

# STORM WARNINGS

Volume 8, Issue 1 - May, 2019  
Future Trajectories



**R. Michael Conley**  
*Founder*

**About the Founder:**

Mike Conley is the Founder of Weathering the Storm, LLC and Chairman & CEO of the Conley Family Foundation. As a former Fortune 500 business executive, author, lecturer, and public policy activist, Conley has written and spoken on topics related to the perfect storm. He graduated from the University of Minnesota, after serving in the U.S. Navy, and later completed a post-grad program at Stanford University. He is active on several boards and advisory groups.

[weatheringthestorm.net](http://weatheringthestorm.net)

## Future Trajectories

In this issue, our Publisher, R. Michael Conley, will talk about his latest book as it nears completion and what he hopes to accomplish with it. Years in the making, Conley will provide a preview of the challenges his research has revealed, how it plays into the perfect storm theme of this publication, and his plans following the release of the book.

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**WTS:** What's the name of your new book and what is it about?

**Conley:** The name of the book is, "*Mortgaging the American Dream; What Were We Thinking?*" A non-fiction book, it chronicles the growth and development of the looming perfect storm in our pathway. It shows how, in our effort to sustain an increasingly unsustainable way of life, we have borrowed heavily on the future and mortgaged, in the process, the American Dream for those following us. Our IOUs – in the form of a resource-depleted planet, pollution, climate change, and staggering debts that can never be paid off – are the legacy we are leaving.

While never our intent, it demonstrates the power of myopic thinking, greed, denial, apathy and lack of political will to see beyond the next election.

**WTS:** What prompted you to write this book?

**Conley:** To answer that, I would have to go back to my earlier book, "Lethal Trajectories," and some of the things that happened after it was published. The book, a story about a perfect storm, opened a number of doors I never envisioned.

In response, I created a new company, "*Weathering the Storm, LLC*" and a website by the same name. Through presentations to various groups and a class I taught for three years running through the University of Minnesota's OLLI program called, "*The Perfect Storm*," I attempted to get the message out on this looming threat.

Regardless of the group, similar questions were asked about the origins, threats, and likely progression of the perfect storm – as well as countermeasures we could take to mitigate its sharper edges. Implicit in all of it was our lack of intergenerational stewardship and the adverse impact it will have on future generations and their access to the American Dream.

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There seemed to be more questions than there were answers. It was a story that needed to be told, and that's what prompted me to write it.

**WTS:** It sounds like an ambitious project: How did you structure the book to tell the story?

**Conley:** It was structured to show how a confluence of events and forces had escalated over time to produce the tsunami-like forces of the perfect storm that now threatens us. It tracks the gathering storm from post-WWII to present times and then extrapolates out the future trajectories and how they are likely to play out.

It documents the folly of applying linear thinking to exponential threats, and it tells of how dangerous feedback loops have now intensified the storm forces to where they may soon become irreversible. Those forces, incidentally, include a maelstrom of energy, economic, geopolitical, environmental, technological, behavioral, and cultural forces – all on a collision course and nearing a critical mass that could ignite the perfect storm. I have supplemented the narrative with accounts from my "Class of 1961" to give this story form, substance, and depth.

**WTS:** What do you mean about that last part, the "Class of 1961?" What's that all about?

**Conley:** There's a human side to this story that I wanted to convey through personal accounts of what it was like to live through the pivotal times covered; at ground zero at the time of occurrence. By blending anecdotal accounts with the macro-forces in play, it was possible to paint a more complete picture of our telling times.

I picked my high school class of 1961 as a focal point for framing and navigating this story because, frankly, we're eye witnesses to history in the crucial times covered. Think about it: We were tykes at the conclusion of WWII and there at the birth of the Atomic Age. We remember the air raid drills to hide under our desks and close our eyes to the blinding nuclear blast that would have quickly vaporized us. We lived through the entire Cold War and recall the launch of Sputnik and start of the new Space Age and race for the Moon.

We served in – or protested – the Viet Nam War and explosive riots that rocked the nation. We voted prior to the enactment of Civil Rights legislation and a new program called Medicare, and we were shocked by Watergate and events that followed. We weathered recessions, market crashes, several wars, McCarthyism, and twelve different presidential administrations.

We watched the world population double from three to six-billion people in the four decades following our graduation, and we participated in a new era of globalization that was fast-tracked by the Digital Age and Internet. While we may not have appreciated the meaning of many game-changing events as they occurred, we can at least share our first-hand accounts of history that younger generations can only read about.

**WTS:** In researching these macro trends, were there things that really stuck out in your mind?

**Conley:** I was surprised by how often history repeats itself and how we can learn from it if we pay attention. I was also struck by how seemingly random events could, over time, morph into

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threatening forces with profound consequences that no one seemed to foresee. Some of that can be attributed, I suppose, to the day-to-day distractions of life, but it goes deeper than that.

Most of us are hardwired to think and act in a linear manner with limited time horizons. As such, we over-focus on the short term and under-focus on the long term. It causes us to seek quick fixes without fully thinking out the longer-term ramifications. With most major challenges today of a long-term nature, the application of linear thinking to exponential threats is as dangerous as approaching problems in a too narrow and non-systemic manner.

Future generations, overwhelmed with the mess they inherited, will look back and wonder what we were thinking when we mortgaged their future to satisfy our own current needs. While our intentions may not have been malevolent, our actions limited their access to the American Dream. It was with this intergenerational injustice in mind that the book was titled: "*Mortgaging the American Dream: What Were We thinking.*"

**WTS:** Can you highlight a few of the intergenerational IOUs we're leaving for future generations to pick up?

**Conley:** The list is long, but I'll mention a few of the more blatant examples of the IOUs that will jeopardize future access to the American Dream we knew:

- \* *Debt timebombs:* And how – like a giant Ponzi scheme – debt will eventually implode of its own weight with catastrophic results; all part of our "play now – pay later" culture.
- \* *Climate change:* And how – as an existential threat – it will soon reach a tipping point without immediate and aggressive countermeasures; something we have yet to see.
- \* *Ecological mayhem:* And how – through wasteful practices, pollution, and benign neglect – we are degrading the life-support systems for a growing world population of the future.
- \* *Geopolitical systems:* And how – given a new cold war, nuclear proliferation, and asymmetric warfare – the shifting power structures will rekindle the need to build bridges and not walls.
- \* *Technologies:* And how – given Fourth Industrial Revolution technologies that will surpass our rate of absorption – it will be disruptive as we are ill-prepared to fully assimilate them.
- \* *Mass Myopia:* And how – in an era of moral hazards and political dysfunction – our fixation on quick fix, no-pain solutions, or denial, are sure-fire prescriptions for disaster.

**WTS:** That's quite a list; we get the point.

**Conley:** Sadly, I've only scratched the surface. It really gets scary when you consider how the explosive potential of these colliding forces could trigger a bang that exceeds the sum of all parts. Taken piecemeal, we can deal with it, but in combination, it could overwhelm us. That's why I refer to it as the perfect storm. I devote a chapter, in fact, to describing what it could be like to live through this storm. It's a chilling saga we want to mitigate at all costs – though I doubt we can totally avoid it.

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**WTS:** You have painted a bleak picture of what could be; is there any hope for mankind?

**Conley:** Oh my, yes. The world has shown its resilience time and again when threatened by great disasters; this one just happens to be bigger than probably all of them combined. That said, we are capable of great things once we awaken to the magnitude of the threat with a resolve to aggressively respond with all forces at our disposal.

I have, in fact, devoted an entire chapter of the book to a set of integrated solutions we can apply at a global, national, and grassroots level – right down to our household. It provides a blueprint for assembling the pieces, weighing their relative importance, and connecting the dots across a broad framework of systemically-based solutions.

**WTS:** To shift gears, what are your plans between now and the time in which your book is published?

**Conley:** Well first, I quit trying to predict exactly when the book will be published; there are too many variables. Let me just say that I'll be disappointed if it doesn't happen later this year. In the meantime, I'll be releasing key parts of my research in future posts like this one.

Once the book is published, I will go out on the speaking circuit like I did before. I have a far better marketing apparatus now than I did with my last book, and I should be able to reach more people more quickly this time. I am still pondering whether or not to teach another OLLI course through the University of Minnesota; it is a wonderful and rewarding experience, but it involves a heavy amount of preparation and classroom time. I will also continue to work with and support a number of non-profit organizations that work in the clean energy fields.

**WTS:** One last question, you are not a young man anymore – what drives you to do what you are doing today?

**Conley:** I have grandchildren that will be strapped with the intergenerational IOUs we are passing on to them, and I cringe to think they may not have the same access to the American Dream that I had. It's a thought that really bothers me. I have no illusions that I will make much of a difference, but I would feel pretty awful if I didn't at least try.

The Good Lord has blessed me with time, energy, and resources, and I want to become an effective voice for future generations. Needless to say, I also get great joy and energy from working with so many good people and organizations that share my concerns. I am hoping that my new book adds to this effort.

Mike Conley

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For more information, please visit my website at [www.WeatheringtheStorm.net](http://www.WeatheringtheStorm.net)