

GAIL COLLINS

There's A Moon Out Tonight

Let's talk about something cheerful. I nominate the apocalypse.

You may not have noticed, but we survived an end-of-the-world moment again this week when a lunar eclipse made the moon look sort of reddish. This is known as a Blood Moon, and, in certain circles, it was seen as the Start of Something Big.

"The heavens are God's billboard," said televangelist John Hagee, the author of the best-selling "Four Blood Moons: Something Is About to Change." This is the same John Hagee who once theorized that Hurricane Katrina was God's punishment to New Orleans for scheduling a gay pride parade. He later apologized. And moved on. To the moon.

As doomsday scenarios go, this one is not particularly original: the basic evangelical vision of trouble in the Middle East followed by the Second Coming. And red moons happen all the time. If you wanted a sign of the end of days this week, there are lots better candidates. Kathleen Sebelius for Senate? The idea that anybody believes Donald Trump will buy the Buffalo Bills? Or

I have seen the future, and it has zombies.

limes — their price is quadrupling! You can read all about that in my upcoming book, "The End of Guacamole."

The Blood Moon predictions are going to be with us for a while because there will be four of the same lunar eclipses over the next year and a half. And Hagee's theories have sold a heck of a lot of books on Amazon. But they lack the exciting specificity of the classic end-of-the-world prophecies. Like polar shifts (earth crust moves, triggering volcanoes, floods and eliminating all life-forms) or the Amazing Criswell, who was waiting for a black rainbow to show up and suck off all the oxygen.

Television is taking up the slack. It's awash with doomsday stories, with more on the runway. Killer viruses, planetary power failures, nuclear war. Plus your basic Rapture. ("The Leftovers" is the story of the people who didn't make the cut.") Chris Carter, the "X-Files" creator who's offering "The After," was apparently really moved by that Mayan-calendar-ends crisis in 2012. "There was nervousness. It was in the air. ... Certainly the power of that played a part in my desire to do something about a world-changing event," he told TV Guide.

People, do you remember being all that worried about the Mayan calendar? Or zombies? Zombies are still so darned popular. It would be nice if we were being barraged with a new series about a utopian future where everybody got along except your occasional Romulan. Yet here we are.

The feel-good side of end-of-the-world predictions is that everything seems so nice the day after. We're still here! There's oxygen!

Unless, of course, you're someone like Robert Fitzpatrick, a follower of the late Harold Camping, a serial apocalypse predictor who claimed Judgment Day was going to be May 21, 2011. Fitzpatrick spent what he said was his life savings putting warning signs in the New York City subway system. ("Global Earthquake: The Greatest Ever!") On the plus side, he did give commuters a really fine ride to work on May 22.

If you enjoy worrying about doomsday, be sure to hedge your bets. Remember Y2K and all the millennium end-of-the-world scenarios? Years ago, I worked on a project that involved a collection of all the predictions about terrible things that were going to happen in the year 2000, and I enjoyed it very much. I talked to a guy living on a mountain who was both waiting for the end and writing a movie script about it.

The Deepwater Horizon Threat

By S. Elizabeth Birnbaum and Jacqueline Savitz

FOUR years ago this Sunday, BP's Macondo well in the Gulf of Mexico blew out, destroying the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig, killing 11 workers and setting off an uncontrolled oil gusher lasting 87 days. By the time the flow was stopped, an estimated 200 million gallons of oil had entered the ocean.

The harm to gulf wildlife has been long-lasting if not fully understood. One recent study found that dolphins in the gulf region were suffering from problems consistent with exposure to oil: lung damage and low levels of adrenal hormones, which are important for responding to stress. Another study found that bluefin and yellowfin tuna sustained heart damage, which suggests likely harm to other fish as well. Another legacy has been the oiling of marshes along the coast, which has exacerbated coastline erosion by killing grasses that help keep the shoreline intact.

One of us, Liz Birnbaum, had for nine months been head of the government agency that regulated the offshore drilling industry when the spill began. We were both horrified to discover that the best efforts of industry and government engineers could not stop the spill for months.

We would never have imagined so little action would be taken to prevent something like this from happening again. But, four years later, the Obama administration still has not taken key steps recommended by its experts and experts it commissioned to increase drilling safety. As a result, we are on a course to repeat our mistakes. Making matters worse, the administration proposes to expand offshore drilling in the Atlantic and allow seismic activities harmful to ocean life in the search for new oil reserves.

Following the spill, the administration promised that it would do what was necessary to make drilling as safe as possible. A presidential commission recommended numerous measures to increase drilling safety. The Coast Guard, the Department of the Interior and the National Academy of Engineering subsequently identified more problems that contributed to the spill. Though some recommendations have been acted upon, in-

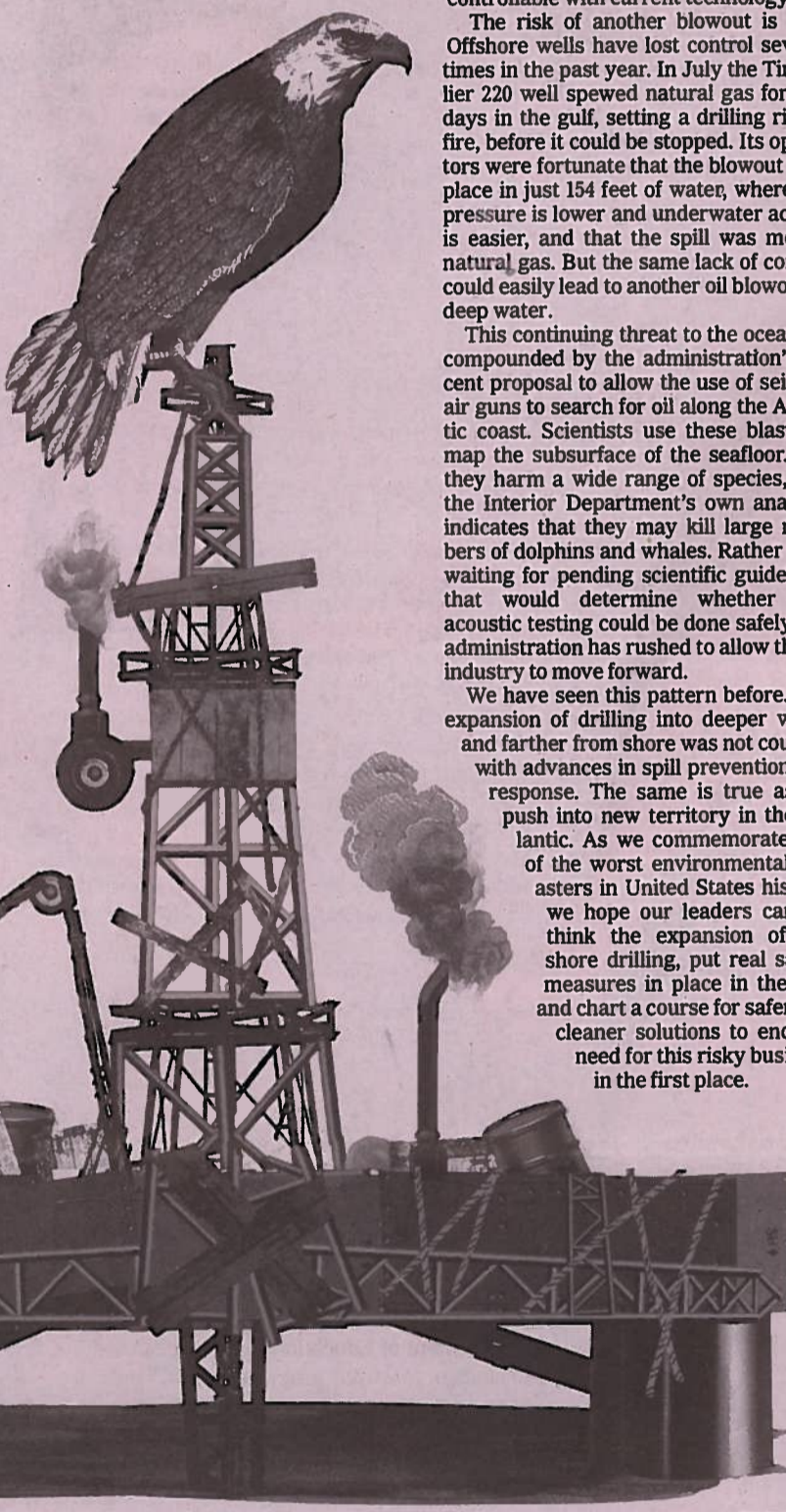
S. Elizabeth Birnbaum is a consultant at SEB Strategies, and was director of the Minerals Management Service at the time of the Deepwater Horizon blowout. Jacqueline Savitz is vice president for U.S. Oceans at Oceana, an international conservation group.

cluding restructuring the regulatory agency that oversees drilling and increasing training and certification for government drilling rig inspectors, threats remain.

One huge concern centers on the blowout preventers, which seal wells in blowouts and are the last line of defense for events like the one at Deepwater Horizon. It's unfathomable that the administration has failed to act on the findings of the December 2011 report of the National Academy of Engineering, which gave us some very bad news about Deepwater Horizon's blowout preventer.

Its massive cutting blades were sup-

Not enough has been done to prevent a blowout at another well.



DOUG CHAYKA

NICHOLAS KRISTOF

In Ukraine, Seeking U.S. Aid

KIEV, Ukraine

For decades, Ukrainians have been starved, oppressed and bullied by Russians, and, with Russia now inciting instability that could lead to an invasion and dismemberment of eastern Ukraine, plenty of brave Ukrainians here say they've had it and are ready to go bear-hunting.

If they could just equip themselves. "Any chance you could provide some machine guns or sniper rifles?" one former protester asked me hopefully in Kiev's Independence Square, a scorched collection of roadblocks where so many Ukrainians lost their lives toppling a corrupt ruler earlier this year.

I explained that I was out of both. The next day, when another self-styled commander asked for weapons to fight the Russian invaders, I pointed to the pistol in his belt and told him he was better prepared than I was.

He laughed ruefully, pulled it out and showed that it was a pellet gun. "It's a child's toy," he said scornfully. "And we have only one of these for every 10 men."

That's a glimpse of the mood in Ukraine these days. People seem to feel a bit disappointed that the United States and Europe haven't been more supportive, and they are humiliated that their own acting government hasn't done more to confront Russian-backed militants. So, especially after a few drinks, people are ready to take down the Russian Army themselves.

"We will defeat the Russian Army, hang the Ukrainian flag over the Kremlin, and turn it into a lake," boasted Roman Butsyk, a locomotive driver who joined the protest movement.

Usually in international affairs, there's a good deal of gray, but what is happen-

People say they're ready to fight the Russians.

ing in Ukraine is pretty black and white.

President Vladimir Putin of Russia warns that Ukraine is on the brink of civil war. But the chaos in eastern cities is his own creation, in part by sending provocateurs across the border. It's not clear how many of the troublemakers in the east are Russian security agents and how many are Ukrainians who want to remain in Russia's orbit, but it's reasonably clear that there are plenty of both. Ukrainians note that supposed locals in the pro-Russian camp sometimes are unfamiliar with local streets.

Putin has emerged as a great champion of the rights of Russian-speakers everywhere — except in the place where their rights are most endangered. That's Russia itself.

Meanwhile, Russian propaganda has reached almost North Korean proportions: Putin shrugs at the world and embraces implausible deniability.

Ukrainians mounted their revolution because they wanted to be more like the West, so it frustrates them that the West hasn't returned the love. Europe fears that sanctioning Russia would hurt business, and even the Obama administration has been cautious and has resisted providing military assistance (except for military meals).

The Ukrainians have a point. A bear is charging them, and we offer spaghetti?

President Obama's concerns about provoking Putin are understandable, and I disagree with those Republicans who argue that Putin is on a rampage because of Obama's foreign policy weaknesses. But I do think the White House can do more — with military transfers, financial aid, economic sanctions and moral support — to stand with Ukraine. Vice President Joe Biden's planned visit to Ukraine is a welcome step to show support.

So far, Putin has arguably gained from his bullying of Crimea: His standing in domestic polls has surged — his approval at home is roughly twice Obama's — and

America's Urban Future

By Vishaan Chakrabarti

FOR all of the attention showered on hipster enclaves like Williamsburg, Brooklyn and Portland, Ore., America is only in the beginning stages of a historic urban reordering. After over a half-century of depopulation, cities have been filling up — and not just with young millennials, but with families and even older workers and retirees.

This reordering, should it continue, will have dramatic consequences for our

makes compact urban living easier).

Environmentally, the traumas of Hurricane Katrina and the Deepwater Horizon spill, the geopolitics of imported energy and the perils of domestic energy extraction all argue for a lifestyle that is more resource-efficient, particularly for parents focused on teaching their children to be aware of the world around them.

The same can be said for social values. Cities were once cast as dying places in contrast to the glowing suburban future; today, the future, inasmuch as it is tied in with issues like cultural diversity and marriage equality, is centered in the ur-

policies continue to encourage the opposite. Sprawl didn't just happen — it is a direct consequence of "big government." Cities don't keep the wealth they generate: Our major cities send billions more in tax dollars to the suburbs, via state and federal coffers, than they get back.

The largest subsidy in the federal system is the mortgage interest deduction, about \$100 billion annually. Gas taxes don't begin to reflect the costs incurred by automobile use, from pollution to depressed land values around highways.

By contrast, urban mass transit, school systems, parks, affordable housing and even urban welfare recipients receive