Excerpts from:

"RAT HUNTING... A BALTIMORE MEMOIR"

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Rat Hunting: A Baltimore Memoir

I.

Looking at the sleek prosperity of the Inner Harbor as it expands eastward through the narrow streets of Canton, it is hard to remember back thirty or forty years, to a time when no one would have dared refer to Baltimore as Charm City.

Bawlamer, the armpit of the east ; a working class city of neighborhoods that was far too busy to think much about anything beyond hard work, the O's, the Colts, National Bo and pass me another crabcake, please. Was the town's biggest attraction "The Block", a sailor's paradise of seedy burlesque bars? Probably not, but the idea of Baltimore as an east coast tourist attraction second only to Disney World would have seemed as remote as sending men to Mars.

There was beauty to be found, but you had to look for it. Most travelers, driving into the city, or arriving by train were treated to the most depressing of vistas…. row after row of attached houses, huddling low to the ground, in a gray and brown sprawl of urban decay, interspersed with tracts of industrial wasteland climaxing in a waterfront that seemed to cry out for a small tactical nuclear weapon to clean the mess up. Few would ever see the rolling horse

farms of Worthington Valley, the vibrant night life of Pennsylvania Avenue, the immaculate ethnic neighborhoods, and the hundreds of touches of beauty and vitality that dotted the urban landscape, just beyond the view of the casual tourist.

And so I came, in 1965, to the home of Poe and Mencken, and began to learn the really important names : Gus Triandos, Boog Powell, Brooks Robinson, Gino Marchetti, Lenny Moore, Johnny Unitas, Alan Ameche, Jim Palmer. The diamond and gridiron legends, so much a part of the city whose name they carried. Their stadium, set squarely amidst the working class neighborhoods of Northeast Baltimore, so much at ease with its neighbors. A city, so consumed with work and so little concerned with image, fashioned its heroes in its own mold. Just regular guys. The ones you went to the diner with. Pass that crabcake please and let's pour one more Bo, and toast the Land of Pleasant Living….

As a college kid, securely settled in Charles Village, I got to see it all from a vantage point of some safety. The Johns Hopkins Homewood campus was like a city on the hill, buttressed by the beautiful old neighborhoods of Guilford and Roland Park….

Regrettably, for many Hopkins students, Baltimore, in the 1960's, seemed to have little to offer, and certainly no charm. The 1966 Johns Hopkins Yearbook noted : " The student, presented with the City, can be amused by the folk culture of its inhabitants for only so long. An inevitable reaction to its poverty and un-attractiveness sets in, and wariness is added to his view of the City."

Some of us were just too stupid or too romantic to notice. In just a year or two, the city worked its magic on a brave few, and we became less and less collegiate interlopers and more and more, dare we say it, Baltimorons. This is our story….

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After all, Baltimore was the town where the Bromo Seltzer Tower vied with a Washington Monument as the architectural symbol of the city. If they could have put a plaster crabcake atop the Bromo Tower, it would have been no contest.

How many current visitors flock to view the monument at Mount Vernon or gaze in awe at the Bromo ? The city's identification with the renewed Inner Harbor has eclipsed these symbols from the past. To many visitors the city's most recognizable landmark is the enormously successful Oriole Park at Camden Yards, but a visit to that baseball stadium seems more like a trip to Washington D.C.— lawyers, yuppie entrepreneurs, tourists and Beltway types populate the stands.

The current stadium no longer reflects sportswriter John Eisenberg's characterization of the Baltimore baseball clubs of the 60's : **"an extension of the Orioles' hometown, a city without airs."** Or to quote sportswriter Frank Deford, **"our workingman's town, where the swells passed through, without stopping, on their way to Washington or New York."** The team, once a notoriously low budget local operation tied to a local brewery, has become a truly regional franchise for the mid-Atlantic states, with record setting attendance and revenues to match.

Historic and appealing as the site is, there is little at Camden Yards to remind one of the crowds at the old Memorial Stadium. The no-frills inhabitants of Baltimore's tightly knit neighborhoods seemed to seep into the stadium on 33rd Street as naturally as sewage oozed into the murky waters of the harbor. The ball club's move in 1992 to the Inner harbor was more than just a change of venue. Ace reliever Greg Olson summed up the change, as recorded by Eisenberg in his oral history of the Orioles:

> **" Once we moved, it just seemed like a different organization than the one at Memorial Stadium. How? I don't know. The fans were always out front by our gate at Memorial Stadium. Always the same people. You waved at everybody, recognized all the faces….It was like a family at Memorial Stadium. Then it changed at Camden Yards—became more of a business… that changed the atmosphere. We weren't homegrown anymore."**

Listen to Frank Deford describe his feelings for the Colts as recorded in his recent *Sports Illustrated* tribute to "**# 19**", the legendary quarterback (1956-1974), Johnny Unitas:

> **" …the Colts were just folks, all around town, at crab feasts**

and bull roasts and what-have-you. Why, I knew I could go a few blocks to Moses' Sunoco on York Road and see a bunch of Colts there, hanging out, kicking tires. Had I had a good enough fake I.D., I could've even gotten into Sweeney's, up Greenmount Avenue, and drunk beer with them. The Colt's were real people, so we loved them even more as they went on their way to becoming champions of the world."

Or Ron Hansen, describing to John Eisenberg his rookie year with the Orioles, 1960:

" Brooks {Robinson} and myself and Chuck Estrada and Skinny Brown lived together that year, We stayed at a place, a family's house over near the stadium. The four of us lived there with a family that took us in….We'd walk to the park. There was a little place on Greenmount Avenue called the Run In, just a little hole in the wall, but we'd go down there every morning and eat. Most of the time it was the four of us. We'd eat breakfast or a late lunch, and we'd go to the ballpark. We'd walk. Then after the game we'd walk back."

Dozens of Oriole players lived within a half mile of Memorial Field in those early years. The fans got to know the players and vice-versa. Centerfielder Jackie Brandt recalled players just walking out into the parking lot in 1963, and signing two hundred autographs before heading home (two blocks away). In the early '60s, as the teams got better and salaries increased, the more successful players moved away from the stadium, but not all that far. Most went a short distance up York Road and bought modest homes in the new suburb of Timonium. Many who stayed with the Orioles became deeply rooted in their communities. They remained just one of the boys. Deford's eulogy for Unitas could equally apply to Brooks Robinson, Cal Ripken Jr., Jim Palmer and dozens of others who walked through the gates on 33rd Streets : **" Perhaps never has greatness found such a fitting address."**

III.

Most of the students at Hopkins in those years would leave the on-campus dormitories after one year. By the spring of freshman year, many of the students had begun their explorations of the city in preparation for off-campus living. A trip down 33rd Street to Memorial Stadium was an essential part of this ritual. There was

nothing like 33rd Street in the spring ,when the flaming azaleas bloomed and marked the way to the home of the Orioles with a corridor of color.

In Eisenberg's history, former Oriole Fred Marsh describes a scene from 1955, which remained unchanged into the '70's :

" All around the stadium the people had azalea shrubs, and those things were blossoming, and that was beautiful. It smelled up the whole neighborhood. I always remember that. It was just beautiful. The odor was all over the place. You could smell it when you came up to bat, That didn't happen in any other parks."

I, too, cannot forget my first springtime walks down 33rd Street, linked forever with that magical season of 1966 when the Orioles welcomed spring by winning 12 of the first 13 games, a sweet harbinger of their amazing four game World Series sweep the following fall. Those days have passed and time has not been kind to my memories. The stadium site now stands stripped and bare. 33rd Street seems to lead nowhere except to a terminal case of urban blight. You can console yourself with a budget- busting day among the suburbanites and Washingtonians at Camden Yards or order a replica of Memorial Stadium from the Danbury Mint that contains authentic crushed brick from the home of the Orioles. I'll take the memories…..

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But to really understand what Baltimore was and to comprehend why its' newly minted tourist appeal appears so utterly alien to one who remembers, you have to explore another aspect of life in vintage Baltimore.

Certain local sports evolved and thrived in Baltimore. Lacrosse and duckpin bowling immediately come to mind. But there was another local favorite. A most peculiar sport…. Rat Hunting !!. And so we enter the Twilight Zone of urban history, as our tale of hunting ***Rattus Norvegicus*** commences…..

The alleys of Baltimore were home to an army of shadowy creatures. They gave Baltimore another colorful nickname “Rat City.” The Pied Piper’s Hamlin had nothing on this town! And what rats they were ! Not some squeaky, mouse- like nibblers. No these were sleek, muscled predators. Big boys. The stuff of nightmares. ***Rattus norvegicus***. The Wharf Rat. These omnivorous denizens of the dark were said to have arrived from Europe by way of ships in the 1700’s. From the wharves, they spread out down the alleys, until the entire city became their habitat.

V.

Wharf rats are not cute. With extremely powerful teeth they can gnaw through the thickest wooden planks to get at stores of food. They can chew through materials as tough as cinderblocks and have been known to bite holes in lead pipes. They will attack domestic animals, poultry and occasionally humans . They will fight almost anything when cornered. As to their vulnerability, the *Concise Columbia Encyclopedia* noted, in a bit of understatement that, **“Efforts to exterminate them have been relatively unsuccessful.”**

Almost anything written about the Norway Rat soon lapses into the purple prose of hyperbole, for there is nothing average about these royalty of rodents. Take for example a recent press release “*Rats in Chicago*” proudly concocted in praise of Mayor Daley’s “ increasingly effective rodent abatement program.” For appetizers:

> **“ A Norway Rat can tread water for days (and swim underwater), fit through an opening the size of a quarter and leap three feet into the air.”**

Now to the main course. Defying the conventional wisdom that Rats breed 4 to 6 litters of 6-12 offspring a year, the Chicagoans write:

> **“ Beginning at the age of two months, rats are capable of producing a new litter of young every month of the year; each litter can contain up to 22 offspring. Litter sizes increase when food is plentiful and decrease when food is scarce. Females can get pregnant again within several hours of giving birth.”**

Finally dessert:

> **" As the food supply dwindles, the stronger rats in the colony will kill and eat the younger and weaker ones. Cut off the food supply and this killing will continue until there is only one survivor."**

Picture some bespectacled bureaucrat punching out this prose on his lunch hour. Amazing how the feats of rattus norvegicus can inspire most any man to creative excess. Obviously pondering why rats had not, in fact, taken over the entire planet, our bureaucrat next provides the explanation:

> **" Rats are extremely anti-social towards one another…. Rat colonies are constantly battling with one another - a rat that strays into another colony's territory is promptly killed and eaten. This constant killing holds down the rat population through death and injury, but the overall size of any rat colony will depend on the amount of available food."**

Charming. Given the fact that rats will eat almost any fresh food but can still do very well on rotting edibles or dog feces, an adequate food supply is usually not a problem….

Encyclopedias say wharf rats could attain a length of 16 inches, of which seven or so are in the tail. Whoever wrote those articles had not been to Baltimore. The example of the beaver, a far more attractive rodent, might prove instructive. While the average adult beaver weighs in at thirty-five pounds, specimens as heavy as ninety pounds have been found. This would suggest that the idea of super-rats with body lengths of a foot and a half is not out of the realm of possibility. I can confirm that foot-longers were in fact plentiful in those days…..

We learned this early on as we walked down Charles Street late at night, after heavy rains. The low, cast- iron streetlamps and abundant trees gave this section of Baltimore's main street a real charm in the late evening when the traffic died down and the damp streets glistened in the darkness. But the streets weren't the only thing that glistened. Near the sewers, after heavy rains, one came across an abundance of sleek, drowned rats reflecting the glow of

the lamps from their slickened, matted coats of fur. Flushed from the sewers, their grim corpses gave mute testimony to the hordes of rodents that prowled the city's subterranean recesses and stygian alleys…..

XI.

The spotlessly clean cities of Canada and New Zealand testify to the determination of these former British colonies to maintain a healthy environment for their citizens. The officials who spearheaded their rat control drives all agree that the key to success is resisting the rat infestations from day one, maintaining an unwavering communal resolve never to share one inch of living space with the foul vermin. The citizenry of these fine nations never became accustomed to living with rats. They never became complacent about environmental hygiene. They never reached an accommodation with filth and disease. As a result, cities like Vancouver and Wellington are world renowned for their beauty.

Unfortunately, a single one hour-round trip between Canada's pristine Niagara-On-The-Lake and America's tawdry Niagara Falls is all that is needed to convince any tourist that these are indeed two neighboring countries with vastly different attitudes about maintaining a clean and healthy environment. There is no better example of America's overall failure to provide a sanitary urban environment for its less affluent citizens than Charm City, still in many respects the Armpit of the East.

The story of Baltimore's failures in the areas of environmental health and hygiene is not new, and it has been told before. But as long as so many deplorable conditions continue to exist, there remains a pressing need to document and revisit both the successes and failures of the ongoing war against urban blight, poverty and disease. Whether the saga is about rats, lead poisoning, substandard housing, disease or other issues related to environmental hygiene, the ending of the tale is similar. Few cities have had more heroic, dedicated and talented persons involved in the fight against blight. Few have developed more expertise. Yet, in the end, the slums remain, to mock the polish and prosperity of the New Baltimore.

Few have written more eloquently of these matters than Jim Haner, whose essay, *"The Baltimore Experience"* (*Baltimore Sun* October 22, 2000) summed up the long, sad history of the war against lead poisoning in Baltimore. The centerpiece of his article was the thirty year career of Baltimore Health Commissioner Dr. Huntington Williams, who made the war against lead poisoning in slum housing a national cause.

Let's begin with the Haner's conclusion:

> **"Despite a century of struggle by heroic doctors, the lead paint scourge continues to strike youngsters in slum housing.… Today, more than 1,000 of the city's kids—mostly black and poor – continue to ingest brain-damaging doses of lead paint chips and dust every year. And the vast majority are being poisoned in the same squalid rowhouse neighborhoods that claimed so many lives nearly a century ago…. Now, more than 50 years after the phrase " The Baltimore Experience" came into popular usage among doctors to describe the horrors that unfolded there… Maryland continues to poison its children at a rate more than 15 times the national average."**

The facts of life in Baltimore were, and remain, a sobering dose of the deadly reality of urban blight and decay. A reporter for the *Baltimore Sun* described a typical West Baltimore neighborhood in 1944:

> **Homes are very badly in need of repair and paint; dead rats lie in the streets… alleys are littered with debris and foul- smelling garbage."**

A 1947 study by a local group of housing activists found that its slums were among the most horrid in America. **"The city had worse incidences of tuberculosis, diphtheria, meningitis, child mortality, rat infestation, dilapidated housing – and more outhouse toilets- than any of the nation's seven largest cities."**

Haner highlighted Dr. William's role in **"the story of a city within a city—one white and relatively healthy, the other black and perpetually ill from living in what have always been among the nation's worst slums."** In the 1950's Williams battled for effective housing inspection and was responsible for **"making Baltimore a 'model city' in early urban renewal- overseeing the razing of huge swaths of rat infested slum shanties on the city's near west**

side," while campaigning "to strong-arm landlords into installing indoor toilets in 56,000 houses." His words from 1954 still resonate today, **"We have lived too long and too complacently with our slums. They are bad investments regardless of any money return, and we must fight a civic battle to rid our city of them."**

Haner's essay sums up the history of these slums so well that it bears repeating:

> **"As the 19th and 20th centuries progressed in Baltimore, as one impoverished ethnic group after another moved through the slums above and below North Avenue, this disease of neglect cut them down… but none has borne the brunt as long as the city's African-American population.…**
>
> **Built or converted almost overnight to house the thousands of European immigrants and freed black slaves who flowed into Baltimore in the Civil War era, the east-and west-side ghettos were monuments to racial segregation and engines of infectious disease. Unheated, unplumbed, poorly constructed and owned almost entirely by speculator landlords, they were built for quick profit. And they were not built to last. By the beginning of the 20th century, their occupants were mostly black….**
>
> **Slum houses generated millions over the decades for powerful interest groups such as landlords, banks and real estate concerns. And they persistently opposed large-scale repair of the city's wretched rental housing as too expensive – then and now….**
>
> **At the time of his death in 1992, Williams' nemesis-lead poisoning-had survived him. And Baltimore's slums were still among the worst in the country."**

As with the scourge of lead poisoning, so with the plague of rats. Unchecked, unabated, they continue to thrive in the trash-filled yards and alleys of the Baltimore ghettos. As the *Baltimore Sun* reported in an February 9, 2001 article, **"vacant rowhouses and neighborhoods abandoned to drug dealers have become perfect breeding grounds for rats…. The loss of 100,000 residents in the past decade has left more neighborhoods vulnerable to rat infestation."** And what an infestation it is !! An unofficial survey of

the city's rat burrows in 1998 estimated that at least 700,000 rats called Baltimore home…..

XIV.

Rats were so prevalent, even in broad daylight, that most people went about their business and hardly noticed them, just as New Yorkers would casually step around the sleeping homeless persons who filled the sidewalks of so many prosperous Manhattan neighborhoods in the pre-Guiliani era. Like lead poisoning, they had become an accepted part of the Baltimore experience.

Residents would get upset when infants were bitten, but in the predominantly black neighborhoods, they had to struggle with problems that made even the rats recede into the background – no heat, no working plumbing, backed-up sewage, dangerous electrical problems and the like. These are the problems that afflict many of the urban poor and, to some degree, they reflect the precarious economic situation of the small property owners, and their relative inability to provide maintenance adequate for an aging housing stock filled with destructive tenants.

Regrettably, in Baltimore, humans frequently rivaled the rats as a particularly malevolent foe of neighborhood improvement. Over and over, we found that the worst properties were owned by a small group of property owners who could legitimately be labeled slumlords. They owned anywhere from dozens to hundreds of properties which they consistently over-populated and under-maintained. They spearheaded rampant real estate speculation which destroyed owner-occupancy and flooded neighborhoods with an ever-increasing number of subdivided housing units until the entire social fabric of the community was ripped apart by overcrowding and transiency.

Many of the slumlords had risen from poor Jewish immigrant roots to positions of social prominence, yet they and their children had little conscience when it came to denying tenants water, heat, plumbing and the most basic necessities of safe shelter. At

the same time they joined powerful property owners associations that bullied the political powers-that-be into accepting their twisted definitions of private property rights. How often I was treated to their endless whining that they were just legitimate businessmen trying to eke out a meager living from an economic system that just could not provide the cash flow they needed to maintain their properties.

Painting themselves as helpless victims of the system, they all too frequently concluded their arguments with endless references to the animalistic and irresponsible lifestyles of their tenants, which deprived the owners of the ability to care for their properties. In the end, their slickly packaged and delivered explanations were about as convincing as the southern slaveholders' defense of their peculiar institution.

The ludicrous veneer of concern for the welfare of their charges did little to conceal an underlying attitude that these tenants were not quite as human as the rest of us, that the "schwarze" somehow deserved their fate. Their protestations aside, a very substantial amount of money was sucked out of the poorest communities leaving the residents to contend with the filth, the danger, the lead poisoning and the omnipresent rats.

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It all came back to me as I walked through the night, until I could clearly see how relevant the story of Baltimore was to the whole puzzling, and ultimately tragic, American experience of the past quarter-century. Baltimore was speaking to me again, but this time I would take notes….

… I can still remember sitting in a bar on St. Paul Street on the hot evening of July 20th 1969, shortly after graduating from Hopkins. I was in the process of moving out of my last college apartment and into my first real house, a duplex on Elkader Road, just behind the stadium. In another month I would begin my first full-time job. Despite the ongoing war in Vietnam, and the horrors of 1968 at home and abroad, there still seemed to be reasons for optimism.

As I watched Neal Armstrong set foot on the moon, I was filled with that spirit of discovery that had energized America since those first sailors charted a course across the dark Atlantic waters.

Despite all that had gone wrong in the late 60's, the promise of new worlds to conquer, both personally and as a country, was still unfolding. I downed another National Bo and life was sweet!
The Orioles, too, seemed to have caught the spirit of the times. They were in first place nine games after the start of the season and never fell out. By mid-July their lead was up to 14 games. Catcher Elrod Hendricks, then in his second year of a three decade career with the Orioles, summed it up:

> **" It just seemed like everything clicked….We went out there knowing we were going to win every game…. After we'd win, Billy Hunter would say, 'Boy, isn't it great to be young and an Oriole?" That was the thing. Everybody felt proud of being a Baltimore Oriole."**

And even though the rats were scurrying down the alley, just a handful of yards behind where I sat, the city seemed particularly beautiful on that luminous July evening. I was flooded with affection for the town and enthusiastic anticipation of all that lay ahead as I stepped out into the adult world.

But the fires of American optimism burned out in the 1970's. By the end of 1973 both the Apollo manned space program and the greatest of the great Oriole teams were passing into history. Their likes would never be seen again. Marylander Spiro T. Agnew, Nixon's hatchet man, resigned the Vice-Presidency in disgrace (although by the standards of Maryland politics his bribe taking was neither unusual nor reprehensible). The Watergate scandal gathered momentum with each passing month. By the spring of 1974 the US economy was plunging into recession and the impeachment of a sitting President became a real possibility. As Nixon bid adieu to the seat of power, the public heaved a sigh of relief, but there was little to look forward to in the post-Nixon era.

The Orioles failed to reach the playoffs in 1975, and while they still could look forward to some great years from 1977-1983, they would

never again field the depth of talent that so distinguished the team in 1969-1974. In Washington the presidential talent pool also seemed to be drying up. 1976 saw an obscure Georgia governor and sometimes peanut farmer successfully campaign for the Presidency, bolstered by his born-again religious convictions which seemed to assure him that somehow decency and rectitude qualified one to lead the most powerful country on earth.

By the end of Carter's lone term, the country was racked by 20% inflation combined with a stagnant economy, double-digit interest rates and high unemployment. The Orioles still had some fight left in them, thanks to a last great class of players nurtured in their minor league farm system during the first half of the '70s. But America, as a whole, limped into the '80s beaten, battered and seemingly adrift. Yet Americans are by nature optimistic. They are impatient with failure and unwilling to accept stagnation for any length of time. The spirit of the frontier courses through the nation's bloodstream, always assuring even the most downtrodden that the Promised Land is indeed just over the horizon. When the future doesn't seem to offer much, you can replenish optimism by turning around and drawing strength from the past. That's what many Americans tried to do in 1980.

Ronald Reagan was both the author and beneficiary of a conservative tide that refashioned the political landscape in the 1980's. He seemed to promise a return to the values that had conquered the West and won two World Wars (his secret service code name was "Rawhide"). The son of a Midwestern shoe salesman, he proved to a forceful communicator of Main Street values during his eight years as a public relations spokesperson for General Electric and subsequent career in California politics. He believed in his conservative values and promised a revolution in government that would revive the economy, confront and defeat the enemies abroad, and sweep away the gloom and despair that had gripped so many Americans at the start of the decade.

Many have sought to analyze Reagan's appeal. Few could deny that that he profoundly altered the course of events for years to come.

Reagan honed his youthful skills as a sports announcer and to many his greatest role was in the 1940 cinema classic "Knute Rockne- All American." So perhaps those who understand the role of sports in transmitting values across the generations are in an excellent position to help us understand what happened during the Reagan years.

Journalist David Lamb spent eight years as a foreign correspondent in Africa and the Middle East and came home to rediscover his own country by way a 16,000 mile odyssey through the world of minor league baseball. A wonderful baseball book, ***"Stolen Season"*** chronicles his journey during the summer of 1989 (Caution: Do NOT read this book. It may make you, too, want to quit your job, grab the kids and head for a Field of Dreams). Lamb begins his book with this observation:

> **"For men of my generation,… who grew up with thirty-game winners and .400 hitters, there were few aspects of life more full of mythology and wistful dreams than baseball."**

From this perspective, Lamb, who had been out of the country during much of the Reagan era, instantly grasped the essence of this presidency:

> **"Nostalgia is a dangerous obsession. It turns stumblebums into princes and dunghills into shining mountain peaks. It makes yesterday sweeter than tomorrow can ever be. But nostalgia is an expression of faith, because inherent in our embrace of the past is the belief that rediscovering the lost values of our youth will return us to simpler, more innocent days. Isn't that, after all, what got Ronald Reagan elected President ?"**

……..As springtime returned to Pennsylvania in 2002, my thoughts naturally turned towards minor league games in Allentown, Erie, Scranton, Reading and Altoona, along with Trenton and Somerset in New Jersey. Walking the alleys of Nazareth, thinking about baseball and Baltimore, I realized that any lessons I hoped to learn from Baltimore would have to include the bittersweet history of the

Orioles. In time, it became clear that the Orioles' experience offered insights that would be central to an understanding of the forces that redefined Baltimore in the 1980's.

The successes and failures of the Baltimore teams are mirrored in the city which they championed. Their triumphs reflected values that served and adorned the team, the citizenry and the city. Their failures illuminate the emptiness of the values that came to dominate the community in the years that followed. Together they are a microcosm of what went wrong in America in the last decades of the 20th Century, during a time of unprecedented growth and prosperity. Let's briefly consider the bigger picture before we turn to the Orioles and Baltimore.

XIX.

The social fabric of America was ripped apart during that convulsive and creative fifteen year "decade" we conveniently label as the Sixties. It could not be repaired in the Seventies. The call to reclaim a sense of national unity and purpose by rediscovering the values of our past resonated well. Unfortunately, the country as a whole chose to embrace a history that wasn't quite real. America opted for the Hollywood version, for the docu-drama instead of the documentary. The consequences of this choice, of a national retreat from the harsh and unyielding realities of life, would prove to be disastrous, in ways we are just beginning to understand.

A number of trends became evident as the Eighties began. All across America the emphasis was shifting from production to consumption, from work to leisure, from news to entertainment. The older, productive industrial base began its steady downward slide, as the economy became globalized, and factories and jobs shifted to other countries. Marketing and distribution came to dominate the economic engines. The nature of imports and exports dramatically changed. Entertainment became both a major domestic industry and an incredibly powerful and profitable export.

Sociologists described Me Generations and Now Generations that seemingly had lost sight of civic and community values, as well as any sense of history and genuine connectivity to previous

generations. This youthful obsession with a detached “here and now” came to coexist with an equally widespread nostalgia for a past that had never really existed. It was a deadly combination.

Presiding over it all was remarkable President, well described by former Baltimore man-about-town Neil Wolfson as the first commander in chief **“who boasted the show biz credentials of a Warner Brothers contract player. In his role as President, Ronald Reagan has finally achieved the superstar status that the movies denied him.”** It is easy to take cheap shots at the first Hollywood Presidency. Wolfson wrote in 1985, that **“In the 1980’s , Americans require more than strong leadership from their President. They want to be entertained.”** But the country’s needs went far beyond entertainment. It wanted reassurance that America was back on track; that if we could just find a way to unleash the mythical American character again, then problems would be sorted out and the country would take care of itself, without even trying.

Reagan’s genius was that he believed this so strongly, and communicated it so well, that he made others feel that this was indeed possible. Listening to this President, you really wanted to believe that the complex problems of the decade, and in fact the past several decades, could be disposed of as quickly and neatly as was the Berlin Wall.

…. so began an era of wishful thinking that affected not just a Republican President and his party, but virtually the entire spectrum of the American body politic. Baltimore’s Democratic politicians and businessmen joined in the chorus. Turning to tourism as an antidote to a crippling recession, they sought to reinvent Baltimore as Charm City, an urban theme park, Disneyland on the Patapsco.

The pivotal role that Walt Disney and his creations have come to play in modern America has proved to be a fertile field for research and commentary. The “Disneyfication” of America is an integral part of the era of wishful thinking. The Main Street of Disney’s vision is the embodiment of American nostalgia for a past as neat and tidy as his theme parks. The incredible power and influence of

television combined with remarkably sophisticated media production techniques and growing concentrations of corporate power to make Disney cartoons the world's babysitters. Add this to the vastly improved cinema technology, throw in video games and by the end of the century, America's collective detachment from reality had progressed to a startling degree.

A main street that is grounded in nostalgia is bad enough. A cartoon environment, the other dominant Disney vision, can be even deadlier…..

Discussing a relative who described a family trip to Disneyland as an "educational vacation" Sear laments:

> **" We used to use the term " Mickey Mouse" to describe a thrown-together, incompetent piece of equipment. Now it seems, to describe a whole society of childish incompetents… where France was noted for its culture, wine, lace and perfumes, America is known from the most remote regions of the Himalayas to the darkest African jungle by Mickey Mouse, McDonald's, Coca-Cola and Bugs Bunny. What an accomplishment!"**

While Sear's particular brand of sour grapes may strike many as simplistic and insignificant, the almost childish faith that so many of all political persuasions placed in the American brand of capitalism during and after the Reagan years is enough to make one wonder if his characterization of the national mind as that of a six year old is really far off base.

The cornerstone of the era of wishful thinking is an almost religious belief in the essential goodness of free market capitalism. Get government bureaucrats and regulators off the backs of entrepreneurs, reduce confiscatory taxation, let the market have its way and voila! … growth and prosperity will surely follow. If religion was the opium of the people, then faith in the overwhelmingly beneficial nature of the global capitalist economy qualifies as the heroin of the last quarter of the 20th century. Could any rational mind really conclude that social problems could truly be solved by letting unprecedented wealth accumulate at the top and then trickle down, like gentle rain, to sustain and uplift the poor and working classes?

Even more pie-in-the-sky was the idea that stable, long-term growth could come from an economy which would be largely based on unprecedented consumer spending. The mainstay of the new economy was to be the American consumer. Strip away all the talk about new technologies and you're left with an economy that is based not on production and not on export, but instead squarely on consumer consumption and debt. Growth would be the inevitable result of getting them to spend almost every dollar they earned, and, in many cases, every dollar they could borrow.

XXIII.

Baltimore followed the same pattern as the larger American economy in trusting that consumer spending and conspicuous consumption could sustain long-term economic growth, even as the fundamental underpinnings of the economy faltered. Just as the Inner Harbor concealed the **"rot beneath the glitter"**, so the expanding American economy of the 1990's blinded the eyes of many to the very basic weaknesses and inequities of the consumption-based economic boom….

The financial scandals and sagging stock markets of 2002 have finally brought many to the realization that much of the so-called prosperity of the roaring '90s was a carefully crafted illusion and exercise in self-deception. What lies behind the mask? Certainly many areas of the country and segments of the economy failed to receive the promised benefits of the boom years…..

It all adds up to a frightening prescription for self-deception and eventual social and economic chaos. Another baseball analogy is fitting. This is an economy, like many current baseball players, that has broken all the records and posted remarkable statistics. But like many of the players, it is on steroids - the growth and strength are suspect. The powerful drugs can bulk-up the players, but in the end they sow the seeds for the eventual destruction of their health and well-being. So it is with the economic system described above.

The words of Jim Palmer continue to reverberate down the hallways of America as we finally begin to comprehend the profound social costs of the era of wishful thinking :

“They started going for quick fixes and there are no quick fixes in this game.”

XXIV.

……. For Baltimore (and America) truth can be found if one is willing to forgo the Quick Fix and take a hard look at the realities of life in urban America. No solutions will emerge if we choose to continue to live in the era of wishful thinking. The truth is in the alleys of Baltimore, littered with the debris of broken promises and empty dreams.

The rats continue to scurry through the alleys, ever-present reminders of the how much governments have promised and how little they have delivered. In this realm the rats still rule. Will we face them ? Will we run? Or will we just walk home and watch the Food Channel, while we contemplate which of the 40 varieties of fungi we’ll try next week ? The rats are waiting. The choice is ours.