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Science Fiction

Michael Crichton takes a novel approach to global-warming alarmism.

By Iain Murray

Michael Crichton's new blockbuster novel, *State of Fear*, begins with sex, violence, and oceanography. It's that sort of book all the way through, mixing the usual adventure novel clichés of beautiful young heroes, indestructible secret agents, and a plot to kill millions alongside hard science, including graphs, footnotes, and words like "aminostratigraphy." As such, the book is half a rip-roaring roller coaster of a read (as Edmund Blackadder would put it) and half didactic tract. It is a testament to Crichton's skill as a novelist that he pulls it off. This is definitely one for the Christmas list.

The adventure centers on a conspiracy to accentuate natural disasters in order to keep the developed world in the state of fear of the title. One particular environmental charity stands to benefit most from this state, and the main plot device is the dawning realization by an idealistic young lawyer named Peter Evans that the cause he believed in for so long is rotten to the core. His Virgil as he wanders through hell to achieve salvation is an almost superhuman character, John Kenner, who is a strange blend of academic physicist, Jack Ryan, James Bond, and, erm, John Graham, real-life director of the Office of Management and Budget (I said it was strange — in a former job, Graham was director of the Harvard Center for Risk Analysis, and Kenner directs a similar organization at MIT).

Together, and with the help of the usual beautiful-but-tough woman and a tech-savvy Gurkha, they are placed in danger in the wilds of Antarctica, a state park in Arizona, and in a cannibal-infested jungle in the Solomon Islands. They face blizzards, bullets, lightning, poisonous octopuses and insufferable Hollywood celebrities. There is no peril so great that Evans and his friends do not face it. Their adventures unfold at a breakneck pace that keeps you turning the page, and it is in the brief downtimes between these escapades that Crichton expounds his scientific case.

This didacticism is directed primarily at global-warming alarmism, which Crichton thinks is overblown (he goes over the case in an appendix). Yet Crichton does not, as some have alleged, criticize the science underlying global-warming alarmism. In fact, he argues from it; as well he should — science is what it is. Instead, it is the use to which the science is put that Crichton argues against most forcefully. The science, by itself, does not argue that the world must take certain actions now. Science can never be prescriptive. All it can do is raise issues for the world's attention. It is politics and economics that then decide what to do about them. People who argue that the science says we must do something are being disingenuous about their true motives. If those people are also scientists, then they are abusing science. This is a tremendously important point.

If there is one scientific exercise Crichton does criticize, it is the use of global-climate models. These models are the basis of the alarming estimates of future temperature rise, yet at their very base they are only partly scientific. Models are a hybrid of science and economics. If science says that a rise in atmospheric greenhouse-gas concentrations will have certain effects on climate, then it can tell us nothing about the future until economic projections of energy use are fed into it. A scientific model without good economic input is useless, and we have been aware for quite some time that the economic scenarios used by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change are seriously deficient. It is a shame that Crichton makes one of his few factual slips when he says that NASA's James Hansen overestimated future emissions when he brought the global-warming issue to the world's attention before Congress in 1988. In fact, Hansen had a range of scenarios, and actual emissions have followed the lower trajectory quite well (and Hansen has updated his projections, now estimating a very small temperature rise by 2050 of around 0.5°C.) Crichton would have done better to take aim at the IPCC here.

Yet, more widely, the novel raises stinging criticisms of the way the environmental movement conducts itself. Its mutual infatuation with Hollywood, its preoccupation with litigation, and, above all, its preoccupation with obtaining more money so as to continue its privileged existence are all writ large in the text. One of the chief villains, a lawyer turned green-group director, regularly rages about the difficulties he has fundraising. His main problem, he rants, is that global warming is not the immediate threat that pollution was in the 70s. It is therefore harder to get people to give money to combat it, something that can be solved if people come to believe that the climate is changing now. These are, of course, tactics the real-life environmental movement has embraced, arguing, for instance, that the recent hurricane season was exacerbated by global warming rather than being sheer bad luck. During one of his rants, that character also, delightfully, called my organization, the Competitive Enterprise Institute, "Neanderthals." This was tremendously gratifying.

In the conclusion of the novel (which seems as if it is ready for a sequel — there are a surprising number of loose ends not tied up), Crichton has a former alarmist conclude that there are serious things wrong with the environmental movement:

Face the facts, all these environmental organizations are thirty, forty, fifty years old. They have big buildings, big obligations, big staffs. They may trade on their youthful dreams, but the truth is, they're now part of the establishment. And the establishment works to preserve the status quo. It just does.

(Interestingly, these comments echo those made by some committed alarmists recently in an essay entitled, *The Death of Environmentalism*.) If Jefferson was right about continual revolution being a good thing, then the environmental movement would do well to take heed.

He also has some very interesting suggestions for getting politics out of science by making the researchers more distant from their funders, to the point of blinding them to the source. As Crichton implies, this would strengthen the science against accusations that it is done to benefit the funders, whether they be industry, government, or activist group. This is something that requires serious attention from science itself.

Doubtless much of this scholarly discussion will be removed when the inevitable movie is made,

but the exhilarating plot should still make it a success (and it will be streets ahead of the scientifically bereft turkey *The Day After Tomorrow*).

Me, I'm waiting for the video game.

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