MARCH 2000
U·S AIRWAYS

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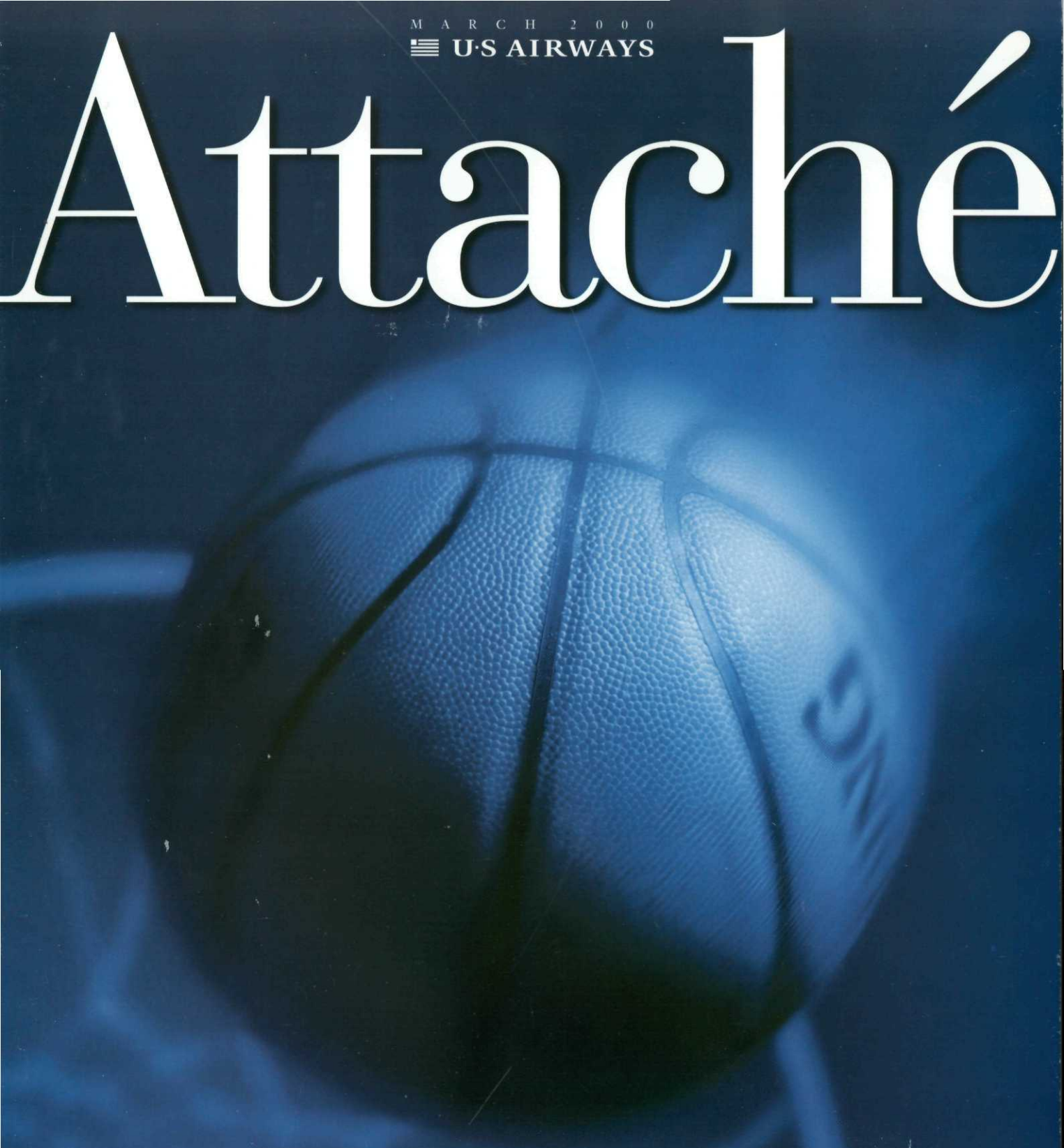


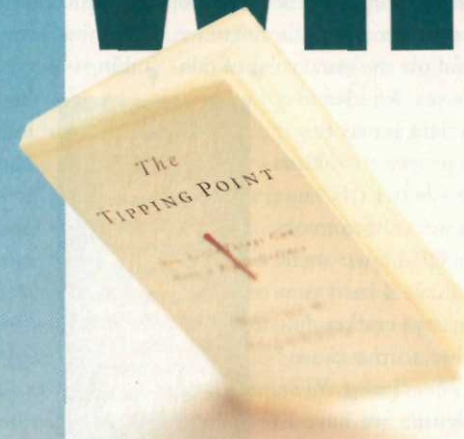
Get a courtside ticket (if you can). PAGE 40

WHY NORTH CAROLINA'S TRIANGLE GETS HOOPS FEVER

Plus: **MALCOLM GLADWELL** Tips His Hand ★ **CHRISTINE SCHULTZ** Uncovers Hotel Quackery ★ **BRIDGETTE LACY** Tastes the South in France ★ **IAN MARSHALL** Takes the Hike of a Lifetime

Writer **Malcolm Gladwell** is one of America's most original thinkers. And he's about to shift our point of view.

what's the point?



HE'S COOL: Gladwell (photographed in his native Canada) was once a competitive runner. Now he chases odd facts, quirky individuals, and bits of arcane information.

BOOK PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK RAYNOR

It's an old high-school science experiment:

Imagine a glass of water, full to the brim. Now carefully—drip by drip—fill the glass to above the rim of the glass, holding the water through surface tension. Now drip one more drop. The tension breaks, the surface trembles, and water flows over the sides of the glass. ★ It is that last drop, indistinguishable from all the others but crucially important to the water in the glass, that 36-year-old *New Yorker* writer Malcolm Gladwell has made his journalistic beat. With the publication of his new book, *The Tipping Point*, aptly subtitled *How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, Gladwell puts that little drop of water—along with crepe-soled Hush Puppies, the murder rate in New York City, the AIDS epidemic, "Sesame Street," hiring practices at the company that makes Gore-Tex, Paul Revere, and a long list of other apparently unrelated phenomena—under the microscope. Nimbly juggling a remarkable assemblage of anecdotes and facts, he presents a convincing case that, contrary to the prevailing wisdom of mass trends and focus-group marketing, a few individuals or a single haphazard event

by Liz Seymour

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS BUCK

can set off a social epidemic that profoundly alters the culture.

For Hush Puppies—nearly moribund in 1994 with sales of 30,000 pairs a year—the tipping point came when a small group of hip young New Yorkers rediscovered the dowdy brushed-suede shoes and started a new fashion trend; the well-honed message of "Sesame Street" tipped a revolution in early childhood education; the Gore company discovered that its operations tipped adversely when any division grew larger than 150 employees; and an entire nation tipped the night Paul Revere started his word-of-mouth campaign. In other words, Gladwell argues, little things not only can make a difference, sometimes they make *all* the difference.

Ideas, Gladwell explains, often follow the same rules of contagion that govern infectious diseases. An idea may incubate for a long time in a few carriers, it may linger for years in a subculture, but if the proper conditions are present it can erupt suddenly, for better ("Sesame Street," breast-cancer screenings) or worse (teen smoking, suicide in Micronesia) into a full-blown social movement. "As human beings we have a hard time with this kind of progression, because the end result—the effect—seems out of proportion to the cause," he writes in the introduction to *The Tipping Point*. "To appreciate the power of epidemics we have to abandon this expectation about proportionality. We need to prepare ourselves for the possibility that sometimes big changes follow from small events, and that sometimes these changes can happen very quickly."

THE TICKET

The Tipping Point **(Little Brown and Company) is available in bookstores. For more about the author, visit his Web site: gladwell.com.**

ONE LATE OCTOBER AFTERNOON I took the subway down to the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan to meet the man who is poised to wrest America's focus from the macro to the micro. The day was sunny and warm, and the stores were full of vampire teeth and candy corn; children in Spiderman costumes and ballerina skirts stood in chattering groups with their school backpacks over their shoulders. New York's newly adopted air of small-town geniality, Gladwell says, is another example of the Tipping Point at work. "If a window is broken and left unrepaired, people walking by will conclude that no one cares and no one is in charge," he writes in his new book. "Soon, more windows will be broken and the sense of anarchy will spread from the building to the street on which it faces, sending a signal that anything goes. In a city, relatively minor problems like graffiti, public disorder, and aggressive panhandling are all the equivalent of broken windows, invitations to more serious crime." Working backward from New York's precipitous drop in crime—50 percent fewer felonies and a two-thirds drop in the murder rate since 1990—Gladwell makes a convincing case that it was not a bigger police force or a more aggressive war on drugs, but the simple act of cleaning up subway graffiti that ultimately made the city less hospitable to major crimes.

The sound of city traffic roared and hooted faintly below us as we sat in Gladwell's tidy corner apartment. Dressed in a neat writer's uniform of crisp white shirt, khaki pants, black tie shoes, and tweed jacket, he sat at a bare pine table and started talking. In 15 minutes he had given a detailed description of the way Japanese adults learn to pronounce the letters R and L; the origins of rural free delivery; the way babies acquire language; turn-of-the-century wallpaper wars; and how rumors are spread. When he learns nuggets of new information, he quickly writes them down in a pocket notebook.

"I don't know anybody who enjoys learning about the world more than Malcolm does," says Bruce Headlam, an editor at *The New York Times* and a friend of Gladwell's since first grade. "What he really loves is figuring things out." Gladwell's book and articles—he has been a staff writer for *The New Yorker* since 1996—are larded with odd facts, quirky individuals, and bits of arcane information. "Behind every ordinary object there is someone for whom the thing is anything but ordinary," he says, and more likely than not he will find that someone. The desk in his study overlooking a distant slice of the Hudson River is piled with photocopies of articles from scholarly journals and chapters from out-of-print books. At the NYU library not far away he wanders through science, history, sociology, business theory, and economics, tugging at loose facts until he finds the knot that binds them all together. "Malcolm delights in surprising everybody with arguments that are contrary to what most people think," says longtime friend Jacob Weisberg, chief political correspondent for the online magazine *Slate*.

The idea behind *The Tipping Point*, which first appeared as a feature on urban crime in *The New Yorker* in 1996, came from a 1991 article Gladwell found by chance while flipping through *The American Journal of Sociology*. The article, with the uneuphonious title "The Epidemic Theory of Ghettos and Neighborhood Effects on Dropping Out and Teenage Childbearing," by University of Chicago sociologist Jonathan Crane, outlines a theory that quality of life can deteriorate gradually in a neighborhood without having much effect on its residents, but when a certain point—Gladwell's Tipping Point—is reached, social problems such as teen pregnancy take a sudden leap. In other words, the difference between a little bit and a lot is not as great as the difference between a lot and a little bit more. "When I read that article, I thought it was the coolest thing I'd ever seen," Gladwell says. "I photocopied it and kept it around for years and years before I did anything with it." With that article, one might say, Gladwell's own career began to tip.

Although much of his writing now has to do with science, sociology, and a kind of interdisciplinary field that could be called "things that are connected in cool ways you wouldn't have expected," Gladwell studied English history at the University of Toronto. "I figured out pretty early that the nineteenth-century English history curriculum went up through the first World War, and the twentieth-century English history program began at 1900. So if I just took the right courses I could get by writing the same paper over and over again," he says. "It means that I graduated knowing a whole lot about Lloyd George and not nearly as much about everything else."

Gladwell was born in England, the youngest of three brothers, to a Jamaican mother and a British father. When he was 6, the family moved to Waterloo, Ontario, where his father still teaches mathematics at the local university. "He was extremely funny even as a child," says his mother, Joyce, herself a writer (she published an autobiography, *Brown Face, Big Master* in 1969) and a family therapist. "He could make strangers laugh just by being himself." A competitive runner, Gladwell was also, briefly, the fastest 14-year-old in Canada when he set a new national record in the 1,500-meter run.

Gladwell's journalistic career began in high school when he and some friends established a magazine of distinctly limited circulation called *Ad Hominem: A Journal of Critical Opinion and Scandal*. "We would run stories about anything," Gladwell says, "as long as they included a personal attack somewhere on someone." After college he moved to Bloomington, Indiana, where he worked briefly as a reporter, and then to Washington, D.C., where he eventually joined the staff of *The Washington Post*. In 1993 he came to New York to become the *Post*'s New York City bureau chief and started freelancing for *The New Yorker* shortly after. "In 1996, I realized that in the last year I had written more articles for *The New Yorker* than I had for *The Washington Post*. It was time to go, so I went." (He also writes off and on for *Slate* and *The New Republic*.)

By a peculiar long-standing tradition, *New Yorker* staff writers are all independent freelancers, although they do have offices at the magazine headquarters which they can use as much or as little as they choose. Gladwell's own office, down a hushed gray-carpeted corridor in the glossy new Condé Nast building, has a wide view of midtown Manhattan. When he is not traveling, Gladwell generally works at home in the morning and then walks the 20 blocks up to *The New Yorker*. But in pursuit of his odd roster of experts he is just as likely to be in Norway (where he once visited a team of scientists searching for flu virus samples in frozen corpses); Austria (to interview a retired advertising executive); Akron, Ohio (to visit an interstate shipping company); or San Francisco (to watch a brain surgeon at work).

Some trends or events reach tipping points by their own momentum. For others, Gladwell says, it takes the right person to get the word out. Paul Revere, for instance, wasn't just any messenger, he was a well-respected and well-connected successful businessman—outgoing and energetic with what one biographer called "an uncanny genius for being at the center of events." It is often forgotten that he was not the only rider that April night in 1775: While Revere rode through Charlestown, Medford, Cambridge, and Menotomy, a fellow revolutionary named William Dawes took the southern route through Roxbury, Brookline, Watertown, and Waltham and raised hardly a peep. The difference, says Gladwell, is that Revere was the special kind of person who can single-handedly move an idea toward its Tipping Point; the soft-spoken Dawes was not.

To support his argument that a social epidemic depends, at least in part, on the right person being in the right place at the right time, Gladwell cites the experiment done in the late 1960s by psychologist Stanley Milgram that introduced the concept of "six degrees of separation" into the American lexicon. Milgram wanted to map the network of invisible threads that connect apparent strangers, so he gave 160 people in Omaha a packet with the name and address of a man in suburban Boston and asked them to mail the packet to someone they knew who might be able to get the packet closer to its destination. Each of those next people were asked to do the same thing, sending the packet along with the same instructions. To the surprise of everyone in the study, it seldom took more than six steps for the packet to reach the man to whom it was addressed—six degrees of separation.

But Gladwell goes on to explain an even more surprising phenomenon: The majority of the packets were delivered to their destination by just three men, a type of person he calls a Connector. "Six degrees of separation doesn't mean that everyone is linked to everyone else in just six steps," he writes. "It means that a very small number of people is linked to everyone else in a few steps, and the rest of us are linked to the world through those special few." Without Paul Revere to act as a Connector, Americans might still be making change in shillings and pence.

Gladwell decreased his own degrees of separation by several notches when he invited Jacob Weisberg, a friend of a friend then working at *The New Republic*, to share a house with several roommates in Washington, D.C. It was Weisberg's outgoing and well-connected mother Lois who became the subject of Gladwell's *New Yorker* article "Six Degrees of Lois Weisberg"; it was Lois Weisberg who introduced Gladwell to a friend of hers whose husband is the president of Lands' End; and he was the one who invited Gladwell to observe the Lands' End order-taking and shipping department for an article on the back end of e-commerce. "Malcolm has an extraordinary social circle," says Headlam. "He just likes hanging around with interesting personalities—he's fascinated with people."

As *The Tipping Point* made its way through the months-long editing process, Gladwell continued tracking down and interviewing his usual assortment of T-shirt manufacturers, child-development experts, long-distance truckers, and professional cellists. But with the publication of his startling and convincing ideas, the first-time book author and one-time fastest boy in Canada may be about to start an intellectual epidemic that could shake up the way we think about everything from selling shoes to planning cities.

And how cool is that? ★

LIZ SEYMOUR *is an* ATTACHÉ *contributing editor. She is based in Greensboro, North Carolina.*

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