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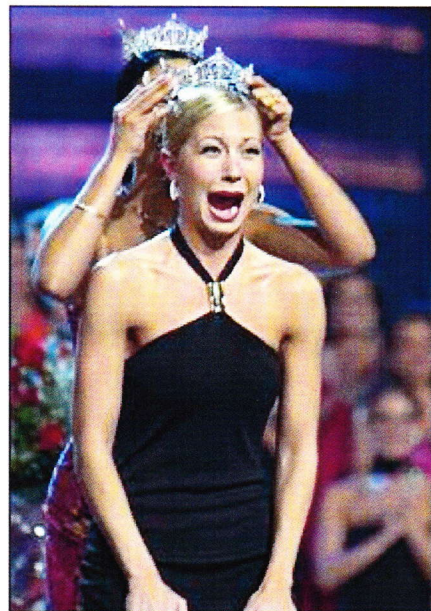
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Less than two weeks after the World Trade Center attacks, the most nationalistic of all awards shows went on as scheduled. Miss Oregon Katie Harman was crowned at the night's end

## Operation Miss America

Behind the scenes at this year's patriotic, playful—and high-security—pageant

By B. J. Sigismund  
NEWSWEEK WEB EXCLUSIVE

Sept. 24 — As everyone knows, this year's Miss America Pageant was supposed to be different. But no one could have known just how changed it would be.

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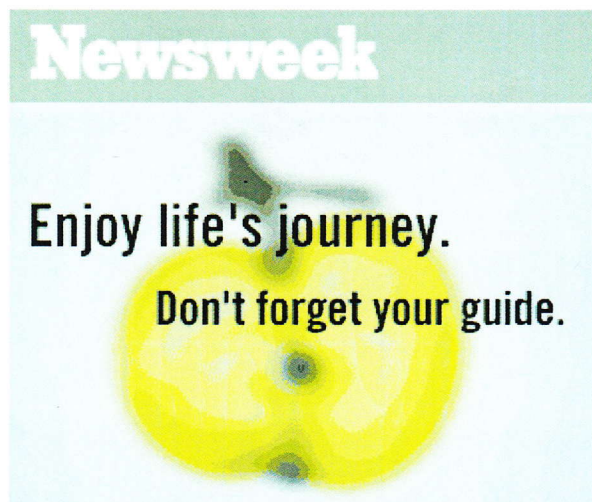
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LAST MONTH, the organizers announced several additions to the competition. There would be a multiple-choice quiz, a "Jury Room" off-stage where also-rans would be interviewed on camera—and most notably, the 41 non-finalists would cast votes for whom they wanted to win. These modifications were all inspired by reality television.

Then came the reality we saw on television on Sept. 11.

**"Our program, like the country, will not be held hostage to terrorists."**

— **BOB RENNEISEN**

With the show just a week-and-a-half away, producers were faced with a dilemma. Postpone it awhile, like the Emmys? Cancel it altogether? After two days, they decided to proceed as planned. "Our program, like our country, will not be held hostage by terrorism," pageant CEO Bob Renneisen told the press.

A lot changed in America between then and now. Heading down to Atlantic City from Manhattan, I rode a bus teeming with suitcases in overhead bins because the storage spaces on the sides of the vehicle were off-limits. Checking into the hotel, I had to show my driver's license. And at the awards show, security was extremely tight, with all guests scanned with a hand-held metal detector from head to toe.

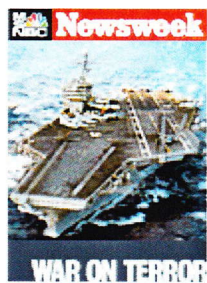
Security was extremely tight, with all guests scanned with hand-held metal detectors from head to toe





Things were less formal inside the arena. There, the vibe was actually giddy, like the last few minutes before a big rock concert. Unlike most awards shows, which are usually rife with air-kissing show-biz types, the Miss America Pageant makes tickets available to the public. In the lobby, a souvenir booth sold Miss America earrings, T-shirts, golf balls and even a cookbook ("favorite recipes from all 50 states"). Packs of young girls, accompanied by chaperones, wore large sashes saying things like "Miss Pre-Teen Alabama." Lots of folks wore pins emblazoned with pictures of their home state's contender for the crown.

Which brings me to what I didn't see. Truth be told, there weren't many red, white and blue ribbons on people's clothing. Over the last week in New York, they had seemed inescapable. But at the pageant—just two hours away in New Jersey—it was 15 minutes before I saw my first remembrance ribbon.



Of course, when host Tony Danza opened the show at 8 p.m., it was clear we were still in the middle of a national crisis. Prior to the attacks, producers had planned to begin the program with an Academy Awards-style opening where the 51 contestants would arrive via limousines. That was scrapped and replaced with a solemn speech from Danza about why they went ahead with the show. "We don't carry on to make less of what happened," Danza told the viewers, "we carry on to make more of it."

The most unabashedly jingoistic of annual awards shows, the pageant gave Americans something both patriotic and playful. Said last year's winner, Angela Perez Baraquio, at one point during the show, "I'm proud to be Miss America, but I'm even prouder to be an American."

Many of the 51 women worked something statesmanlike into their introductions. "I'm Marta Strzyzewski, hello from New Mexico, homeland of America's most powerful defense research!" Then, "I'm Jennifer Leigh D'Ambrosio from Rhode Island, America's pioneer of religious freedom." Miss California mentioned the Ronald Reagan connection. Each contestant elicited screams and shouts from the

13,000-people-strong crowd, which was largely sorted by state. People held up placards like, "Go Kari! Minnesota all the way!"

The program was peppered with references to the attacks. Several times during the show, Danza would encourage viewers to give to the Sept. 11th Fund. A video sequence showed how the crisis had affected the pageant and its competitors, all of whom had arrived in Atlantic City for rehearsals a few days before the tragedy. Images of flags filled the stage during downtime.

Of course, it was still showbiz. Toward the end of commercial breaks, a voice overhead would wail, "We're coming back in 30 seconds. Let's see those signs in the air!" Danza also hammed it up. At one point, he said of the 51 women: "Young, bright, beautiful—just don't tell them I'm not a judge!"

The show was, admittedly, pretty exciting to watch. Like many tuning in at home, occasionally I felt guilty for having so much fun, and wondered if it was still a touch too early for something like this. Over the three-hour pageant, the 51 contestants became 20, then the 20 were pruned to 10, and finally, the 10 were whittled to five. I had my favorites at the beginning, but none of them made it to the final round.

And, of course, a beauty competition is still a beauty competition. The contestants were undoubtedly talented: Did you see Miss Tennessee work that piano? Or Miss D.C. twirl two batons to "I Will Survive"? Or Miss Oregon's startling aria? But in spite of such amazing displays, the women still had to do a rather humiliating strip down to practically nothing for what organizers have renamed the "Lifestyle and Fitness"—a.k.a. swimsuit—category.

One innovation that didn't work at all: the Jury Room. Originally, the concept was that the also-rans would dish a bit on the remaining competition. Maybe the crisis is to blame, but the ladies just didn't seem to want to rag on each other. Remarks were along the lines of, "There are so many wonderful girls, I don't know how the judges are gonna pick." The bitchiest it got: "I thought Georgia and Louisiana would [still] be out there—you guys are awesome!"

When the competition got down to the final ten, the 41 also-rans got to vote for their favorite. Their selections would count as "the 8th Judge"—and make up 10 percent of the ultimate decision. Among the press pool, rumor had it that one or two of the final 10 had been "aloof" to her peers—and that it would cost them dearly.

Designed to show once and





for all that these young women were smart as well as striking, the 'knowledge quiz' was decently difficult

But the most fascinating part of the whole night had to be the "knowledge quiz," which tested the final five on history and current events. Designed by the producers to show once and for all that these young women were smart as well as striking—and of course to cash in on the "Millionaire" craze—the contest proved a few naysayers wrong. Know why? It was decently difficult. Questions concerned the Declaration of Independence, stem cell research and Supreme Court justices. (Example: "Started by the Kennedy Administration, this worldwide volunteer service is celebrating its 40th anniversary this year. A. The Red Cross. B. The Peace Corps. C. The Public Works Administration." Answer: B.) I took the quiz along with them, and when the totals were tallied, I sank deeper into my chair.

Over one last commercial break, the judges tabulated the final scores. The crowning was imminent.

Then there they were, the five finalists, standing on stage and holding hands, naturally. One by one, Danza announced the runners-up, until finally, the winner: Miss Oregon, Katie Harman.

Before she even finished walking down the runway, I was ushered with other reporters off the floor and through several halls to a press conference filled with Miss America brass, television cameramen and at least a dozen armed policemen.

We waited patiently, ready to procure quotes that would turn an ordinary young woman into a celebrity overnight. It was there I learned that Miss Oregon had won the knowledge quiz, nailing six of eight questions. Behind me, a woman bragged that she'd been one of the only people to pay attention to little Katie Harman when she was just one of the 51 contenders. "She's totally unpretentious," said the reporter.

Then Harman emerged, taking to the podium in her crown, with a style that was easy and funny and real. She answered questions with pluck and showed a lot of grace.

My moment with Miss America came next. I had two minutes with her—well, her and the six cops who surrounded us. I was told repeatedly by police and press representatives exactly how this interview would take place. After she spoke with "Entertainment Tonight," I could talk with her during the time it took her to walk across a parking lot to an escalator. We'd be flanked by the fuzz the whole stretch.

And that's exactly how it happened. We moved at a brisk pace, with cops in front, back and at our side. I asked her when she first heard about the attacks. "We were at rehearsal," Harman said. "We didn't have a

television around. So someone brought in a radio and we just sat there, stunned, and listened. We didn't even see the footage until 1 in the afternoon or so. And that's when we totally went into shock." That's all I got—our interview was over. She waved good-bye, joined her cadre of cops and rode up the escalator.

There she went, a new Miss America at an incredibly uncertain time in the nation's history. Over the next 12 months, she'll travel around the globe, representing the U.S. and discussing it with foreign leaders. She has quite a year ahead of her.

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