


[Join Salon.com today](#) | [Help](#)
[Benefits of membership](#)


salon.com

Site Pass

SITE PRESENTED BY [open salon](#)

Go!

 Salon

 The Web

powered by

YAHOO! SEARCH

[A&E](#) [Books](#) [Comics](#) [Environment & Science](#) [Life](#) [Movies](#) [News & Politics](#) [Opinion](#) [Open Salon](#) [Tech & Business](#)

CURRENT NEWS & POLITICS

Can Republicans come back from their "thumpin'?" Three conservatives plot the future of the GOP, and handicap the chances of Sarah Palin and other 2012 contenders.

By Thomas Schaller

Awaiting Obama's top lieutenants Will it be Chuck Hagel, or even Hillary Clinton, for secretary of state? Will Bob Gates stay at the Pentagon? Obama's national security team remains mostly top secret.

By Walter Shapiro

Obama's plans for probing Bush torture President Bush could pardon officials involved in brutal interrogations -- but he may also face a sweeping investigation under the new president.

By Mark Benjamin

A permanent Democratic majority? Hispanic voters played a pivotal role in this election. If current trends continue, they may turn other parts of the country as blue as they just turned New Mexico.

By Alex Koppelman

TABLE TALK

What will McCain do now?

How can we get the economy back on track?

SALON DAILY NEWSLETTER

Get Salon in your mailbox!

SIGN ME UP

America's water war

Pages 1 2 3

[Share](#) | [Print](#) | [RSS](#) | Font: [S](#) / [S+](#) / [S++](#)

Let's face it, with water, you're down to the basics. And if, as some say, we've passed the point not of "peak oil," but of "peak water" (and cheap water) on significant parts of the planet ... well, what then?

I mean, I'm hardly an expert on this, but what exactly are we talking about here? Someday in the reasonably near future could Atlanta, or Phoenix, which in winter 2005-06, went 143 days without a bit of rain, or Las Vegas become a Katrina minus the storm? Are we talking here about a new trail of tears? What exactly would happen to the poor of Atlanta? To Atlanta itself?

Certainly, you've seen the articles about what global warming might do in the future to fragile or low-lying areas of the world. Such pieces usually mention the possibility of enormous migrations of the poor and desperate. But we don't usually think about that in the "homeland." Maybe we should.

Or maybe, for all I know, if the drought continues, parts of the region will burn to a frizzle first, à la parts of Southern California, before they can even experience the complete loss of water? Will we have hundred-year fire records in the South, without a Santa Ana wind in sight? And what then?

OK, excuse a terrible, even tasteless, sports analogy, but think of this as a major bowl game, and they've sent one of the water boys -- me -- to man the press booth. I mean, please. Why am I the one asking this? Where's the media's first team?

In my own admittedly limited search of the mainstream, I found only one vivid, thoughtful recent piece on this subject: "The Future Is Drying Up," by Jon Gertner, written for the [New York Times Magazine](#). It focused on the southwestern drought and began to explore some of the "and thens," as in this brief passage on Colorado in which Gertner quotes Roger Pulwarty, a "highly regarded climatologist" at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration: "The worst outcome ... would be mass migrations out of the region, along with bitter interstate court battles over the dwindling water supplies. But well before that, if too much water is siphoned from agriculture, farm towns and ranch towns will wither. Meanwhile, Colorado's largest industry, tourism, might collapse if river flows became a trickle during summertime."

Mass migrations, exfiltrations ... Stop a sec and take in that possibility and what exactly it might mean. After all, we do have some small idea, having, in recent years, lost one American city, New Orleans, at least temporarily.

Or consider another "and then" prediction: What if the prolonged drought in the Southwest turns out, as Mike Davis wrote in the Nation magazine, to be "on the scale of the medieval catastrophes that contributed to the notorious collapse of the complex Anasazi societies at Chaco Canyon and Mesa Verde during the twelfth century"?

What if, indeed.

I'm not simply being apocalyptic here. I'm just asking. It's not even that I expect answers. I'd just like to see a crew of folks with the necessary skills explore the "and then" question for the rest of us. Try to connect a few dots, or tell us if they don't connect, or just explain where the dots really are.

OK, since I'm griping on the subject, let me toss in another complaint. As this piece has indicated, the Southeastern drought, unlike the famed cheese of childhood song, does not exactly stand alone. Such conditions, often involving record or near record temperatures, and record or near record wildfires, can be observed at numerous places across the planet. So why is it that, except at relatively obscure Web sites, you can hardly find a mainstream piece that mentions more than one drought at a time?

Save up to 75% on Last-Minute Cruises



Click here for a complete list of deeply-discounted cruises departing in the next 90 days.

VACATIONS ToGo.com

An honorable exception would be a recent [Seattle Times](#) column by Neal Peirce that brought together the Southwestern and Southeastern droughts, as well as the Western "flame zone," where "mega-fires" are increasingly the norm, in the context of global warming, in order to consider our seemingly willful "myopia about the future."

But you'd be hard-pressed to find many pieces in our major newspapers (or on the TV news) that put all (or even a number) of the extreme drought spots on the global map together in order to ask a simple question (even if its answer may prove complex indeed): Do they have anything in common? And if so, what? And if so, what then?

To find even tentative answers to such questions you have to leave the mainstream. Amy Goodman of Democracy Now!, for example, interviewed paleontologist and author of "The Weather Makers: The History and Future Impact of Climate Change" Tim Flannery recently on the topic of a "world on fire." Flannery offered the following observation:

"It's not just the Southeast of the United States. Europe has had its great droughts and water shortages. Australia is in the grip of a drought that's almost unbelievable in its ferocity. Again, this is a global picture. We're just getting much less usable water than we did a decade or two or three decades ago. It's a sort of thing again that the climate models are predicting. In terms of the floods, again we see the same thing. You know, a warmer atmosphere is just a more energetic atmosphere. So if you ask me about a single flood event or a single fire event, it's really hard to make the connection, but take the bigger picture and you can see very clearly what's happening."

I know answers to the "and then" question are not easy or necessarily simple. But if drought -- or call it "desertification" -- becomes more widespread, more common in heavily populated parts of the globe already bursting at the seams (and with more people arriving daily), if whole regions no longer have the necessary water, how many trails of tears, how many of those mass migrations or civilizational collapses are possible? How much burning and suffering and misery are we likely to experience? And what then?

These are questions I can't answer; that the Bush administration is guaranteed to be desperately unwilling and unprepared to face; and that, as yet, the media has largely refused to consider in a serious way. And if the media can't face this and begin to connect some dots, why shouldn't Americans be in denial, too?

It's not that no one is thinking about, or doing work on, drought. I know that scientists have been asking the "and then" questions (or perhaps far more relevant ones that I can't even formulate); that somewhere people have been exploring, studying, writing about them. But how am I to find out?

Of course, all of us can wander the Internet; we can visit the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which has just set up a [new Web site](#) to help encourage drought coverage; we can drop in at blogs like RealClimate.org and ClimateProgress.org, which make a habit of keeping up with, or ahead of, such stories; or even, for instance, the [Georgia Drought Web site](#) of the University of Georgia's College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences; or we can keep an eye on a new organization of journalists (well covered recently on the NPR show "On the Media"), [Circle of Blue](#), who are planning to concentrate on water issues. But, believe me, even when you get to some of these sites, you may find yourself in an unknown landscape with no obvious water holes in view and no guides to lead you there.

In the meantime, there may be no trail of tears out of Atlanta; there may even be rain in the city's near future for all any of us know; but it's clear enough that, globally and possibly nationally, tragedy awaits. It's time to call in the first team to ask some questions.

Honestly, I don't demand answers. Just a little investigation, some thought, and a glimpse or two over that precipice as the world turns ... and bakes and burns.

This piece originally appeared on [TomDispatch.com](#).

Pages [1](#) [2](#) [3](#)

[Share](#) | [Print](#) | [RSS](#) | [Font: S / S+ / S++](#)

[Read all letters on this article \(162\)](#)

[Read Editor's Choice letters on this article \(3\)](#)

About the writer

Tom Engelhardt runs the Nation Institute's Tomdispatch.com. He is the co-founder of the American Empire Project and the author of "The End of Victory Culture, a History of American Triumphalism in the Cold War." His novel, "The Last Days of Publishing," has just come out in paperback.

Ads by Google

1 flat stomach rule: obey

I cut out 2 lbs of stomach fat per week by obeying this 1 old rule.
AnnasDietingBlog.com

Intelligent Online Dating

Post a profile, browse and search. Video, photos, blog and more. Free!
www.brainiacdating.com

New Duracell® DAYLITE™

It's the Dawn of a New Flashlight. Turn Night Into Day. Get Info!
www.Duracell.com/daylite

Story finder (3 ways to search Salon)

powered by YAHOO! SEARCH

 Salon the Web

A list of all published articles organized by month and year:

[Salon Directory](#) (browse by topic)

[Salon](#) | [About Salon](#) | [Contact & Help](#) | [Corrections](#) | [Advertise in Salon](#) | [Salon Personals](#) | [Salon Jobs](#) | [Salon Mobile](#) | [Salon Newsletter](#) | [RSS Feeds](#)

Salon Premium: [Premium log in](#) | [What is Salon Premium?](#)

[A & E](#) | [Books](#) | [Comics](#) | [Community: Table Talk & The WELL](#) | [Life](#) | [News & Politics](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Sports](#) | [Tech & Business](#) | [Letters](#)

[Investor Relations](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#)

Copyright ©2008 Salon Media Group, Inc. Reproduction of material from any Salon pages without written permission is strictly prohibited. SALON® is registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office as a trademark of Salon Media Group Inc.