, there was a recorded message saying that the earliest the center could see me was over a month away. Sadly, little blood was needed, as few were injured—people either got away physically unhurt or they were killed.

There were attacks against Muslims but as others sought understanding, conversions to Islam quadrupled! I was pleased that the President made a special point of saying that the vast majority of American Muslims were worthy citizens and deserved our support and not hatred. The country was covered in American flags and a many cars sport stickers proclaiming "United we stand". There were rallies and speeches. However, there is a fine line between patriotism and nationalism and I read an article expressing a minority opinion that the display of national pride reminded the author of the Nazi Nuremberg rallies.

If you must be killed, it is certainly better to do it as part of a large group—US\$1.4 billion

was raised to help the families of victims and others adversely affected such as those who lost their jobs. As bad as it was, fewer people were killed on 11th September than an average month on America's roads. Get killed by a drunk driver and there are no telethons, no memorial funds, no interest. Sadly, some of the money raised has been at the expense of other worthwhile causes. One large concert to raise money for AIDS in Africa was converted at the last minute to a concert to aid victims of the attacks.

At the risk of being controversial, I want to say that I believe the "war on terrorism" is a sham. Its fundamental problem is that it is fighting the *symptoms* and not the *disease*.

It seems to me that there are two ways to deal with hatred directed against the United States. One way is to make the country a harder target to hit by improving intelligence, tightening airport security, increasing defense spending and so on. The other is to look inward ask why some people hate America so much that they are willing to kill themselves to harm us and then see if we can modify our behavior to be less offensive.



An amazing photo of a tourist on the observation deck of the WTC just before it was hit by a plane—but it's a FAKE³.

There has been effectively *zero* effort by political figures to answer the question posed by the second option. The symptom is terrorism but the disease is an arrogant and inconsistent foreign policy. Immediately after the attacks, an Arab sheik gave \$10 million to New York to help the victims but made some comments that perhaps some aspects of American foreign policy were fueling the rage that led to the attacks. His money was returned. There will be no

³ This photo did the rounds of the Internet in late September. The story was that it was from a camera recovered from the rubble and that the FBI had released the photo though not the identity of the tourist. There are many things wrong with the picture indicating it is a fake: <http://www.blueeartharts.com/uhoh.htm> and <http://www.truthorfiction.com/rumors/lastpic.htm>. If you can accept it as a joke (and that may be hard for some), you might be interested to know that the same man was in the car in Dallas with JFK, was at the crash of the *Hindenburg* and so on. There are hundreds of "photos": <http://www.touristofdeath.com> <http://www.waldoconspiracy.com/>

discussion of policy. Indeed, statements such as "they hate our freedom" by the President only serve to obscure the real issues as it suggests that those who hate America are irrational and want to take away our fundamental rights.

Most Americans are kind, decent people and would be horrified to know that much of what is done by America outside the country takes away the freedom of other peoples. If only the media reported it⁴.

America's policies in the Middle East appear to be based on two principles: ensuring the continuing flow of cheap oil and unquestioning support for Israel.

The former ensures that brutal and corrupt regimes are supported throughout much of the Arab world. Although the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia is almost as bleak as Afghanistan under the Taliban, there is no criticism. Saddam Hussein was America's friend in the region before the Gulf War, despite using poison gas against the Kurdish minority because he fought against the Iranians who, in a popular revolution, had humiliated America by sweeping aside the hated Shah and took embassy staff hostage for over a year.

The latter means that Palestinian rights are ignored and that American-made weapons are used to attack them. I think few Americans know that *three* Palestinians have been killed for every Israeli but Israel presents itself as the victim. A forgotten footnote to the Gulf War was that Saddam Hussein offered to withdraw his forces from Kuwait if Israel would withdraw from the areas they took by force in the 1967 Six Day War. The offer was ignored, so while Iraqi occupation of Kuwait was unacceptable and would be repelled by force, Israeli occupation of the "Occupied Territories" continues to this day. American politicians say they support Israel because it shares our democratic values which is true to an extent, though you can make a case that the population movements that accompanied Israeli's founding in 1948 would today be called "ethnic cleansing", so many potential voters are excluded. What they don't mention is political contributions: check for yourself on the web site of Center for Responsive Politics⁵. Pro-Israel groups gave more in the 2000 election cycle than the pro-gun lobby, though less than the tobacco industry.

Just in case you were worried about me, I'd like to say that I'm against all oppression, no

⁴ ABC's *Nightline* program is a notable exception. On the general topic of bias in US media, read this fascinating comparison of coverage after both the Soviets and the US shot down civilian airliners: <http://www.fair.org/extra/best-of-extra/kal007-iranair655.html>

⁵ www.opensecrets.org

² <http://www.msnbc.com/news/635213.asp>

matter who is doing the oppressing: it was wrong for Nazis to kill Jews but it is also wrong for Israelis to kill Palestinians and take their land.

Hardening America against attack, while failing to address the root causes of terrorism, appears doomed to failure. The Vice President is right when he said it is only a matter of "when" and not "if". It is not possible to protect everything all the time. Given the demonstrated effectiveness of flying a large plane into a tall building but the new difficulties of hijacking a plane, I predict that next time, the terrorists will just **buy their own plane**. You read it here first. I did some poking around the Internet and it appears you can buy a very used 707 or even a 747 for US\$1 to \$2 million. It only has to make a few flights. I couldn't find any prices but I suspect old Soviet airliners are almost being given away.

Since September 11, America has given its enemies even more reasons to hate it. It appears that American bombs have killed more Afghan civilians than Americans were killed in the terror attacks⁶, the President has told the Palestinians to elect someone else as their leader while describing Ariel Sharon as a "man of peace"⁷. American's would rightly be outraged if, for example, the Chinese told Americans that they refuse to deal with Mr. Bush until they elect someone else. Prisoners taken in the "war against terrorism" are not accorded "prisoner of war" status. We will probably never know what really happened but it appears that the US gave at least a wink and a nod to the military coup that overthrew the democratically elected government of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela.

Perhaps more worrying because it has received so little attention, are actions in the ex-Soviet republics of central Asia, some of which surround the Caspian oil fields. To its credit, America had been trying to promote democracy and an open society but that has ended. Given the new willingness of the US to fight Islamic fundamentalism, some dictators in these countries have allowed, even invited, America to establish military bases on their soil for the "war against terrorism". However, Islamic groups are often the only credible opposition and America has looked the other way while press freedoms have been curtailed, leaders have

been arrested and much of the oil wealth has gone in the pockets of a tiny elite. Now that they are there, the bases may now be more important to protect the rapidly growing interests of US oil companies.

If you missed it, I urge you read a refreshing alternative view on America in "Beyond Good and Evil", an essay that appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald⁸.

And in other news

Some of you with long memories will recall that one of the principle reasons we came to the US was to be a tourist and that the original intention was to stay for 9–12 months. That was over 7 years ago now so we feel that we have "done" Denver and surrounding areas and it is time to move on. We made that decision about a year ago, just as the job market was drying up. Lan has been applying for jobs Chicago, Washington, Boston and New York but so far without success. Since her job pays better than mine, it will be her job that determines when and where we go. Strangely, ever since the terrorist attacks, I've been drawn to New York even more. It is expensive but there is so much to see in the city and will serve as a great base to see the rest of the north-east, including the major Canadian cities. Something will come up eventually.

"It's all based on the Constitution"

Many of you will probably recognize this as being a quote from *The Castle*, the movie we now regard as the best movie ever made anywhere. Seriously though, two interesting constitutional issues have come up recently.

The first has received very little attention. As I commented in an earlier letter, the 2nd amendment says, "*A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.*" While pro-gun groups focus on the second part about the "right to ... bear arms" and politicians have done little to publicly argue otherwise, the government's official position has been that the unrestricted right to bear arms belongs to "militias", now the National Guard. At the time the Constitution was written, there was no

national army, so the nation's defense relied on local militias made up of regular folks who would be part-time soldiers. The Supreme Court has never directly ruled on the issue but lower courts have almost all taken this interpretation. However, the Bush administration recently filed a court brief indicating that it believed the right *does* apply to individuals. The National Rifle Association has won a huge victory.

The other concerns the "Pledge of Allegiance". School children in many states recite a pledge each morning that includes the words "under God". However, the Constitution demands the separation of church and state and a court one level below the Supreme Court has ruled that forcing children to recite this phrase is unconstitutional. The court said it would be no more acceptable to say "under Krishna" or even "under no god". Although coins and notes say "In God we trust" and a prayer is said in Congress each day, the court has been very restrictive when children are involved so public prayer in school is also forbidden. Christian conservatives⁹, who hold substantial political power and normally rush to support the Constitution, have been outraged. Politicians rushed to defend the phrase with virtually the entire Congress rushing to recite the pledge for the TV cameras. Interestingly, the pledge was written by a socialist and the words "under God" were only added in 1954 to make Americans remember why they were different from the evil communists. The issue is almost certain to be reviewed by the Supreme Court.

Bumper stickers

I regret I don't have many to share with you, even though it has been a year and a half since our last newsletter. Anyway, those I have seen are good:

Last time we mixed politics with religion, people got burned at the stake.

Don't do it.

Vegetarian: Indian for lousy hunter.

Never underestimate the power of stupid people in large groups.

I think. Therefore I am dangerous.

Dogs have masters; cats have staff.

Well, that's all for now. Send us an email (to LanPeter@POBox.com) or a note when you get a chance. We love to hear your news too.

- Peter and Lan

⁶ See report by Marc Herold of the Uni. of New Hampshire <http://www.democracynow.org/thndtrmb.doc> and <http://pubpages.unh.edu/~mwherold/AfghanDailyCount.xls>

⁷ Yassir Arafat may well be "compromised by terror" but so is Ariel Sharon, though I would argue, only more so. His own government found him "indirectly responsible" for massacres in Lebanese refugee camps in 1982 that killed at least a thousand Palestinians. Documents leaked since the inquiry indicate more direct control. For a summary of his work gaining land at the expense of peace <http://www.danpal.dk/vidensbase/bagerund/bg-033.htm>

⁸ http://www.richardneville.com/Content_Cafe/Beyondgoodandevil.html

Also, I think most people are bewildered at why anyone would kill thousands of innocent civilians to further their cause. It turns out that the use of civilians as military targets is a relatively recent phenomenon, dating only from WWII. In the early stages of the war, both the RAF and the Luftwaffe avoided some military targets for fear of hurting civilians. I highly recommend that you read this fascinating article on the subject: <http://bostonreview.mit.edu/BR20.4/Forbes.html>

⁹ Also called "religious conservatives" though I think "neo-fascist" is more appropriate for some of them.