

The Global Weather Crisis

A dramatic landscape photograph featuring a bright sunburst breaking through a dark, stormy sky. The sun's rays create a strong lens flare effect, illuminating a field of green crops in the foreground. The overall mood is one of intense natural power and environmental contrast.

GOODING

Copyright 2011 by Mark Gooding. Cover photo and design
copyright 2011 by Michele Gooding. All rights reserved.

The Global Weather Crisis

“Weather changes!”

This stunning pronouncement greeted readers of the *Washington Prattle* on a fine Sunday morning in late spring, a morning the unsuspecting citizenry would have thoroughly enjoyed had it not been for the devastating news. Indeed, many incautious citizens thoroughly enjoyed it in spite of the news, and in spite of themselves. A sudden warming of the air had brought a profusion of color to the city’s parks and boulevards, the cherry trees along Pennsylvania Avenue virtually exploding in fragrant and seductive hues; and the people of the city seemed unwilling to acknowledge that they faced an imminent crisis. Huge throngs of them took to the streets in what appeared to be an attitude of stubborn denial. They appeared, in fact, to enjoy themselves enormously, as if the air had suddenly taken on an intoxicating quality. And maybe it had.

It was their good fortune, and probably their salvation, to have elected to the presidency a man who not only appreciated the dire predicament they were in; he seemed to revel in it. On hearing the news of the sudden warming he summoned his entire complement of advisors to an emergency summit—so many of them that they had to convene in a conference room the size of a small concert hall. The president took his place before them, put on his best leadership face, apprised attendees of the meeting’s purpose, and solicited their expert advice as to how best to proceed.

“Press conference,” the press secretary immediately asserted. “Let’s get that press corps in here right away. The friendly ones, at least. We know which networks to invite. Let the doubters and detractors read about in the papers.”

A collective guffaw went up from the assembled brain trust of a great nation.

“Who reads a paper anymore?” a quiet voice said. “They get their news from the Internet.”

And the room lapsed back into silence—uneasy silence. It may even have been bitter silence.

“Let’s not move too quickly,” advised one of several secretaries in charge of public health issues. He was a man of eminent scientific background. In his younger years, just out of graduate school in the early 70s, he had made a name for himself even outside the scientific community—well outside that community—with his splendid work *Deep Freeze: Return of the Ice Age*, in which he forecast the re-glaciation of the entire northern hemisphere in the next two decades. He proposed that the elderly and infirm be frozen and stored as a future food source for the fittest survivors. He even drew up a detailed map of the proposed storage facilities, each one denoted by a tiny human icicle. He estimated that as many as a thousand frozen corpses could be stored at each such facility, the natural refrigeration units spaced at intervals of roughly twenty miles. By his reckoning, a population of approximately ten million persons, all key figures in the government and scientific communities—and carefully handpicked for the special qualities that suited them to perpetuate and rejuvenate their race—could sustain itself by working its way slowly north, from one storehouse of human popsicles to the next, as the glaciers slowly receded. Naturally, his own expertise would be needed to oversee the entire operation.

“Let’s consider how this impending crisis might be used to our fullest advantage,” he said now, in response to an entirely different climatic phenomenon, but one that he was no less well suited to manage. “When the time is right, we’ll disseminate the news to the general public. But let’s decide what is best to tell them before we tell them anything.”

“Sage advice,” seconded the president’s chief science advisor. He too had written an important book in his younger years—in between sit-ins at Berkeley—and his book too had enjoyed wide circulation and influence. His revelatory Malthusian tome was about the world population explosion. Its thesis was that the human race would grow in number beyond Earth’s capacity to support it by no later than the arrival of the new millennium. Desperate measures would be required, including, perhaps, cannibalism, to outlast the ensuing famine and prevail in the war of attrition that would accompany the

onset of mass starvation. Billions would die; only the fittest would remain to repopulate the planet. It was necessary, then, to exert tight governmental control over the whole process so as to ensure that repopulation proceeded along orderly and sustainable lines. By his reckoning, a population of approximately ten million persons, all key figures in the government and scientific communities—and carefully handpicked for the special qualities that suited them to perpetuate and rejuvenate their race—could sequester itself in an isolated government compound, carefully stocked with supplies for the post-apocalyptic world to come, and wait out the savage bloodletting, the feast of human on human that was sure to mark humanity's self-consumptive purge. When the war of attrition had weakened all participants it had not devoured, the handpicked leaders of the future would emerge from sanctuary and take control. This time, in carefully retracing their steps to Eden, the savvy citizens of the world—the chosen few of them who remained—wiser for harsh experience, would avoid the mistakes of the past. Naturally, his own expertise would be required to oversee the entire operation.

“Let's consult the Association of Sensitive Scientists,” the sagacious science advisor now opined. “We know they'll be sympathetic. We can overwhelm the public with their authority. We know how trusting the masses are when confronted with dire predictions from highly educated experts. They know how much they don't know, and they'll be too busy watching TV and 'social networking' to ask questions. Let us inundate them with experts, overload them with information, completely befuddle them, and then send them back to their TVs and their PCs convinced that we're doing what's best for them. It's worked in the past; it'll work in the present. And it'll work in the future. The masses are a pathetic herd of sheep.”

The metaphor evoked images in his own mind of the cannibalistic world he had long ago writ into his verbal vision of the future, and it prompted him to lick his chops reflexively. Nobody in the giant room seemed to notice.

“There is work to be done, and done quickly!” the secretary of public information fairly shouted. She was excited by the prospect of much imminent public planning, and much of that planning would be hers to do. Moreover, as a white female, and therefore a representative of a historically marginalized segment of the population, she felt herself the victim of a patronizing patriarchal society—and consequently she felt the tireless compulsion to assert herself forcefully, lest she be

ignored. Come hell or high water (and under this administration, there was a fair chance that either or both would come), she would make herself heard! In truth, these scientific big thinker types made her feel inferior, though naturally she would never divulge that sentiment to anyone save her closest friends. With their scientific formulas and Latinate terminology, and all those damn math and science courses behind them, the science nerds were an imposing bunch, not to mention an arrogant bunch, so cocksure of themselves and their theories that it sickened a girl sometimes. And all she had was a lousy PhD in political science.

But she was not entirely without weapons in the ceaseless war of words that characterizes the charming world of political discourse. In her life she had published just a few books, and not one of them had sold more than a handful of copies, most of those as required reading in the various seminars she taught at Elite U—her “real job,” as the expression goes. Until her former fellow graduate student, now the charismatic leader of a glorious nation in a phase of “self-renewal” (as he called it), had summoned her to work in “the movement” (as he called it), she had led the quiet life of an academic. She had tried to contribute to the march of progress and the campaign for social justice in her own subtle way—by insinuating herself into the minds of the students whose parents paid good money to get them seats in her classrooms—but she had been essentially invisible to the broader public, and more than mildly resentful of her invisibility. Then, abruptly, through the invitation of her president, and in the span of a scant few months, she had become a popular public figure indeed, almost nightly in the national news, her name known to any citizen or non-citizen who kept abreast of current events. (In other words, a small segment of the population knew who she was.) By her fellow active participants in progress she was revered; by reactionary naysayers she was reviled. But broad exposure to public view, it turned out, could be painful, and in the end she shied away from it. She tried, in fact, to make herself completely invisible once again beyond the Beltway and the comforting embrace of Washington. Among her partisans in government, though, and away from the public eye, she was more vocal than ever, more determined than ever to make her voice heard. She did not want History to forget her, as long as it remembered her kindly. So she competed with “the boys,” as she thought of them, through arduous and persistent self-assertion, countering their “hard science” with what she regarded as “womanly wisdom”—

vital counterpoint, in her own mind, at least, to their suffocating and often shortsighted masculinity. She competed, not infrequently—when she was at a loss for better words—by flashing various pearls of wisdom culled from the enormous storehouse of her academic training.

Now was a perfect time for such a gem. She gave them one from memory, the more to impress. It was a quote from her most hallowed visionary political philosopher, whom she had cited frequently in *Prophets of the New Millennium* (widely overlooked by the critics, but in her own mind her finest work to date): “Natural science is one of man's weapons in his fight for freedom. For the purpose of attaining freedom in society, man must use social science to understand and change society and carry out social revolution. For the purpose of attaining freedom in the world of nature, man must use natural science to understand, conquer and change nature and thus attain freedom from nature.”

Her president was clearly moved, and clearly in the way she hoped he would be moved—and she was certain she detected resentment among “the boys” in the room. The president stroked his chin thoughtfully and reflected for a moment. It was a look that everybody in the room knew well, the look that preceded swift action. “Get Whatshisname on the phone,” he said abruptly to his entourage of personal secretaries. He snapped his fingers then, repeatedly, as if the gesture might jog his memory. “The guy from Sensitive Scientists.”

“Grandstander,” said the press secretary quickly. It was his job to be on top of such things, important names and such, and it was important, too, that everybody in the room at the moment recognize that he was good at his job. The press secretary was easily replaceable, and therefore he had to work harder than the others in the room to avoid replacement. It was simply the nature of the biz.

“That’s it,” the president said. He had a smooth, handsome face with enterprising eyes and a prominent, sturdy jaw. He was just ungodly pretty to look at, at least as far as everybody in the room was concerned. “Get him on the phone,” he snapped to the secretaries. “Make sure he knows it’s the president. Tell him it’s a conference call.”

Moments later, through the efficiency of the president’s staff and the virtual magic of modern technology, all of them in the room were party to a conversation with the great Dr. Z. Ellis Grandstander, scientist extraordinaire, whose belief that science should “serve the common good” had been widely disseminated.

It was Professor Grandstander who had first popularized the now common view that human activity was destroying the planet by overheating it. He had received grant after grant from government entities and published article after peer-reviewed article in prestigious scientific journals such as *The Journal of Marxist Science*, *The Revolutionary Scientist*, and *Deconstructed Modernity*, all of those articles written and reviewed in the spirit of using science for the good of the planet. Naturally, in part through his own diligence and persistence, his work had been noticed and reported on by members of the objective mainstream press, and Professor Grandstander had enjoyed a somewhat elongated moment in the sun, wowing the rubes with his witty alarmism on late-night talk shows, gently but urgently cautioning stay-home moms with young children on the morning coffee-sipping shows, and of course appearing in the shocking but scientifically circumspect (if your interest was in using science for good) documentaries *Troublesome Truths*, *Our Croaking Planet*, and *Spontaneously Combustible Earth*, all of which echoed his popular argument that the planet we inhabit was becoming a simmering hothouse. The consequences for all humanity would be dire, as the good professor repeatedly warned. In his bestseller *Return to Nature*, he advocated a “return to our natural selves,” as he put it, a universal reversion to a simpler (the less enlightened among us might call it a “primitive”) way of life. “Simplicity! Simplicity! Simplicity!” he quoted Thoreau. “It should be the governing principle in all our lives.” It was simplicity he advocated on every TV show that hosted him, at every lavish fundraiser to which he was invited as a guest speaker, at every highly paid stop on his whirlwind world lecture tour, and of course on his website and in his books—both print and ebooks. It was “SMPLCT1” and “SMPLCT2,” in fact, that he’d had inscribed on the license plates of his and his wife’s new Mercedes.

A grueling winter, though, had sent his compatriots scurrying for their snow shovels and snow blowers, not to mention their mufflers and ski masks and fur-lined parkas and gloves and rubber boots, and it had somewhat subdued their enthusiasm for simplicity. Sitting before his cozy fireplace on his winter break from both teaching and research, he found the demand for his vast knowledge about climate change growing weaker, the engagements on his calendar growing fewer and farther between. By late spring he was practically no more than a college professor again, and his loss of popularity disheartened him. He was thus tickled pink when his telephone rang one

morning, and the voice on the other end of the call invited him to a “conversation on the changing weather” with some of his country’s most celebrated political minds. Of course he was interested in talking to them!

When he recognized the president’s voice, he practically wet himself. “Yes,” he said. “Yes. Yes. Of course. Yes. Why certainly. Yes. Naturally. Nothing could be plainer, given the evidence. Of course it is. Why certainly. There’s nothing else to conclude. Of course, Mr. President. So glad to be of service.”

Later that same afternoon, the handsome and charming president opened his press conference with a short statement. The statement had been thoughtfully if hastily prepared by his best speechwriters, calculated to be precise and yet ambiguous, to alarm and yet reassure, to ask and to demand, to persuade and to threaten. It was meant to sound formal and yet entirely offhand, in keeping with the president’s carefully crafted image as the visionary leader who was both down-home and folksy and polished and refined; both simple and unassuming and sophisticated and crafty; both a man of the common people and an urbane metrosexual; scripted and yet spontaneous; funny and yet serious; tender yet tough; conciliatory and yet uncompromising. He was, by God, a man for all seasons if ever there was one, and he tried very hard to communicate that resplendent all-inclusive persona in every public appearance he ever made and every speech he ever gave.

And so he began: “I think we’re all aware of today’s events with respect to the weather, and we’re all equally aware of the obvious implications of these events. We can expect similar, and even more drastic, changes in the near future unless we take action. I do not believe the situation warrants a declared state of emergency—not yet. But I am petitioning congressional leaders to forge a new piece of legislation to address the crisis, and I’m asking for it within the week.

“What I am asking for is a whole new menu of taxes specifically designed to curtail carbon emissions and reduce our dependency on foreign oil. A decline in consumption will trigger a decline in human impact on the environment, and a decline in human impact will trigger reduced weather changes. In turn, the quality of all our lives will improve. It’s a win-win situation for all of us.

“There will be hard choices to make, but I do not doubt for a moment that we are capable of making them. In times of crisis such as this, sacrifices must sometimes be made. Let us unite and make those sacrifices now, that we and all our

descendants may benefit later. Circumstances don't merely ask us to make those sacrifices; they demand that we make those sacrifices.

"If we do not act swiftly and judiciously, what we have seen today will only be the beginning. It won't stop with cherry blossoms, let me assure you. The changes to come will be severe, and their consequences will be far reaching. This morning I spoke with Professor Z. Ellis Grandstander, perhaps the world's leading expert on changes in the weather, and he assured me, without qualification, of the potential severity of those consequences. We can expect rain in virtual torrents. High winds. Sleet and snow in some parts of the country. Scorching sunlight and drought in others. Terrifying and debilitating darkness across all the land for hours at a time. Temperature swings of as much as a hundred degrees, in a single region of the country, within a six-month period."

This last grave outcome of the weather change he announced with particular gravity, pausing both before and after he announced it to look imploringly into the TV camera. It was important that his people understand what they were getting into. It was important that they be willing to make the sacrifices that would be expected and demanded of them.

"That sacrifices will be demanded of us all, I do not deny," he continued, finally. "Nor would I ever try to conceal that fact from you. You deserve to know the truth at all times, and by this administration, it's the truth that you shall be told.

"Therefore let us forge forward into the future, undaunted, giving what is required of us for the benefit of our own and future generations. Let ours be the generation of hope, the generation of commitment to service, the generation of change."

Perhaps only one reporter who attended that afternoon's press conference, and certainly not more than a few, troubled themselves to ask other scientists besides the worthy and noteworthy Z. Ellis Grandstander for their views on the weather change. One who did was a reporter for a television network notorious for its contrarianism, a network so continually bent on questioning both the administration's and the congress's actions, their rhetoric—indeed, even their motives—that the president's press secretary had once, in a fit of irritation, decried the network's lack of impartiality and fairness and excoriated it as a "propaganda agency" without "journalistic integrity." The attack, motivated purely by frustration, had merely provoked more antagonism. Scoundrels! That any member of the

miserable Fourth Estate would dare to challenge any thought, any word, or any deed of a political enterprise so noble, so well intentioned! It was an insult to benevolent government and the power of hope and change.

But the network and its reporters still had the legal right to question others besides government sources, at least for the time being, and question is just what one intrepid reporter did. He contacted a relatively well-known source from the not-so-distant past, a scientist of contrarian disposition himself but also reliable credentials. The scientist had been dismissed from his tenured post at a large state university for speaking heresy—which is to say he had challenged the new orthodoxy concerning the weather and its propensities, and he had done it using data, apparently trustworthy data, much to the chagrin of his detractors, especially those at the vocal and self-important Association of Sensitive Scientists. Since then, he had taken his mild-mannered brand of scientific apostasy on the road, lecturing for a price, publishing heretical books and articles, and finally landing on the payroll of a think-tank that was disposed to hear ideas that ran contrary to the government grain.

The apostate, apprised of the clamor in Washington over the abrupt weather change, and asked for his own take on the matter, just shrugged. “It’s nothing,” he said. “Tell your readers to go on about their business. The planet will still be here, more or less in the same shape it’s in now, for the foreseeable future.”

“But what about the sudden weather change?” the reporter asked him, looking for a provocative angle that would make for some juicy news.

“What about it? Weather changes. There’s nothing new about that.”

“So there won’t be wars or famine? There won’t be hurricanes and volcanoes and floods and droughts and people dying of starvation?”

“Of course there will. There’s nothing new about those things, either. And I suspect they’ll be with us as long as the weather is—and the weather change.”

The intrepid reporter was downcast, and the scientist felt sorry for him. It must be a challenge to have to beat the bushes day in and day out, trying to scare up a little news. “You want something for your readers?” the scientist offered consolingly. “Tell them this: Humans, like other organisms, are adaptable creatures. They’ve adapted to weather changes through the entire course of their existence, and I expect they’ll adapt to this

one. It's really nothing to worry about. I was thinking of doing a little adapting myself."

The reporter's face brightened suddenly at the prospect of some tidbit of controversy. "What do you mean?" he said eagerly.

"Well," the scientist shrugged again, "I was thinking of putting on a short-sleeved shirt."