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The Few and the MAHB

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Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few
Winston Churchill to the House of Commons, 20 August, 1940.

Although Britain's dilemma in 1940 was microcosmic compared to today's global emergency, as is often the case examining microcosms can be helpful in understanding larger systems. The development of Britain's first two modern, low-wing monoplane fighters – the Hawker Hurricane and the Supermarine Spitfire – and of radar, had been started by Britain's two “appeasing” prime ministers, Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain, who preceded Churchill. Although rarely credited with their part in producing victory, radar and modern fighters were necessary but not nearly sufficient, as events proved. Without Dowding's coordination system connecting fighters and radar, those aircraft could not alone have won the battle of Britain. Similarly, new solar energy technologies are likely to be a necessary part of revising humanity's energy-mobilizing systems, but clearly that alone can't solve even the climate disruption part of the human predicament unless many connected problems such as breaking the political power of the fossil fuel industry, bringing human population growth to a halt, and limiting consumption by the rich are also dealt with. Mobilizing young women to run Britain's air-battle coordination centers was one key to its victory; mobilizing women (and solving the inequities they and many other groups face) could well be a key to building a sustainable civilization.

But the military culture that Dowding had to shatter to save Britain was a minor hurdle compared to the global perpetual growth culture, pervasive for a few hundred years and especially entrenched since World War II. The old-fashioned RAF senior officers had no vast

funds to buy politicians and hire intellectual prostitutes to spread outright lies as does, for example, today's petroleum industry. Dowding's success clearly showed the need for tackling cultural change at multiple pressure points, but the complexity of that task highlights the unprecedented challenge facing the world today. Leadership must be generated at the top and many levels below, and a supportive public mobilized for change. Many in the British military and public were convinced of the German threat by 1936, just as many today realize that population growth, overconsumption by the rich, and resultant abuse of the environment threaten the human future. But in Britain in 1936 there were no well-financed, well-organized interests working on many fronts to obfuscate the situation.

The lack of Dowding-style foresight intelligence is everywhere manifest in today's societies. Consider only the multitudes of discussions of how to keep feeding a burgeoning population that ignore the real (and relatively inexpensive) possibilities for humanely limiting the numbers of additional mouths to feed. Note that they also ignore that agriculture and population growth are major sources of climate disruption, which, in turn, is likely the chief obstacle to increasing food production. And consider how little discussion there is of the serious governance and institutional failures responsible for this dilemma, and the pressing need to adapt the structures of society to meet the challenges it now faces.

Nonetheless there are some advantages the MAHB has that Dowding did not. There is wide agreement in the scientific community about the perfect storm – expressed most recently by the Consensus Statement signed by over 500 scientists. No substantial, united, “no worries” scientific faction exists; those who pay attention are unanimously worried. Moreover, many thousands of NGOs and millions of individuals are already concerned about the predicament and working hard to solve some aspect of it, from trying to conserve biodiversity and lower human fertility rates to ending racial, gender, and economic inequity. Members of this environmental movement are not few, but they are still *too few and too disunited* – and they certainly have too few Dowding-style leaders. It's as if there had been thousands of modern British fighter aircraft, a complete radar net, and eager volunteers waiting for Dowding to take over and mold them into a coherent and victorious force. MAHB is a small but growing attempt to coordinate the efforts of civil society, promote foresight intelligence, encourage the emergence of leaders, and revitalize the environmental movement to avert a collapse of civilization. We hope you'll join the effort.

MAHB-UTS Blogs are a joint venture between the University of Technology Sydney and the Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere. Questions should be directed to joan@mahbonline.org.

MAHB Blog: <http://mahb.stanford.edu/blog/the-few-and-the-mahb/>