

First Contact

BY EDWARD MCKEOWN

"Poor prior planning yields piss-poor performance," My Dad and probably a lot of other Dads as well

— EFM

"Mr. President," the chairman of the Joint Chiefs begins, "we have a first contact situation. Unbelievable though it seems, sir, an alien spacecraft of unknown power and intentions has landed at 1200 hours in the centerfield of the Charlotte motor speedway in North Carolina. The craft, which is the size of an aircraft carrier, has neither moved nor given any indication of its intentions since then."

You are the 44th president of the United States. It doesn't matter what party you came from but you have taken the reins of power with the usual issues of deficits, unemployment, racial and immigration tensions and the war on terrorism. You had plans for all these things; some might even work. But you never believed you'd be asked to deal with such a situation. Your cabinet, the joint chiefs and your press secretary are watching you intently. They are scared. The roof has been blown off the world.

You turn to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, a uniformed officer who greatly exceeded your own rank when you served as an infantry officer for operations in Grenada. This man has seen deadly combat for his country for decades.

"Do we have a plan for this, General?"

He looks you straight in the eye. "No, sir. If someone had suggested it yesterday, we'd have assigned him to the paper clip department in Kenosha. We are going to have to make this one up as we go."

"Crap."

"Yes, sir."

"Why in God's name would they land there? Why come down without establishing communication beforehand?"

"Hard to say sir," the CJCS says, "but it makes some sense. An unknown aircraft approaching DC or New York would be challenged, probably attacked, if it did not warn off. Charlotte has no such protocols, yet it's obviously a large city with substantial government assets. The speed-

way is a big open space able to take the ship. Even provides it some cover as it is out of direct fire, pardon me, direct line of sight, inside the arena. It's open and yet contained."

You ponder. What is the most important thing you have to do? What are the other objectives and in what order?

Answers come. One is the memory of an old movie starring Michael Rennie. A saucer lands in Washington, frightened people and National Guard reservists surround it. One fool of a tanker pops the alien with a .45, almost ending the world. Other movies show sinister government conspiracies to capture and dissect aliens and steal their technology. As if they hadn't possessed the ability to drop nuclear weapons or even accelerated asteroids through Earth's atmosphere in retribution.

"Mr. President," the chairman of the Joint Chiefs begins, "we have a first contact situation."

"At all costs," you begin slowly, "we must avoid conflict with these aliens. They have traveled here from interplanetary, if not interstellar distances, their technology is at least as far above ours as Columbus' was over the native Americans. Perhaps the disparity is even greater. Cultures are about to collide. One or both may be drastically changed. Conflict will likely be disastrous for us. The survival of the human species is, and must be, our first objective, determining all else.

"We have to hope their intentions are peaceful, until proven otherwise. If they are hostile, then a daylight landing in a civilian area is an odd way to open hostilities."

Your national science advisor, an eager and idealistic young woman says. "Sir, I don't believe we have to deal with military issues here. A people so advanced as to travel interstellar space must surely have advanced sociologically as well."

You stare at the well-meaning young woman and wonder if someone very like her was standing next to Montezuma when he met Cortez.

The general sitting next to her has his mouth drawn in a thin line. You can tell what he thinks of that idea but his natural inclinations must be watched too. He will see the situation as one of security and threat.

"The biggest danger right now," you say, "is panic and hysteria. Religious fanatics in the Muslim world are denouncing these new arrivals as devils. Some of our own people are on TV prophesying the end of the world. Other hysterics are demanding immediate attack or immediate surrender. One nut apparently tried to attack the nuclear power plant north of Charlotte thinking it was making the aliens mad. I don't want some crazed individual taking a shot at, or God forbid, crashing a plane into that ship and starting an interstellar war.

"Mr. Chairman, I want Charlotte and the counties surrounding it put under martial law. No air traffic other than government authorized in North Carolina, South Carolina or Tennessee. A total exclusion zone for fifty miles around the Charlotte Speedway. I want US Air Force interceptors patrolling that area immediately. They will have the same shoot-down authority as they have for White House airspace. *The aliens must be protected at all cost.*

"I want three concentric rings of security around the site. Within one mile of the craft I want everyone out but Delta Force, CIA SEALS and Air Force Special Forces and a team of scientists and diplomats. More on that later.

"Beyond one mile I want the best troops you have. They will be setting up a military control zone. We will need civilian labs and scientists as well as the press and other communications."

"I'll get the 82nd airborne and the Marine expeditionary force, moving sir." The CJCS says. "We've got all Federal troops in Charlotte moving into blocking positions already." He glances over his

shoulder and a colonel moves crisply out of the room.

"In the overall Charlotte area we will move in FBI, federal marshals, state and local police as well as military police to handle civilian control issues and keep the city running and quiet. We need to settle the area so scientists and politicians can do their work. This is a political situation"

"And if they are hostile?" an admiral asks.

"Our efforts must be directed at avoiding conflict, but," you finish grimly, "if conflict is inevitable then we must have plans for that. I am summoning to the underground Pentagon, representatives from the Security Council and the UN Secretary General. While I must remain in the White House to reassure the country, the Vice President will be leaving immediately to a secure location. We dare not risk a loss of command and control either by human actions, alien actions or simple mischance. Madam Vice President, please go now in Marine Two."

The vice president looks startled for a second, then climbs to her feet, immediately surrounded by her staff and Secret Service. "Yes, sir," she says. "God be with you, Mr. President." All her usual charming informality is gone. History is breathing down everyone's neck.

You turn to the Secretary of State. "John, I have work for you, too. You will head a triumvirate charged with handling this one on scene. You will have the chief science advisor at your elbow and the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. This is a political issue, John. I need to establish who these...people...are and what they want. I am sure we will be attaching a UN rep to your team eventually as well as other governments. For now, you will be the highest ranking government official that the aliens can meet face to face."

"Assuming they have faces," John says easily. A nervous laugh ripples around the room and you are reassured that you have the right person for the job.

"Before you go," you say, "brief the UN ambassador and any of the Security Council ambassadors that you can reach. Advise them that the US is going to go to Defcon Two. Advise that they do so as well but urge them, particularly the Russians and the Chinese, NOT to respond militarily to any landing. No one of us

should make this decision for the species alone or in haste. We are truly in this together as we have never been before in the history of the Earth."

"Yes, sir,"

You look at the CJCS. "In the meanwhile, General you need to provide me with options for attacks with everything from Special Forces immediately in the area up to and through strategic nuclear weapons."

The room is deadly quiet.

"The latter, ladies and gentleman, is classified ultimate secret. If word gets out of this room that we are planning for such an eventuality I will, as God is my witness, have the leaker arrested and punished to the ultimate extent. I am in deadly earnest about this. Deadly earnest. This is not politics as usual, this is not any other day."

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You turn next to the new director of FEMA and you hope to God that he is the improvement you thought he was when you appointed him. "Start making plans for an orderly voluntary evacuation of civilians from Charlotte. A lot will be fleeing anyway; let's control it. We may need to change it to mandatory evacuation at any point. Be prepared. Encourage any company that can transfer their operations and data out of the Charlotte area to do so. Ditto for government operations."

"Sir," the national science advisor says hesitantly. "Everything you are doing is reasonable, but in a human context. We are in a non-human context. We don't know what responses our moves will call from the aliens."

"I am aware of that," you reply, with a touch of impatience. "What alternatives do you have for me in perspective? Who thinks about these issues?"

The science advisor looks a bit sheepish. "Sir, xeno-sociology is only a word. We could bring in some historians who

have the perspective of vastly different cultures colliding. It's happened before."

You remember the books you've read about WWII in the Pacific when Western cultures fought Eastern and the savagery normal to warfare became even deeper and more barbaric because of racial and sociological overtones. Kamikaze, suicide boats, children taught to run at soldiers with bamboo spears, an enemy that would not surrender. Other episodes of imperial age combat come to mind, Zulus vs. British, Everyone against the Chinese Boxers, Cortez again. Yes, the historians may help, but no matter how different the culture it is human history.

"There's another group," your press secretary continues. "Science fiction writers."

On any other day this could have gotten him laughed out of the room. Not today.

"Go on," you say.

"Larry Niven wrote about a scenario like this in the book 'Footfall.' In the book the president even assembled a team of SF writers for that reason. They'd made up alien cultures, thought about how they might work. What might trigger fight or flight for them."

"Other names?" you prompt, nodding to the FBI director, whose aide is furiously working a computer. You're delighted that your press secretary is an SF fan.

"CJ Cherryh," The press secretary says. "She practically invented anthropological science fiction. Jerry Pournelle, Arthur C Clarke.... He rattles out more names unfamiliar to you."

"Get them," you say to the FBI director. "They'll probably be eager to help but get them regardless. Hire them, draft them, reactivate them, put them in black helicopters and threaten to drop them in the sea but get them all here as soon as possible." The FBI aide departs at a fast jog.

You look at the press secretary. "I am going to be before the American people and the people of the world almost hourly for the next few days. People have to feel that the government is working and that the situation is under control."

"Is it?" the press secretary asks.

"Hell, no," you reply. "Wish we had given this one some thought before today."

FIRST CONTACT IN FILM AND PRINT

This has been handled wonderfully as in Ray Bradbury's "It Came from Outer Space" and miserably as in an episode in the latest "Star Trek" when Captain Archer, informed that an alien ship was approaching, idly deferred the meeting of civilizations to a subordinate. After I finished howling abuse at the screen for the unpardonable sin of making first contact boring, I forswore any further involvement with the franchise. When we return to women in go-go boots armed with phasers, call me.

Carl Sagan and others testified that the technological achievement of crossing interstellar distance would be matched by a spiritual growth that would make conflict unlikely. He also believed there would be no practical military or economic way for war to be waged given the immense distances. While the vast reaches of interstellar space are immensely more challenging than the air or sea, it must be noted that we have fought in every medium we have ever encountered. Mankind is not simply a logical or economical creature, and indeed, wars among our species are far more often started for reasons of religion, race, and culture than through any cool, rational analysis of goods wagered and material and life lost. Hitler declared war on us not because he was obligated to do so (or felt any obligation to honor the Tripartite treaty) he was simply that contemptuous of American fighting ability and staying power. So while it will not be easy for first contact to occur, or for conflict to come from it, bad karma may find a way.

First Contact in SF usually means conflict, either by misadventure, or failure to communicate. In Larry Niven's brilliant "Footfall" we are attacked because the aliens evolved from herd animals, and assume that on the meeting of two herds there will be a battle and the loser will then become part of the herd. Their surrendered soldiers assume that they are part of the human herd now and work for us. They simply cannot understand why we won't become part of them. Biology has made their actions, nonsensical to us, imperative. With them it's attack first, talk later and there are no recriminations because we are all one big happy herd now.

Niven has given us plausible aliens

in a greater array and with more originality than any other writer (in my humble opinion), from Puppeteers, Slavers, Bandersnatch and Trinocs to Protectors. While First Contact was rarely the subject of his work, it was brilliantly handled when pacifistic humans met carnivorous aliens called the Kzinti, who evolved (or in his later work are revealed to have been tampered with) from something like a felinoid hunting animal. Niven didn't settle with making them big cats. He works out the psychology of creatures that see life as divided into predator and prey. A Kzinti will kill you for smiling at him; it would never occur to him to bare teeth in friendship. All his relationships are expressed in domination. Even more unusual, only the males of his species are sentient. It won't occur to him to chat up Madeline Albright.

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Niven and Pournelle create another alien culture in the "Mote in God's Eye" where creatures are so at the mercy of their biology that it determines their history and fate in a never-ending cycle of boom and bust. What we do with machines, they do with evolution. Woe to us if they ever get out of their home system.

In a lesser effort, "Independence Day," the aliens are xenophobic locusts and the attack is brought on because they are migratory, seeking resources, and other life forms are merely targets. It may be that they do not have a word for friend. Certainly the concept does not appear to exist outside their species. Hostility is immediate and without quarter. Similarly in the various versions of the HG Wells, "War of the Worlds" in book, audio and video and in the versions of Campbell's, "Who goes there?" a.k.a. the "The Thing" first contact merely means attack. We are too different to have anything in common but to act as a food source for the hostiles. Andre Norton often depicted such aliens, positing that some creatures would have such radically different ways of thinking and being that to merely consider them would drive humans mad, as in "Inherit the Stars."

Particularly upsetting is Ridley Scott's, "Alien." First contact with this creature consists of being raped then murdered as a food source for its young. It's unclear if the aliens are sapient though they, in the adult stages, exhibit degrees of intelligence. I think they were someone's bio-ordnance that got loose and I hope it ate their butt first.

CJ Cherryh, is one of the greatest sociological and anthropological creators of aliens. Her creatures THINK alien even if they usually look like us. There are the Iduve, for whom the words "help" and "hurt" mean essentially the same thing. They exist in a society somewhere between a wolf pack and feudal Japan. The Mri, absolutist aliens who are incapable of change and have thus remained culturally intact through uncounted ages. The Regul, ugly mercantile aliens who casually destroy and torment their young. The Atevi, who have no word for friend or love, only manichi, a complex web of obligation and social interactions that sometimes functions the same as love and friendship and sometimes leads humans into the dangerous gulf of alienness because it is neither of those emotions.

Cherryh deftly creates aliens who you can insult merely by existing or love, even while knowing that, while they will die for you (as in the case of Jago the Atevi bodyguard and Bren her human diplomat charge) they are incapable of loving you back.

Her catlike aliens are not as much fun as Larry Niven's Kzinti, but her depiction of a feline society is interesting. She deals with an alien society beyond the warrior stage, begging the question: Are there alien accountants, insurance adjusters, used car salesman? "In the Pride of Chanur," males battle for harems of hard-working, starship-running female traders. "Pride" has a double meaning in this title. First contact with humans sets the wheels in motion for one canny trader to remake her civilization when she decides she likes her male, doesn't understand why he should die and she should become chatel to some younger stud.

In terms of the awesome effect of First Contact, CJ probably takes the prize. No one else so clearly conveys the sociological effect of first contact. One society or both will be drastically and permanently remade.

SO HOW DO YOU PLAN FOR AN ALIEN INVASION?

It starts with making certain assumptions. There is no point in preparing for an overwhelming attack by an invincible enemy. If it happens, we'll wake up in heaven and maybe somebody will tell us what it was all about. Similarly we can't engage anyone in deep or midspace and even in near (orbital) space. Our prospects for doing anything significant to an enemy are minimal. If they want to "nuke us from orbit, since it's the only way to be sure," then we are toast.

We have to hope that whoever is coming wants the planet in relatively good condition, infrastructure and environment intact. In short, they are going to have to come down, get out of the ships, and engage us directly. This will play to the only strengths we will have in such a situation. We know this planet and we were specially made to live and fight here. Beyond that, we will have the numbers.

Here's where you can do some high-level conflict planning. Everything depends on the exchange ratios. You may divide these into high, medium and low. At the low level the alien's technology is only marginally better than ours. They either lucked into stardrive or it's the main area where the technology is better. This makes us competitive with them. Take an analogy that makes this simple. Swedish King Gustav Adolphus in 1631 won the battle of Breitenfeld (Thirty Years' War) with a force of 40,000 men using the weapons of the day which included matchlock-firing musketeers and cannon. If his force of 40,000 encountered a modern American infantry battalion of 1000, what would the result be? In essence the weapons of the 16th century Swedes are the same as the weapons of the 101st Airborne, gas-operated projectile weapons of various calibers firing bits of accelerated metal. What differs is the efficiency. If the doughty Swedes pressed home their attack, expecting annihilation of their homes and even of the species should they fail, they will cause casualties. If the rate is less than forty to one at the end of the day, the Swedes win. While the modern battalion's firepower gives casualties at fantastic rates undreamt of by Adolphus, that battalion takes them the same way as the Swedes do. Here's where numbers matter. A dead Swede is 1/40,000 of Adolphus

power. A dead modern trooper is 1/1000.

We see this in current warfare. The armies of the Third World crumble under the impact of New World or Old World modern armies. Iraq was the fourth largest Army in the world each time the US and its allies shredded it. But the Western armies suffer disproportionate disruption from casualties. Though the casualties are almost never militarily significant in themselves, they are demoralizing. Western troops are far from home and attrition by low tech ambushes is more of a danger than the enemy's best troops. In addition, they are surrounded by unfriendly and uncooperative natives, who see them as aliens and will help the insurgents. Send 100 men down a road, they find nothing. Send five men, they don't come back.

If it takes twenty-two "first line" fighter aircraft, or forty attack helicopters, to drop one Martian fighting machine, then the war-planner knows his needs. Submarines won't do us any good, so don't build them. Airfields will be too vulnerable to an enemy that holds the high ground of near orbit, so VTOL fighters will be more valuable. These calculations can be made now with the assumption of a low level of technological disparity.

One area that the planner will have to consider is quislings and "peace at any price." The higher the toll for humanity, the more humans there will be, who for reasons of expediency, belief or practical desire to survive, will aid and abet the enemy. Some will hope to gain power and privilege in what they see as the inevitable alien victory. Some will worship aliens for religious and sociological reasons. Others will cooperate because the outside of the concentration camp looks better than the inside. Better to be the overseer than the field hand. Sometimes when we meet the enemy he will be us. Anticipate it and be ready to deal with it effectively. You can guess what that means.

On a larger grand strategic scale if it takes us 100,000,000 human casualties to extinguish an alien invasion force of 1,000,000 that leaves only about 4,900,000,000 to carry on. We won't like it and the planet won't be much fun for a while but we will still hold title to it.

On a medium level, their technology is substantially better than ours and the practical effect is that our current

military is useless. Then we are reduced to developing new technology; as in "Earth versus the Flying Saucers" with sonic disruptors, or chemical and biological effects or weapons such as did for H.G Wells' Martians, or finally, there is always the wonderful option of nuking ourselves and them. It is hard to imagine that any level of technology or metallurgy will provide protections against a ten-megaton bomb. If deflector screens are a reality...well, ouch.

Then there is the high level. Frankly we just lose. The only way we can affect the aliens then is follow the tactics of insurgents. "Hang on their belt buckle," be too close to them for their superior weapons to be used effectively. In this scenario we may have to decide between going out in a blaze of glory, where we all meet at Fiddler's Green for a few brews at the Valhalla bar, or living on our knees in the hope that eventually something brings down our occupiers. Maybe we get their technology. Maybe as in John Christopher's Tripod books, the other side gets old and sloppy. Perhaps out in the deeps of space our enemies have enemies who will be our friends. Or perhaps as in Brian Aldiss' "Bow Down to Null" all we are capable of is inconsequential acts of defiance that keep our hope alive for another day.

I approached the Department of Defense to ask if there were such plans for possible alien incursions. I assume that there are at least theoretical plans in the Pentagon for conflict with every nation that exists. Perhaps that is an incorrect assumption but I would like to think that if the Belgians wake up cranky tomorrow, there is a plan to deal with that. I have not received a reply as yet. On the other hand there's been this black suburban parked on my block all this week...;-) ■

