

# Goliath

It's all about timing.

**Bruce W. Ferguson**

The Spacegard XP survey overlooked Goliath because there was nothing to fear until a dead comet caromed off a nickel-iron buckle in the asteroid belt. A 20-kilometre fragment tumbled crazily on its new trajectory.

Ashen-faced astronomers announced the dinosaur-killer would create a new ocean basin in the Sahel. Time to impact: 1,001 nights. By Cope's rule nothing on Earth larger than a gerbil would survive, and even the gerbils would have to draw lots.

Global response was swift. "We shall mobilize every resource to overcome this dire threat," declared the US president. "Immediately," agreed the UN secretary-general. "Dinosaurs are a Darwinist myth," added a watchdog group in Kent.

To ensure human survival, Goliath had to be diverted and Earth fortified. For the first time in Earth's history, the vast planetary resources of an advanced technological society united in a single mission other than winning the World Cup.

On Day 5, the UN announced an intercept plan. Aerospace contractors would cluster the world's ICBMs into larger rockets. Dozens of new launch sites would be built around the world. Hundreds of nuclear bombs would be launched. Stand-off detonation would spall Goliath's surface, blasting relativistic ions off one side of the monster to nudge it the other way.

Time was of the essence. Governments quickly awarded massive sole-source contracts. After a few months, the initial funding rush slowed as bills were introduced in Congress to increase union labour content. The European Union debated member-state budget allocations. Contracts were negotiated more carefully, then renegotiated. Machine parts sat for weeks on a West African dock until a quiet payment was made to the Premier's uncle.

The Martha's Vineyard Beautification Committee picketed the construction of rocket platforms off the Massachusetts coast, claiming the launch platforms were even uglier than windmills. By Day 200 approximately 30,612 environmental impact statements had been filed. Rocket construction slowed further.

Abrupt, overjoyed relief! New Zealand researchers calculated Goliath would miss Earth by a whisker. They proposed a follow-on grant to make absolutely sure. In Pasadena, Carnegie Observatories

noted hesitantly that the New Zealand model reversed the sign of gravitational acceleration, thereby assuming Earth and Goliath would repel each other. Spinning a globe, a Fox News commentator pointed out that although gravity in the Northern Hemisphere held things down, in New Zealand it held things up. Galvanized, the US House of Representatives swiftly passed a bill funding the New Zealand proposal and imposing a 90% tax rate on Carnegie scientists.

Whispers grew that the intercept plan was fatally flawed. On Day 337 the world's greatest orbital dynamicist, a 50-year-old cigar smoker named Enrico who headed the UN's Intercept Task Force, scowled in fierce concentration as he walked slowly down Rome's Via Veneto. Suddenly his face brightened. "Eureka!" he exulted, striding directly into the path of a hurtling pasta truck.

Noting the projected impact point, a television evangelist claimed divine retribution for the sins of Africa. "It's an African problem," he boomed. "Let the Africans fix it." Viewers barraged Congress with demands to halt funding for planetary defence.

Hamas stole an interceptor rocket and launched it sans warhead at Tel Aviv, killing 12 people. Twenty-seven minutes later AIPAC objected to installation of the rockets anywhere in the Middle East except Israel. The intercept programme slowed for five weeks to qualify alternative launch sites.

China announced the execution of ten corporate chieftains who had profited in rice, soya beans, petroleum and pirated movies. Tunnel-pocked Superfund sites sold at higher prices than Tokyo office lots. Desperate homeowners screamed and tussled to claim the best spots in abandoned mines. "Fraternité," pleaded the French president. The French parliament approved construction of a Riviera refuge for the president and his wife. A furore erupted following disclosure of the cost of the refuge's wardrobe closets and vanity mirrors.

Deep in the tropical forest 600 kilometres northeast of Kinshasa, a female bonobo named Lucy pouted her lips at her companion and scratched at a flea bite. Like most other organisms on the planet, *Pan paniscus* Lucy rarely made plans extending beyond her next meal or liaison. If she had



been capable of understanding this statement and of formulating her response in sentence form, she would have demanded: "So what's your problem?"

Tests of a revolutionary technology showed promise. Money, people and equipment cascaded into crash development of a quantum resonance projector that would zap Goliath into a cloud of dust. On Day 769 this project, too, stopped dead. A patent troll had challenged the project IP. There'd been an errant MTA, or perhaps failure to file a CIP. Did the project have FTO? The US president suspended the dispute on the grounds of national security. After a delay of only six weeks the project resumed, though regrettably the weapon could no longer be ready before impact.

Day 824. In the spaceship at L5 a soft chime sounded the Point of Inevitability. Probability of imminent extinction of most Earth species now exceeded nine sigma. Preparing to depart the post they had held since the Trinity fission test, the two observers emitted soft bursts of methane from frustration and dyspepsia.

<\* Confirm sequencing of Earth's gaiatype, ditto on-board storage of keystone biota breeding stock. \*>

[+ Confirmed. I'll place the adverts. Maybe someone will give them a new home. +]

<\* I hope so. I hate it when they have to be put down. You know, this job is stressing me out. I don't think I can stand to watch yet another intelligent species persuade itself of its mysterious immunity to natural selection. \*>

[+ There you go again, attacking my religion. I wish you'd stop that. +]

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