

STORM WARNINGS

Vol. 5 Issue 3 – October 2016
Happy 5th Anniversary



R. Michael Conley
Founder

"We are heading into a perfect storm and don't see it coming," according to R. Michael Conley, Founder of Weathering the Storm, LLC and this website.

The WTS mission is to "Awaken, engage and help others to weather the storm."

The WTS website provides the following on a regular basis:

Storm Warnings: An in-depth quarterly newsletter.

News Flash: Frequent postings on topical perfect storm issues.

Best Practices: Featuring leaders in sustainability practices.

Happy 5th Anniversary

On this 5th anniversary of Weathering the Storm LLC, our founder, R. Michael Conley, provides a candid assessment of results to date and an overview of significant new global developments that are reshaping his views on the perfect storm. He will also update readers on his latest project and future plans.

WTS: Let's start from the beginning: What motivated you to create your Weathering the Storm (WTS) organization and what did you hope to accomplish?

Conley: I've been concerned for many years about the intergenerational challenges we are facing and the mess we're leaving for those following us. The enormity of the problem, and the lack of long term planning or any sense of urgency to address it had me gasping. It's a story that needs to be told, and I formed WTS as a vehicle for telling it.

The WTS mission, to "*awaken, engage and help others to weather the storm,*" recognizes the perfect storm threat, and the WTS is designed to provide information to help address it.

WTS: As a point of clarification, it might be helpful for you to tell new readers what you mean by the "perfect storm."

Conley: We use the perfect storm metaphor to describe the buildup of long festering, tectonic-sized forces on a collision course. As they interact and reach critical mass, they could trigger a perfect storm that exceeds the sum of all parts. For simplicity, we have generically categorized these forces into four great buckets; environmental, energy, economic and behavioral forces with a number of sub-sets. Through active feedback loops and exponential growth, the trajectory lines of the storm are sharpening.

WTS: Let's dig a little deeper; what are some of the underlying premises driving WTS and their relationship to the *perfect storm*?

Conley: Our job is frame the issues, track the trajectories, connect the dots, report on the results and offer resources and ideas for weathering the storm. There are really three underlying assumptions that drive our thinking and shape our value propositions:

- 1) The forces of the perfect storm are systemic in nature, dynamic in scope, insidiously developing and exponentially growing.
- 2) Effective solutions require systemic approaches that frame our challenges in their totality. Piecemeal solutions that mortgage

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WTS Guide: A free “how-to” Guide for beginners.

Info & Resources: Books, articles information & resources:

weatheringthestorm.net

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.

Weathering the Storm website.

WTS: Your book, *Lethal Trajectories*, seemed to be your launch vehicle; can you talk a little more about it?

Conley: I started working on the book in early 2010, and it was published in November 2011 along with a non-fiction, “*Weathering the Storm Guide*” that went along with it. It is a futuristic novel that takes place in the years 2017-18. It starts with a Chinese naval battle in the East China Sea; a terrorist overthrow of the Saudi government; alarming new climate change data, and contentious political unrest in the United States that come together to trigger a perfect storm. While written several years ago, it’s scary how many of the projections have come true.

In writing the book, I couldn’t help but appreciate how interconnected our world really is; how, for instance, a case of economic “sniffles” in the United States can cause pneumonia in other countries. It affirmed the need to frame our challenges in their totality and not as disjointed, random events. In a

the future to sustain the unsustainable have huge intergenerational consequences.

3) We have the resiliency to *weather the storm* – or at least mitigate its sharper edges – if we will awaken to the threat and respond accordingly.

WTS: Can you provide an historical perspective on what your WTS organization has done or is doing to *awaken* others to the perfect storm challenge?

Conley: My journey with this challenge started at the beginning of this century. As a way of learning about the challenges and connecting the dots, I wrote what I would call two mini-books to explain the perfect storm and sound the alarm. Unfortunately, they garnered little attention.

Frustrated, I recalled in my college days how writers like George Orwell and Ayn Rand used the medium of novels to tell their stories. It prompted me to write my book, “*Lethal Trajectories*,” (See: *Lethal Trajectories book*) to graphically illustrate a set of scenarios that could lead to a perfect storm. It was written in the genre of a techno-thriller – a la Tom Clancy or Vince Flynn novels – but it was also a hybrid book with 35 pages of end-notes and a bibliography. My intent was to educate as well as entertain.

To my surprise, it became an award winning novel and led to some T.V. and radio spots. It opened doors and spearheaded a number of speaking engagements, writing assignments and a “perfect storm” class that I subsequently developed and taught for three years through the University of Minnesota’s *Osher Lifelong Learning Institute* series. The WTS LLC organization has become, in effect, a “holding” company that houses all of these activities along with our

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dynamic world of multiple systemic forces, Newton's Third Law – where there's an action there is a reaction – is always at play.

WTS: Can you talk more about the website part of Weathering the Storm LLC?

Conley: The *Weathering the Storm* website became operational at about the time of our *Lethal Trajectories* book launch in November 2011, and it is now a critical part of our entire operation. Our first regular posting, "Storm Warnings" – used the same Q&A format as this article when it was posted in January 2012. Its purpose was and is to provide an in-depth analysis of broader topics and trends that pertain to the perfect storm, and it is now published quarterly.

We recognized early on the need to cover current events more frequently, and initiated, in May 2013, our "News Flash" postings. Posted at least monthly, it covers a current topic and ties it into the broader framework of the perfect storm matrix. Our intent is to help readers connect the dots and to call attention to the incremental creep of the perfect storm.

In 2014, we added another series titled "Best Practices." It features organizations with solid track records for addressing perfect storm-related challenges. The organizations we've featured represent an awesome example of resiliency and what can be done to proactively address the complex challenges of the perfect storm.

WTS: Looking ahead, what new features are you building into your website and operation?

Conley: We are now in the early stages of three new initiatives that will greatly enhance our mission and capabilities:

- 1) First, we are most pleased to have Matt Hoiland join our team as the new writer of our "Best Practices" series. Matt will focus on sustainability-related issues and the growing migration toward a *circular economy* (See: *Sustainability: An Introduction*) Our intent is to publicize exciting new initiatives that will help us mitigate the sharper edges of the perfect storm. Matt's postings will also highlight the new economic engines of growth and job opportunities these initiatives will provide.
- 2) Second, to help expand this effort, we are adding a feature called "Friends of Weathering the Storm." It will provide networking opportunities and indexed reference material to help readers weather the storm.
- 3) Last, I am working on a new non-fiction book that documents the creeping growth of the perfect storm and its future trajectories; the dangers of living in a "play now – pay later" culture that is mortgaging the future for those following us, and strategies to redirect our efforts and mitigate the sharper edges of the perfect storm.

WTS: Can you tell us more about the book you're working on and what you hope to do with it?

Conley: The book is based partly on feedback I've received from speeches, postings and presentations made over the course of many years and, of course, an enormous amount of new data. After a while, you begin to develop a sense for what is and isn't important and that is what I am focusing on in this book.

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I've learned, for instance, that audiences do not like "gloom and doom" messages that are devoid of remedial solutions. The absence of hope is almost a sure prescription for denial, and denial is not a strategy. Conversely, people respond well and with resiliency to threatening situations when they truly understand the challenges, options available, and risk/reward consequences of acting or doing nothing. The better folks understand the nature of the problem, the better the solutions.

The title of my book is "*Mortgaging the American Dream: What Were We Thinking?*" It is a work in progress that chronicles how seemingly innocuous ripple events in previous decades grew into tidal waves and later tsunamis with huge intergenerational consequences. By connecting the dots, we can begin to see how these forces have framed the perfect storm that now looms in our pathway. My hope is that this knowledge will help us develop better solutions and tilt the odds more in our favor.

We are resilient people and capable of meeting great challenges once we understand the true nature of the threats. Accordingly, the message of hope in my book is supplemented with a call for tough love and the need to curtail the mortgages we are taking on future generations to sustain an unsustainable way of life. The opportunities created from our efforts to reopen the American Dream for others will be enormous.

WTS: It sounds like an ambitious project. What obstacles have you encountered?

Conley: It has involved a tremendous amount of research, for sure, but the biggest obstacle by far was to settle on a point-of-view (POV) and framework for telling the story; always a challenge for authors.

In one of those "AHA!" moments, it hit me: My high school class of 1961 provided an ideal vantage point for telling the story; not because of who we were or are, but because we were there at the forefront of the greatest transformational period in American history. We were there at the birth of the atomic, space, digital and computer ages; the building of the interstate highway system, jet travel and globalization. We lived through the entire Cold War and watched America emerge as the preeminent global superpower. We lived it, experienced it, struggled with it, and passed it on to the Baby Boomers, Gen-Xers and Millennials that followed.

The book blends together an historical panorama of events with personal stories from classmates recollecting how these events looked to them at ground level at the time of their occurrence. It provides, in effect, a tactile, humanistic barometer of how these transformational forces played out and were interpreted in real time over the course of several decades. That's probably all I want to say about the book at this time.

WTS: Back to your *Lethal Trajectories* book written over five years ago, it was loaded with futuristic assumptions and predictions. What surprises do you see now that were not anticipated when it was written?

Conley: Good question. The surprises for me were not so much about the events, *per se*, but rather the timing and progression of the events. For instance, I thought the oil situation would be far worse by now, but new shale oil production has temporarily eased the supply problem. Make no mistake, it's only a quick fix; our long term oil problems will continue to worsen over time.

I was unpleasantly surprised that the pace of climate change predicted in my book has been exceeded by real events. On the other hand, I'm encouraged by the level of global awareness and responses to climate

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change as well as the plethora of promising new initiatives to address it. I had also predicted a new cold war based on control of markets and physical resources; not ideology like the first cold war, but I now find myself alarmed by our regression back to a more militaristic focus with Russia once again an adversary. Whatever happened to détente?

WTS: Your Weathering the Storm company has been at it now for five years. Have your perceptions and conclusions about the perfect storm changed over that period of time?

Conley: Oh my, yes. There are two major shifts in my thinking: First, I am more optimistic about our resiliency. We've made significant strides in clean energy technologies, and our level of awareness with respect to climate change and other challengers has improved. It also seems like there's a greater sense of global connectivity and a feeling that we might all be in this together; all encouraging signs.

Second, it was my feeling a few years back that energy – particularly oil-based energy – would be the prime triggering mechanism for igniting the perfect storm. That's still very possible, but I think the greater threat now is in the economic front; specifically, in our unfunded entitlement liabilities, humongous public and private debt and deficit levels – not only in the United States but globally – and the plethora of “bubbles” that have become internationally pandemic (*See: Bubbles and Backlashes*). They could easily ignite a global meltdown that would put the 2008 *Great Recession* to shame.

The good news is that while challenges like oil are subject to the immutable laws of geology – over which we have no control – we have a greater say in how our economic challenges play out with respect to the fiscal and monetary policies we choose and the manner in which we manage expectations, debt loads and spending habits. I also see opportunities to address the widening gap between the haves and have-nots of the world as well as rebuilding our own middle class.

Like so many things, it's a question of whether or not we will find the political will to do the things we need to do while there is still time.

WTS: Do you have any concluding remarks?

Conley: I am appreciative and grateful for having the WTS platform to discuss a variety of intergenerational issues that so deeply concern me. I am thankful for all of my subscribers and the good folks who have attended my classes or listened to my talks over the past several years. Above all, I thank the Good Lord for these opportunities and hope, in some small way, that my efforts will help others to weather the storm.

For more information, please visit our website at: www.WeatheringtheStorm.net