



From Concept to Story: *Time* Magazine and “America at 300 Million”

Since it first started to publish in 1923, the general news magazine *Time* had regularly featured ambitious stories about social conditions, from the state of public education to poverty or religion. Such broad-concept stories were not easy to produce; editors wrestled with the challenge of how to translate a wide-ranging topic with dozens of possible angles into a few pages of concrete, tightly-written prose and pictures. The choices of what to include and what to leave out could be agonizing.

In the fall of 2006, *Time* Graphics Director Jackson Dykman faced this challenge, with a twist. Editors had decided to produce a snapshot of who Americans are—to be told all in graphics. The news peg was that the US population would soon hit 300 million. The *Time* article would function as a mirror held up to the face of the nation. How to accomplish that was left up to Dykman.

Although he was a frequent contributor to others’ pieces, Dykman had never undertaken such a large project for *Time*. He had a scant three weeks to decide what to include in the story, pull together a team, assign them to research specific topics, design the layout, and rush the piece into print. Keenly aware of the looming deadline, Dykman worked feverishly to assemble the components of the graphics project—which was soon elevated to likely status as the cover story. But two days before the piece went to press, he had completed only two “spreads” (two-page exhibits) out of five planned.

As he prepared for the home stretch, Dykman took a late-night call that threw his production schedule into disarray. Because the 2006 midterm elections were approaching, Managing Editor Richard Stengel wanted Dykman to add something new—a spread on Americans’ political affiliations. The request left Dykman reeling.

This case was written by Kathleen Gilsinan for the Knight Case Studies Initiative, Graduate School of Journalism, Columbia University. The faculty sponsor was Professor Michael Shapiro. The Columbia Center for New Media Teaching and Learning (CCNMTL) produced the multimedia, online product. Josh Stanley was the project coordinator, and Zarina Mustapha was the website designer. Funding was provided by the Knight Foundation. TIME Magazine material © Time Inc. used with permission. (1007)

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The graphics director wanted to satisfy Stengel. But he wondered whether a politics spread would fit well with his other pages—which emphasized lifestyle and tried to debunk some of the myths Americans told themselves. He also felt he had nothing new to add to *Time*’s political coverage and no pressing argument to make. Was a graphic illustration of party affiliations really the best way to present the nuanced and important story of how Americans vote? Finally, should he aim to give Stengel what he wanted regardless of the quality of the graphic he was likely to be able to produce in 24 hours?

Background: “American Mirror”

The idea for an all-graphics story had originated two years earlier with Nancy Gibbs, an editor at large. *Time* produced a number of themed issues, called annuities, every year. The most famous was “Person of the Year,” an in-depth profile of a particularly newsworthy or influential individual. Such themed issues, published around the same date each year, were popular with advertisers because they could use the publication schedule to plan in advance the issues in which they would purchase space.

In the fall of 2004, *Time* was considering introducing some new annuities into the mix. Pondering the alternatives, Gibbs remembered that comparative statistics—ranking best places to live or top vacation destinations or most popular cars—were a consistent hit with readers. “People love comparing their community to others or reading about themselves,” she reasons. “People love lists.”¹ Gibbs began to consider the statistical measures *Time* could present to foster other revealing comparisons. States could be ranked by their residents’ state of health, education level, or divorce rates. They could be explored through the lenses of drug abuse, population density, or average earnings. Because there was no limit to the ways of measuring Americans, there was potentially no limit to the feature. Gibbs therefore suggested that this could be another annuity—one that would “hold up a mirror” to America. She dubbed it “American Mirror.”

Since Gibbs was proposing a story told with statistics, however, she reasoned that a written article would not be the best vehicle for it. “None of this makes sense to just write in prose,” she says. “It all screams to be told visually.” She presented her idea as an opportunity to take advantage of *Time*’s strength in graphics.

Graphics at *Time*

Gibbs wanted specifically to take advantage of *Time*’s Graphics Director, Jackson Dykman. Then-Managing Editor James Kelly had hired Dykman away from a similar position at the Washington Post in 2001, and since then *Time*’s graphics had occupied an increasingly central role in the magazine. Kelly recalls that after Dykman’s arrival, *Time* printed a freestanding, two-page

¹ Author’s interview with Nancy Gibbs, on April 3, 2007, in New York City. All further quotes from Gibbs, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

graphic spread almost every week. “They’re very popular with readers,” says Kelly.² Dykman had produced such spreads about straightening the Leaning Tower of Pisa, selecting a new pope, and pulling a sunken Navy warship out of the Atlantic. Their role in the magazine was to present a great deal of information in an appealing, accessible way.

Such self-contained projects were only one component of Dykman’s job, however. He was also responsible for producing charts and maps that were embedded into written stories in order to amplify them or strengthen a point. Larger graphics of perhaps several pages often accompanied *Time*’s coverage of broad topics.

Dykman’s position was therefore unique in *Time*’s hierarchy. The magazine was divided into sections according to subject—such as Nation, World, Business, and Science. A section editor managed a staff of reporters in each. Dykman, however, contributed to every section, and did not report to any one section editor. Though these editors frequently requested his input, Dykman had a great deal of autonomy in choosing the projects he wished to undertake. His only direct superiors were the art director and the managing editor, both of whom also gave him wide latitude.

Dykman—a reporter, writer, and artist in his own right—managed his own team of two reporters and three artists. Graphics reporters, he notes, concentrated on statistical and visual data, rather than quotes and narratives. They required facility with numbers and their meaning. “To achieve a visualization,” Dykman says, “you have to ask a completely different set of questions” from those required to achieve a narrative story.³ Dykman’s three artists used the data reporters uncovered to design graphics. Dykman coordinated these efforts, in addition to contributing his own reporting and art. The graphics department’s goal, as Dykman describes it, was “to tell stories in interesting and different ways that aren’t solid pages of text.”

To do so, Dykman had to identify what data could be paired with *Time*’s written content in a compelling visual display. His job required him to stay on top of all the stories *Time* planned to publish, so that he could suggest which reports, polls, or research could enhance those stories. “I read endless reports and studies,” he says. *Time* held daily editorial meetings at 10 a.m. for the magazine’s writers and editors to offer ideas and discuss the progress of the week’s issue. Dykman’s role at these meetings was to propose—based on his wide reading—maps, charts, or other graphics to complement *Time*’s narrative content.

Fortunately, Dykman had abilities and a personality to match these duties. He had a nearly photographic memory; he recalls the irritation of one editor at the Washington Post when she noticed that Dykman was not taking notes during a training session. She soon realized, however, that Dykman did not need to take notes. He was also a contrarian, drawn to examining societal

² Author’s interview with James Kelly, on April 12, 2007, in New York City. All further quotes from Kelly, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

³ Author’s interview with Jackson Dykman, on April 5, 2007, in New York City. All further quotes from Dykman, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

“truths” in order to correct mistaken hypotheses or faulty data. He drew ideas from a wide variety of sources: sometimes a report published the previous week, sometimes trivia he had learned several years before. “I just remember,” he says.

On the Shelf

Still, Dykman had never in his tenure at *Time* undertaken a project of the scope Gibbs envisioned. He was enthusiastic about the idea but busy with the requirements of the weekly magazine. Managing Editor Kelly was also interested in the project, but saw no immediate opportunity to print it. “I think it was just a matter of the news getting in the way,” Kelly recalls. For one thing, it would have required the graphics department to take three to four weeks to concentrate only on that project. The Iraq war dominated the news in 2004, and when Hurricane Katrina ravaged the Gulf Coast in 2005, *Time* devoted substantial resources to covering the aftermath. In short, Kelly could not spare the staff required to produce “American Mirror.” For another thing, Kelly says, “it was a good idea with no tremendous urgency behind it.” A story about America would always be timely. “It’s the nature of journalism,” adds Dykman, “that things that can wait, do wait.”

Meanwhile, *Time* was changing. Norman Pearlstine, who had for 10 years been the editor-in-chief of Time Inc.—*Time* magazine’s parent company, which published some 130 titles—retired in 2005, bequeathing the post and the oversight of Time Inc.’s magazines to John Huey. According to *New York Magazine*, Huey was eager to “blow up” *Time*.⁴ To that end, one of his first tasks as the sixth editor-in-chief of Time Inc. was to give its flagship magazine new leadership. In June 2006, he replaced the managing editor, the publication’s top post. Instead of Kelly, Richard Stengel would run the magazine.

Stengel would have a mandate to adapt the newsweekly for a 21st century readership. As news consumers came increasingly to rely on the Web for breaking news, weekly news magazines struggled to stay relevant. They also struggled to stay economically solvent. *Time*’s circulation, along with that of its main competitors, *Newsweek* and *US News & World Report*, was plummeting. Industry-wide newsstand sales had fallen by more than 4 percent in the first half of 2006. But *Time* had experienced by far the largest drop, losing 24 percent of its newsstand sales compared to the previous year.⁵ Its staff, like that at *Newsweek*, had been shrinking steadily since the 1980s—between 2005 and 2006, *Time*’s staff decreased by about 38 people, or nearly 14 percent.⁶ This was the magazine Stengel inherited.⁷

⁴ Joe Hagan, “The Time of Their Lives,” *New York Magazine*, March, 2007.

⁵ Reuters, “Newsstand Magazine Sales Fell in the First Six Months of 2006,” *New York Times*, August 22, 2006.

⁶ Project for Excellence in Journalism, “The State of the News Media 2007,” Magazines, News Investment. The Project for Excellence in Journalism evaluates magazines’ staff sizes by counting the individuals listed on the masthead.

⁷ Katharine Q. Seelye, “Richard Stengel is Chosen to be Top Editor at Time,” *New York Times*, May 18, 2006.

Choosing Covers

As managing editor, Stengel was ultimately responsible for *Time's* content. While *Time* had a staff of 226, including reporters, photographers, artists, and editors, it was Stengel who held ultimate responsibility for the magazine's material.⁸ With his team of top editors, Stengel directed the magazine's coverage and, perhaps most importantly, chose its cover every week. Part of the job was to choose compelling artwork and text to display. But far more critical was the decision about which article from all those in development would become that week's cover story.

Economics. Kelly, Stengel's predecessor as managing editor, describes *Time's* cover as its "main selling mechanism." A compelling cover could generate impressive newsstand sales over and above *Time's* subscription sales. In 2006, Stengel's first year as managing editor, *Time* sold an average of about 130,000 magazines a week at newsstands. Its best-selling issue that year, on April 6, urged from the cover, "Be Worried. Be Very Worried" about global warming. It sold more than 200,000 copies.⁹

Newsstand sales, however, constituted less than 4 percent of the magazine's overall circulation, which exceeded 4 million copies a week on average.¹⁰ A proliferation of celebrity magazines had relegated *Time* and news magazines like it to less prominent positions on the newsstand. "Ten years ago," says Kelly, "you'd go to a newsstand in Rockefeller Center and right there in front would be *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Business Week*, *The Economist*, *US News*. You go there now, and more likely than not... it's four or five of these celebrity magazines." Magazines paid for newsstand space, or "pockets," and highly visible pockets were expensive. Since subscriptions comprised almost 97 percent of *Time's* circulation, there was little need to invest in costly, prominent pockets.¹¹

But newsstand revenue was not the only consideration that went into the managing editor's cover selection. A magazine that consistently looked intriguing on the newsstand was capable of generating what Kelly calls "subscriber appeal." According to Kelly, "covers that tend to be popular on the newsstand are also covers that tend to be popular with subscribers."

Philosophy. *Time's* covers also had to reflect the mission of the magazine. The magazine's iconic cover, with its thick red border, was in Kelly's mind both a great asset and a great responsibility. "[The red border is] one of the most recognizable magazine brands," Kelly told the

⁸ Project for Excellence in Journalism, "The State of the News Media 2007," Magazines, News Investment.

⁹ Author's telephone interview with James Kelly, on May 15, 2007.

¹⁰ Audit Bureau of Circulations, Paid & Verified Magazine Publisher's Statement, TIME-The Weekly Newsmagazine, for the six months ended December 31, 2006.

¹¹ Stores and newsstand vendors also exercised some control over the placement of magazines.

media website mediabistro.com in 2003. “But a story has got to be awfully good to deserve that red border.”¹²

Choosing the right cover story was all the more challenging because there was only one a week. Newspapers, Kelly points out, could print several stories on the front page every day, but *Time* had no such luxury. As a result, Kelly notes, “the cover for a magazine like *Time* was really important in getting the reader’s attention and setting the tone of the magazine.” He estimates that as managing editor he spent fully a fourth of his time on covers – “thinking about, executing, editing, regretting covers.” Kelly continues: “You try to make statements with covers that support the grand statement you want to make about the magazine.”

Stengel also considered choosing covers critical--“the single most important job of the managing editor.”¹³ He explains: “The cover to me is the one chance we have to break through the media clutter.” In Stengel’s view, the cover represented a weekly opportunity to explain *Time*’s mission. Stengel saw *Time*’s role as explaining current events in an accessible and comprehensive way. He wanted readers to trust *Time* as the source that would make sense of complicated issues for them; he hoped that the magazine could be “one-stop shopping” for curious readers overwhelmed by the variety of news sources on the Web.

When Stengel learned about Gibbs’ “American Mirror” proposal, he felt that it fit well with his conception of the magazine’s mission. He was inclined to test some version of “American Mirror” as a cover story. “I loved the idea of doing a completely graphic cover story, which I think had never been done before,” he recalls. “I liked the idea of testing... whether this could be an annuity... and it would be hard to test that, I think, if it wasn’t on the cover.” The newsstand sales such a cover generated would offer a measure of readers’ interest in the feature.

But Stengel, too, saw no immediate opportunity to print “American Mirror.” It was not until Gibbs, the project’s originator, was on book leave and Dykman, the project’s predetermined director, was on vacation that Nation Editor Lisa Beyer noticed a news peg for “American Mirror.” Inconveniently, that peg was fast approaching.

A Chance to See Print

Sunday, October 1, marked the last day of the single week’s vacation Graphics Director Dykman took in 2006. It was also the only day that week that he checked his work email. Nation Editor Beyer had forwarded him an exchange that had transpired in his absence. He recalls:

¹² Jesse Oxfeld, “So What Do You Do, Jim Kelly?” Interview with James Kelly for mediabistro.com, October 21, 2003.

¹³ Author’s interview with Richard Stengel, on April 12, 2007, in New York City. All further quotes from Stengel, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

Somebody had pointed out that the population of the US would hit 300 million sometime in mid-October, and then there was a bunch of back and forth about what we should do about it. Then somebody suggested... dredg[ing] up the old idea for the American Mirror project... The last message, the one that came to me, was: 'Do you think you could do this project by October 20?'

Dykman was stunned. The suggested due date would leave him with a scant three weeks to complete the assignment, which struck him as "a crazy amount of time to bite off something like this." He discerned that the project could become a cover story. Given the average length of *Time's* cover features, this meant he would have to fill perhaps a dozen pages. He also knew that he had to spend the week of October 2 working on that week's issue of the magazine, giving him only two weeks to devote his entire attention to whatever "American Mirror" would become. The graphics department, furthermore, had never undertaken a project this big; Dykman had no template, no strategy, and virtually no guidance from any other department. "Nobody was conceiving this project or editing this thing," Dykman recalls. "It was 'let's do that 300 million thing,' and that was it."

Dykman considered declining the assignment. On the other hand, Gibbs' "American Mirror" concept was already two years old. Dykman had liked it, and had occasionally discussed it with Gibbs throughout 2005. This was Dykman's first opportunity to get the project into the magazine. By Monday, Dykman had begun to see the population milestone as a "now-or-never-moment" for his graphics department. "I could... keep talking about it for the next 10 years or just do it," Dykman says. He told Beyer that day he would do it.

The first week of October, Dykman started monitoring the Census Population Clock. The United States Census, in addition to collecting exhaustive information about features of the American population, also counted US residents. It calculated the population's growth rate using data about births, deaths, and immigration. It displayed this information in the "US Population Clock," a section of its website that kept a running tally of US residents. In October 2006, the Census estimated that there was a birth every seven seconds, a death every 13 seconds, and an international arrival every 31 seconds.¹⁴ Taken in tandem, this meant the resident US population increased by one person every 11 seconds on average.

Noticing this growth rate, Dykman realized that his October 20 due date, while unsettlingly near, was also too late. By the Census' estimate, the US population would reach 300 million nearly a week before he could get anything into the magazine.

¹⁴ United States Census, "Nation's Population to Reach 300 Million October 17," October 12, 2006.

Crafting a Wish List

Dykman got started anyway. His challenge, as he saw it, was not only to translate a large and amorphous concept into a print format, but to find numbers that lent themselves to understandable, enlightening graphics. “We’re a country obsessed with quantifying things about ourselves that actually reveal very little about ourselves,” he says. He wondered which statistics, out of all the ways of measuring Americans, could be meaningful. The goal was to illustrate who Americans are, and the question in Dykman’s mind was: *what* about us?

The answer could take any number of forms, ranging from which movies Americans watch to how religious they are, from how much they spend on donuts to how much they make each year. Dykman had sketched a possible approach when he had learned of the “American Mirror” project in 2004. He had been at lunch with then-Executive Editor Priscilla Painton who, intrigued by the idea of telling a story exclusively through graphics and statistics, was explaining Gibbs’ idea to Dykman. He had taken a Post-It Note from his pocket and sketched a possible approach: produce a number of themed double-page spreads, each illustrating a different facet of American life.

As he considered how to address the vast topic of “who we are,” he resurrected the idea from the two-year-old Post-It Note. First, he wrote down a list of themes. He wanted to choose topics that would capture significant features of American life. At the same time, he wished to present data that could challenge his readers’ assumptions. Numerous subjects seemed to require careful exploration, from crime to health, education, and religion.

Demographics. The news peg of the 300 millionth American, in Dykman’s view, forced him to open the piece with a spread on demographics. This spread would lead into the other spreads as an “overall portrait of the current US population” and how it reached 300 million. The demographics spread should be fairly straightforward; he could construct an entire display using Census data. Finding the rest of the Census data would be, he imagined, “kind of [like shooting] fish in a barrel.” Nonetheless, Dykman would have to make choices.

a) Traits. For example, he could illustrate the nation’s growth over time, or its ethnic composition, or its age distribution. Or, mused Dykman, he could examine the proportion of US residents who were immigrants, and their countries of origin.

b) Distribution. He could also include a display of how 300 million Americans were distributed throughout the nation. He already had a population density map that one of *Time*’s artists, Joe Lertola, had fashioned as an experiment a year and a half before. “It was just so darn cool I had to find a way to get it into the magazine,” Dykman says.

Crime. Dykman felt that a spread on crime would be one effective way to dispel some common public misunderstandings. He considered three possible approaches.

a) Rates. Dykman had worked with crime statistics for several years at the Washington Post, and he had long been fascinated by what he considered Americans' irrational fear of random crime. "Random crime is virtually nonexistent in this country," he says, yet it was feared out of proportion to its frequency. A graphic could make that rarity vivid.

b) Prisons. The US also imprisoned more people per capita than any other country.¹⁵ Perhaps he could chart which prisons held how many prisoners, or compare the number of US prisoners with those of other countries.

c) Location. Dykman might also explore the changing trends in where crime occurred. He knew that small and medium-sized cities were experiencing large increases in crime rates.¹⁶ Dykman muses:

Per capita, you have a 40-50 percent higher chance of being murdered in Columbus [Ohio] than New York. Yet which do we think of as the pure American heartland? You're wildly safer in the South Bronx than you are in Columbus... That's just the truth of this data... [And] there is a way to empirically present... the truth about crime.

Health. Dykman also considered fashioning a spread on healthcare, on which the US spent more per capita than any other industrialized nation in the world, including those with universal medical care.¹⁷ Dykman wondered not only why this was the case, but why many Americans did not realize it. Most citizens believed, he says, that "we have the best healthcare system in the world. It's not really true." He recalls thinking:

We get worse results with our allegedly greatest medical system in the world. We have a higher infant mortality rate, we have much higher rates of disease, we have lower life expectancies than almost all of Western Europe and Asia... These are just facts you can present, and I don't have to write an article saying 'We must have socialized medicine.'

Dykman thought about two ways to depict what he viewed as the dire state of healthcare in the US.

¹⁵ International Center for Prison Studies, "World Prison Population Totals," King's College, London, 2006.

¹⁶ Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Preliminary Crime Statistics for 2005," Press Release, June 12, 2006.

¹⁷ World Health Organization, "World Health Organization Assesses the World's Health Systems," Press Release, June 21, 2000.

See also: World Health Organization, "Annex Table 3—Selected national health accounts indicators: measured levels of per capita expenditure on health, 1999-2003," *The World Health Report 2006*, pp. 186-189.

a) Comparative statistics. He could illustrate how the US compared to other countries according to several measures of wellbeing. The US infant mortality rate, for example, was among the worst in the industrialized world.¹⁸ The US also had significantly higher rates of rates of mortality from heart disease than most of Western Europe and Asia.¹⁹

b) Preventive Care. Dykman also found it alarming that the US healthcare system devoted proportionately so few resources to preventive healthcare. A recent study had found that Americans incurred an “overwhelming preponderance” of their health care costs in the last years of their lives.²⁰ Dykman viewed this as clear evidence that preventive care was comparatively neglected.

Religion. The subject of Americans’ beliefs was another that Dykman felt deserved critical scrutiny. He considered two ways of approaching a spread about religion.

a) Who’s in Church? “There’s lots of empirical evidence that Americans aren’t nearly as religious as they profess,” he says. “Most of these themes come from... arguments I have with myself. The religion thing started because I had an argument: darn it, people aren’t as religious as they say they are.” He continues:

Religious [studies tend] to be about polling, and people lie to pollsters.
The odd thing is, people will tell the truth about money, they’ll tell the
truth about sex, and they’ll lie about religion to pollsters all the time.

He had long wanted to address this subject in the magazine. About 10 years earlier, he had read a study that compared 30 years of polling data on church attendance. The authors found that the number of Americans who reported attending church every week had held steady at around 40 percent for the entire period. But counting the number of people in church yielded a much lower rate of attendance—closer to 20 percent.²¹

Meanwhile, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, a statistical research agency serving the federal government, had also been gathering data on this subject. The Bureau collected information on labor economics and statistics, and in the course of such work, it had undertaken a time use survey to determine how Americans spent their days. Thousands of respondents recounted their activities, minute by minute, to the Bureau’s researchers. “Nobody ever mentions going to church,” Dykman says. They reported precisely how many minutes they spent watching TV, taking care of children,

¹⁸ Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, “Chart 1.20—Infant and Neonatal Mortality Rates, 2003,” *Health at A Glance—OECD Indicators 2005*, pp. 30-31.

¹⁹ Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, “Chart 1.10—Ischaemic heart disease, mortality rates, 2002,” *Health at A Glance—OECD Indicators 2005*, pp. 24-25.

²⁰ Joanne Lynn, David M. Adamson, “Living Well at the End of Life: Adapting Health Care to Serious Chronic Illness in Old Age,” RAND Corporation White Paper, 2003.

²¹ C. Kirk Hadaway, Penny Long Marler, and Mark Chaves, “What the Polls Don’t Show: A Closer Look at US Church Attendance,” *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 58, Issue 6, December 1993, pp. 741-753.

or doing housework, but far fewer than 40 percent mentioned church.²² “But if you poll those same people,” Dykman emphasizes, “40 percent say they go to church. There has always been this creeping evidence of things like that, which I always found really interesting.”

b) Baylor Survey. By an accident of good timing, Dykman had read a study that week that offered a fresh and timely examination of American religion. Sociologists at Texas’ Baylor University had produced a study called *American Piety in the 21st Century*, during the course of which researchers asked nearly 2,000 participants 29 questions about God’s “character and behavior.”²³ Based on the results, Baylor’s researchers had extracted “two clear and distinct dimensions of belief in God.” The first pertained to God’s level of engagement in human affairs; the second, to God’s level of dissatisfaction with the human race. Based on these factors, the Baylor study identified four distinct ways of viewing God—as benevolent, authoritarian, distant, or critical. The study went on to explore the impact respondents’ perceptions of God had on their daily lives and policy stances.

These results were unlike those of typical religion surveys Dykman had read, which were based on data about poll respondents’ reported church attendance and religious denominations. Though the study did not speak to Dykman’s conviction that Americans are not as religious as they professed to pollsters, it could provide a timely supplement to the concept he had been considering.

Use of Time. His research for the religion spread gave Dykman another idea: a spread on the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ American Time Use Survey itself. Readers, he thought, would want to know how the average American spent time, and how their own priorities compared.

He was also interested in Americans’ impression that they had so little time. “I’ve always been fascinated by the perception that we work more than ever and have less time for leisure,” he says. “The opposite is actually somewhat true. We have more leisure time than we... did 100 years ago, 50 years ago, and even 30 years ago.” He was convinced that the notion of the “time crunch” was related more to the choices people made than to the shortage of hours in the day. “We never have time to read a book,” he notes, “yet we have time for six hours of television a day.”

Military. Dykman also considered a spread on the military. There were a number of angles he could explore.

a) Pay. On October 3, soon after Dykman had embarked on his project, Congress had passed a 2.2 percent pay raise for members of the armed services.²⁴ He knew that even with the

²² Stanley Presser and Linda Stinson, “Data Collection Mode and Social Desirability Bias in Self-Reported Religious Attendance,” *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 63, Issue 1, February 1998, pp. 137-145.

²³ Baylor University, *American Piety in the 21st Century*, September 2006.

²⁴ Stephen Barr, “Congress Sets Military Pay Raise, Punts on Civil Service,” *Washington Post*, October 3, 2006, p. D4.

raise, a soldier's starting pay was roughly the same as that of a full-time *barista* at Starbucks. "The Starbucks *barista* is not risking his/her life for the low pay," Dykman emphasizes, "but a soldier very certainly is. That takes uncommon dedication. I don't think most Americans have the slightest clue how very little soldiers are paid."²⁵

b) Demographics. He also knew that the military published its own census, called "Population Representation in the Armed Services," which reported the composition of the armed services based on ethnicity, income, geography, and a number of other factors. He was interested in the geographic distribution of soldiers and Marines, as well as their economic background. Since women comprised an ever-larger proportion of the armed services, he considered examining their role and their numbers in different segments of the military.

c) Chain of Command. The military, furthermore, had drawn its members from a shrinking proportion of society since the end of the Vietnam War-era draft. Dykman wondered if he could produce a variation on a graphic he'd done for *Time* in June 2006, which had produced considerable response from readers pleased to have learned something.²⁶ His June chart had detailed the hierarchy of the armed forces, including the size of subunits such as platoons, companies, and battalions. "It's... stuff everybody knew in my father's generation," says Dykman. But the average American no longer knew much about the structure of the military. Perhaps he could explore this subject in greater depth for the "300 Million" story.

Politics. Dykman knew that Managing Editor Stengel was especially interested in stories on Americans' political views. "Almost every [*Time*] story has to have some kind of politics component," says Stengel. "That's so important to... who we are as a magazine." Since taking over as managing editor, Stengel had already produced numerous political cover stories—on congressional malfeasance, on Senator Hillary Clinton's presidential ambitions, on the politics of stem cell research.

The 2006 congressional midterm elections were scheduled for November 7, about two weeks after Dykman expected his piece to be published. A portrait of American politics could explain the political landscape, state by state, and offer a sense of the upcoming election's importance.

²⁵ Email from Jackson Dykman, July 26, 2007. He continues: "Starbucks claims their starting pay is \$7.50 an hour, plus tips. If you enlist in the Army tomorrow you will make \$14,446.80 a year (with a raise to \$15,616 after four months). That's just under \$7 an hour (it's actually far less than that, if you consider that deployed active-duty soldiers 'work' much more than 40 hours a week). Congress just passed a new minimum wage law that will increase it to \$7.20 an hour over two years." Monthly armed services pay figures (2007) available: http://www.dfas.mil/militarypay/2006militarypaytables/2007_Web_Pay_Table.pdf

²⁶ The graphic accompanied a story by Michael Duffy, Tim McGirk, and Aparism Ghosh, "The Ghosts of Haditha," *Time*, June 4, 2006. *Time* broke the story about Marines who allegedly gunned down 24 unarmed Iraqis in Haditha on its website in March 2006. The revelations sparked two major military investigations, the progress of which *Time* continued to document. One investigation sought to uncover whether the Marines had deliberately killed civilian Iraqis. The other examined the possibility that Marine commanders had tried to cover up the incident.

Education. Dykman also felt the subject of education deserved scrutiny in a feature about America. Several topics appealed to him.

a) Earnings. Few Americans realized, he suspected, that the real income (adjusted for inflation) of college graduates had declined steadily in the first four years of the 21st century. Though it had begun to climb again in 2005, it had not regained its pre-2000 level.²⁷

The last time college graduates' real income had declined over several consecutive years was in the 1970s.²⁸ At the time, Harvard economist Richard Freeman had suggested that this decline was due to the expanding supply of college-educated workers.²⁹ But the real income of college graduates had begun growing steadily again in the 1980s and had continued its upward trend until the end of the 20th century. Dykman wondered how to quantify the "lifetime earnings reward of education," which he knew was still substantial, but was nevertheless decreasing. He suspected that notwithstanding politicians' advocacy of education as a panacea for the nation's ills, its value was diminishing in relation to its costs.

b) Funding. Another feature of education he could explore was public school funding. Elementary and high schools were funded locally by property taxes, with some contribution from the state (which allocated funding according to a formula).³⁰ Because affluent communities collected more property taxes than lower-income communities, they had more to spend on schools. The quality of public education therefore depended a great deal on geography. A map could depict graphically the huge disparities in the amount spent on public education among communities across the US.

c) NCLB. Meanwhile, the federal government had mandated certain educational standards for the entire country. The 2001 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, more commonly known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), was one such standard. The law required states to test public school students for reading and math proficiency every year from 3rd through 8th grade, as well as once in high school, and publish the results. Schools had to demonstrate sufficient yearly progress toward literacy and mathematical proficiency or lose federal funding.³¹

In 2006, it was early to try to measure the effects of the NCLB law. But research had already uncovered some trends. Since each state developed its own tests and curricula, one way states could demonstrate the federally required progress in test scores was to make their tests

²⁷ United States Census, Historical Income Tables – Households, Table H-13: "Educational Attainment of Householder/Households with Householder 25 Years and Older by Median and Mean Income: 1991 to 2005."

²⁸ Michael Mandel, "The Continuing Decline in College Wages," *BusinessWeek* Weblog "Economics Unbound," September 1, 2005.

²⁹ R.B. Freeman, "The Decline in Economic Rewards to College Education," *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (February, 1977), pp. 18-29.

³⁰ Edsource Online, *School Finance Overview*, 2006.

³¹ Claudia Wallis, and Sonja Steptoe, "How to Fix No Child Left Behind," *Time*, May 24, 2007.

easier. That this had happened was evident when scores on state tests were compared with those on a national test, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which measured proficiency in math and reading. Mississippi, for example, had one of the highest rates of 4th-grade reading proficiency in the country according to the results of its own test; yet the NAEP results ranked Mississippi 4th graders among the least proficient readers. An impressive 89 percent of them met the state standards—but only 18 percent met the national standard.³²

d) SATs. Dykman also considered examining the nation's intelligence quotient. He could, for example, compare SAT scores over time. Dykman wondered whether the data would demonstrate that, as the country aged and grew, Americans were on average getting smarter, or not?

Income. Comprehensive treatment of the American condition should probably include an examination of money as well. Jeremy Caplan, a reporter in *Time's* Nation section, had long suggested that the magazine print a graphic package on the nation's income distribution. None had yet seen publication, but Dykman's project represented an opportunity for such a piece. A visual representation of the nation's income distribution could be an effective way to demonstrate how much wealth the nation's richest controlled. It would furthermore be easier for readers to understand and digest than a set of income figures embedded in a narrative. "The key message or key facts or stats behind something can sometimes be obscured by elegant writing or a story, a narrative," Caplan notes. "That takes people's attention away from the heart of the matter towards the nuance or decoration of it."³³

Dykman considered what an income distribution graphic should accomplish. "We always hear about the top 1 percent of earners, but what is that?" Dykman wondered. Furthermore, what was the ethnic distribution of income in the United States? What were the demographics of poverty? Income inequality was rising in the US, though economists had yet to achieve a consensus on the reason. There were several possible approaches to this topic on his list.

Consumption. In Dykman's mind, a spread about earnings could segue nicely into a graphic about spending. It would give context to some of the income numbers he uncovered. Maybe going to a company like Wal-Mart, which kept meticulous records of daily purchases made there, would yield rich data. What Americans bought could offer one measurement of what they valued.

Narrowing it Down

By the time Dykman was done, he had a list of over 20 topic possibilities—some of them single-page graphics, others two-page spreads. That was too many. He would keep the list,

³² Ibid.

³³ Author's interview with Jeremy Caplan, on April 13, 2007, in New York City. All further quotes from Caplan, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

however; if the project was successful, he might have the opportunity to do it again. The magazine's editors might commit to the graphics project as an annuity. Another option Editor-at-Large Gibbs had suggested in her original "American Mirror" proposal was a weekly one- or two-page feature, perhaps running for 26 weeks consecutively. The current project was a test of Gibbs' idea, and could be reused in a variety of ways if it proved popular with readers and advertisers.

But he still had to cut. Dykman knew that his project might end up on the cover, but a typical *Time* cover story was about 12 or 13 pages long, not 20 plus. Dykman decided to treat the feature as if it would be a cover story or a long inside piece. Where it eventually played depended on whether more urgent news broke the week his story ran. Managing Editor Stengel usually did not select the cover until late in the magazine's production cycle, often postponing a final decision until Friday, the day before the entire magazine went to the printers. But whether on the cover or inside, Dykman figured he would have space for up to six double-page spreads plus one single—or any other combination that resulted in the same number of pages.

That meant some hard choices. He had to whittle his wish list down to a can-do list. Ideally, he would have liked to spend more time, up to five weeks, researching the themes and choosing those with the most impact—both visual and in terms of information. To help himself better conceptualize the project, he tried to visualize "American Mirror" as a book. What, he wondered, would the first five chapters be? Which themes would make a coherent package? Should there be a unifying principle, and if so, what? What should the tone be: upbeat; educational; sober? He liked the idea of using as a common thread across the spreads correcting common misperceptions about American life. But could he sustain a theme so quirky?

In the end, Dykman decided he did not have the luxury of choosing themes strictly according to his "debunking" criterion. Time and staffing constraints meant that instead he would have to focus on what he could get done by deadline with the staff he had. Still, he made some decisions in an effort to adhere to his "common misperceptions" thread. Politics, he decided, could wait. As a subject, he did not find politics as interesting as Stengel did. Furthermore, the most recent nationwide election had occurred two years before, which meant that he would have to republish old election results that in his view had been more than adequately publicized when it was fresh. He also had no argument to make about politics. "For these kinds of things to work, you have to make an argument," says Dykman. "In any given election, you can analyze results and look for patterns but, as a statement, I didn't have one."

In a first cut, Dykman narrowed his list of themes to nine double-page spreads (18 pages): on demographics, crime, religion, healthcare, education, time use, the military, consumption, and income. From those, he decided to select five—which would give him 10 pages to fill with graphics.

Or, if he chose to do one of the five in a single page he could play with text without adding length. While a bit short for a cover story, that would give him room to expand if he or his editors decided to include some narrative as well.

The Initial Strategy

Dykman decided he had to open the piece with a candid acknowledgment of the population milestone—a spread on America’s 300 million people. Although he personally found demographic data “dry” and not especially surprising, he thought it could be interesting to portray how the population was distributed across the nation, the ethnic groups to which they belonged, and immigrants’ countries of origin. That would leave him four other spreads which he could devote to his unofficial agenda: puncturing myths that influenced Americans’ perceptions of themselves.

Income, for example, was an indispensable part of American life. Yet Dykman suspected that not many readers were aware just how much money the wealthiest citizens controlled. An illustration of US income distribution would allow him to make that abundantly clear. So he decided to include an income spread. The religion spread also rose quickly to the top of his list. The recent Baylor Religion Survey was not only timely, but offered a unique perspective on a much-discussed issue. He would start with a graphic on the survey results.

With three topics—population, income and religion—chosen, Dykman stopped briefly to consider the tone of the piece. Should it be upbeat, educational, sober? Ultimately, he applied his own quirky criterion: “They can’t all be depressing. Health care’s depressing. Education is kind of depressing. Crime is really depressing. Religion is depressing depending on your point of view.”

So with only two spreads left to fill, he regretfully discarded his ideas for displays about healthcare, education, and crime. Instead, he decided to pursue a graphic display fashioned from the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ time use data. Finally, he thought he would offer readers what he called a “dessert course”—a single page about what Americans buy. In his view, it would be a lighthearted way to conclude the piece. He could include amusing trivia, such as how many jars of Peter Pan Lite Chunky Peanut Butter™ Wal-Mart sold in a given day.

By the end of his first week on the project, Dykman had a strategy for how to arrange his 10 pages.

- He would begin with a single-page text introduction. Though Editor-at-Large Gibbs was on leave to write a book, she had expressed interest in composing an opening to Dykman’s piece.
- A two-page demographics spread would be the first set of graphics. It would tie the entire package to the population milestone.

- Another two-pager would illustrate the “four ways of viewing God” described in the Baylor Religion Survey.
- A spread on earnings would demonstrate the income distribution of US residents.
- A time use graphic would examine how the average American divided the day among leisure, work, sleep, chores, childcare, and numerous other activities.
- Finally, a concluding page on consumption would depict what Americans buy and how much.

But this was only a general plan. Now Dykman would have to oversee the research.

Assembling a Team

His initial inclination had been to do the project alone. But with the topics selected, Dykman realized that he would not have time to read, digest, and craft displays for all the data he wanted the project to include. Indeed, a cover-length graphics piece would be too much work even for Dykman and the two graphics reporters who worked primarily for him. If Nation Editor Beyer could spare them, he hoped at first to recruit three more reporters from her section. If he assigned one reporter to each spread, he could produce the five spreads he had in mind in the time he had. Over the weekend, however, Dykman realized he could do one of the spreads himself. So he needed four reporters to help him.

He would assign his two graphics reporters, Kathleen Adams and Kristina Dell, each a spread to research. He then asked Nation Editor Beyer if she could spare two of her own reporters. His first preference was to recruit colleagues with whose work he was familiar. He also wanted to ensure that, like his graphics reporters, the draftees were comfortable with statistics and what they meant.

He had two reporters in mind. Since Jeremy Caplan had earlier expressed interest in a graphic illustration of the nation’s income distribution, Dykman knew he would be eager to research the income spread. Coco Masters was another young reporter Dykman sought to involve. She was primarily a science and business reporter and, in Dykman’s view, she was careful and conscientious when she worked with data. Dykman also personally liked Caplan and Masters. Given the stress of producing such a large project in a short period of time, he wanted a team that could work amicably together. Beyer, who had suggested the project to Dykman the previous week, gave him the reporters he requested.

On Tuesday, October 10, Dykman met with his reporting team. Dell and Adams joined Caplan and Masters to discuss their assignments. Caplan would examine IRS data for the earnings spread. Masters would be responsible for the time use spread. Dykman was confident that Masters’ assignment would be straightforward, since he could point her to the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ Time Use Survey results. Meanwhile, Adams would take care of the demographics spread, and Dell would handle the consumption page. Dell would also assist Dykman in reporting the religion spread. He provided Dell with a list of questions to ask the authors of the Baylor

religion study. He wanted to know what they felt were the most interesting or surprising results of their research. This would help him decide what to highlight.

By Thursday, October 12, Dykman had reported and laid out most of his religion spread with the help of Ed Gabel, one of *Time's* graphic artists. The centerpiece was the four ways of viewing God described in the Baylor religion survey. He and Gabel illustrated each notion of God—as authoritarian, benevolent, critical, or distant—and what percentage of people identified with each view. The spread showed how the type of God one believed in influenced other viewpoints, from the morality of abortion to the proper level of military spending.

But the other four spreads remained blank while the reporters tracked down information. Dykman had given them the rest of the week of October 10 to research their topics. He planned to spend the week of October 16 working with the reporters and other artists to assemble the reporters' findings into an effective, readable package.

He already had a rough idea of how he would like to arrange the data. For the Time Use Survey, he envisioned a 24-hour clock sliced up into the average amount of time people spend performing certain activities. The income spread would use a pyramid to represent the number of people in various income brackets. And he already had a population density map for the demographics spread.

Behind the News

Dykman had no sooner picked out and assigned his reporters than the Census declared in an October 12 press release that the population would reach 300 million five days later, on October 17.³⁴ If the project went to the printers on Saturday, October 21, as planned, it would hit newsstands on Monday, October 23, six days after the event. Other news outlets would already have reported on it and moved on. Given the unusually tight deadline, as well as the fact that *Time's* story would end up behind the news, Dykman and other editors discussed whether it made sense to postpone the project. "We missed that date," Dykman recalls thinking. "It's October. Let's just wait till March. Why not? We did have that talk... Part of me was like... yeah, let's wait. Because now that I have an idea, I know I can finish it by March."

On the other hand, the time lag might not matter to readers. "It's still in people's minds," Dykman remembers thinking. "It's still just plain interesting." Besides, there was a risk that if Dykman did not do the story now, it might never appear in the magazine. "I've seen it happen so many times around here," Dykman recalls, "where cover contenders... don't make it by the end of that week and you never hear from them again."

³⁴ US Census Bureau, "Nation's Population to Reach 300 Million," Press Release, October 12, 2006.

But the general sense of the 10 a.m. editorial meeting on Friday, October 13 was that the news peg was, in Dykman's words, "nice, but not critical." True, Managing Editor Stengel still had not given Dykman any guarantee that his piece would see print. If urgent news broke during the week of October 16, the magazine might not be able to commit space to Dykman's graphic snapshot of America. Nevertheless, Dykman had already invested two weeks in the project. He was encouraged by the level of enthusiasm it seemed to generate among his colleagues. He decided to keep it alive.

The Boss Checks In

With the religion spread done as well as the population density map, Dykman had two spreads tacked to his wall by Tuesday, October 17. This, coincidentally, was the day that the Census estimated marked the arrival of the 300 millionth American—either by birth, by airplane, or on foot. October 17 also marked the first time Managing Editor Stengel visited Dykman's office to observe his progress.

There was little Dykman could show him other than several blank pages, a map, and the religion spread he had completed. Yet Stengel perused the wall, as Dykman recalls, with interest.

He said something like, 'Wow, that's pretty interesting... but you've put me in a tough spot.' I said, 'Oh?' He [said], 'Well, I really wanted to hate it, but I don't.'

Dykman muses that there was some truth behind Stengel's joking compliment. The piece was already behind the news peg, and Stengel could easily have killed it if he was unimpressed with Dykman's progress. "At which point," Dykman says, "I would have just gone home and gone to sleep, because I was really tired."

But Stengel urged Dykman to continue working on the project. Dykman realized this did not mean the project would definitely see print. It only meant that Dykman would continue to work on it for several more days, at which point, he feared, Stengel might still decide not to publish the piece after all. "But," Dykman shrugs, "that's the business."

Time Use. Meanwhile, the spread on the American Time Use Survey was creating unexpected problems. What Dykman had envisioned as an easy job for his young colleague Masters was a much bigger project. The data as presented in the Time Use Survey did not lend itself to Dykman's planned presentation as a 24-hour clock. Survey respondents reported performing the same activities at different times of day, as well as performing multiple activities at once. Thus, average times reported spent on various activities during the day added up to well over 24 hours. The clock presentation would have to be scrapped.³⁵

³⁵ Author's interview with Coco Masters, on April 19, 2007, in New York City. All further quotes from Masters, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

Masters spoke to numerous academics to help her untangle the data. She even found a professor in the Netherlands who had constructed an online time use clock using Macromedia Flash Player. The problem, in Dykman's estimation, was that it was "utterly incomprehensible," not to mention untranslatable to a paper format.

"If we had done this over the course of five or six weeks, [we] probably would have killed [the time use spread] and maybe put education instead," Dykman recalls. "I had five or six other themes that would have worked." But by this point, the entire project was due in a matter of days. Dykman decided to try to present the data they had rather than start a new spread from scratch. The challenge now was to take the unwieldy data Masters had uncovered and forge a compelling visual presentation.

Masters had also found some intriguing trivia she wanted to include. For example, the more educated a Time Use Survey respondent was on average, the less time he spent per week working. She also learned that different categories of people tended to perform the same activities at different times of day, depending on factors like age and marital status. But it was not obvious how these facts could be incorporated into the time use spread, nor what should be left out.

Consumption. The consumption page had also hit a roadblock. Dykman had predicated his plan for this page on access to the detailed information Wal-Mart kept about all purchases made there. But Wal-Mart would not disclose the information. Reporter Dell had several conversations with a contact at Wal-Mart, but the megastore ultimately declined to participate.

"So what do you do then? Well, you just start calling companies. And Kristina [Dell] just kept calling, calling," says Dykman. Finally, Dell found a willing participant in the Unilever Corporation, which made food and personal-care products. Relying only on Unilever's data, though, would yield a page focused almost exclusively on food, and Dykman wanted variety. He recalls thinking: "We have a lot of food. We need some cars. We need some gadgets. We need pets. How about some booze?" He and Dell "just kept calling" companies to find out what they sold and how much.

Dykman let Dell select the products displayed, but suggested juxtapositions: if they showed how many Camrys were sold, they would have to do the same for an expensive car, like a Porsche. The number of high calorie Krispy Kreme™ original glazed donuts consumed on an average day in America should be paired with the same statistic for cans of Slim-Fast™ diet shakes.

The Phone Call

At the 10 a.m. editorial meeting on Thursday, October 19, two days before the entire magazine would be sent to the printers, Managing Editor Stengel asked his colleagues for their

opinions of the graphics project. The editors were enthusiastic about running it, even though many at the meeting had not seen Dykman's project and at any rate, the religion spread was still the only finished part of the package. Their approval meant the project would go on. Moreover, by this point it had emerged as the frontrunner for the cover story that week. Stengel, however, had not yet made his final decision. That week's magazine would also carry a story detailing five ways to withdraw from Iraq; there was a strong case to be made for putting that on the cover. It ultimately depended on what Stengel preferred.

Even now, Dykman did not have a clear grasp of Stengel's intentions. "Now," says Dykman, "I'm in panic mode because there's always that little part of you [secretly hoping], man, he can kill it and I can just go home, I'm so tired, I haven't seen my bed in two weeks." Instead, he had to get back to work. It would be another late night at the office. "This was where Mr. Stengel dropped a hand grenade into my life," Dykman recalls.

In terms of completed, printable work, Dykman on Thursday was still where he had been on Tuesday when Stengel had checked on the project. The religion spread was done, and the population density map was done. Though he had been collecting information from his reporters for the other spreads, he was still unsure what to do with it. "It was just a mess," he reports.

It was somewhere around 10 [p.m.] and Rick [Stengel] called me on the phone. Rick never calls me, so... I'm like this is going to be the call where he kills it. He's thought about it and he's killed it. He's calling me on his cell phone, on his way home. I can hear traffic noises in the back[ground].

Stengel, it turned out, had no intention of killing the project. But he did have a suggestion. Feeling that the upcoming November 2006 midterm congressional elections could be pivotal, Stengel wanted to acknowledge the elections' approach by including a spread about Americans' political preferences. He also thought that such a spread would connect the entire package more strongly to current events. "Every year we can do 'where we live,'" he explains. "Every year we can do 'what we earn,' and every year we can do 'what we believe.' I wanted something that was a little less evergreen, [something] that would feel more rooted in the contemporary."

After Dykman hung up, he says, "I'm sitting there going, I still have three full spreads to finish. It's Thursday night. I have 24 hours and you want me to add two more [pages], from scratch, about politics?" Dykman considered his options. Stengel was his superior, but it was likely the managing editor would defer to Dykman's judgment if the graphics director insisted there simply was not enough time to produce an additional spread.

But the tone of Stengel's request discouraged him from doing so. "I've been around enough," Dykman explains. "There's a difference you can just sense between 'Wouldn't it be neat to do something about politics?' and 'We really need to do something about politics.'" Dykman recognized that Stengel's overture was less of a request than an order. "It was pretty clear that this

was a make or break issue,” he recalls. Refusing the new assignment could jeopardize the publication of the entire piece after three weeks of work.

Dykman struggled to conceive how a political spread could fit into the overall aim of the piece, which he had designed to dispel commonly held misconceptions about American life. What could be surprising about the distribution of Democrats and Republicans in the nation? Americans’ party affiliations, Dykman thought, had been adequately reported two years earlier, after the 2004 presidential election. A “red-state, blue-state” map (which depicted Republican-majority states in red and Democratic-majority states in blue) had at the time become a familiar sight in newspapers and magazines across the country. Since there had been no nationwide elections in the meantime, any spread he could produce would have to rely on two-year-old election results. He did not have time to commission his own poll, which would take four or five days to complete. He also worried that, even if he could produce a politics spread in the time he had left, it might look hastily assembled and of lower quality than the rest of the package. Such a spread could attract Stengel’s disapproval in any case, again putting the entire piece at risk.

If Dykman succeeded in producing a politics spread that appealed to Stengel, however, that might be enough to catapult the story to the coveted position on the front cover. The fact that Stengel was demonstrating personal interest in the project this late in the week was an encouraging sign. Dykman would have to balance the advantages of satisfying Stengel—which likely meant he would have a cover to his credit—against the merits of sticking to his original concept for the story.