

THE AMERICAN CRISIS

BY MARGIT LIA BOWLER

The year is 2085, and the vast water shortage, as has been predicted for centuries, has struck. Without adequate water supply all nations suffer greatly, being forced to change their ways of life to adapt to a world without enough water even to support their own people. The worst blow falls on the United States, of course, a country that had once consumed the most water of them all. The President, Hallor Taffing, has no idea at all how to confront this problem. He calls a hasty conference with his associates.

"We're in an awful fix, I know that," he announces, "but is there any way to deal with this?"

The Vice-President, Amos Rull, raises one hand politely. "Mr. Taffing, sir, I think it would be best if you could have an hour or so on a news channel of the sub-transmitter, and maybe explain the situation to our citizens."

Taffing shakes his head. "I'd do that, Mr. Rull, but what difference would it make? I don't think there's a single red-blooded American out there who isn't aware of our water crisis."

Rull is persistent. "However, maybe if you urged them to help conserve what water we have left we could last out longer."

"But really, it's a small chance that every United States citizen would tune in," adds White House Secretary Fiskel. "Not everyone has a sub-transmitter, you know. They'd continue on with their wasteful ways."

Taffing paces up and down the room, thinking hard. "I'm aware of that. There are just too many people in the U.S., don't you see? Too many people using up millions of gallons of water every second..."

"So," Rull adds, "perhaps Mr. Taffing, we don't have a water crisis on our hands, but simply a population crisis? Too many people using too much water?"

"Still," says Mr. Fiskel, "That doesn't explain how all the other countries of the world are also having water-related issues. Even the sparsely inhabited places as well —"

Taffing ignores him. "A population problem exactly, Mr. Rull! But...how are we supposed to go about fixing this?"

There is silence for a few minutes as the men ponder their options. "Perhaps, Rull, if we passed a law stating that no women would be allowed to bear babies..."

Rull disagrees. "It'd never work. Besides, we need something to help the people now. Something like...say... a 'thinning out' of the population."

Taffing is skeptical. "Are you talking about deaths, Mr. Rull? About murder?"

"Oh, Mr. Taffing, murder is much too harsh a word for it. We could simply order that all children in a certain age bracket receive a new vaccine, supposedly to help in the prevention of AIDS, or something like that. But, really, the vaccine would contain a lethal drug made to kill. Nothing painful, of course, but perhaps if we cut one generation out of the picture our water problem will ease up."

"Hmmmnnn," Mr. Fiskel says. "So with less people to supply water to, the less water we'll use."

"Perfectly Mr. Fiskel," Rull says. "Now, what age bracket should we be talking about particularly?"

"I think the young toddler age would age work," Taffing recommends. "But wouldn't somebody be bound to notice that their children are being killed off?"

Rull thinks for a moment. "No...well, not if we only take a few from each city. We could forbid all newspapers to publish anything about it —"

Taffing disagrees. "Too risky of a plan. Besides, sooner or later someone would find the connection between the deaths and the vaccines."

"True," Fiskel mutters.

Two days later, Taffing, Fiskel and Vice-President Rull are seated together, discussing their alternatives besides the faulty AIDS vaccines. "I was thinking," Rull volunteers, "perhaps if we erected a force-shield around an area of the U.S. and had a plane innocently flying over release a deadly virus, say, something like anthrax, that would do it."

Fiskel nods. "That would decrease the population, certainly, but still, the newspapers would be all over it."

"Well, Mr. Fiskel," continues Rull, "nobody would have to know the plane released the virus. To explain the force-shield we could say we put it up as soon as we were aware of the virus. Don't you see? This could work!"

"Yes, it could work," says Taffing. "But what if somebody found out?"

"There's a chance like that for everything we do, Mr. Taffing."

"I understand. So, say that we did go through with this, which area should we choose?" Taffing asks.

Rull has to admit he isn't sure. "If we wanted to take out a very large amount of people, we could go somewhere near one of the big cities, such as Seattle, Los Angeles, Chicago, someplace like that."

"Yes, I see what you're getting at, Mr. Rull. What about Florida?"

Rull is taken aback by this remark. "Florida, Mr. Taffing? Florida is a state, not a city."

Taffing glares over at him. "I know Florida is a state, I'm not that stupid! Florida is a well-populated state, after all, full of retirement homes and such. See?"

"See what, Mr. Taffing?"

Taffing is losing his patience. "Retirement homes are usually filled with older citizens, Mr. Rull. They're bound to die soon, so why not simply infect a large section of Florida?"

"Ah, I see what you mean."

"Do you?" Taffing asks. "Good. I like the plan. Mr. Fiskel, please get me in contact with Mr. Kane."

"Certainly, Mr. Taffing," Fiskel replies, furiously typing something into the laptop computer he had tucked under his arm. With minutes a fairly clear image of Mr. Kane, head of the United States Air Force, appears on the screen.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Taffing," Kane says genially.

"What can I do for you?"

Hurriedly, Taffing gives him a brief explanation of their plans. "I need you to give me the name of your finest pilot... I need to be able to have full faith in whoever has the virus aboard."

Kane thinks for a moment, then announces, "I'd have to say Commander Briggs. She's the best trained of them all."

Rull nods. "Thank you Mr. Kane. That will be all."

Kane's picture flickers, and then disappears.



"You want me to be the pilot of the plane that carries the virus?" Commander Briggs asks incredulously. "This is an honor, sir, really, but are you sure we are doing this for the good of the nation?"

"Positive, Ms. Briggs," Taffing replies. "Would you rather we suffer horribly, dying from thirst and famine, or have a number of older people, bound to go sometime soon, die for us?"

"The good of the many before the needs of the few, Ms. Briggs," Rull adds.

Briggs nods slightly. "...I understand, sir. Would you tell me what virus I would be carrying, exactly?"

"That's just what I was going to do now," says Taffing.

"See, we need a virus that is deadly, that kills quickly and has no known cure. Top on our list was anthrax."

Briggs is astounded. "Anthrax!" she gasps. "But, sir, that's so highly infectious...so deadly...sir, there's a good chance that I myself could contract it too!"

"No," contradicts Rull. "If you erect a steady force-shield around the cockpit, you probably won't be harmed. Even anthrax can't penetrate shields like that."

"I see," says Briggs. "Another question, though: Will we have enough anthrax? And will it do the work quick enough? We don't want them to suffer, do we. Anthrax isn't known for being painless at its job."

"That's very truthful," Rull admits. "But I've got an idea, Mr. Taffing."

"Speak your piece," Taffing waves a hand.

"Say that we order a handful of scientists — very clandestinely, of course — to create a supervirus, one like that of anthrax, only fairly painless and extremely contagious. It could be used in place of the anthrax virus, and would effectively kill off part of the population." Rull looks pleased with himself.

"That's a good idea, Mr. Rull," Taffing says. "Mr. Fiskel, please get hold of Ms. Ruumholt for me, will you?"

Fiskel already has the image of Ruumholt appearing on his laptop screen. "Hello Mr. Taffing, Mr. Rull," she says.

"Ms. Ruumholt, you're one of the most brilliant scientists in the nation," Taffing says. "I need you to do something for us — no questions asked."

Although she looks a bit more tentative, Ms. Ruumholt nods her head in reply.

"I need you to create a supervirus of sorts. One that can kill quickly and efficiently," Taffing orders.

"Why not use anthrax, sir?"

Rull takes over for the President. "Because it needs to be utterly painless, Ms. Ruumholt. As painless as a deadly virus like that can be."

"Sir, I must ask..."

"I'm sorry, Ms. Ruumholt," Taffing laughs, "but that's all I'm going to tell you, for at least right now. All I can say is that it's for the good of America."

"The good of America, sir. Are we going to war?"

Rull chuckles slightly. "No, no, Ms. Ruumholt. Just prepare the supervirus. Have it ready as soon as possible."

Ruumholt is still a bit bewildered, but what can she do?

"Yes, Mr. Rull," she replies.

Mr. Taffing walked quickly and hurriedly down a hallway of the White House, Commander Briggs right behind him. "It's done!" he grins merrily. "Ms. Briggs, you may very well be flying sooner than we anticipated. Ms. Ruumholt and her team of scientists have finished the supervirus far ahead of schedule!"

"Do you have it here, Mr. Taffing?" questions Briggs, "in the White House?"

"Oh, Ms. Briggs, not only do we have it in the White House, but we have it in this very room!" Taffing leads Briggs to a closed metal door with a hand-pad installed beside it. Pressing his hand to the pad, the specialized software recognizes Taffing as the President and the doors unlock with a soft click.

Twin metal tubs, perfectly circular and exactly the same, are sitting on a small table. "Just look at those beauties," Taffing says happily. "In each of these tubs, Ms. Briggs, there are 25 vials, each containing just enough of the supervirus to infect hundreds of people alone!"

"Does it have a name?" Briggs asks suddenly.

Taffing seems a bit confused. "Does what have name?"

"The virus," answers Briggs. "Has it been named yet?"

"No... No... I don't suppose it has been named yet. But in honor of the person who delivers it, it could be called 'Briggs' Virus', if you like."

Briggs grins. "That'd be nice. Now, I remember you ordering Ms. Ruumholt to create a virus that is incredibly contagious. If 'Briggs' Virus' is so contagious, then how come we need so many of these vials?"

"It is contagious, and very," Taffing says. "But with risks this high, we can't take any chances. We need only one person to be infected before others would start getting it. All within the force-shield would be dead with four or five days."

"Nice and quick, Mr. Taffing," Briggs notes. "I suppose it's surrounded with a force-shield right now, I hope."

"Oh yes, Ms. Briggs, and a very strong force-shield at that. We wouldn't want to be infected ourselves...then we would have an epidemic — perhaps a pandemic — on our hands!"

Briggs is sitting in the cockpit of her plane, just moments away from departure on her killer mission. In her hand she clutches a sub-communicator, and on a closed channel she reports, "All's working as planned, Mr. Taffing, sir. Mr. Kane, the officers helping to load the virus have installed it in the plane successfully."

From the White House, Taffing feels like shouting out merrily. "Good, Ms. Briggs," he says, trying to maintain his composure. "You may begin your liftoff sequence."

"Right, sir," Briggs says, activating the plane's engines. "I'll be off the ground and on my way shortly."

"With our new hyperspeed engines, she should reach the desired location in about 20 minutes," Kane estimates. "These new aircraft can go much faster with the advent of hyperspeed engines."

"Let's hope those same hyperspeed engines can get her out in time before we erect the force-shield," Rull comments.

"It'd be awful if she's trapped in there with the virus, wouldn't it?"

"Very," agrees Fiskel.

"Let's hope she doesn't," Taffing says.

"She won't, though," Kane assures Taffing hurriedly.

"Commander Briggs is the best pilot I've ever known; she won't let us down."

The four men sit in silence, waiting for Briggs' next transmission. Suddenly, Briggs' voice comes in over the communicator. "I'm in position for the ejection of the virus. So far there's not a problem in sight...everything is working normally."

Taffing nods over at Kane, and Kane activates his own communicator. "Men, be ready to initiate the force-shield on my mark," he orders, and listens to Briggs' voice.

"Ready...now!" Briggs says excitedly.

Kane barks into the transmitter, "Now!"

"Pull up, Briggs, the force-shield is being activated!"

Taffing says.

Inside the plane, Briggs hastily yanks upward on the throttle. The craft's nose goes up sharply, slipping out just as the filmy indescence of the force-shield closes behind her tail. She pauses to wipe her sweating brow, and then a relieved grin spreads widely across her face. "We did it, sir! The 'Briggs' Virus' has been successfully ejected over the designated land!"

"Wonderful," Taffing replies, sounding a bit giddy himself. "Be back here as soon as possible."

It is 2 in the morning, and United States President Hallor Taffing is lying peacefully in his bed, fast asleep after an extremely strenuous day. Without warning, his communicator sitting on his bedside table begins blaring loudly into his ear. With a start he awakens.

"What," he snaps at the communicator, "is so important that you can't wait until morning to tell me?"

It is Kane on the other end, and his voice sounds frightened and nervous. "It's the force-shield, Mr. Taffing," he explains. "There's something wrong with it...a malfunction of sorts."

Taffing is awake instantly. "What do you mean, a malfunction?" he hisses.

"I mean...we haven't got much time left before the entire thing goes down, sir —"

Another person interrupts Kane in mid-sentence. There is a long pause before Kane speaks again. "It's happened, Mr. Taffing," he trembles. "The shield's down. 'Briggs' Virus' has escaped."

"What!" Taffing roars. "Quick, erect a new one around the White House!"

Another pause. "I can't, sir," Kane reports. "The whole force-shield network's jammed — I really don't know what happened, sir."

"Don't give me any of your excuses!" howls Taffing, and snaps his communicator off. For the first time in his life, he is really afraid. So afraid that he can't even speak, only huddle under his comforter and wait for morning to come. It is as if he can hear 'Briggs' Virus' coming closer and closer to him with each second that passes...

Upon morning's arrival, ironically bright and clear, Taffing, Rull, Fiskel and Ruumholt are sitting about a round table, discussing their options.

"We really haven't got any," Ruumholt says. "Mr. Taffing, you ordered me to design a virus that's incurable, deadly and contagious; I did just that. If the virus infects at the rate we predicted at the lab, we will all be infected in this area of the country in two or three days."

"Two or three days..." Fiskel turns pale.

"Are you sure there isn't any cure?" asks Rull. "There's got to be some cure for the virus."

Ruumholt shakes her head sadly. "None that we know of. And even if there were, we won't have enough time to discover it. In about two weeks all of the continental United States will be infected. Hawaii might be safe, and Alaska too, though they'll both be delaying the inevitable."

"Delaying the inevitable..." Taffing has his head in his hands, looking as though he might burst into tears any second.

"That's right, Mr. Taffing," Ruumholt sighs, and the silence in the room is so heavy it is almost tangible.

In the middle of the night, two-and-a-half days after the meeting, Fiskel wakes up shivering outrageously. He feels terrible, and the sheets of his bed are sticking to him like glue, drenched in sweat. Heaving for breath, he staggers to his feet, and is vaguely surprised to find that he is having difficulty to focus. His dazed mind wanders back to 'Briggs' Virus'... absolutely painless...but extremely contagious.

Fiskel slumps into a chair next to his bed. Although he has never been one for singing, he feels that singing for a bit would be nice. Drawing his feet up to his chest while rocking back and forth uncontrollably, he begins to sing a verse from "America The Beautiful." Not a well known verse, really, but nonetheless his favorite. Fiskel's gravelly voice is hoarse and wavers, but the words flow freely:

*O beautiful for heroes proved,
in liberating strife,
Who more than self their country loved,
And mercy more than life!
America! America! May God thy gold define!
'Til all success be nobleness,
And every grain divine!*

Margit Bowler will be 12 on August 9 and starts 7th grade at Astoria Middle School in September.