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News from the Clouds

Written by Robert Llewellyn

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News from the Clouds

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unbound

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*This book is dedicated to all the people
whose names appear at the back of
the book, for one very simple reason,
if they hadn't supported the book,
it wouldn't exist.*

Preface

Global climate change is the greatest threat the United States faces – more dangerous than terrorism, Chinese hackers and North Korean nuclear missiles. Upheaval from increased temperatures, rising seas and radical destabilisation is probably the most likely thing that is going to happen... that will cripple the security environment, probably more likely than the other scenarios we all often talk about.

Admiral Samuel J. Locklear III,
Commander of the United States Pacific Command, 2007

Extreme weather events (floods, droughts, heat waves) will increasingly disrupt food and energy markets, exacerbating state weakness, forcing human migrations, and triggering riots, civil disobedience, and vandalism.

James Clapper,
US Director of National Intelligence, 2010

The first decade of the 21st century saw 3,496 natural disasters from floods, storms, droughts and heat waves. That was nearly five times as many disasters as the 743 catastrophes reported during the 1970s.

World Meteorological Organization, 2014

HEN CONFRONTED WITH STATEMENTS SUCH as these, the easiest thing to do is get depressed and give up, hide in our safe little world for as long as we can and try not to think about what is really happening to the planet we live on.

Like many fairly well informed people I try to do this every

x day, because the torrent of anxiety-inducing reports from every corner of the globe could easily drive you to despair.

In the same way, the barking but well-funded loons who trumpet their denials that the way we are treating the small planet we inhabit will make no difference are light relief. I always cheer up when I hear them prattle on.

It's so much easier to deny the 'doom merchants', but if history has taught us anything, every now and then, especially if their predictions are backed by enormous amounts of data collected over decades, it might be worth giving them a listen.

An extraordinary American called Bill McKibben has been hammering on about the issues the entire human race faces since 1989, when he wrote a book called *The End of Nature*.

The now much-maligned term 'global warming' was coined around the time this book was published.

McKibben is the founder of 350.org, named after the number of parts per million (ppm) of carbon in the atmosphere that is considered safe for the continuation of civilised life on Earth.

To explain in simple terms even I can understand, scientists from all over the world, from all manner of organisations, universities, research laboratories and NASA have agreed that if we go above 350 ppm we are going to face serious trouble.

At the time of writing, mid-2014, the latest figure gathered at Mauna Loa Observatory in Hawaii is 401.36 ppm.

I just want to underline where this data comes from – not downtown Los Angeles or London, not the smog-choked streets of Beijing or Mumbai, but from the top of a mountain on an island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

Another aspect of human activity making a huge difference to our planet is the use of nitrogen fertilisers. It's what has saved us from mass starvation in the last 100 years, but there is a bit of a downside.

Less than half of the nitrogen that we gleefully sprinkle on fields gets used by the crops; the rest is washed away into streams

and rivers and eventually into the sea. As it breaks down it not only kills fish by the shipload, it also releases gasses with a 300 times greater climate changing impact than CO₂. xi

Bit of a downer.

In the past I have made jokes about global warming along with most of the world's population. Living in a cool, moist island off the coast of Europe, it's a common thing to hear a red-faced yeoman leaning on a bar in a country pub saying, 'A bit of jolly old global warming wouldn't go amiss around here.'

It was only the slow realisation that the results of warming up the global atmosphere would lead to all manner of 'climate change' – again a term much denigrated by a few bitter and increasingly downright evil detractors – that I actually started to worry for my children.

As I have tried to suggest in the previous two books, *News from Gardenia* and *News from the Squares*, the notion of long-term planning is beyond the grasp of most of the world's authorities and particularly our most powerful political elites: the corporations.

What we are facing isn't one sudden storm, one violent change to our world, but a slowly increasing build-up of damaging and increasingly dangerous events. Extreme weather, not a pleasant term no matter how you view it, seems to be the prevailing prediction.

No one knows what is going to happen. I would be the first out on the streets cheering if the whole concept of climate change was proven utterly incorrect; if all the scientists who've been warning about it for donkey's years came out of their research labs and shrugged in embarrassment saying, 'Sorry folks, got the maths a bit cock-eyed, everything is fine, the climate is 100 per cent stable for the next four million years, carry on as you were.'

So *News from the Clouds* could be seen as going against my initial intention with these books which was to try and imagine future worlds where things are better, not worse.

There is no doubt that there are apocalyptic elements in *News from the Clouds* and this may indeed be as a result of the reports,

xii books, studies I've read and people I have spoken with in the last three years. However, I would defend this by suggesting that the power of the human spirit, collectively, to overcome adversity is very much to the fore in the story.

Again and again we have witnessed the collapse of civilisations through history, but not the end of the human race. Something new, sometimes something better, grows from the rubble, and the lessons we can learn from looking at that rubble are invaluable.

I'd put my money on the sun and solar energy. What a source of power! I hope we don't have to wait until oil and coal run out before we tackle that.

Thomas Edison (1847–1931)

A good science fiction story should be able to predict not the automobile but the traffic jam.

Frederik Pohl (1919–2013)

It must be considered that there is nothing more difficult to carry out nor more doubtful of success nor more dangerous to handle than to initiate a new order of things; for the reformer has enemies in all those who profit by the old order and only lukewarm defenders in all those who would profit from the new order; this lukewarmness arising partly from the incredulity of mankind who does not truly believe in anything new until they actually have experience of it.

Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527)

You want a future where you're expecting things to get better, not a future where you're expecting things to get worse.

Elon Musk (1971– present)



HY I WAS SURPRISED TO SEE A LOAD OF white doughnuts floating around the Yuneec as I came out of the cloud is easy to understand.

Why I wasn't alarmed that I might run into them or be destroyed by them is, on reflection, harder to grasp. I was flying along at a speed the Yuneec had never previously achieved. I remember glancing down at the data screen: 482 kilometres an hour.

Up until the moment the crowd of doughnuts appeared in the clear blue sky I could see nothing, I was totally blind; the cloud was a thick mass of grey nothingness and I had no idea where I was or what was happening.

It stopped as suddenly as it started. I just burst out into bright sunlight surrounded by a load of floating white doughnuts that scattered and formed a little ring around the Yuneec. Maybe a more accurate description of them would be as floating padded toilet seat covers you sometimes see in a disabled loo as I suspected they were much larger than actual doughnuts, maybe even a couple of metres across.

The sun was low and in front of me, just as it had been in London, but I didn't need to blink and rub my eyes to know this was somewhere very different.

The sky above me was beautifully clear, the deep blue of an early autumn morning, in the distance a few low cumulonimbus clouds, but other than the doughnuts, nothing.

I did burst into tears. I'm not proud, but it did happen and it happened suddenly. I suppose the overriding motivation was that it was immediately bloody obvious I wasn't flying over Didcot in 2011. I was somewhere else, somewhere completely

- 2 new and weird and exhausting. However confused I was at that moment, however tired and wired, I was fairly confident that flying doughnuts had not been around in 2011 or I think I might have read about them on TechCrunch.

I'll tell you now, it's quite hard to fly a plane you're not used to when you're sobbing, but although I'm sure I wobbled a bit, I managed not to lose it completely and dive the damn Yuneec into the ground to get the whole nightmare over with, though it crossed my mind more than once. I had to accept I was perpetually trapped in a bizarre vortex of peculiar worlds, none of which felt like home. I don't know if I gave up at that point, I don't know if I just shrugged off the ache for home and accepted I was doomed to be stuck in bonkers realities 200 years in the future, but whatever it was, I didn't kill myself.

The Yuneec flew true, straight and at great speed yet it felt like I was gliding along an invisible silk ribbon.

The doughnuts travelled alongside me and for some odd reason I found this mildly reassuring – there is something completely un-alarming about a flock of floating white doughnuts. It is hard to explain why, as it's not something anyone from 2011 is likely to have witnessed. It was their shape and manner that reassured me, they were utterly non-threatening, it was as if they were expecting me.

The experience of flying through a small gathering of these things was akin to being met at an airport by friendly people you've never met before but who know who you are. Like a smiling Japanese woman holding a small sign with a friendly kitten illustration at the top and your name written on it at Tokyo Airport. This happened to me once in 2009 and it was very reassuring. It was my first visit to Japan and I was confused about where I should go until I saw this sign.

The white doughnuts weren't carrying signs with 'Mr Gavin Meckler' written on them but they may as well have been. I was smiling as I looked out at them, for some reason they made me want to chuckle.

This mood turned to alarm as I felt something make contact 3
with the Yuneec that was nothing to do with wind turbulence or
changes in air pressure. Whatever had made contact felt solid
and mechanical.

I peered out of the side window with what I can genuinely
describe as mild panic. I couldn't see anything. The second event,
which took place mere moments after the first, was the complete
cessation of my control over the plane.

I could sense it instantly. For reasons I had no hope of under-
standing, the joystick was not connected to any of the plane's
control surfaces. I wasn't flying the Yuneec, someone else, or as I
suspected, *something* else, was.

The plane didn't fall out of the sky like a rock, explode in a
ball of flame or start behaving erratically. It continued in the
same direction at the same speed and I continued to be sur-
rounded by a load of flying white doughnuts.

After a while, I could sense that we were banking slightly to
the left, and it was about this time that I realised the prop was
reducing speed and the new electric motor Pete had fixed into
the nose cone was slowly spinning down, yet I couldn't sense a
drop in speed.

All the data readouts on the smooth screen in front of me were
blanks, there was nothing going on, it looked the same as when
the plane was switched off.

Was I completely freaked out? To quote a wonderfully amus-
ing Australian colleague I'd worked with in an open cast coal pit
in Northern Queensland in 2010, 'How about, yeah!'

I suppose to be fair I was less terrified than I would have
been had this happened when I emerged from the cloud over
Gardenia. My experiences over the previous months had
hardened me to technological, environmental and psychological
events over which I had no control.

As the Yuneec slowly banked to the left, something came into
view that is once again very difficult to describe. Yes, by this time
I'd seen filaments of ridiculously strong thread reaching from the

4 planet's surface into deep space, I'd seen massive ships that moved effortlessly across the top of waves with no moving parts.

Now all I was seeing was a cloud.

Anyone can describe a cloud: it's a white fluffy thing that floats in the sky or a grey low thing sitting above your head for months on end. If like me you grew up in the UK, clouds are very familiar and all I was looking at was a cloud.

The thing that set it apart from its fluffy brethren was primarily the height it was floating along at – it was much lower than I would expect. This cloud was well below me but also on closer inspection its shape and size were unusual.

This was a very big cloud: I would estimate several kilometres long, more than one wide, fairly flat and generally white. That's where its cloud-like appearance ended.

I continued to glide toward this extraordinary vision. I say glide as now all I could hear was the rush of wind over the Yuneec. The motor had stopped and the soft propeller blades were stuck to the nose cone like damp dishcloths.

As I got closer, the inconceivable became concrete. I don't mean I was looking at a cloud made of concrete, I mean I was seeing a human-made construction and not a large formation of water vapour. The floating structure my eyes and brain were struggling with was something more solid and I could clearly see human figures standing among the billowing white shapes. Had I a scintilla of religious sensitivity about me I might have presumed I was seeing angels, but as I got much closer I couldn't spot any wings. I was seeing people, a crowd of people who appeared to be staring up at me.

The cloud did appear mostly white but as I could see more and more detail there was evidently a great many colourful constructions at the centre of this mind-boggling apparition. I could not work out what sort of constructions these were. They were sort of tent-like, vaguely balloon-like, but not quite.

I felt the Yuneec slow down, not violently, more akin to the

experience I was familiar with when I throttled back and applied 5
the air brakes when coming into land. The distressing moment
came when I could sense no forward movement at all. It seemed
I was static in space, hovering above an inhabited cloud that was
in turn floating above the ground. By that point I was directly
above the crowd of people I had spotted as I approached, and
all I could see was the bulbous tops of some bizarre structures
surrounding me.

After a few moments of complete stillness I felt the plane
descend. I had no control over any of this. As I gently sank
down the crowd came into view; I felt utterly helpless. I had
been flying free and under my own control, I emerged from the
cloud into clear sky, but somehow all control had been taken
away from me. Feeling like a fly trapped in a spider's web was one
possible analogy; it was creepy.

The Yuneec eventually came to a gentle and slightly bouncy
halt, and as I glanced about me I noticed the white doughnuts
that had been escorting me had disappeared.

I was stationary, resting on a bouncy cloud surrounded by
several hundred people of various races and ages. They didn't
look angry or dangerous; in fact they looked quite friendly.
Some of them even made little waving gestures.

Two people broke ranks and walked up to the plane: an old
man and woman. They were moving toward me in a very
peculiar way. I suppose it was a little as if they were walking
across a giant mattress.

They both had their palms held up indicating, I hoped, that
they meant me no harm. It did cross my mind that they might
have been sporting some kind of fearsome body-disintegrating
weapon resembling, to the uninitiated, an upheld human palm,
but they were smiling.

I opened the cockpit door slowly. I didn't want to make
sudden movements that could be misinterpreted so it seemed
like the right thing to do.

6 The woman, who was not as tall as the people of London, stood next to the Yuneec's wing and spoke slowly: 'Hallo, Gavin, *es ist eine freude sie zu treffen, willkommen in der anthropocene.*'