

STEWART BRAND INTERVIEW

What was Bucky Fuller's reaction to your button campaign that asked, "Why haven't we seen an image of the whole earth yet?"

It was all because of LSD, see. I took some lysergic acid diethylamide on an otherwise boring afternoon and came to the notion that seeing an image of the Earth from space would change a lot of things. So, on next to no budget, I printed up buttons and posters and sold them on street corners at the University of California, Berkeley. I went to Stanford and back east to Columbia, Harvard, and MIT. I also mailed the materials to various people: Marshall McLuhan, Buckminster Fuller, senators, members of the U.S. and Soviet space programs. Out of everyone, I only heard back from Bucky Fuller, who wrote, "Dear boy, it's a charming notion but you must realize you can never see more than half the earth from any particular point in space." I was amused, and then met him a few months later at a seminar at Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California. I sat across from his lunch table and pushed the button over to him, asking him what he thought about it. He said, "Oh yes, I wrote to that guy." I said, "I'm the guy. So what do you think? What kind of difference do you think it will make when we actually get photographs of the earth from space?" There was this slow, lovely silence. Then he said, "Dear boy, how can I help you?"

Why was this image so powerful?

It was motivating for a lot of people, I think, because it gave the sense that Earth's an island, surrounded by a lot of inhospitable space. And it's so graphic, this little blue, white, green and brown jewel-like icon amongst a quite featureless black vacuum. Islands know about limitations. Bucky led me to this notion. He said people still think the

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earth is flat because they act as if its resources are infinite. But that photograph showed otherwise. Unless and until we find other flourishing planets, this is all we've got and we've got to make it work. There's no back up.

What would the iconic image be now?

I grew up with the image of the mushroom cloud, which was the first image seen as potential planetary Armageddon – one great big nuclear exchange, and there we would all be. We cowered in the shadow of that for 20, 25 years. It was thoroughly supplanted two years later by the image of Earth from space, and I have a feeling there's still a lot of changes to ring on that. I'm a little sorry that Al Gore's idea of putting up a satellite whose job it was to keep that photograph absolutely daily fresh hasn't come to realization because it's the sort of thing that would make it a little more here and now than the still photograph. As far as a new icon, the Long Now Foundation is trying to add one with a clock you can visit in the limestone cliffs of eastern Nevada and look at pictures of, which very plausibly would go on for 10,000 years.

Is this a strategic response to our bumper sticker culture?

Yes. When things are moving faster in a civilization, one of the things you can do to keep balance is look out for the slow things being tended to well. Attention tends to move toward things that move quickly, you see. We pay attention to the daily paper, to the next election or to the next financial report. That's great. You're supposed to do that. But if it takes up 100% of your attention you will lose things like training the children and having decent universities and tending to the preservation of culture. The Clock of the Long Now will be a peephole of predictability through a deeply unpredictable series of events that will come at us in the future.

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What do you think, Stewart? Will we see the end of war?

Stephen LeBlanc's book *Constant Battles* talks about our routine organized conflict, driven by there not being enough to eat. Whenever we exceed carrying capacity, we fight over scraps. It's the absolute norm for humanity. Occasionally, we would bump the carrying capacity up by inventing agriculture or invading a continent with new tools but very quickly we'd rise back up to carrying capacity and then get back to the same old dilemma: do you starve or steal? The obvious answer is stealing, and that usually involves fighting. And on you go.

This relates to what E.O. Wilson has written about in a beautiful book called *The Future of Life*. He predicts we'll bump up against carrying capacity issues very soon, sometimes locally, sometimes in very large regions. Even now you see it with Rwanda with its dense population, degraded natural environment, pillaging, raiding, stealing, killing.

LeBlanc does say at the end, "Look, for the last three or four hundred years warfare has become more organized but the actual lethality has gone down drastically. It used to be that 25% of all young men would die in a war – and you'd get that until quite recently in Papua, New Guinea and various places where the old forms of warfare hold. But one advantage of state warfare is that it, like agriculture, gets industrialized. On the one hand, it's terrible that more civilians get killed. On the other side, fewer people are actually dying as a result of combat. But that trend could reverse. And we're seeing potential for that.

I know the Global Business Network does some work with the Pentagon.

What about the possibility of a long peace?

I love working with the Pentagon because they're the only entity I know that is completely eager to think in half-century terms. And there are several reasons for that.

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They're not a commercial entity so they're not worried about the next quarter. They're not a democratic entity so they're not worried about the next election. There really is a socialist economy in the military, and the people that you encounter at the senior levels are extremely bright. They've come up in a very tough meritocratic pyramid, and are trained throughout their lives to think globally.

What sort of scenario planning do you do with them?

One of the scenarios that developed in the course of our work with the Pentagon was what we refer to as a rogue superpower. We were looking at the various threats from rogue states and one of us said, "Let's see. What if you combined a lone superpower? What about rogue states? What if they're one and the same?" The answer is a rogue superpower! So we looked at this at great length and, lo and behold, in 2001 we received a call from a friend in the Pentagon. He said, "I think we've gotten to the rogue superpower scenario."

What were your thoughts on 9/11?

We were thinking that it was sort of right on schedule. It was horrifying for a lot of people who had been working both in the Clinton Administration and in Congress on the terrorism environment because we were saying for some time, "Look, the U.S. is not invulnerable in this." So a lot of us just groaned because we had already thought about it.

It's hard to stay optimistic sometimes.

The balance I find most pleasant to live with, and also useful in the world, is to be personally optimistic and globally pessimistic – in the sense of not becoming cynical but becoming focused on how things can go wrong and what we can do to fix them. By and

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large, I think there are plenty of reasons for optimism. Things have been getting better. So you can build on that. I would not want to live in even Rome at its height. Television's much better than it was in the Roman days!

Do you believe the current technologies are moving us in the direction of greater equity?

In aggregate, yes. Kevin Kelly likes to say that we take three steps forward and two steps back, but the net is that we've taken a step forward. The way Bill Clinton puts it is, "We're moving along and a lot of times we stumble and fall and back up and all that stuff. But as long as we're stumbling in the right direction, we're probably doing alright."

Stewart Brand is founder of the Whole Earth Catalog and cofounder of The Long Now Foundation, The WELL, and Global Business Network.