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In his state-of-the-union speech, George Bush laid out a brave but hazardous course for American foreign policy which, if carried out, will shape the world during the next few years: leader, page 13. The hard task of controlling weapons proliferation, pages 24-26

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CHICAGO

**How much can you learn about someone in three minutes?**

AMERICANS are always keen to do things more efficiently. So why not speed-dating? On a Tuesday night in Chicago, 50 men and 50 women have gathered at Joe's Bar for an event sponsored by FastDater. The men sit at a series of long tables, the women opposite them. A master of ceremonies tells the couples that they have exactly three minutes to dazzle one another. A bullhorn sounds and the dating begins. "Be free with your yeses!" the MC barks. "You can always dump the guy or girl later."

The bullhorn sounds again. The men swap seats, the women stay put and a new round of three-minute dates begins. Every participant keeps a scorecard, marking each "date" as a yes or a no. FastDater will tabulate the matches and notify the participants by e-mail, a few tactful days later, of the matches and also the "missed opportunities"—cases in which you said no but the person across the table said yes.

The evening requires strategy (to elicit as much information as possible) and endurance (to do it 30 or 40 times). "Most of the time, three minutes feels too short," says Craig Bartal, a 38-year-old computer programmer. Still, he is a fan. The movie-star good looks that might be described in a personal ad can be checked on the spot; and filling out the scorecard is easier than soliciting telephone numbers in a bar "like a car salesman".

Besides, sometimes three minutes is quite long enough. Lisa Lombardi, the founder of FastDater and an occasional participant, recalls one such date. "I said I wanted kids. He said he had had a vasectomy. The date was over."

Speed-dating is now popping up in plenty of American cities. Miss Lombardi copied her version of the idea from a rabbi who was organising such events for Jewish singles. She started FastDater in May 2001. It's not a bad little money-spinner. Each event has sold out. The

daters pay \$35 to take part. Joe's Bar donates the space (it makes a packet refuelling the speed-daters between bouts). The biggest cost is the 20 hours it takes Miss Lombardi to sort through the cards, though technology could presumably help here.

The crowd looks like the front office of any bank or insurance company, conservative and respectable. Is there a stigma associated with entrusting your social life to the dating equivalent of the Big Mac? Not one that matters, says Mr Bartal, who collected three matches, and has since been on his "best date so far" with one of them. Others disagree. "I will never admit to my mom that I'm doing this," confesses a Belgian man who works in a Chicago suburb.

The bullhorn sounds, once again filling your smugly married correspondent, looking on from the bar, with even more conjugal bliss than usual. The participants have now been on 20 or 30 dates. During the short break, Alexandra Dreier, a software designer, admits to exhaustion, but is still enthusiastic. "There is none of the bar bullshit," she says. "Everyone is here for the same reason, and everyone knows that they're here for the same reason." That's what makes for an efficient market.



What makes the Boston case different is the explosion of outrage it has caused.

There is no evidence to suggest that celibacy turns people into paedophiles. Married men, too, can be paedophiles. But the churches—and not only the Roman Catholic one—have a tradition of trying to cover things up. Their leaders have sometimes appeared to show more concern for the abuser, and for protecting the church's reputation, than for the victims. They

have, rightly, been criticised for this.

In Boston, the silence has been broken. Cardinal Law, who has done much good for the people of Boston, now has a sadly tarnished reputation. Many churchgoers feel deeply disillusioned. As Stephen Brady, head of the Roman Catholic Faithful, a pressure group, says, "It's a shame the cardinal didn't err on the side of the children." But an unbroken silence would have been worse. ■