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2-21-2003

### 2002-Berkshire-Hathaway-Letter From Warren E. Buffett

Warren Buffet

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**Note: The following table appears in the printed Annual Report on the facing page of the Chairman's Letter and is referred to in that letter.**

**Berkshire's Corporate Performance vs. the S&P 500**

Year	Annual Percentage Change		Relative Results
	in Per-Share Book Value of Berkshire	in S&P 500 with Dividends Included	
	(1)	(2)	(1)-(2)
1965	23.8	10.0	13.8
1966	20.3	(11.7)	32.0
1967	11.0	30.9	(19.9)
1968	19.0	11.0	8.0
1969	16.2	(8.4)	24.6
1970	12.0	3.9	8.1
1971	16.4	14.6	1.8
1972	21.7	18.9	2.8
1973	4.7	(14.8)	19.5
1974	5.5	(26.4)	31.9
1975	21.9	37.2	(15.3)
1976	59.3	23.6	35.7
1977	31.9	(7.4)	39.3
1978	24.0	6.4	17.6
1979	35.7	18.2	17.5
1980	19.3	32.3	(13.0)
1981	31.4	(5.0)	36.4
1982	40.0	21.4	18.6
1983	32.3	22.4	9.9
1984	13.6	6.1	7.5
1985	48.2	31.6	16.6
1986	26.1	18.6	7.5
1987	19.5	5.1	14.4
1988	20.1	16.6	3.5
1989	44.4	31.7	12.7
1990	7.4	(3.1)	10.5
1991	39.6	30.5	9.1
1992	20.3	7.6	12.7
1993	14.3	10.1	4.2
1994	13.9	1.3	12.6
1995	43.1	37.6	5.5
1996	31.8	23.0	8.8
1997	34.1	33.4	.7
1998	48.3	28.6	19.7
1999	.5	21.0	(20.5)
2000	6.5	(9.1)	15.6
2001	(6.2)	(11.9)	5.7
2002	10.0	(22.1)	32.1
Average Annual Gain — 1965-2002	22.2	10.0	12.2
Overall Gain — 1964-2002	214,433	3,663	

Notes: Data are for calendar years with these exceptions: 1965 and 1966, year ended 9/30; 1967, 15 months ended 12/31.

Starting in 1979, accounting rules required insurance companies to value the equity securities they hold at market rather than at the lower of cost or market, which was previously the requirement. In this table, Berkshire's results through 1978 have been restated to conform to the changed rules. In all other respects, the results are calculated using the numbers originally reported.

The S&P 500 numbers are **pre-tax** whereas the Berkshire numbers are **after-tax**. If a corporation such as Berkshire were simply to have owned the S&P 500 and accrued the appropriate taxes, its results would have lagged the S&P 500 in years when that index showed a positive return, but would have exceeded the S&P in years when the index showed a negative return. Over the years, the tax costs would have caused the aggregate lag to be substantial.

## BERKSHIRE HATHAWAY INC.

### To the Shareholders of Berkshire Hathaway Inc.:

Our gain in net worth during 2002 was \$6.1 billion, which increased the per-share book value of both our Class A and Class B stock by 10.0%. Over the last 38 years (that is, since present management took over) per-share book value has grown from \$19 to \$41,727, a rate of 22.2% compounded annually.\*

In all respects 2002 was a banner year. I'll provide details later, but here's a summary:

- Our various non-insurance operations performed exceptionally well, despite a sluggish economy. A decade ago Berkshire's annual pre-tax earnings from our non-insurance businesses was \$272 million. Now, from our ever-expanding collection of manufacturing, retailing, service and finance businesses, we earn that sum *monthly*.
- Our insurance group increased its float to \$41.2 billion, a hefty gain of \$5.7 billion. Better yet, the use of these funds in 2002 cost us only 1%. Getting back to low-cost float feels good, particularly after our poor results during the three previous years. Berkshire's reinsurance division and GEICO shot the lights out in 2002, and underwriting discipline was restored at General Re.
- Berkshire acquired some important new businesses – with economic characteristics ranging from good to great, run by managers ranging from great to great. Those attributes are two legs of our “entrance” strategy, the third being a sensible purchase price. Unlike LBO operators and private equity firms, we have no “exit” strategy – we buy to keep. That's one reason why Berkshire is usually the first – and sometimes the only – choice for sellers and their managers.
- Our marketable securities outperformed most indices. For Lou Simpson, who manages equities at GEICO, this was old stuff. But, for me, it was a welcome change from the last few years, during which my investment record was dismal.

The confluence of these favorable factors in 2002 caused our book-value gain to outstrip the performance of the S&P 500 by 32.1 percentage points. This result is aberrational: Charlie Munger, Berkshire's vice chairman and my partner, and I hope to achieve – *at most* – an average annual advantage of a few points. In the future, there will be years in which the S&P soundly trounces us. That will in fact almost certainly happen during a strong bull market, because the portion of our assets committed to common stocks has significantly declined. This change, of course, helps our relative performance in down markets such as we had in 2002.

I have another caveat to mention about last year's results. If you've been a reader of financial reports in recent years, you've seen a flood of “pro-forma” earnings statements – tabulations in which managers invariably show “earnings” far in excess of those allowed by their auditors. In these presentations, the CEO tells his owners “don't count this, don't count that – just count what makes earnings fat.” Often, a forget-all-this-bad-stuff message is delivered year after year without management so much as blushing.

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\*All figures used in this report apply to Berkshire's A shares, the successor to the only stock that the company had outstanding before 1996. The B shares have an economic interest equal to 1/30th that of the A.

We've yet to see a pro-forma presentation disclosing that audited earnings were somewhat high. So let's make a little history: Last year, on a pro-forma basis, Berkshire had *lower* earnings than those we actually reported.

That is true because two favorable factors aided our reported figures. First, in 2002 there was no megacatastrophe, which means that Berkshire (and other insurers as well) earned more from insurance than if losses had been normal. In years when the reverse is true – because of a blockbuster hurricane, earthquake or man-made disaster – many insurers like to report that they would have earned X “except for” the unusual event. The implication is that since such megacats are infrequent, they shouldn't be counted when “true” earnings are calculated. That is deceptive nonsense. “Except for” losses will forever be part of the insurance business, and they will forever be paid with shareholders' money.

Nonetheless, for the purposes of this exercise, we'll take a page from the industry's book. For last year, when we didn't have any truly major disasters, a downward adjustment is appropriate if you wish to “normalize” our underwriting result.

Secondly, the bond market in 2002 favored certain strategies we employed in our finance and financial products business. Gains from those strategies will certainly diminish within a year or two – and may well disappear.

Soooo . . . “except for” a couple of favorable breaks, our pre-tax earnings last year would have been about \$500 million less than we actually reported. We're happy, nevertheless, to bank the excess. As Jack Benny once said upon receiving an award: “I don't deserve this honor – but, then, I have arthritis, and I don't deserve that either.”

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We continue to be blessed with an extraordinary group of managers, many of whom haven't the slightest financial need to work. They stick around, though: In 38 years, we've never had a single CEO of a subsidiary elect to leave Berkshire to work elsewhere. Counting Charlie, we now have six managers over 75, and I hope that in four years that number increases by at least two (Bob Shaw and I are both 72). Our rationale: “It's hard to teach a new dog old tricks.”

Berkshire's operating CEOs are masters of their crafts and run their businesses as if they were their own. My job is to stay out of their way and allocate whatever excess capital their businesses generate. It's easy work.

My managerial model is Eddie Bennett, who was a batboy. In 1919, at age 19, Eddie began his work with the Chicago White Sox, who that year went to the World Series. The next year, Eddie switched to the Brooklyn Dodgers, and they, too, won their league title. Our hero, however, smelled trouble. Changing boroughs, he joined the Yankees in 1921, and they promptly won their first pennant in history. Now Eddie settled in, shrewdly seeing what was coming. In the next seven years, the Yankees won five American League titles.

What does this have to do with management? It's simple – to be a winner, work with winners. In 1927, for example, Eddie received \$700 for the 1/8th World Series share voted him by the legendary Yankee team of Ruth and Gehrig. This sum, which Eddie earned by working only four days (because New York swept the Series) was roughly equal to the full-year pay then earned by batboys who worked with ordinary associates.

Eddie understood that how he lugged bats was unimportant; what counted instead was hooking up with the cream of those on the playing field. I've learned from Eddie. At Berkshire, I regularly hand bats to many of the heaviest hitters in American business.

## **Acquisitions**

We added some sluggers to our lineup last year. Two acquisitions pending at yearend 2001 were completed: Albecca (which operates under the name Larson-Juhl), the U.S. leader in custom-made picture frames; and Fruit of the Loom, the producer of about 33.3% of the men's and boy's underwear sold in the U.S. and of other apparel as well.

Both companies came with outstanding CEOs: Steve McKenzie at Albecca and John Holland at Fruit. John, who had retired from Fruit in 1996, rejoined it three years ago and rescued the company from the disastrous path it had gone down after he'd left. He's now 70, and I am trying to convince him to make his next retirement coincident with mine (presently scheduled for five years after my death – a date subject, however, to extension).

We initiated and completed two other acquisitions last year that were somewhat below our normal size threshold. In aggregate, however, these businesses earn more than \$60 million pre-tax annually. Both operate in industries characterized by tough economics, but both also have important competitive strengths that enable them to earn decent returns on capital.

The newcomers are:

- (a) CTB, a worldwide leader in equipment for the poultry, hog, egg production and grain industries; and
- (b) Garan, a manufacturer of children's apparel, whose largest and best-known line is Garanimals®.

These two companies came with the managers responsible for their impressive records: Vic Mancinelli at CTB and Seymour Lichtenstein at Garan.

The largest acquisition we initiated in 2002 was The Pampered Chef, a company with a fascinating history dating back to 1980. Doris Christopher was then a 34-year-old suburban Chicago home economics teacher with a husband, two little girls, and absolutely no business background. Wanting, however, to supplement her family's modest income, she turned to thinking about what she knew best – food preparation. Why not, she wondered, make a business out of marketing kitchenware, focusing on the items she herself had found most useful?

To get started, Doris borrowed \$3,000 against her life insurance policy – all the money *ever* injected into the company – and went to the Merchandise Mart on a buying expedition. There, she picked up a dozen each of this and that, and then went home to set up operations in her basement.

Her plan was to conduct in-home presentations to small groups of women, gathered at the homes of their friends. While driving to her first presentation, though, Doris almost talked herself into returning home, convinced she was doomed to fail.

But the women she faced that evening loved her and her products, purchased \$175 of goods, and TPC was underway. Working with her husband, Jay, Doris did \$50,000 of business in the first year. Today – only 22 years later – TPC does more than \$700 million of business annually, working through 67,000 kitchen consultants.

I've been to a TPC party, and it's easy to see why the business is a success. The company's products, in large part proprietary, are well-styled and highly useful, and the consultants are knowledgeable and enthusiastic. Everyone has a good time. Hurry to [pamperedchef.com](http://pamperedchef.com) on the Internet to find where to attend a party near you.

Two years ago, Doris brought in Sheila O'Connell Cooper, now CEO, to share the management load, and in August they met with me in Omaha. It took me about ten seconds to decide that these were two managers with whom I wished to partner, and we promptly made a deal. Berkshire shareholders couldn't be luckier than to be associated with Doris and Sheila.

\* \* \* \* \*

Berkshire also made some important acquisitions last year through MidAmerican Energy Holdings (MEHC), a company in which our equity interest is 80.2%. Because the Public Utility Holding Company Act (PUHCA) limits us to 9.9% voting control, however, we are unable to fully consolidate MEHC's financial statements.

Despite the voting-control limitation – and the somewhat strange capital structure at MEHC it has engendered – the company is a key part of Berkshire. Already it has \$18 billion of assets and delivers our largest stream of non-insurance earnings. It could well grow to be huge.

Last year MEHC acquired two important gas pipelines. The first, Kern River, extends from Southwest Wyoming to Southern California. This line moves about 900 million cubic feet of gas a day and is undergoing a \$1.2 billion expansion that will double throughput by this fall. At that point, the line will carry enough gas to generate electricity for ten million homes.

The second acquisition, Northern Natural Gas, is a 16,600 mile line extending from the Southwest to a wide range of Midwestern locations. This purchase completes a corporate odyssey of particular interest to Omahans.

From its beginnings in the 1930s, Northern Natural was one of Omaha's premier businesses, run by CEOs who regularly distinguished themselves as community leaders. Then, in July, 1985, the company – which in 1980 had been renamed InterNorth – merged with Houston Natural Gas, a business less than half its size. The companies announced that the enlarged operation would be headquartered in Omaha, with InterNorth's CEO continuing in that job.

Within a year, those promises were broken. By then, the former CEO of Houston Natural had taken over the top job at InterNorth, the company had been renamed, and the headquarters had been moved to Houston. These switches were orchestrated by the new CEO – Ken Lay – and the name he chose was Enron.

Fast forward 15 years to late 2001. Enron ran into the troubles we've heard so much about and borrowed money from Dynegy, putting up the Northern Natural pipeline operation as collateral. The two companies quickly had a falling out, and the pipeline's ownership moved to Dynegy. That company, in turn, soon encountered severe financial problems of its own.

MEHC received a call on Friday, July 26, from Dynegy, which was looking for a quick and certain cash sale of the pipeline. Dynegy phoned the right party: On July 29, we signed a contract, and shortly thereafter Northern Natural returned home.

When 2001 began, Charlie and I had no idea that Berkshire would be moving into the pipeline business. But upon completion of the Kern River expansion, MEHC will transport about 8% of all gas used in the U.S. We continue to look for large energy-related assets, though in the electric utility field PUHCA constrains what we can do.

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A few years ago, and somewhat by accident, MEHC found itself in the residential real estate brokerage business. It is no accident, however, that we have dramatically expanded the operation. Moreover, we are likely to keep on expanding in the future.

We call this business HomeServices of America. In the various communities it serves, though, it operates under the names of the businesses it has acquired, such as CBS in Omaha, Edina Realty in Minneapolis and Iowa Realty in Des Moines. In most metropolitan areas in which we operate, we are the clear market leader.

HomeServices is now the second largest residential brokerage business in the country. On one side or the other (or both), we participated in \$37 billion of transactions last year, up 100% from 2001.

Most of our growth came from three acquisitions we made during 2002, the largest of which was Prudential California Realty. Last year, this company, the leading realtor in a territory consisting of Los Angeles, Orange and San Diego Counties, participated in \$16 billion of closings.

In a very short period, Ron Peltier, the company's CEO, has increased HomeServices' revenues – and profits – dramatically. Though this business will always be cyclical, it's one we like and in which we continue to have an appetite for sensible acquisitions.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dave Sokol, MEHC's CEO, and Greg Abel, his key associate, are huge assets for Berkshire. They are dealmakers, and they are managers. Berkshire stands ready to inject massive amounts of money into MEHC – and it will be fun to watch how far Dave and Greg can take the business.

## The Economics of Property/Casualty Insurance

Our core business — though we have others of great importance — is insurance. To understand Berkshire, therefore, it is necessary that you understand how to evaluate an insurance company. The key determinants are: (1) the amount of float that the business generates; (2) its cost; and (3) most critical of all, the long-term outlook for both of these factors.

To begin with, float is money we hold but don't own. In an insurance operation, float arises because premiums are received before losses are paid, an interval that sometimes extends over many years. During that time, the insurer invests the money. This pleasant activity typically carries with it a downside: The premiums that an insurer takes in usually do not cover the losses and expenses it eventually must pay. That leaves it running an “underwriting loss,” which is the cost of float. An insurance business has value if its cost of float over time is less than the cost the company would otherwise incur to obtain funds. But the business is a lemon if its cost of float is higher than market rates for money. Moreover, the downward trend of interest rates in recent years has transformed underwriting losses that formerly were tolerable into burdens that move insurance businesses deeply into the lemon category.

Historically, Berkshire has obtained its float at a very low cost. Indeed, our cost has been less than zero in many years; that is, we've actually been paid for holding other people's money. In 2001, however, our cost was terrible, coming in at 12.8%, about half of which was attributable to World Trade Center losses. Back in 1983-84, we had years that were even worse. There's nothing automatic about cheap float.

The table that follows shows (at intervals) the float generated by the various segments of Berkshire's insurance operations since we entered the business 36 years ago upon acquiring National Indemnity Company (whose traditional lines are included in the segment “Other Primary”). For the table we have calculated our float — which we generate in large amounts relative to our premium volume — by adding net loss reserves, loss adjustment reserves, funds held under reinsurance assumed and unearned premium reserves, and then subtracting insurance-related receivables, prepaid acquisition costs, prepaid taxes and deferred charges applicable to assumed reinsurance. (Got that?)

Yearend Float (in \$ millions)

<u>Year</u>	<u>GEICO</u>	<u>General Re</u>	<u>Other Reinsurance</u>	<u>Other Primary</u>	<u>Total</u>
1967				20	20
1977			40	131	171
1987			701	807	1,508
1997	2,917		4,014	455	7,386
1998	3,125	14,909	4,305	415	22,754
1999	3,444	15,166	6,285	403	25,298
2000	3,943	15,525	7,805	598	27,871
2001	4,251	19,310	11,262	685	35,508
2002	4,678	22,207	13,396	943	41,224

Last year our cost of float was 1%. As I mentioned earlier, you should temper your enthusiasm about this favorable result given that no megacatastrophe occurred in 2002. We're certain to get one of these disasters periodically, and when we do our float-cost will spike.

Our 2002 results were hurt by 1) a painful charge at General Re for losses that should have been recorded as costs in earlier years, and 2) a “desirable” charge we incur annually for retroactive insurance (see the next section for more about these items). These costs totaled \$1.75 billion, or about 4.6% of float. Fortunately, our overall underwriting experience on 2002 business was excellent, which allowed us, even after the charges noted, to approach a no-cost result.

Absent a megacatastrophe, I expect our cost of float in 2003 to again be very low – perhaps even less than zero. In the rundown of our insurance operations that follows, you will see why I’m optimistic that, over time, our underwriting results will both surpass those achieved by the industry and deliver us investable funds at minimal cost.

### **Insurance Operations**

If our insurance operations are to generate low-cost float over time, they must: (a) underwrite with unwavering discipline; (b) reserve conservatively; and (c) avoid an aggregation of exposures that would allow a supposedly “impossible” incident to threaten their solvency. All of our major insurance businesses, with one exception, have regularly met those tests.

The exception is General Re, and there was much to do at that company last year to get it up to snuff. I’m delighted to report that under Joe Brandon’s leadership, and with yeoman assistance by Tad Montross, enormous progress has been made on each of the fronts described.

When I agreed in 1998 to merge Berkshire with Gen Re, I thought that company stuck to the three rules I’ve enumerated. I had studied the operation for decades and had observed underwriting discipline that was consistent and reserving that was conservative. At merger time, I detected no slippage in Gen Re’s standards.

I was dead wrong. Gen Re’s culture and practices had substantially changed and unbeknownst to management – and to me – the company was grossly mispricing its current business. In addition, Gen Re had accumulated an aggregation of risks that would have been fatal had, say, terrorists detonated several large-scale nuclear bombs in an attack on the U.S. A disaster of that scope was highly improbable, of course, but it is up to insurers to limit their risks in a manner that leaves their finances rock-solid if the “impossible” happens. Indeed, had Gen Re remained independent, the World Trade Center attack alone would have threatened the company’s existence.

When the WTC disaster occurred, it exposed weaknesses in Gen Re’s operations that I should have detected earlier. But I was lucky: Joe and Tad were on hand, freshly endowed with increased authority and eager to rapidly correct the errors of the past. They knew what to do – and they did it.

It takes time for insurance policies to run off, however, and 2002 was well along before we managed to reduce our aggregation of nuclear, chemical and biological risk (NCB) to a tolerable level. That problem is now behind us.

On another front, Gen Re’s underwriting attitude has been dramatically altered: The entire organization now understands that we wish to write only properly-priced business, whatever the effect on volume. Joe and Tad judge themselves *only* by Gen Re’s underwriting profitability. Size simply doesn’t count.

Finally, we are making every effort to get our reserving right. If we fail at that, we can’t know our true costs. And any insurer that has no idea what its costs are is heading for big trouble.



At yearend 2001, General Re attempted to reserve adequately for all losses that had occurred prior to that date and were not yet paid – but we failed badly. Therefore the company’s 2002 underwriting results were penalized by an additional \$1.31 billion that we recorded to correct the estimation mistakes of earlier years. When I review the reserving errors that have been uncovered at General Re, a line from a country song seems apt: “I wish I didn’t know now what I didn’t know then.”

I can promise you that our top priority going forward is to avoid inadequate reserving. But I can’t guarantee success. The natural tendency of most casualty-insurance managers is to underreserve, and they must have a particular mindset – which, it may surprise you, has nothing to do with actuarial expertise – if they are to overcome this devastating bias. Additionally, a reinsurer faces far more difficulties in reserving properly than does a primary insurer. Nevertheless, at Berkshire, we have generally been successful in our reserving, and we are determined to be at General Re as well.

In summary, I believe General Re is now well positioned to deliver huge amounts of no-cost float to Berkshire and that its sink-the-ship catastrophe risk has been eliminated. The company still possesses the important competitive strengths that I’ve outlined in the past. And it gained another highly significant advantage last year when each of its three largest worldwide competitors, previously rated AAA, was demoted by at least one rating agency. Among the giants, General Re, rated AAA across-the-board, is now in a class by itself in respect to financial strength.

No attribute is more important. Recently, in contrast, one of the world’s largest reinsurers – a company regularly recommended to primary insurers by leading brokers – has all but ceased paying claims, including those both valid and due. This company owes many billions of dollars to hundreds of primary insurers who now face massive write-offs. “Cheap” reinsurance is a fool’s bargain: When an insurer lays out money today in exchange for a reinsurer’s promise to pay a decade or two later, it’s dangerous – and possibly life-threatening – for the insurer to deal with any but the strongest reinsurer around.

Berkshire shareholders owe Joe and Tad a huge thank you for their accomplishments in 2002. They worked harder during the year than I would wish for anyone – and it is paying off.

\* \* \* \* \*

At GEICO, everything went so well in 2002 that we should pinch ourselves. Growth was substantial, profits were outstanding, policyholder retention was up and sales productivity jumped significantly. These trends continue in early 2003.

Thank Tony Nicely for all of this. As anyone who knows him will attest, Tony has been in love with GEICO for 41 years – ever since he went to work for the company at 18 – and his results reflect this passion. He is proud of the money we save policyholders – about \$1 billion annually versus what other insurers, on average, would have charged them. He is proud of the service we provide these policyholders: In a key industry survey, GEICO was recently ranked above all major competitors. He is proud of his 19,162 associates, who last year were awarded profit-sharing payments equal to 19% of their base salary because of the splendid results they achieved. And he is proud of the growing profits he delivers to Berkshire shareholders.

GEICO took in \$2.9 billion in premiums when Berkshire acquired full ownership in 1996. Last year, its volume was \$6.9 billion, with plenty of growth to come. Particularly promising is the company’s Internet operation, whose new business grew by 75% last year. Check us out at [GEICO.com](http://GEICO.com) (or call 800-847-7536). In most states, shareholders get a special 8% discount.

Here’s one footnote to GEICO’s 2002 earnings that underscores the need for insurers to do business with only the strongest of reinsurers. In 1981-1983, the managers then running GEICO decided to try their hand at writing commercial umbrella and product liability insurance. The risks seemed modest: the company took in only \$3,051,000 from this line and used almost all of it – \$2,979,000 – to buy reinsurance in order to limit its losses. GEICO was left with a paltry \$72,000 as compensation for the minor portion of the risk that it retained. But this small bite of the apple was more than enough to make the experience memorable. GEICO’s losses from this venture now total a breathtaking \$94.1 million or about 130,000% of the net premium it received. Of the total loss, uncollectable receivables from deadbeat reinsurers account for no less than \$90.3 million (including \$19 million charged in 2002). So much for “cheap” reinsurance.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ajit Jain's reinsurance division was the major reason our float cost us so little last year. If we ever put a photo in a Berkshire annual report, it will be of Ajit. In color!

Ajit's operation has amassed \$13.4 billion of float, more than all but a handful of insurers have ever built up. He accomplished this from a standing start in 1986, and even now has a workforce numbering only 20. And, most important, he has produced underwriting profits.

His profits are particularly remarkable if you factor in some accounting arcana that I am about to lay on you. So prepare to eat your spinach (or, alternatively, if debits and credits aren't your thing, skip the next two paragraphs).

Ajit's 2002 underwriting profit of \$534 million came *after* his operation recognized a charge of \$428 million attributable to "retroactive" insurance he has written over the years. In this line of business, we assume from another insurer the obligation to pay up to a specified amount for losses they have already incurred – often for events that took place decades earlier – but that are yet to be paid (for example, because a worker hurt in 1980 will receive monthly payments for life). In these arrangements, an insurer pays us a large upfront premium, but one that is less than the losses we expect to pay. We willingly accept this differential because a) our payments are capped, and b) we get to use the money until loss payments are actually made, with these often stretching out over a decade or more. About 80% of the \$6.6 billion in asbestos and environmental loss reserves that we carry arises from capped contracts, whose costs consequently can't skyrocket.

When we write a retroactive policy, we immediately record both the premium and a reserve for the expected losses. The difference between the two is entered as an asset entitled "deferred charges – reinsurance assumed." This is no small item: at yearend, for all retroactive policies, it was \$3.4 billion. We then amortize this asset downward by charges to income over the expected life of each policy. These charges – \$440 million in 2002, including charges at Gen Re – create an underwriting loss, but one that is intentional and desirable. And even after this drag on reported results, Ajit achieved a large underwriting gain last year.

We want to emphasize, however, that we assume risks in Ajit's operation that are huge – *far* larger than those retained by any other insurer in the world. Therefore, a single event could cause a major swing in Ajit's results in any given quarter or year. That bothers us not at all: As long as we are paid appropriately, we love taking on short-term volatility that others wish to shed. At Berkshire, we would rather earn a lumpy 15% over time than a smooth 12%.

If you see Ajit at our annual meeting, bow deeply.

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Berkshire's smaller insurers had an outstanding year. Their aggregate float grew by 38%, and they realized an underwriting profit of \$32 million, or 4.5% of premiums. Collectively, these operations would make one of the finest insurance companies in the country.

Included in these figures, however, were terrible results in our California workers' compensation operation. There, we have work to do. There, too, our reserving severely missed the mark. Until we figure out how to get this business right, we will keep it small.

For the fabulous year they had in 2002, we thank Rod Eldred, John Kizer, Tom Nerney, Don Towle and Don Wurster. They added a lot of value to your Berkshire investment.

### **Sources of Reported Earnings**

The table that follows shows the main sources of Berkshire's reported earnings. You will notice that "Purchase-Accounting Adjustments" dropped sharply in 2002, the reason being that GAAP rules changed then, no longer requiring the amortization of goodwill. This change increases our reported earnings, but has no effect on our economic earnings.

	<i>(in millions)</i>			
	<u>Pre-Tax Earnings</u>		<i>Berkshire's Share of Net Earnings (after taxes and Minority interests)</i>	
	<u>2002</u>	<u>2001</u>	<u>2002</u>	<u>2001</u>
Operating Earnings:				
Insurance Group:				
Underwriting – General Re.....	\$(1,393)	\$(3,671)	\$(930)	\$(2,391)
Underwriting – Berkshire Group .....	534	(647)	347	(433)
Underwriting – GEICO.....	416	221	271	144
Underwriting – Other Primary .....	32	30	20	18
Net Investment Income .....	3,050	2,824	2,096	1,968
Apparel <sup>(1)</sup> .....	229	(33)	156	(28)
Building Products <sup>(2)</sup> .....	516	461	313	287
Finance and Financial Products Business .....	1,016	519	659	336
Flight Services .....	225	186	133	105
MidAmerican Energy (80% owned).....	613	565	359	230
Retail Operations .....	166	175	97	101
Scott Fetzer (excluding finance operation).....	129	129	83	83
Shaw Industries <sup>(3)</sup> .....	424	292	258	156
Other Businesses.....	256	212	160	131
Purchase-Accounting Adjustments.....	(119)	(726)	(65)	(699)
Corporate Interest Expense.....	(86)	(92)	(55)	(60)
Shareholder-Designated Contributions.....	(17)	(17)	(11)	(11)
Other .....	<u>19</u>	<u>25</u>	<u>12</u>	<u>16</u>
Operating Earnings .....	6,010	453	3,903	(47)
Capital Gains from Investments .....	<u>603</u>	<u>1,320</u>	<u>383</u>	<u>842</u>
Total Earnings – All Entities .....	<u>\$6,613</u>	<u>\$1,773</u>	<u>\$4,286</u>	<u>\$ 795</u>

<sup>(1)</sup> Includes Fruit of the Loom from April 30, 2002 and Garan from September 4, 2002.

<sup>(2)</sup> Includes Johns Manville from February 27, 2001 and MiTek from July 31, 2001.

<sup>(3)</sup> From date of acquisition, January 8, 2001.

Here's a summary of major developments at our non-insurance businesses:

- MidAmerican Energy's earnings grew in 2002 and will likely do so again this year. Most of the increase, both present and expected, results from the acquisitions described earlier. To fund these, Berkshire purchased \$1,273 million of MidAmerican junior debt (bringing our total holdings of these 11% obligations to \$1,728 million) and also invested \$402 million in a "common-equivalent" stock. We now own (on a fully-diluted basis) 80.2% of MidAmerican's equity. MidAmerican's financial statements are presented in detail on page 37.
- Last year I told you of the problems at Dexter that led to a huge loss in our shoe business. Thanks to Frank Rooney and Jim Issler of H.H. Brown, the Dexter operation has been turned around. Despite the cost of unwinding our problems there, we earned \$24 million in shoes last year, an upward swing of \$70 million from 2001.

Randy Watson at Justin also contributed to this improvement, increasing margins significantly while trimming invested capital. Shoes are a tough business, but we have terrific managers and believe that in the future we will earn reasonable returns on the capital we employ in this operation.

- In a so-so year for home-furnishing and jewelry retailers, our operations did well. Among our eight retailing operations, the best performer was Homemaker's in Des Moines. There, the talented Merschman family achieved outstanding gains in both sales and profits.

Nebraska Furniture Mart will open a new blockbuster store in metropolitan Kansas City in August. With 450,000 square feet of retail space, it could well produce the second largest volume of any furniture store in the country – the Omaha operation being the national champion. I hope Berkshire shareholders in the Kansas City area will come out for the opening (and keep coming).

- Our home and construction-related businesses – Acme Brick, Benjamin Moore Paint, Johns-Manville, MiTek and Shaw – delivered \$941 million of pre-tax earnings last year. Of particular significance was Shaw's gain from \$292 million in 2001 to \$424 million. Bob Shaw and Julian Saul are terrific operators. Carpet prices increased only 1% last year, but Shaw's productivity gains and excellent expense control delivered significantly improved margins.

We cherish cost-consciousness at Berkshire. Our model is the widow who went to the local newspaper to place an obituary notice. Told there was a 25-cents-a-word charge, she requested "Fred Brown died." She was then informed there was a seven-word minimum. "Okay" the bereaved woman replied, "make it 'Fred Brown died, golf clubs for sale'."

- Earnings from flight services increased last year – but only because we realized a special pre-tax gain of \$60 million from the sale of our 50% interest in FlightSafety Boeing. Without this gain, earnings from our training business would have fallen slightly in concert with the slowdown in business-aviation activity. FlightSafety training continues to be the gold standard for the industry, and we expect growth in the years to come.

At NetJets, our fractional-ownership operation, we are the runaway leader of the four-company field. FAA records indicate that our industry share in 2002 was 75%, meaning that clients purchased or leased planes from us that were valued at triple those recorded by our three competitors *combined*. Last year, our fleet flew 132.7 million nautical miles, taking clients to 130 countries.

Our preeminence is directly attributable to Rich Santulli, NetJets' CEO. He invented the business in 1986 and ever since has exhibited an unbending devotion to the highest levels of service, safety and security. Rich, Charlie and I insist on planes (and personnel) worthy of carrying our own families – because they regularly do.

Though NetJets revenues set a record in 2002, the company again lost money. A small profit in the U.S. was more than offset by losses in Europe. Overall, the fractional-ownership industry lost significant sums last year, and that is almost certain to be the outcome in 2003 as well. The bald fact is that airplanes are costly to operate.

Over time, this economic reality should work to our advantage, given that for a great many companies, private aircraft are an essential business tool. And for most of these companies, NetJets makes compelling sense as either a primary or supplementary supplier of the aircraft they need.

Many businesses could save millions of dollars annually by flying with us. Indeed, the yearly savings at some large companies could exceed \$10 million. Equally important, these companies would actually increase their operational capabilities by using us. A fractional ownership of a single NetJets plane allows a client to have several planes in the air simultaneously. Additionally, through the interchange arrangement we make available, an owner of an interest in one plane can fly any of 12 other models, using whatever plane makes most sense for a mission. (One of my sisters owns a fraction of a Falcon 2000, which she uses for trips to Hawaii, but – exhibiting the Buffett gene – she interchanges to a more economical Citation Excel for short trips in the U.S.)

The roster of NetJets users confirms the advantages we offer major businesses. Take General Electric, for example. It has a large fleet of its own but also has an unsurpassed knowledge of how to utilize aircraft effectively and economically. And it is our largest customer.

- Our finance and financial products line covers a variety of operations, among them certain activities in high-grade fixed-income securities that proved highly profitable in 2002. Earnings in this arena will probably continue for a while, but are certain to decrease – and perhaps disappear – in time.

This category also includes a highly satisfactory – but rapidly diminishing – income stream from our Berkadia investment in Finova (described in last year’s report). Our partner, Leucadia National Corp., has managed this operation with great skill, willingly doing far more than its share of the heavy lifting. I like this division of labor and hope to join with Leucadia in future transactions.

On the minus side, the Finance line also includes the operations of General Re Securities, a derivatives and trading business. This entity lost \$173 million pre-tax last year, a result that, in part, is a belated acknowledgment of faulty, albeit standard, accounting it used in earlier periods. Derivatives, in fact, deserve an extensive look, both in respect to the accounting their users employ and to the problems they may pose for both individual companies and our economy.

## Derivatives

Charlie and I are of one mind in how we feel about derivatives and the trading activities that go with them: We view them as time bombs, both for the parties that deal in them and the economic system.

Having delivered that thought, which I’ll get back to, let me retreat to explaining derivatives, though the explanation must be general because the word covers an extraordinarily wide range of financial contracts. Essentially, these instruments call for money to change hands at some future date, with the amount to be determined by one or more reference items, such as interest rates, stock prices or currency values. If, for example, you are either long or short an S&P 500 futures contract, you are a party to a very simple derivatives transaction – with your gain or loss *derived* from movements in the index. Derivatives contracts are of varying duration (running sometimes to 20 or more years) and their value is often tied to several variables.

Unless derivatives contracts are collateralized or guaranteed, their ultimate value also depends on the creditworthiness of the counterparties to them. In the meantime, though, before a contract is settled, the counterparties record profits and losses – often huge in amount – in their current earnings statements without so much as a penny changing hands.

The range of derivatives contracts is limited only by the imagination of man (or sometimes, so it seems, madmen). At Enron, for example, newsprint and broadband derivatives, due to be settled many years in the future, were put on the books. Or say you want to write a contract speculating on the number of twins to be born in Nebraska in 2020. No problem – at a price, you will easily find an obliging counterparty.

When we purchased Gen Re, it came with General Re Securities, a derivatives dealer that Charlie and I didn’t want, judging it to be dangerous. We failed in our attempts to sell the operation, however, and are now terminating it.

But closing down a derivatives business is easier said than done. It will be a great many years before we are totally out of this operation (though we reduce our exposure daily). In fact, the reinsurance and derivatives businesses are similar: Like Hell, both are easy to enter and almost impossible to exit. In either industry, once you write a contract – which may require a large payment decades later – you are usually stuck with it. True, there are methods by which the risk can be laid off with others. But most strategies of that kind leave you with residual liability.

Another commonality of reinsurance and derivatives is that both generate reported earnings that are often wildly overstated. That’s true because today’s earnings are in a significant way based on estimates whose inaccuracy may not be exposed for many years.

Errors will usually be honest, reflecting only the human tendency to take an optimistic view of one’s commitments. But the parties to derivatives also have enormous incentives to cheat in accounting for them. Those who trade derivatives are usually paid (in whole or part) on “earnings” calculated by mark-to-market accounting. But often there is no real market (think about our contract involving twins) and “mark-to-model” is utilized. This substitution can bring on large-scale mischief. As a general rule, contracts involving multiple reference items and distant settlement dates increase the opportunities for counterparties to use fanciful assumptions. In the twins scenario, for example, the two parties to the contract might well use differing models allowing *both* to show substantial profits for many years. In extreme cases, mark-to-model degenerates into what I would call mark-to-myth.

Of course, both internal and outside auditors review the numbers, but that’s no easy job. For example, General Re Securities at yearend (after ten months of winding down its operation) had 14,384

contracts outstanding, involving 672 counterparties around the world. Each contract had a plus or minus value derived from one or more reference items, including some of mind-boggling complexity. Valuing a portfolio like that, expert auditors could easily and honestly have widely varying opinions.

The valuation problem is far from academic: In recent years, some huge-scale frauds and near-fraud have been facilitated by derivatives trades. In the energy and electric utility sectors, for example, companies used derivatives and trading activities to report great “earnings” – until the roof fell in when they actually tried to convert the derivatives-related receivables on their balance sheets into cash. “Mark-to-market” then turned out to be truly “mark-to-myth.”

I can assure you that the marking errors in the derivatives business have not been symmetrical. Almost invariably, they have favored either the trader who was eyeing a multi-million dollar bonus or the CEO who wanted to report impressive “earnings” (or both). The bonuses were paid, and the CEO profited from his options. Only much later did shareholders learn that the reported earnings were a sham.

Another problem about derivatives is that they can exacerbate trouble that a corporation has run into for completely unrelated reasons. This pile-on effect occurs because many derivatives contracts require that a company suffering a credit downgrade immediately supply collateral to counterparties. Imagine, then, that a company is downgraded because of general adversity and that its derivatives instantly kick in with *their* requirement, imposing an unexpected and enormous demand for cash collateral on the company. The need to meet this demand can then throw the company into a liquidity crisis that may, in some cases, trigger still more downgrades. It all becomes a spiral that can lead to a corporate meltdown.

Derivatives also create a daisy-chain risk that is akin to the risk run by insurers or reinsurers that lay off much of their business with others. In both cases, huge receivables from many counterparties tend to build up over time. (At Gen Re Securities, we still have \$6.5 billion of receivables, though we’ve been in a liquidation mode for nearly a year.) A participant may see himself as prudent, believing his large credit exposures to be diversified and therefore not dangerous. Under certain circumstances, though, an exogenous event that causes the receivable from Company A to go bad will also affect those from Companies B through Z. History teaches us that a crisis often causes problems to correlate in a manner undreamed of in more tranquil times.

In banking, the recognition of a “linkage” problem was one of the reasons for the formation of the Federal Reserve System. Before the Fed was established, the failure of weak banks would sometimes put sudden and unanticipated liquidity demands on previously-strong banks, causing them to fail in turn. The Fed now insulates the strong from the troubles of the weak. But there is no central bank assigned to the job of preventing the dominoes toppling in insurance or derivatives. In these industries, firms that are fundamentally solid can become troubled simply because of the travails of other firms further down the chain. When a “chain reaction” threat exists within an industry, it pays to minimize links of any kind. That’s how we conduct our reinsurance business, and it’s one reason we are exiting derivatives.

Many people argue that derivatives reduce systemic problems, in that participants who can’t bear certain risks are able to transfer them to stronger hands. These people believe that derivatives act to stabilize the economy, facilitate trade, and eliminate bumps for individual participants. And, on a micro level, what they say is often true. Indeed, at Berkshire, I sometimes engage in large-scale derivatives transactions in order to facilitate certain investment strategies.

Charlie and I believe, however, that the macro picture is dangerous and getting more so. Large amounts of risk, particularly credit risk, have become concentrated in the hands of relatively few derivatives dealers, who in addition trade extensively with one other. The troubles of one could quickly infect the others. On top of that, these dealers are owed huge amounts by non-dealer counterparties. Some of these counterparties, as I’ve mentioned, are linked in ways that could cause them to contemporaneously run into a problem because of a single event (such as the implosion of the telecom industry or the precipitous decline in the value of merchant power projects). Linkage, when it suddenly surfaces, can trigger serious systemic problems.

Indeed, in 1998, the leveraged and derivatives-heavy activities of a single hedge fund, Long-Term Capital Management, caused the Federal Reserve anxieties so severe that it hastily orchestrated a rescue effort. In later Congressional testimony, Fed officials acknowledged that, had they not intervened, the outstanding trades of LTCM – a firm unknown to the general public and employing only a few hundred

people – could well have posed a serious threat to the stability of American markets. In other words, the Fed acted because its leaders were fearful of what might have happened to other financial institutions had the LTCM domino toppled. And this affair, though it paralyzed many parts of the fixed-income market for weeks, was far from a worst-case scenario.

One of the derivatives instruments that LTCM used was total-return swaps, contracts that facilitate 100% leverage in various markets, including stocks. For example, Party A to a contract, usually a bank, puts up all of the money for the purchase of a stock while Party B, without putting up any capital, agrees that at a future date it will receive any gain or pay any loss that the bank realizes.

Total-return swaps of this type make a joke of margin requirements. Beyond that, other types of derivatives severely curtail the ability of regulators to curb leverage and generally get their arms around the risk profiles of banks, insurers and other financial institutions. Similarly, even experienced investors and analysts encounter major problems in analyzing the financial condition of firms that are heavily involved with derivatives contracts. When Charlie and I finish reading the long footnotes detailing the derivatives activities of major banks, the only thing we understand is that we *don't* understand how much risk the institution is running.

The derivatives genie is now well out of the bottle, and these instruments will almost certainly multiply in variety and number until some event makes their toxicity clear. Knowledge of how dangerous they are has already permeated the electricity and gas businesses, in which the eruption of major troubles caused the use of derivatives to diminish dramatically. Elsewhere, however, the derivatives business continues to expand unchecked. Central banks and governments have so far found no effective way to control, or even monitor, the risks posed by these contracts.

Charlie and I believe Berkshire should be a fortress of financial strength – for the sake of our owners, creditors, policyholders and employees. We try to be alert to any sort of megacatastrophe risk, and that posture may make us unduly apprehensive about the burgeoning quantities of long-term derivatives contracts and the massive amount of uncollateralized receivables that are growing alongside. In our view, however, derivatives are financial weapons of mass destruction, carrying dangers that, while now latent, are potentially lethal.

## Investments

Below we show our common stock investments. Those that had a market value of more than \$500 million at the end of 2002 are itemized.

<u>Shares</u>	<u>Company</u>	<u>12/31/02</u>	
		<u>Cost</u>	<u>Market</u>
		<i>(dollars in millions)</i>	
151,610,700	American Express Company .....	\$ 1,470	\$ 5,359
200,000,000	The Coca-Cola Company .....	1,299	8,768
96,000,000	The Gillette Company.....	600	2,915
15,999,200	H&R Block, Inc. ....	255	643
6,708,760	M&T Bank.....	103	532
24,000,000	Moody's Corporation.....	499	991
1,727,765	The Washington Post Company .....	11	1,275
53,265,080	Wells Fargo & Company .....	306	2,497
	Others .....	<u>4,621</u>	<u>5,383</u>
	Total Common Stocks .....	<u>\$9,164</u>	<u>\$28,363</u>

We continue to do little in equities. Charlie and I are increasingly comfortable with our holdings in Berkshire's major investees because most of them have increased their earnings while their valuations have decreased. But we are not inclined to add to them. Though these enterprises have good prospects, we don't yet believe their shares are undervalued.

In our view, the same conclusion fits stocks generally. Despite three years of falling prices, which have significantly improved the attractiveness of common stocks, we still find *very* few that even mildly

interest us. That dismal fact is testimony to the insanity of valuations reached during The Great Bubble. Unfortunately, the hangover may prove to be proportional to the binge.

The aversion to equities that Charlie and I exhibit today is far from congenial. We love owning common stocks – if they can be purchased at attractive prices. In my 61 years of investing, 50 or so years have offered that kind of opportunity. There will be years like that again. Unless, however, we see a very high probability of at least 10% pre-tax returns (which translate to 6½-7% after corporate tax), we will sit on the sidelines. With short-term money returning less than 1% after-tax, sitting it out is no fun. But occasionally successful investing requires inactivity.

Last year we were, however, able to make sensible investments in a few “junk” bonds and loans. Overall, our commitments in this sector sextupled, reaching \$8.3 billion by yearend.

Investing in junk bonds and investing in stocks are alike in certain ways: Both activities require us to make a price-value calculation and also to scan hundreds of securities to find the very few that have attractive reward/risk ratios. But there are important differences between the two disciplines as well. In stocks, we expect every commitment to work out well because we concentrate on conservatively financed businesses with strong competitive strengths, run by able and honest people. If we buy into these companies at sensible prices, losses should be rare. Indeed, during the 38 years we have run the company’s affairs, gains from the equities we manage at Berkshire (that is, excluding those managed at General Re and GEICO) have exceeded losses by a ratio of about 100 to one.

Purchasing junk bonds, we are dealing with enterprises that are far more marginal. These businesses are usually overloaded with debt and often operate in industries characterized by low returns on capital. Additionally, the quality of management is sometimes questionable. Management may even have interests that are directly counter to those of debtholders. Therefore, we expect that we will have occasional large losses in junk issues. So far, however, we have done reasonably well in this field.

### **Corporate Governance**

Both the ability and fidelity of managers have long needed monitoring. Indeed, nearly 2,000 years ago, Jesus Christ addressed this subject, speaking (Luke 16:2) approvingly of “a certain rich man” who told his manager, “Give an account of thy stewardship; for thou mayest no longer be steward.”

Accountability and stewardship withered in the last decade, becoming qualities deemed of little importance by those caught up in the Great Bubble. As stock prices went up, the behavioral norms of managers went down. By the late ’90s, as a result, CEOs who traveled the high road did not encounter heavy traffic.

Most CEOs, it should be noted, are men and women you would be happy to have as trustees for your children’s assets or as next-door neighbors. Too many of these people, however, have in recent years behaved badly at the office, fudging numbers and drawing obscene pay for mediocre business achievements. These otherwise decent people simply followed the career path of Mae West: “I was Snow White but I drifted.”

In theory, corporate boards should have prevented this deterioration of conduct. I last wrote about the responsibilities of directors in the 1993 annual report. (We will send you a copy of this discussion on request, or you may read it on the Internet in the Corporate Governance section of the 1993 letter.) There, I said that directors “should behave as if there was a single absentee owner, whose long-term interest they should try to further in all proper ways.” This means that directors must get rid of a manager who is mediocre or worse, no matter how likable he may be. Directors must react as did the chorus-girl bride of an 85-year-old multimillionaire when he asked whether she would love him if he lost his money. “Of course,” the young beauty replied, “I would miss you, but I would still love you.”

In the 1993 annual report, I also said directors had another job: “If able but greedy managers over-reach and try to dip too deeply into the shareholders’ pockets, directors must slap their hands.” Since I wrote that, over-reaching has become common but few hands have been slapped.

Why have intelligent and decent directors failed so miserably? The answer lies not in inadequate laws – it’s always been clear that directors are obligated to represent the interests of shareholders – but rather in what I’d call “boardroom atmosphere.”



It's almost impossible, for example, in a boardroom populated by well-mannered people, to raise the question of whether the CEO should be replaced. It's equally awkward to question a proposed acquisition that has been endorsed by the CEO, particularly when his inside staff and outside advisors are present and unanimously support his decision. (They wouldn't be in the room if they didn't.) Finally, when the compensation committee – armed, as always, with support from a high-paid consultant – reports on a megagrant of options to the CEO, it would be like belching at the dinner table for a director to suggest that the committee reconsider.

These “social” difficulties argue for outside directors regularly meeting without the CEO – a reform that is being instituted and that I enthusiastically endorse. I doubt, however, that most of the other new governance rules and recommendations will provide benefits commensurate with the monetary and other costs they impose.

The current cry is for “independent” directors. It is certainly true that it is desirable to have directors who think and speak independently – but they must also be business-savvy, interested and shareholder-oriented. In my 1993 commentary, those are the three qualities I described as essential.

Over a span of 40 years, I have been on 19 public-company boards (excluding Berkshire's) and have interacted with perhaps 250 directors. Most of them were “independent” as defined by today's rules. But the great majority of these directors lacked at least one of the three qualities I value. As a result, their contribution to shareholder well-being was minimal at best and, too often, negative. These people, decent and intelligent though they were, simply did not know enough about business and/or care enough about shareholders to question foolish acquisitions or egregious compensation. My own behavior, I must ruefully add, frequently fell short as well: Too often I was silent when management made proposals that I judged to be counter to the interests of shareholders. In those cases, collegiality trumped independence.

So that we may further see the failings of “independence,” let's look at a 62-year case study covering thousands of companies. Since 1940, federal law has mandated that a large proportion of the directors of investment companies (most of these mutual funds) be independent. The requirement was originally 40% and now it is 50%. In any case, the typical fund has long operated with a majority of directors who qualify as independent.

These directors and the entire board have many perfunctory duties, but in actuality have only two important responsibilities: obtaining the best possible investment manager and negotiating with that manager for the lowest possible fee. When you are seeking investment help yourself, those two goals are the only ones that count, and directors acting for other investors should have exactly the same priorities. Yet when it comes to independent directors pursuing either goal, their record has been absolutely pathetic.

Many thousands of investment-company boards meet annually to carry out the vital job of selecting who will manage the savings of the millions of owners they represent. Year after year the directors of Fund A select manager A, Fund B directors select manager B, etc. ... in a zombie-like process that makes a mockery of stewardship. Very occasionally, a board will revolt. But for the most part, a monkey will type out a Shakespeare play before an “independent” mutual-fund director will suggest that his fund look at other managers, even if the incumbent manager has persistently delivered substandard performance. When they are handling their own money, of course, directors will look to alternative advisors – but it never enters their minds to do so when they are acting as fiduciaries for others.

The hypocrisy permeating the system is vividly exposed when a fund management company – call it “A” – is sold for a huge sum to Manager “B”. Now the “independent” directors experience a “counter-revelation” and decide that Manager B is the best that can be found – even though B was available (and ignored) in previous years. Not so incidentally, B also could formerly have been hired at a far lower rate than is possible now that it has bought Manager A. That's because B has laid out a fortune to acquire A, and B must now recoup that cost through fees paid by the A shareholders who were “delivered” as part of the deal. (For a terrific discussion of the mutual fund business, read John Bogle's *Common Sense on Mutual Funds*.)

A few years ago, my daughter was asked to become a director of a family of funds managed by a major institution. The fees she would have received as a director were very substantial, enough to have increased her annual income by about 50% (a boost, she will tell you, she could use!). Legally, she would have been an independent director. But did the fund manager who approached her think there was *any* chance that she would think independently as to what advisor the fund should employ? Of course not. I am

proud to say that she showed *real* independence by turning down the offer. The fund, however, had no trouble filling the slot (and – surprise – the fund has not changed managers).

Investment company directors have failed as well in negotiating management fees (just as compensation committees of many American companies have failed to hold the compensation of their CEOs to sensible levels). If you or I were empowered, I can assure you that we could easily negotiate materially lower management fees with the incumbent managers of most mutual funds. And, believe me, if directors were promised a portion of any fee savings they realized, the skies would be filled with falling fees. Under the current system, though, reductions mean nothing to “independent” directors while meaning everything to managers. So guess who wins?

Having the right money manager, of course, is far more important to a fund than reducing the manager’s fee. Both tasks are nonetheless the job of directors. And in stepping up to these all-important responsibilities, tens of thousands of “independent” directors, over more than six decades, have failed miserably. (They’ve succeeded, however, in taking care of themselves; their fees from serving on multiple boards of a single “family” of funds often run well into six figures.)

When the manager cares deeply and the directors don’t, what’s needed is a powerful countervailing force – and that’s the missing element in today’s corporate governance. Getting rid of mediocre CEOs and eliminating overreaching by the able ones requires action by owners – big owners. The logistics aren’t that tough: The ownership of stock has grown increasingly concentrated in recent decades, and today it would be easy for institutional managers to exert their will on problem situations. Twenty, or even fewer, of the largest institutions, acting together, could effectively reform corporate governance at a given company, simply by withholding their votes for directors who were tolerating odious behavior. In my view, this kind of concerted action is the only way that corporate stewardship can be meaningfully improved.

Unfortunately, certain major investing institutions have “glass house” problems in arguing for better governance elsewhere; they would shudder, for example, at the thought of their own performance and fees being closely inspected by their own boards. But Jack Bogle of Vanguard fame, Chris Davis of Davis Advisors, and Bill Miller of Legg Mason are now offering leadership in getting CEOs to treat their owners properly. Pension funds, as well as other fiduciaries, will reap better investment returns in the future if they support these men.

The acid test for reform will be CEO compensation. Managers will cheerfully agree to board “diversity,” attest to SEC filings and adopt meaningless proposals relating to process. What many will fight, however, is a hard look at their own pay and perks.

In recent years compensation committees too often have been tail-wagging puppy dogs meekly following recommendations by consultants, a breed not known for allegiance to the faceless shareholders who pay their fees. (If you can’t tell whose side someone is on, they are *not* on yours.) True, each committee is required by the SEC to state its reasoning about pay in the proxy. But the words are usually boilerplate written by the company’s lawyers or its human-relations department.

This costly charade should cease. Directors should not serve on compensation committees unless they are *themselves* capable of negotiating on behalf of owners. They should explain both how they think about pay and how they measure performance. Dealing with shareholders’ money, moreover, they should behave as they would were it their own.

In the 1890s, Samuel Gompers described the goal of organized labor as “More!” In the 1990s, America’s CEOs adopted his battle cry. The upshot is that CEOs have often amassed riches while their shareholders have experienced financial disasters.

Directors should stop such piracy. There’s nothing wrong with paying well for truly exceptional business performance. But, for anything short of that, it’s time for directors to shout “Less!” It would be a travesty if the bloated pay of recent years became a baseline for future compensation. Compensation committees should go back to the drawing boards.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rules that have been proposed and that are almost certain to go into effect will require changes in Berkshire’s board, obliging us to add directors who meet the codified requirements for “independence.”

Doing so, we will add a test that we believe is important, but far from determinative, in fostering independence: We will select directors who have huge and true ownership interests (that is, stock that they or their family have *purchased*, not been given by Berkshire or received via options), expecting those interests to influence their actions to a degree that dwarfs other considerations such as prestige and board fees.

That gets to an often-overlooked point about directors' compensation, which at public companies averages perhaps \$50,000 annually. It baffles me how the many directors who look to these dollars for perhaps 20% or more of their annual income can be considered independent when Ron Olson, for example, who is on our board, may be deemed not independent because he receives a tiny percentage of his very large income from Berkshire legal fees. As the investment company saga suggests, a director whose moderate income is heavily dependent on directors' fees – and who hopes mightily to be invited to join other boards in order to earn more fees – is highly unlikely to offend a CEO or fellow directors, who in a major way will determine his reputation in corporate circles. If regulators believe that “significant” money taints independence (and it certainly can), they have overlooked a massive class of possible offenders.

At Berkshire, wanting our fees to be meaningless to our directors, we pay them only a pittance. Additionally, not wanting to insulate our directors from any corporate disaster we might have, we don't provide them with officers' and directors' liability insurance (an unorthodoxy that, not so incidentally, has saved our shareholders many millions of dollars over the years). Basically, we want the behavior of our directors to be driven by the effect their decisions will have on their family's net worth, not by their compensation. That's the equation for Charlie and me as managers, and we think it's the right one for Berkshire directors as well.

To find new directors, we will look through our shareholders list for people who directly, or in their family, have had large Berkshire holdings – in the millions of dollars – for a long time. Individuals making that cut should automatically meet two of our tests, namely that they be interested in Berkshire and shareholder-oriented. In our third test, we will look for business savvy, a competence that is far from commonplace.

Finally, we will continue to have members of the Buffett family on the board. They are not there to run the business after I die, nor will they then receive compensation of any kind. Their purpose is to ensure, for both our shareholders and managers, that Berkshire's special culture will be nurtured when I'm succeeded by other CEOs.

Any change we make in the composition of our board will not alter the way Charlie and I run Berkshire. We will continue to emphasize substance over form in our work and waste as little time as possible during board meetings in show-and-tell and perfunctory activities. The most important job of our board is likely to be the selection of successors to Charlie and me, and that is a matter upon which it will focus.

The board we have had up to now has overseen a shareholder-oriented business, consistently run in accord with the economic principles set forth on pages 68-74 (which I urge all new shareholders to read). Our goal is to obtain new directors who are equally devoted to those principles.

### **The Audit Committee**

Audit committees can't audit. Only a company's outside auditor can determine whether the earnings that a management purports to have made are suspect. Reforms that ignore this reality and that instead focus on the structure and charter of the audit committee will accomplish little.

As we've discussed, far too many managers have fudged their company's numbers in recent years, using both accounting and operational techniques that are typically legal but that nevertheless materially mislead investors. Frequently, auditors knew about these deceptions. Too often, however, they remained silent. The key job of the audit committee is simply to get the auditors to divulge what they know.

To do this job, the committee must make sure that the auditors worry more about misleading its members than about offending management. In recent years auditors have not felt that way. They have instead generally viewed the CEO, rather than the shareholders or directors, as their client. That has been a natural result of day-to-day working relationships and also of the auditors' understanding that, no matter what the book says, the CEO and CFO pay their fees and determine whether they are retained for both auditing and other work. The rules that have been recently instituted won't materially change this reality. What *will* break

this cozy relationship is audit committees unequivocally putting auditors on the spot, making them understand they will become liable for major monetary penalties if they don't come forth with what they know or suspect.

In my opinion, audit committees can accomplish this goal by asking four questions of auditors, the answers to which should be recorded and reported to shareholders. These questions are:

1. If the auditor were solely responsible for preparation of the company's financial statements, would they have in any way been prepared differently from the manner selected by management? This question should cover both material and nonmaterial differences. If the auditor would have done something differently, both management's argument and the auditor's response should be disclosed. The audit committee should then evaluate the facts.
2. If the auditor were an investor, would he have received – in plain English – the information essential to his understanding the company's financial performance during the reporting period?
3. Is the company following the same internal audit procedure that would be followed if the auditor himself were CEO? If not, what are the differences and why?
4. Is the auditor aware of any actions – either accounting or operational – that have had the purpose and effect of moving revenues or expenses from one reporting period to another?

If the audit committee asks these questions, its composition – the focus of most reforms – is of minor importance. In addition, the procedure will save time and expense. When auditors are put on the spot, they will do their duty. If they are not put on the spot . . . well, we have seen the results of that.

The questions we have enumerated should be asked at least a week before an earnings report is released to the public. That timing will allow differences between the auditors and management to be aired with the committee and resolved. If the timing is tighter – if an earnings release is imminent when the auditors and committee interact – the committee will feel pressure to rubberstamp the prepared figures. Haste is the enemy of accuracy. My thinking, in fact, is that the SEC's recent shortening of reporting deadlines will hurt the quality of information that shareholders receive. Charlie and I believe that rule is a mistake and should be rescinded.

The primary advantage of our four questions is that they will act as a prophylactic. Once the auditors know that the audit committee will require them to affirmatively endorse, rather than merely acquiesce to, management's actions, they will resist misdoings early in the process, well before specious figures become embedded in the company's books. Fear of the plaintiff's bar will see to that.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Chicago Tribune ran a four-part series on Arthur Andersen last September that did a great job of illuminating how accounting standards and audit quality have eroded in recent years. A few decades ago, an Arthur Andersen audit opinion was the gold standard of the profession. Within the firm, an elite Professional Standards Group (PSG) insisted on honest reporting, no matter what pressures were applied by the client. Sticking to these principles, the PSG took a stand in 1992 that the cost of stock options should be recorded as the expense it clearly was. The PSG's position was reversed, however, by the "rainmaking" partners of Andersen who knew what their clients wanted – higher reported earnings no matter what the reality. Many CEOs also fought expensing because they knew that the obscene megagrants of options they craved would be slashed if the true costs of these had to be recorded.

Soon after the Andersen reversal, the independent accounting standards board (FASB) voted 7-0 for expensing options. Predictably, the major auditing firms and an army of CEOs stormed Washington to pressure the Senate – what better institution to decide accounting questions? – into castrating the FASB. The voices of the protesters were amplified by their large political contributions, usually made with corporate money belonging to the very owners about to be bamboozled. It was not a sight for a civics class.

To its shame, the Senate voted 88-9 against expensing. Several prominent Senators even called for the demise of the FASB if it didn't abandon its position. (So much for independence.) Arthur Levitt, Jr., then Chairman of the SEC – and generally a vigilant champion of shareholders – has since described his reluctant

bowing to Congressional and corporate pressures as the act of his chairmanship that he most regrets. (The details of this sordid affair are related in Levitt's excellent book, *Take on the Street*.)

With the Senate in its pocket and the SEC outgunned, corporate America knew that it was now boss when it came to accounting. With that, a new era of anything-goes earnings reports – blessed and, in some cases, encouraged by big-name auditors – was launched. The licentious behavior that followed quickly became an air pump for The Great Bubble.

After being threatened by the Senate, FASB backed off its original position and adopted an “honor system” approach, declaring expensing to be preferable but also allowing companies to ignore the cost if they wished. The disheartening result: Of the 500 companies in the S&P, 498 adopted the method deemed less desirable, which of course let them report higher “earnings.” Compensation-hungry CEOs loved this outcome: Let FASB have the honor; *they* had the system.

In our 1992 annual report, discussing the unseemly and self-serving behavior of so many CEOs, I said “the business elite risks losing its credibility on issues of significance to society – about which it may have much of value to say – when it advocates the incredible on issues of significance to itself.”

That loss of credibility has occurred. The job of CEOs is now to regain America's trust – and for the country's sake it's important that they do so. They will not succeed in this endeavor, however, by way of fatuous ads, meaningless policy statements, or structural changes of boards and committees. Instead, CEOs must embrace stewardship as a way of life and treat their owners as partners, not patsies. It's time for CEOs to walk the walk.

\* \* \* \* \*

Three suggestions for investors: First, beware of companies displaying weak accounting. If a company still does not expense options, or if its pension assumptions are fanciful, watch out. When managements take the low road in aspects that are visible, it is likely they are following a similar path behind the scenes. There is seldom just one cockroach in the kitchen.

Trumpeting EBITDA (earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation and amortization) is a particularly pernicious practice. Doing so implies that depreciation is not truly an expense, given that it is a “non-cash” charge. That's nonsense. In truth, depreciation is a particularly unattractive expense because the cash outlay it represents is paid up front, before the asset acquired has delivered any benefits to the business. Imagine, if you will, that at the beginning of this year a company paid all of its employees for the next ten years of their service (in the way they would lay out cash for a fixed asset to be useful for ten years). In the following nine years, compensation would be a “non-cash” expense – a reduction of a prepaid compensation asset established this year. Would anyone care to argue that the recording of the expense in years two through ten would be simply a bookkeeping formality?

Second, unintelligible footnotes usually indicate untrustworthy management. If you can't understand a footnote or other managerial explanation, it's usually because the CEO doesn't want you to. Enron's descriptions of certain transactions *still* baffle me.

Finally, be suspicious of companies that trumpet earnings projections and growth expectations. Businesses seldom operate in a tranquil, no-surprise environment, and earnings simply don't advance smoothly (except, of course, in the offering books of investment bankers).

Charlie and I not only don't know today what our businesses will earn *next year* – we don't even know what they will earn *next quarter*. We are suspicious of those CEOs who regularly claim they do know the future – and we become downright incredulous if they consistently reach their declared targets. Managers that always promise to “make the numbers” will at some point be tempted to *make up* the numbers.

### **Shareholder-Designated Contributions**

About 97.3% of all eligible shares participated in Berkshire's 2002 shareholder-designated contributions program, with contributions totaling \$16.5 million.

Cumulatively, over the 22 years of the program, Berkshire has made contributions of \$197 million pursuant to the instructions of our shareholders. The rest of Berkshire's giving is done by our subsidiaries, which stick to the philanthropic patterns that prevailed before they were acquired (except that their former

owners themselves take on the responsibility for their personal charities). In aggregate, our subsidiaries made contributions of \$24 million in 2002, including in-kind donations of \$4 million.

*To participate in future programs, you must own Class A shares that are registered in the name of the actual owner, not the nominee name of a broker, bank or depository. Shares not so registered on August 31, 2003 will be ineligible for the 2003 program. When you get the contributions form from us, return it promptly so that it does not get put aside or forgotten. Designations received after the due date will not be honored.*

### **The Annual Meeting**

This year's annual meeting will be held on Saturday, May 3, and once again we will be at the Civic Auditorium. The doors will open at 7 a.m., the movie will begin at 8:30, and the meeting itself will commence at 9:30. There will be a short break at noon for food. (Sandwiches will be available at the Civic's concession stands.) That interlude aside, Charlie and I will answer questions until 3:30. Give us your best shot.

An attachment to the proxy material that is enclosed with this report explains how you can obtain the credential you will need for admission to the meeting and other events. As for plane, hotel and car reservations, we have again signed up American Express (800-799-6634) to give you special help. They do a terrific job for us each year, and I thank them for it.

In our usual fashion, we will run vans from the larger hotels to the meeting. Afterwards, the vans will make trips back to the hotels and to Nebraska Furniture Mart, Borsheim's and the airport. Even so, you are likely to find a car useful.

Our exhibit area for Berkshire goods and services will be bigger and better than ever this year. So be prepared to *spend*. I think you will particularly enjoy visiting The Pampered Chef display, where you may run into Doris and Sheila.

GEICO will have a booth staffed by a number of its top counselors from around the country, all of them ready to supply you with auto insurance quotes. In most cases, GEICO will be able to give you a special shareholder discount (usually 8%). This special offer is permitted by 41 of the 49 jurisdictions in which we operate. Bring the details of your existing insurance and check out whether we can save you money.

On Saturday, at the Omaha airport, we will have the usual array of aircraft from NetJets® available for your inspection. Just ask a representative at the Civic about viewing any of these planes. If you buy what we consider an appropriate number of items during the weekend, you may well need your own plane to take them home. Furthermore, if you buy a fraction of a plane, I'll personally see that you get a three-pack of briefs from Fruit of the Loom.

At Nebraska Furniture Mart, located on a 77-acre site on 72<sup>nd</sup> Street between Dodge and Pacific, we will again be having "Berkshire Weekend" pricing, which means we will be offering our shareholders a discount that is customarily given only to employees. We initiated this special pricing at NFM six years ago, and sales during the "Weekend" grew from \$5.3 million in 1997 to \$14.2 million in 2002.

To get the discount, you must make your purchases during the Thursday, May 1 through Monday, May 5 period and also present your meeting credential. The period's special pricing will even apply to the products of several prestigious manufacturers that normally have ironclad rules against discounting but that, in the spirit of our shareholder weekend, have made an exception for you. We appreciate their cooperation. NFM is open from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. on weekdays and 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Sundays. On Saturday this year, from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m., we are having a special affair for shareholders only. I'll be there, eating hot dogs and drinking Coke.

Borsheim's — the largest jewelry store in the country except for Tiffany's Manhattan store — will have two shareholder-only events. The first will be a cocktail reception from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. on Friday, May 2. The second, the main gala, will be from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Sunday, May 4. Ask Charlie to autograph your *sales ticket*.

Shareholder prices will be available Thursday through Monday, so if you wish to avoid the large crowds that will assemble on Friday evening and Sunday, come at other times and identify yourself as a

shareholder. On Saturday, we will be open until 6 p.m. Borsheim's operates on a gross margin that is fully twenty percentage points below that of its major rivals, so the more you buy, the more you save (or at least that's what my wife and daughter tell me).

In the mall outside of Borsheim's, we will have some of the world's top bridge experts available to play with our shareholders on Sunday afternoon. We expect Bob Hamman, Sharon Osberg, Fred Gitelman and Sheri Winestock to host tables. Patrick Wolff, twice U.S. chess champion, will also be in the mall, taking on all comers — blindfolded! Last year, Patrick played six games *simultaneously* — with his blindfold securely in place — and for the first time suffered a loss. (He won the other five games, however.) He's been training overtime ever since and is planning to start a new streak this year.

Additionally, Bill Robertie, one of only two players who have twice won the backgammon world championship, will be on hand to test your skill at that game. Finally, we will have a newcomer: Peter Morris, the winner of the World Scrabble Championship in 1991. Peter will play on five boards simultaneously (no blindfold for him, however) and will also allow his challengers to consult a Scrabble dictionary.

We are also going to test your vocal chords at the mall. My friend, Al Oehrle of Philadelphia, will be at the piano to play any song in any key. Susie and I will lead the singing. *She* is good.

Gorat's — my favorite steakhouse — will again be open exclusively for Berkshire shareholders on Sunday, May 4, and will be serving from 4 p.m. until 10 p.m. Please remember that to come to Gorat's on Sunday, you must have a reservation. To make one, call 402-551-3733 on April 1 (*but not before*). If Sunday is sold out, try Gorat's on one of the other evenings you will be in town. Show your sophistication by ordering a rare T-bone with a double order of hash browns.

There won't be a ball game this year. After my fastball was clocked at 5 mph last year, I decided to hang up my spikes. So I'll see you on Saturday night at NFM instead.

\* \* \* \* \*

Next year our meeting will be held at Omaha's new convention center. This switch in locations will allow us to hold the event on either Saturday or Monday, whichever the majority of you prefer. Using the enclosed special ballot, please vote for your preference — *but only if you are likely to attend in the future*.

We will make the Saturday/Monday decision based upon a count of shareholders, not shares. That is, a Class B shareholder owning one share will have a vote equal to that of a Class A shareholder owning many shares. If the vote is close, we will go with the preference of out-of-towners.

Again, please vote only if there is a reasonable chance that you will be attending some meetings in the future.

February 21, 2003

Warren E. Buffett  
Chairman of the Board