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## Rocky Mountain High

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The techno-narcissism flowed like a melted Slurpee this torrid weekend at the annual Aspen Environment Forum where scores of scientists, media figures, authors, professors, and policy wonks convened to settle the world's hash - at least in theory. The trouble started Friday night when Stewart Brand, 74, impresario of *The Whole Earth Catalog*, and an economic cornucopian these days, exhorted the skitish audience to show a little goshdarn optimistic spirit about the future instead of just griping about climate change, peak oil, imploding global finance, and a few other vexing trifles. The audience's response was to not line up and buy a signed copy of his latest book.

The Aspen Institute is supported by a bizarre array of corporate donors and individuals ranging from the secretive, devious, extreme right-wing Koch brothers to Goldman Sachs, to Michael Eisner to Duke Energy. The mission of the Environment Forum is divided about equally between publicizing the gathering horrors of climate change and promoting an ethos of wishful thinking that all the problems of mankind will yield to technological rescue remedies.

It's a very odd mix of hard-headed science and the most dismaying sort of crypto-religious faith in happy endings, tinged with overtones of corporate log-rolling and government propaganda. The basic message is: the world is hopelessly fucked up but thank God for technology. There is not even a dim apprehension that many of the aforementioned vexations originate in technology itself, and its blowbacks. Alas, this is about the best that the American intelligentsia can do right now, collectively, and it explains why we have such uniformly impotent and clueless leadership across the board in America, from the White House to the CEO offices

to the diploma mills to the news media and every other realm of endeavor where thinking realistically about the future might be considered valuable.

Another strange notion permeating this forum - and probably the entire Progressive intellectual class in America - is the belief that if you can measure things, you can control them. Thus, an endless regurgitation of statistics, which, after a while, resembles liturgical incantation and, pretty much, serves the same purpose, namely an obsessive-compulsive ritual aimed at calming the nerves. If it was, after all, techno-magic that led us to poison the oceans and upset the calibration of the earth's atmosphere, then maybe fresh applications of magic can make all those bad things go away, fighting fire with fire, shall we say.

Speaking of fire, there was one burning up the valley from Aspen, which made the whole town smell like barbeque Sunday morning while six other wildfires blazed all around Colorado. One of them, the High Park fire, has been going for two weeks and burned over 82,000 acres so far with no sign of petering out. Temperatures in the high Rockies soared over 90 degrees all weekend and there was practically no snowpack left up in the elevations - a spooky development this early in the summer.

The odor of empire's end also hangs over Aspen these days, despite the sheen of spectacular wealth visible around the little town and the emanations of glowing health in the buff and tanned population of exercise freaks. Everything that makes the town tick is in danger of unraveling. The ski industry can't possibly survive the eventual effects of peak oil, and the collapse of commercial aviation will put an end to the conveyer belt of tourists. The villas of the

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Wall Street and Hollywood kingpins that decorate the ridge lines above town give off a desolate vibe of futility, as if the foregone disaster of a global banking meltdown had already sent their once-proud owners to bankruptcy Palookaville. The place gave off eerie intimations of a ghost town in-the-making.

Anyway you looked at America from the vantage of Aspen, Colorado, everything we do and stand for looks out of kilter. Our intellectual resources look spent, our prospects seem grim, and our assets are going up in flames. Maybe there's some consolation that we're not Europe. That said, I have never been to a conference in all my vagabond years where so many magnificent buffet spreads and overflowing gorgeous snack tables were laid in never-ending succession. It almost persuaded me that the old Right Reverend Malthus was too Malthusian.