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EDITORIAL DESK

The End of Everything

By Mihir Desai (Op-Ed) 856 words

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. -- The End it's everywhere, and we can't get enough of it. By "the end," I do not mean "They lived happily ever after." I mean, "That's it; it's over." The shelves of bookstores are lined with books declaring that the end of everything has come.

In the beginning, there was "The End of Nature," written by Bill McKibben in 1989.

About four years later, we got Francis Fukuyama's "The End of History and the Last Man."

Mr. Fukuyama assured us of the triumph of democracy and capitalism and the coming conclusion of many of the world's great struggles. Then, just when we were being lulled into complacency, the great flood of endings arrived.

Entire disciplines and professions have fallen. In 1993, architects around the world attended a conference titled "The End of Architecture," and soon after David Lindley announced "The End of Physics." (This last must have been contagious; recently, John Horgan published "The End of Science.")

In the literary world, meanwhile, theorists and practitioners have been writing about the end of postmodernism (which already marked the end of another era), and the end of character, of discourse and of the novel.

Political writers, unsatisfied with the dramatic demise of the Soviet Union and Communism, have been crossing off other regions and ideologies as well.

Are we at "The End of Sovereignty?" asks Joseph Camilleri and Jim Falk.

Is it altogether "The End of Isms?" Alexander Shtromas wonders.

Christopher Wood sees "The End of Japan Incorporated," while Kenichi Ohmae and Jean-Marie Guehenno go further, proclaiming "The End of the Nation State."

Economic writers, too, are weighing in with their endings. I guess they haven't yet read Paul Ormerod's "The Death of Economics."

Robert Kuttner has resolved a century-long dispute with "The End of Laissez-Faire," published in 1992. And last year, Jeffrey Madrick concluded that the United States had reached "The End of Affluence," which was not much of a shock, given that Jeremy Rifkin was announcing "The End of Work."

With all this, domestic policy wonks of all stripes are pulling the plug on some of our biggest issues. Back in

1992, Mickey Kaus concluded that we had reached "The End of Equality," but not to worry: Last year, Dinesh D'Souza pronounced "The End of Racism." No wonder Darien McWhirter has just published "The End of Affirmative Action."

Neil Postman, meanwhile, says we've reached "The End of Education." Gifford and Elizabeth Pinchot describe "The End of Bureaucracy."

And private life? Forget about it. Philip Brown announced "The Death of Intimacy" last year, no doubt after reading Julian Hafner's earlier speculations on "The End of Marriage."

No more art, science, politics, economics or human interaction. What does it all mean? Well, notwithstanding George Zito's "The Death of Meaning," there is a force behind all these endings. And it's not just the arrogance of some authors or the anxiety of booksellers forced to trumpet something cataclysmic.

As we approach the end of a millennium, authors and thinkers in a variety of fields seem eager to declare the end of something -- and unable to announce the beginning of something else.

These titles signal a note of finality that stems from our country's obsession with millennial visions.

Such visions, which sacrifice perspective and a sense of continuity to heighten feeling, have a long history in this country. From the sermons of Cotton Mather, the 17th century preacher, to the current proliferation of apocalyptic writing, Americans have been anxious to declare or believe that the end is near.

Now that the calendar is cooperating with these millenarian yearnings, some writers and thinkers are falling prey to this thinking as well.

Voters, too, seem receptive to these apocalyptic notions, and today's politicians aren't helping much. They no longer speak of welfare reform, for example, but of ending welfare as we know it.

Of course, many of the books that deal with the death of this or the end of that include some discussion of what may come after. But it seems that only in the field of technology do we find a passion for looking into the future -- a fabulous future, at that. Technology's wizards and practitioners are filling the vacuum of thinking on what's coming up. "The Road Ahead" is what Bill Gates and his co-writers called their book about the wonders of computers. But technology alone cannot provide a nourishing vision of the new millennium.

Months. Years. Centuries. Millenniums. In demarcating the passage of time, these units encourage us to pause for reflection and to locate ourselves within a longer narrative. But they can also frame our thinking in distorted ways.

We have been confronted, at the end of this century and millennium, with an overwhelming sense of finality. We are adrift in a sea of endings, waiting for writers who will rescue us with a fresh start.
