

Getting ready: The Y2K thing

by [David Wilhelm](#) in the [February 17, 1999](#) issue

It's time to begin paying attention to this Y2K thing. And not just because it recently made the cover of *Time*. What roused me from my slumber was a story buried deep in the *Wall Street Journal* of January 11. It reported that the states of Washington and Wisconsin have mobilized National Guard troops for December 31 of this year, just in case.

Just in case our social fabric unravels, I guess.

Not that "mobilization" is a word that the National Guard uses to describe what it is doing. "There are some negative connotations to the word 'mobilization,'" said Major Philip Logan, a spokesman for the Washington state Military Department, in a burst of truthfulness.

Are you starting to feel a little queasy? Now get this: in May, all 640,000 Guardsmen from across the country will participate in a drill designed to prepare them to respond to the interruption of all telephone service.

I'm beginning to feel like I'm the last on my block not to have visited the local Army Navy store in the last month or so. I have this vision of aisle after aisle of empty shelves, devoid of necessary things like dehydrated foods and hunting knives.

I am not kidding. Neither is Sherry Burns, the head of the Central Intelligence Agency's Y2K office, when she says, "We're concerned about the potential disruption of power grids, telecommunications and banking services." As interesting as her words are, the fact that the CIA has a Y2K office struck me as even more noteworthy.

According to a Harris poll of Silicon Valley computer programmers and engineers conducted just over a year ago, 62 percent will avoid air travel, 20 percent will withdraw all of their money from savings accounts, and one in 12 plans to move to safer quarters before January 1.

Christians of the more evangelical or fundamentalist stripe have been among the first to bring this matter to the attention of the broader public. Jerry Falwell preached three separate sermons on this topic last August, and the Web site of Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network is considered to be one of the best sources of Y2K information by those who worry a lot about New Year's Day 2000.

There is a natural and understandable reaction to their interest in this issue, and that is to dismiss it out of hand. "If they've got anything to do with this," you might say, "then I've got nothing to do with it." Just a wild guess on my part that you might feel this way.

While some official Y2K worriers are the run-of-the-mill Doomsday proponents, a perusal of Web sites that come up when the words "Y2K" and "Christian" are submitted to the browser suggests that most Y2K worriers of a religious persuasion are not wild-eyed fanatics. In fact, most seem very conscious of the need to fend off millennial interpretations of the computer bug. Typical of these Web sites is one called: Y2K: A Christian Perspective (www.christianity2k.com), which asserts: "Throughout history, many Christians have ignored biblical warnings about prophetic assumptions. . . . These efforts are unbiblical and can be damaging to the credibility of the gospel."

To get the perspective of someone from the left of the political spectrum, listen to what Eric Utne, founder and editor-in-chief of the *Utne Reader*, has to say about the Y2K bug: "The operative watchwords are 'be prepared.' As we prepare . . . something surprising and quite wonderful is going to happen. We are going to get to know our neighbors. Possibly for the first time in our lives, we will begin to get to know what it means to live in a real community."

One thing I know for sure: when the *Christian Century* reviews the top religious stories of 1999, the Christian response to the Y2K bug is certain to be among them. Just wait until the mainstream media move away from impeachment and start focusing on this matter. Guys like Geraldo Rivera will be all over this thing. (Yes, I do think he is a member of the mainstream media.) We will hear of little else.

One question, of course, is whether January 1 will come and go with no larger import than when Geraldo opened the safe of Al Capone, only to find nothing there. But another question is how Americans will respond to the frenzied anticipation of the big day, and how that response will be informed by their faith.

We can either act on our fears, stock up on canned goods, buy guns, and head for the hills in splendid isolation, or we can act on our Christian faith and hopes, and celebrate the coming of the next millennium with optimism--and with our neighbors.

Something that Dee Hock, founder of Visa International, the credit card company, recently said about the Y2K bug struck me as downright theological: "It's far too late, and things are far too bad, for pessimism."

"Fear not," said the angels heralding Christ's birth. Let us "rejoice in hope," Paul admonished the early Christians. The turn of the millennium, the hysteria that will come as the world turns its focus to the Y2K bug, offers the church an extraordinary opportunity for contemplation, for reflection and, yes, for evangelism. The national discussion of this topic should not be dominated by voices of fear and reaction.