

OUR FINAL HOUR

By Ed O'Rourke

Someone following the coverage of the joint appearances of the US presidential candidates would have no idea that our planet is witnessing its sixth great extinction. The dinosaurs were too dumb to know what was going on and human beings have been ineffective at slowing down our own demise. After all, there are better things to do.

Issues of gay marriage, immigration, flag burning, and the inerrancy of the Christian Bible deserve attention but do not rank as the most urgent issues of the day.

Great Britain's top astrophysicist, Sir Martin Rees, has written a thought provoking book, *Our Final Hour, A Scientist's Warning: How Terror, Error, and Environmental Disaster Threaten Humankind's Future In This Century—On Earth and Beyond* (Basic Books, 2003, 228 pages). According to Doctor Rees, "We are entering an era when a single person can, by one clandestine act, cause millions of deaths or render a city uninhabitable for years, and when a malfunction in cyberspace can cause havoc worldwide to a significant segment of the economy: air transport, power generation, or the financial system. Indeed, disaster could be caused by someone who is merely incompetent rather than malign."

A network of terrorists is not required. Any disgruntled person with a scientific background will do. Since there are enough people manufacturing computer viruses, it is logical that there are others who will use bio- and cyber-technology to spread destruction. These threats are growing for at least three reasons: 1) any individual familiar with genetics, bacteriology, or computers has unrecognized power. Your home computer has more power than NASA did in the early space shots. 2) Our worldwide society is integrated and interdependent. Think of what would happen to the world oil market as a result of a terrorist strike in a Saudi Arabian oilfield. 3) With well wired news organizations, the psychological impact is almost immediate.

Construction of a missile with a nuclear warhead is currently beyond the capability of rebel or terrorist groups. This incapability will not endure. Anyone can use signals from GPS satellites. As long as nuclear weapons exist, they can be bought or stolen. A terrorist group will one day launch a cruise-type missile guided by a commercially available package.

Nuclear energy is itself a menace. Terrorists could set fire to spent fuel rods at a nuclear plant and release ten times more cesium-137 than the Chernobyl accident.

Carelessness can do us in as well. Experimental work with atom smashing may start a chain reaction that erodes everything on earth. The experiments may tear the fabric of space itself and spread at the speed of light to consume the entire universe.

The recklessness of individuals is matched by the irresponsibility of nations. In the 1980s, the world's nuclear stockpile was equivalent to ten tons of TNT for every person in the Soviet Union, Europe, and the United States. An extensive nuclear exchange still can bring about a nuclear winter and cause mass extinction. Elimination of all the world's nuclear weapons is not just a dream offered by the hippies. The United States and other major powers committed themselves to this goal in the Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1968. In an article in the January 4, 2007 edition of the Wall Street Journal, George Schultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger and Sam Nunn called for a world free of nuclear weapons. Hopefully the next administration will take this seriously.

To this point, humankind has been lucky rather than smart on the nuclear issue. An international group (known as the Canberra Commission) convened by the Australian government in 1997 concluded, "The proposition that nuclear weapons can be retained in perpetuity and never used—accidentally or by decision—defies credibility."

One of the desperate answers to these threats that Doctor Rees offers is intrusive comprehensive surveillance enforced by a police state. The abuses of the Bush Administration are small potatoes compared to this. The state would administer drugs to the entire population that would reduce the extremes of mood and behavior. Think of Aldous Huxley's Brave New World. Considering the lack of success in the war on drugs, my feeling is that this approach is futile.

I like other options. Make everybody happy or at least content. Start a worldwide anti-poverty program. If people had decent jobs, they would not form terrorist groups nor

crash the gates to get into the United States or the European Union. Some would point out that the 9/11 hijackers were not poor. Revolutionary leaders and participants are seldom poor. Crane Britton discovered this in his classic, *The Anatomy of Revolution*, in his analysis of the British, French, American, and Russian revolutions. As everyone knows, George Washington, Robespierre, Lenin, and others in their caliber were not poor. To some extent, they represented the aspirations of the poor—to remove the unrest caused by poverty, to eliminate poverty itself.

Eliminate nuclear weapons and nuclear energy. Even spent fuel rods can be material for atomic weapons.

Initiate a 100% tax on incomes over \$10,000,000. There are at least two objections to this. The rich would just put their money in tax shelters. My reply is to make obstacles for these types of tax shelters. The second objection is that this move would disrupt the financial markets. Good. That is what I had in mind.

Start an Apollo type investment in alternative energy. With cheap alternative energy available, there will be no more wars in the Middle East over petroleum.

Set up a Department of (Domestic) Peace in every country. Identify programs that are effective in dealing with domestic violence, gang activity, and criminal acts. Sponsor programs that bring about reconciliation among neighbors, races, and cultures. Since the United States has more people behind bars than anywhere else, figure out some alternatives to long-term incarceration.

Stop bankrolling stadiums for professional sports and invest in neighborhood parks and sports programs for all ages.

Abolish the war on drugs. Legalize and license the drugs. Set up treatment programs for those who want off.

Where is the peace dividend? The Cold War has been over for more than a decade but defense expenditures are still high. Aircraft carriers and tanks will not protect us from terrorists. If the Chinese want to do us in, all they have to do is stop buying our debt and accept payment on all future contracts in Euros only. Reduce the US defense budget by 50% next year for starters.

Adopt a one payer health care system that will replace the most expensive health care program in the world.

The rich countries will have to live on fewer resources. To support the predicted population and lifestyle of 2050, all we need are three planets. Look past the mindless consumerism and think of a three and four day work week. With city planning, people can live close to work and not need any new freeways.

All of my proposals will take a lot of money. But they are cheaper than the two trillion dollar war in Iraq.

Ed O'Rourke is an environmental accountant in Houston, Texas USA. On November 11, 2007, he was a speaker at the Quaker Peace Festival in Houston.