



THE PROGRESSIVE SURVIVALISM MANIFESTO

Planning for the coming emergencies

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*Things are getting worse and worse and worse
and they will never get better again*

- Kurt Vonnegut

The threats are real

Even if you try to hide, you cannot avoid the bad news. The short list of man-made and natural disasters looming on the horizon not only poses a threat to our way of life, but to life itself.

At the top of the list are the linked threats of peak oil and global warming. Technologically advanced countries like ours are gobbling up the world's declining oil supply at a startling rate, without investing the resources it would take to develop sustainable, clean alternatives fast enough to save us. And forget the quick fixes. As the [Christian Science Monitor reports](#), ethanol is not a solution but a boondoggle for the corn growers' lobby.

Meanwhile, developing countries are trying to become us. China is emerging as an insatiable competitor for those dwindling oil supplies, at the same time they are now [the biggest buyer of U.S. debt](#). If countries like China and Saudi Arabia elect to stop underwriting our deficit spending, our economic balloon bursts without warning. Meanwhile terrorist attacks and wars in the Middle East threaten jolts in oil prices that would reverberate worldwide.

The global economy that brings us cheap Chilean grapes in the winter and low-cost steel from Asia relies on everything going right – inexpensive energy, cheap labor, reliable weather, secure markets. The side effects of global trade agreements currently in place already ignore crucial environmental and labor concerns. Those [grapes may well contain pesticides like DDT that we banned years ago](#), while importing steel from China, [where they rely on prison labor](#), results in destroying ever more high-wage manufacturing jobs in the U.S. Midwest. But those contemporary concerns pale in comparison to what will happen if that fragile system collapses overnight. A few hiccups in the supply chain and the interconnected global economic system grinds to a halt.

The most ominous threat, however, is that burning up the world's remaining oil reserves will only accelerate global warming, as Al Gore's movie [An Inconvenient Truth](#) documents. Climate change is generating increasingly violent storms and extreme weather, rising sea levels, the spread of tropical diseases and devastating shifts in the

ecological balances that keeps numerous animal and plant species alive, on land and in the oceans. As the glaciers melt and seas rise, millions of people worldwide will become environmental refugees. (Forget that beachfront home. Half the people in the United States live in coastal regions threatened by rising sea water.)

An added irony is that dilution of salt content of the sea, caused by those melting glaciers, could [trigger a new Ice Age, according to William T. Calvin in *The Atlantic* in 1998](#). (Global warming deniers often use this as proof that somehow the problem isn't real because we may get colder, not warmer).

At a certain point ([perhaps within a decade](#) according to the Institute for Public Policy Research), we cross the point of no return, cascading toward an irreversible runaway greenhouse effect. Physicist Stephen Hawking, who is far smarter than we are, warns that our current path means the earth "[might end up like Venus, at 250 degrees centigrade and raining sulfuric acid.](#)" He proposes that we invest immediately in developing space travel so that we can find a new planet to ruin after we finish the job on this one.

Then there's bird flu. If today's avian flu virus acquires the ability for human-to-human transmission, it could kill [as few as seven million people](#) or as many or more than the estimated 40 million who died of Spanish flu in 1918. This would be on top of current plagues such as [AIDS, which already infects roughly 40 million people on the planet](#), according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The rosiest view of the future for countries like ours suggests an inexorable decline in what some would argue is our obscenely pampered standard of living, while developing nations sink ever deeper into chaos. And don't even ask what the worst-case scenario might be.

What to do?

Many of us progressives grew up believing in the Star Trek fantasy future. Someday soon, all the countries on earth would join together as a benevolent federation. Yes, we might suffer some bumps along the way, but we were headed toward creating an equitable, secure and sustainable future where no one goes without. (And the Tooth Fairy would handle the funding.)

Like many of my friends, I now believe instead in the hard lessons of Katrina, the main one being - ***you're on your own***. Like bureaucracies everywhere, survival in government agencies at the municipal, state and federal levels means avoiding blame

and putting out today's fires, which leaves precious little time for thinking through all of the pitfalls in the plans they are building to handle tomorrow's emergencies.

The litany of impending disasters documented above can inspire dread, depression, anxiety, even paralysis. But the knowledge that the cavalry is not poised on the horizon, ready to save us, can be oddly comforting and even liberating. It means that it's time to roll up our sleeves and save ourselves and our loved ones and maybe we can save the planet in the process as well. There is personal satisfaction and potential salvation in the empowerment that comes from taking control and putting our future back into our own hands.

The Doctrine of Progressive Survivalism

History is littered with the carcasses of those who proclaimed the End Is Coming, only to wake up the next day to find life relatively unchanged. Think of the people who built fallout shelters in the Fifties. The seemingly never-ending supply of apocalyptic cults. The Y2K survivalists at the turn of the millennium. On little or no evidence but a lot of faith, these people literally took to the hills, hunkering down with their guns, their Bibles and their canned fruits and veggies.

So it's hard for progressives not to feel a little silly suggesting that it's our turn to start shopping for generators. The difference is that (1) the science is real and (2) the danger in ignoring the potential for disaster outweighs the embarrassment of finding out it was all a big mistake.

Yes, Paul Ehrlich's 1968 book *The Population Bomb* predicted scenarios that did not come to pass. On the other hand, regulating the use of chlorofluorocarbons in aerosol sprays undeniably averted the total destruction of the ozone layer. Better safe than sorry, to be sure.

So the challenge lies in crafting responses to these potential threats that will benefit us even if the danger proves overblown. Harder still is to ensure that the solutions embrace progressive values.

With those caveats in mind, we humbly offer the

Eight Essentials of Progressive Survivalism

From problems such as peak oil to global warming to bird flu, we are arguably facing the most dangerous constellation of threats in human history. Yet we are not doing all that we should to deal with these dangers, at the macro (policy) and micro (personal) levels. The challenge for progressives is to invest the time and effort now in

developing an effective, equitable and life-enhancing response to the coming emergencies.

- **Hope (work) for the best; plan for the worst** – Better to be over-prepared than ill-prepared. At the same time, learning what it takes to deal with impending threats helps clarify what we need to do to avert them.

For decades, we have had the luxury of looking at tragedies elsewhere, whether it's the AIDs orphans of Africa or the civil strife in Bosnia, while thinking, "It can't happen here." But then came Hurricane Katrina, which showed us how quickly the thin veneer of civilization can be ripped away – even here.

Katrina was a catastrophe because of failures at the local, state and national level. Poor leadership, lack of planning, cronyism, corruption. For years, [newspapers such as](#) the *Houston Chronicle* and the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* had been warning that the levees would not withstand a major hurricane. FEMA conducted the mock exercise [Hurricane Pam](#), which showed how devastating a Category 3 or above hurricane would be. Yet our corroded and corrupted political process meant that money flowed to [Alaska's bridge to nowhere](#), while the poor and disabled people of New Orleans were left to drown.

Katrina is also a cautionary lesson in forgetting. Remember how we promised ourselves we would not abandon the people who were displaced? How we would finally engage in a serious national discussion of race and class? That we would make sure that we held agencies like FEMA accountable?

See how quickly we (and our peripatetic media) have moved on?

Katrina was at least immediate and dramatic enough to get our sustained attention. The coming calamities such as global warming and pandemic flu are instead creeping up on us, which makes them easier to ignore.

The basics of strategic planning require gathering information about the problem, assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the current response, developing a better plan and then implementing it. Done thoughtfully, the plan prioritizes solutions that offer benefits even if we are lucky and a specific threat is averted. We all hope that bird flu never becomes a pandemic, but taking the time to develop a good response plan should improve on our current response to tornadoes and floods anyhow.

The same holds true at the micro level. Build a family plan now to deal with the violent storms that global warming will spawn and that same plan might save well lives if

the house catches fire. Moreover, the experience of building your personal plan will illuminate the things you need to know to hold our leaders accountable for crafting effective and reliable responses.

- **Expand your survival skill-set** – What a great time to learn first-aid or how to plant a vegetable garden. Do you know how to make pond water drinkable? Learning such skills now, at your leisure, will save you from trying to master them in an emergency. The best answers are those that enhance our lives, regardless of whether specific threats materialize.

Americans live in a cocoon of convenience. We get our water by turning on the faucet or it comes in plastic bottles (where do they go?). Our food either comes from restaurants or we buy it shrink-wrapped in grocery stores. What's that pain in your side? Those of us who still have health insurance are assured a full battery of high-tech tests until a team of specialists can find the cause.

But what will we do if all of that is ripped away? We rely on Google to provide us everything from a gourmet recipe to a support group for rare diseases. But what if you're on your own, with no Internet, and your child breaks a bone? What if oil jumps to \$200 a barrel and fuel shortages leave you in the cold? What if bird flu quarantines you in your home and your water is running out? (About running out of water, don't forget the water in your hot water tank and the tank in your toilet - now aren't you glad you know that?)

In an article by [Richard Florida in *The Atlantic*](#), we learn that more than half the people in the world now live in cities (compared to only 3% in 1800). This makes us more inter-dependent, at the same time it robs of a direct connection to nature and opportunities for self-sufficiency. Rising gasoline prices will likely drive even more commuters back into urban areas, where they will have fewer options such as growing their own food or cutting their own wood for heat. Cities are also places where diseases can spread faster.

At the same time, heading to the wilderness brings its own set of issues. Even those who are lucky enough to work from home are typically dependent on today's sophisticated, but vulnerable, communication networks.

The time for planning and learning, at both the policy and the personal level, is before the emergency hits. We need to think through how to cope with different scenarios, then invest in acquiring the skills we will need to survive, whether that means

learning how to can our own food or pressuring government to reinvest in our public health infrastructure.

- **Make informed, life-enhancing choices** – As citizens and as consumers, we have an obligation to educate ourselves about issues and options, so that we can make wise choices that support the worldview we believe in.

There are different ways to handle problems, as the partisan battles between conservatives and progressives demonstrate every day. Concerned about terrorists? We can wage wars to kill all the bad guys -- or you can invest in strategies to free us from our dependence on Middle Eastern oil.

You can also try to do both, but there are limits to the resources we can bring to bear. You cannot spend the same dollar twice.

Without becoming overly mystical, the reality is that we end up living in the world we create. Rely on force and you must expect blowback. On the other hand, just expecting everything to turn out all right is not a winning strategy. What we need to do now is invest this time in developing progressive long-term solutions based on the values we share.

Buy a dog today to scare away the burglar so that you don't have to shoot him tomorrow instead. The choice is ours and waiting only narrows our options.

- **Learn to live simply** – At the personal, family, community, national and global level, we must all learn to find meaning and enjoy living in ways that put less stress on each other and on the planet.

In [The Overworked American](#), Harvard professor Juliet Schor explains why we all feel so tired. Since the 1940s, U.S. productivity has doubled, yet we now work 320 hours (two months) more each year than our counterparts in countries like West Germany and France. According to Schor, we now own and consume twice as much as we did back in the 1940s. Are you twice as happy?

The dizzying pace of modern life is giving the whole planet a stress headache. As individuals and through our institutions, we need to restructure our priorities. The current standard of living enjoyed by those at the top is simply unsustainable. Over the years, the farmland around me has given way to rural estates, with the requisite Hummers and SUVs out front and the heated swimming pools and hot tubs out back. The new neighbor, a one-man band of global warming, revs up his gas-fired, noise-

polluting leaf blower every day to make sure that no speck of dirt or grass clipping dares rest on his driveway overnight.

When I see my neighbors jogging in their trendy, sweatshop-manufactured running shoes, I can't tell whether they are happy or not. The Botox injections and nip/tucks prevent them from expressing anything other than a frozen smile.

A step back from wretched excess need not be a bad thing.

- **Build community** – Our real strength lies in working together for positive change. From developing a neighborhood plan to building a global network on the Internet, the goal is to enlist like-minded people who can help promote progressive, proactive and positive solutions.

For many of us, new communities such as this one on the Internet are invaluable in allowing like-minded people to find each other. Send your like-minded friends [the link](#) now.

However, the challenges facing us today, from energy shortages to new diseases, also require working together face-to-face. Better decisions inevitably emerge from collaborations where people from different points of view and experience come together.

More than a decade ago, I spent 18 months working with a team to provide workshops on developing anti-violence strategies to more than 60 public housing developments nationwide, at a time when the homicide was rate so high that parents were putting their kids to bed in the bathtub at night, hoping that would stop the bullets. The community policing approach required that each housing development field a 10-person team, including at least two residents and one or more police professionals. The other slots were typically filled with schoolteachers, clergy, representatives from non-profit agencies and local officials.

Without fail, the plan each team put together reflected the composition of the group. A team with a schoolteacher had schools playing a major role. Put a hospital administrator into the mix and the hospital became a hub of new community activities (and hospitals were rarely if ever mentioned unless someone from that sector was on the team).

It's time to begin organizing a mutual support network in your neighborhood -- identifying skills, talents and resources that can be shared in emergencies. Check back often for ideas, advice and checklists than can help.

- **Educate others** – Many people fail to understand or accept the reality of the threats we face. Entrenched interests are fighting hard to protect the status quo. We must find ways to persuade others that the threats are real and that we can do something about them. Remember that evil flourishes when good men (and women) do nothing.

Frightened people make bad decisions – when we're scared, we react instead of taking the time to gather information and explore options. However, Americans have a history of failing to act unless there's a crisis and the bunker mentality offers an illusion of safety and control, while the best decisions depend on helping each other.

One of the bigger challenges that Progressive Survivalism faces is persuading people that thoughtful planning now is our best bet in avoiding the panic that often leads to draconian solutions later.

Many people find the prospect of facing these coming emergencies so frightening that it's easier to run from the reality. The good news is that people who experience the sense of mastery and empowerment that comes from tackling the problems can help recruit others to help.

- **Support enlightened leadership** – There are wise and caring individuals, academics, policymakers, legislators and advocates who “get it” and they deserve our support. This can mean donating to progressive organizations that do good work, or voting for politicians with fresh ideas, or standing up for people willing to take the heat for telling the truth.

The conservative strategy is first to deny the problem, while ridiculing anyone who backs up their analysis with scientific facts. Then, if all else fails and people demand answers, the right offers solutions that turn out to be little more than slick soundbites.

Real answers require dealing with complexity, recalibrating responses when ideas don't pan out and that's a hard sell.

Part of the answer lies in inventing a new approach to language to explain the problems and the solutions. Conservatives know how to package their ideas. When the estate tax becomes the death tax, they win. Selling the War in Iraq as "fighting the terrorist there so we don't have to fight them at home" is misleading but it works. Allowing global warming to be softened into climate change is a step backward, unless we define climate change as the choice between dying from fire or ice.

We also need to educate people that clinging to Morning in America slogans instead of doing the hard work of developing real solutions just wastes precious time. No more War on Poverty, War on Drugs, War on Terrorism. Save the planet while saving ourselves is a good slogan, but it must be backed up with hard work.

We need fresh ways to make our case in the marketplace of ideas. And we need to rally 'round those with the skill, charisma and knowledge to bring others along.

- **Savor today** - Our world is a lush and wondrous place. Nothing is forever, our own lives included, but savoring today will affirm the importance of taking positive action now to protect the planet's beauty and diversity.

Each day it seems we learn more bad news:

- The president of Iran warns that [oil will spike to \\$200 a barrel](#) if the U.N. passes sanctions that threaten his country's nuclear program.
- British Petroleum, [which promotes itself as the "green" oil company](#), was forced to shut down much of its Alaskan pipeline, because of corrosion caused by years of neglect.
- [The Economist](#) predicts that the global housing boom was a bubble whose burst will hurt the U.S. most of all.
- [A Penn state scientist](#) warns that global warming could deprive the oceans of oxygen, thereby endangering all aquatic plant and animal life.

The smart money, unfortunately, is on things getting worse before they get better. Chances are, the earth today will be a more inviting place than the earth tomorrow, at least until we get our act together.

The choice is stark - we either need to find ways to live without fouling our own nest or there must be far fewer of us. If one or the other does not transpire, human life on the planet may well end. It's hard not to give in to depression if not despair. But giving in to nihilism merely seals our doom.

There are glimmers of what a wiser and more caring community would look like, if we can learn our lessons quickly enough. Discovering how to do more with less could reinvigorate our culture, re-connecting us to nature and reminding us what really matters.

These eight principles are offered to frame the discussion that must start now. We must learn how to work together to save ourselves, our loved ones and (we hope) life on this planet. Thinking good thoughts is not enough. It will take a hard-headed, practical approach to the tough issues confronting us.

The toughest challenge of all may be to carry the day without losing our concern and our respect for each other and for all living things on the planet.

Bonnie Bucqueroux launched Sustainable Farmer in July 2008. For almost 20 years, Bucqueroux has taught at Michigan State University, working with police agencies and victim groups on how communities can prevent violence and on the role that the media can play in making us safer. Bucqueroux ran for Congress in 2000 on the Green Party ticket, on a platform that warned about the dangers of global warming. She hopes to spend future decades exploring ways to deal with these impending threats without compromising our progressive values.