

CULTURE SHIFT BY JOHN DOYLE

Time to say goodbye to flibbertigibbets, Idols, models and celebs

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Remember the new seriousness?

It was supposed to wash over the U.S. culture like a sobering acid rain after the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001. And it never happened. Instead, at a time when the country and its widely exported, influential culture was under severe strain, the frivolity increased. People decided on distraction and escapism. As well they might.

It was more, not less Paris Hilton, Joe Millionaire, floozies, flibbertigibbets, *The Simple Life*, *The Surreal Life*, Nipplegate, Nick and Jessica, *Idol* shows, models shows and show after show featuring some airhead celeb talking

about dating, dieting and how to stay skinny and hot. Seriousness was not the option chosen.

Well, here it comes. The new seriousness starts today. I betcha. I write this on Tuesday morning and if Barack Obama wins, as looked certain yesterday, the U.S. culture shifts. It must.

For all the giddy optimism, Obama would arrive in office with a clear, rational plan for a seismic overhaul - regulation of the financial system, investment in education, a national infrastructure reinvestment bank to build or restore roads, bridges and mass-transit systems, a major investment in the green-energy sector and a lot more. The economy is on the brink of ruin. The culture wars are over. The future is uncertain and unsettling. The time for irresponsibility is over. Paris Hilton and the flibbertigibbets' time has passed.

While an excess of frivolity and a need for escapism characterized the George W. Bush years, the defining, culture-war

nuclear bombs and assassinations, coupled with a tendency to fetishize torture, all delivered in a comic-book form, perfectly captured the lunacy and shallowness of the Bush presidency.

It's not unusual for U.S. television to reflect aspects of the presidency. Network television offers U.S. society a mirror. TV programs, aired within weeks or days of being written, reflect the mood and contemporary myths with an intuitive accuracy.

And in a country where every president is a magnetic centre of attention, the president becomes an instant archetype.

The atmosphere and mood of the White House is culture-defining. The Bill Clinton era spawned shows about boyish, immature men and *Seinfeld* was the zeitgeist program. During the Ronald Reagan and George Bush Sr. years, TV threw up a bunch of older, appealingly wise authority figures,

with Bill Cosby on *The Cosby Show*, Angela Lansbury on *Murder, She Wrote* and Andy Griffith on *Matlock*. These represented a comforting acquiescence to the wisdom of older folks such as Reagan and stuffy WASP men such as Bush Sr.

See, U.S. television is, by commercial necessity, about shared values, and if shared values are embodied in the new president by definition of his being elected by the majority, then we will get television that captures his personality and vision. In the

case of Obama, a black Chicago liberal and an academic with a gift for stirring rhetoric, there is the perfect vessel for the long-awaited new seriousness.

How this will be manifested on TV is impossible to predict. But it is surely coming. This TV season, arriving after the writers' strike, is already a half-baked thing, lacking focus. Soon, though, the two-hour TV movie episode of *24*, called *Redemption*, will air, and in January, just as Obama takes office, *24* will finally return with a full,

new season.

While an early season of *24* featured a black president, the dynamic of the show has always been the Bush-era politics of fear. Should Obama win and his presidency embody hope, optimism and austerity, *24* will instantly look tired and terribly dated. By next fall, the new seriousness will be all over the U.S. networks. Distractions and escapism will look very different. The frivolity will decrease. The heroes will be Obama types. The culture will finally shift. I betcha.

Airing tonight

LIFE (NBC, 9 p.m.) moves to this new time slot - its third of this season - tonight. Stick with it. It's a cop show with a dissenting attitude, and its moodiness and rage are admirable. Tonight, Charlie (Damian Lewis) investigates when a woman is found dead at a dinner table.

LAW & ORDER (NBC, 10 p.m.) is back and the cops look into the death of a Wall Street stockbroker as the result of organized street fighting. Torn from the headlines, perhaps.

SECOND SIGHT (TVOntario, 10 p.m. on Human Edge) is a gloriously good, gorgeous documentary. Made by Alison McAlpine, it's a journey into the culture - hovering between the Gaelic past and English present - of Scotland's Isle of Skye. It's about storytellers, ghosts, apparitions and the haunting, haunted landscape. Actually, it's stunningly good. // J.D.

// Check local listings.

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