



February 27,  
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Original Report



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## The Time Is Now

Some Argue We Should Worry About Incoming Asteroids

By Lee Dye  
Special to ABCNEWS.com

**Feb. 27** — Long ago David Morrison grew tired of the snickers he has heard for these many years. Despite the fact that he is a senior scientist with the NASA, some people regard him as a bit of a nut.

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LEE DYE



DYE HARD SCIENCE

He's a prophet of doom in a three-piece suit.

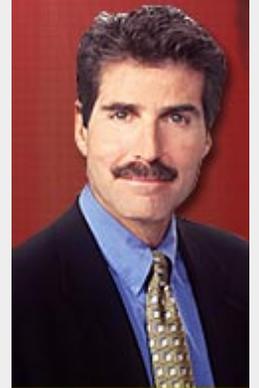
Morrison has been shouting into the wind for a couple of decades now about a very real threat that many prefer to dismiss. He believes an asteroid or a comet may be headed our way and could smash into the Earth with catastrophic consequences, maybe even wiping out all life.

Yup, you've heard that so many times now that you want to chuckle. It's *Star Wars* stuff. And besides, there's probably little we can do about it anyway, so why waste time worrying?

'Lesser' Asteroids Also Pose Threats

But in the years since he first began to boldly proclaim that we need to take this threat seriously, Morrison has picked up support, and not just

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from astronomers who are cataloguing celestial bodies that we need to monitor closely. A small number of experts in various fields are joining the struggle, convinced that we shouldn't give up the battle before the fight is joined.

One of them is Lee Clarke, associate professor of sociology at Rutgers University and a specialist in disaster preparations. Clarke makes a point that is too often ignored.

We are focusing too much, Clarke maintains, on the "doomsday scenario." It would only take one of the approximately 700,000 mega-asteroids that are whipping around our solar system to wipe out all life on Earth. If one of them hits us, we're toast, and that is so unthinkable that it has turned many off to Morrison's lament.

Clarke calls that a "low-probability, high-consequence event," and it may not happen for thousands, or millions, of years. If at all.

What is far more likely, Clarke and others maintain, is a collision with a lesser asteroid or a comet that may not be a "planet killer," as he puts it, but quite capable of creating catastrophic results.

"That's a near-certain event with a range of consequences," he says, noting that a relatively small object, less than 200 feet in diameter, leveled trees over a 25-mile area in the Tunguska region of Siberia in 1908.

"These things are rare, but over the long haul they are almost certain to happen," Clarke says. "That was big enough that if it hit any major metropolitan area we would have an unprecedented calamity on our hands. To not think about it, or not talk about it, just because it's got that *Star Wars* kind of patina, is a mistake."

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But what really bothers Clarke is that he doesn't hear many people talking about it. He thinks that's partly because of a misconception. Political leaders seem to think that a catastrophic collision would cause such panic in the streets that no amount of planning would be of any help.

Clarke says that's nonsense.

People don't panic during a disaster, he says. Instead, they help each other. Way down deep, he says, our society is a civil one, and it doesn't go away just because life around us is falling apart.

"Most of us would not rip off our neighbors, or even a stranger, even if we knew we would not get caught," Clarke says. "That's heightened during a time of disaster."

And it is particularly true when people see themselves as facing a common threat.

"They will bind together to fight that threat," he says.

And in the end, it is the people themselves who must rise to the occasion. Clarke points out that the "first responders" in any disaster aren't police or firefighters. They are the "people in the street," he says, who pull their fellow citizens from an earthquake-damaged building, or a crashed airliner.

Government Secrecy?

So mitigating a major disaster like an asteroid collision will depend primarily on how well the people themselves are prepared. They are the ones, for example, who will have to help their fellow citizens evacuate a major metropolitan area if the asteroid is headed that way. There won't be enough cops to do the job.

But nobody can do that without adequate preparation, and the consequences of failure could be the loss of thousands of lives that could have been saved.

My guess is most people figure that scientists will come up with a plan to divert the asteroid before it hits the Earth. Some have suggested that small rockets placed on the asteroid could push it toward a different course. Others

have indicated that even painting one side of the big rock could cause the solar wind to push it into a safe trajectory. Of how about a giant solar sail to pull it out of harm's way?

But that all depends on how much time we have, and whether we have the technological resources to do it.

Unfortunately, we're not anywhere close to dealing with the threat. We don't even know how to talk about it.

During the recent convention of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Denver, one expert set off a firestorm when he suggested that government secrecy might be the best alternative.

Geoffrey Sommer of the Rand Corp., a think tank in Santa Monica, Calif., that advises the federal government on many issues, told a press conference that if a planet killer is headed our way, maybe the feds ought to just keep their mouths shut.

"If an extinction-type impact is inevitable, then ignorance for the populace is bliss," Sommer said.

His comments angered so many people that he has since decided to decline all interviews on the subject, according to a Rand spokesman.

### Sensitive Politicians

Sommer's plight is worth noting because it reveals just how contentious this issue can be. It also shows that it will take a bold leader to move the matter forward.

Clarke, for one, isn't optimistic that's going to happen anytime soon.

"It's hard to see which politicians are going to step up to the plate," he says. "They'll be branded as crazies."

Besides, we've got lots of other things to worry about. So we'll probably just put this off until some astronomer comes up with an asteroid that really is headed our way.

But by then, it will probably be too late. ■

*Lee Dye's column appears weekly on ABCNEWS.com. A former science writer for the Los Angeles Times, he now*

*lives in Juneau, Alaska.*

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