

FOGGIE'S MOP

Not admitting to having written this pile of nonsense: Thomas C. Gibbons

Human beings, 181 of them from fourteen countries, first reached the surface of Mars in the mid twenty first century, capping a voyage in space that had lasted about eight and a half months for the two dozen or so spacecraft in the swarm. The project had been so expensive that it became one of the most criticized endeavors in the history of the world. However all criticism ended when the astronauts discovered oil on the planet Mars.

Then the astronauts on the red planet became media heroes, especially the mission commander, Harvey Albright. The world's various news feeds screamed headlines that sang his praises for leadership, intelligence, and scientific ability. Harvey was amused to hear that since he had become used to being the spendthrift villain.

All over the world they uncorked huge barrels of beer, to celebrate. Generally it was felt that the best way to feel good was to lose not only as much feeling as possible in as many extremities as possible but also consciousness. In that condition, you could forget the world's troubles.

The earth was starved for oil. Land-based oil reserves in Texas, Saudi Arabia, and other such temporarily wealthy places had played out leaving a pin-pricked ground covering vast deposits of carbon dioxide and other such propellants that had been used to squirt the last remaining drops of the stuff out of the ground.

The action moved off shore into progressively deeper and more difficult waters where more and more oil was recovered. This forced the invention of new cleanup equipment for spills, since most people believed that the wings of birds were insufficient for such a purpose. Eventually, with technological progress, most spilled oil was not only recovered but actually sold. The new equipment came in handy whenever the Arctic Ocean turned into an oil puddle. In earlier years it had been a major pain when such a spill occurred in the winter, but spill workers considered it a blessing that ice no longer hindered their work no matter what season it was.

Land-based sources such as shale and tar sands were developed as well, but at first they could not produce fast enough. New technology again came to the rescue thus increasing the production volume to unheard of levels in spite of the poor quality deposits of the stuff. Advanced shovels large enough to swallow a small mountain in a couple of gulps eventually came with automatic control. Of course there were scandals such as the time one of these shovels swallowed half of Pittsburgh.

That shovel was just under construction, and someone had installed a switch backwards. Fortunately most people survived because by that time trucks and SUV's were so heavy, powerful, and well-armored that they could survive any such shovel at will. It was safety first with these large vehicles. At the time of the accident, the vast majority the population was actually on the road. Some were going out for a loaf of bread or a beer or something; others were just cruising, although no one was actually able to move very fast given how packed the roads were. The image of the gigantic shovel gobbling up the expressway was a comic staple for years.

With the world oil demand doubling every few years, even these supplies were threatening to run out. There were accidents that shortened the time even more. A project to produce improved bacteria that made oil backfired when it accidentally produced improved bacteria that ate oil. By that time, since oil spills were being reclaimed for actual use, there was no demand for such bacteria, so a few microbiological workers threw away their samples in frustration. The discarded bacteria started multiplying exponentially while eating the oil out of the tar sands, shale, and sea bed with alarming speed.

A sense of impending doom by oil crisis grew despite assurances from officials that all was well. Technology had always produced enough oil in the past, and it would again. Before the trip to Mars, no one suspected that space travel would be the technology that came through.

The Martian astronauts became worried at the reaction to their oil discovery. They had expected the jubilation on earth to fade, but in the one year of their planned stay on Mars billions of earthlings just celebrated more and more. That was one Mars year – one trip of Mars around the sun. It was just short of two earth years, so the people on earth had a lot of time to work up a frenzy. Mostly they celebrated by building newer, larger, heavier automobiles and trucks and by driving them farther and faster, except in Pittsburgh.

Albright and his crew had dug below the Martian surface to find permafrost, because they had become adept at using solar panels to make hydrogen and oxygen from the ice. That was their standard rocket fuel anyway. Some icy comet pieces had been steered into earth orbit for fuel for such a purpose. When they dug for water on Mars, out came oil, much like some of the original oil drillers on earth. Without oxygen in the atmosphere, they had no way to burn the oil, so they just moved away from the ugly, messy stuff to hunt for cleaner ice, which they eventually found in abundance.

They found the ice a few miles away from their oil strike. At first nobody thought about the fact that it was all downhill from the oil to the ice and the nearby encampment.

They also found ancient, organic soil under the surface of Mars. Between the oil and the soil, it was clear that ancient life had existed there, but it must have been very ancient. There was no sign of anything currently living. Fortunately they had brought seeds and nutrients from earth, in case experiments with them became possible, and by using these along with some minerals found on Mars, they dug up and mixed up a large patch of soil that could grow food for the group. This soil was on the edge of the settlement, downhill from the oil.

Earth-bound scientists and engineers worked on the problem of how to get the oil back from another planet like Mars. That proved to be a difficult problem requiring much time during which the Martian food was growing well. So the length of the mission was increased to two Martian years – about three and three quarters earth years. That was enough time for the next US presidential election to roll around.

One presidential candidate named Foggie Foghorn, actually Robert A Foghorn with the nickname Foggie, ran on a platform of building a pipeline. When the scientists, engineers, and other candidates called that too difficult, Foggie ran commercials to ridicule their low opinion of American know-how. The commercials were so effective that Foggie rose in the polls by at least ten points especially after he started to talk about how American skill could easily build a 34 million mile long pipeline. He adopted the slogan “skill, baby, skill.”

Someone pointed out that both planets were actually moving and 34 million miles was only the minimum distance. Foggie replied that since the earth was in the center of the universe with Mars moving around it in a circle, then the distance had to be a constant 34 million miles. He then promised to reform American education and to fire all the stupid math and science teachers who didn't even know that a circle had a constant radius.

It turned into quite a bitter debate. Foggie had his critics, but he also acquired many angry, vocal supporters. The stars of most of the various kinds of news outlets tended to point out that Foggie was nuts, but they usually said that quietly, or off the air, or in interviews away from their regular programs. While reporting they generally gave both sides of the issue and pointed out that such strongly held beliefs had to be taken seriously because they were so strongly held.

The pipeline vs. no pipeline debate became so divisive that a number of political moderates and independents stepped in to attempt a bipartisan compromise. They suggested building a pipeline half way to Mars.

Foggie may have had a point about math and science education, but actually when his support rose ten points it was from twelve to twenty-two, and he lost in the primaries. However, that didn't solve the problem of getting the oil back from Mars. So the next administration, headed by the newly elected president, Marjorie Duckworth, put a whole department full of scientists and engineers to work on the problem. The vice president was Foggie Foghorn, but Marjorie had not chosen him because she believed a word he said. She just needed the swing votes. Marjorie's opponent had also offered Foggie his choice of jobs, but Foggie had chosen Marjorie. To get him on board and satisfy his supporters, she also had to put him in charge of the Martian Oil Project (MOP). Foggie's MOP went into action.

When the astronauts on Mars heard about Foggie's platform and the support it received, they wondered if they could ever fit in after their return to earth. But they reasoned that even though 22% of the American voters might have lost their minds, the others must be OK. When they heard that everyone else was pandering to Foggie for the votes, they decided to not even come home. That had become feasible because of their food, fuel, and water production as well as other mineral and raw material discoveries on Mars. Besides, it was cooler on Mars; the earth was becoming very warm.

The tone of the news stories on earth changed immediately, especially when they heard that the Martians thought that the American voters had holes in their heads. Headlines in the various news feeds suddenly screamed about Martian traitors, about that ungrateful Commander Albright who didn't appreciate that the earth had made his adventure possible, and that earth people including Americans had perfectly intact and hole-free heads. Many headlines also suggested that Albright was the reincarnation of Benedict Arnold. A "birther" movement sprang up claiming that Albright really was a native Martian who had come to earth to subvert it before going back home.

President Duckworth, who had taken office by then, immediately called for the arrest of everyone on Mars, although it took the Justice Department a while to figure out the charges. Besides desertion and treason, the government settled on theft of government property. The president appointed a commission to figure out how to make the arrests.

It was actually an international team of astronauts with members from fourteen countries, and all fourteen decided to press charges. About twenty more countries with equipment on the mission filed lawsuits to get their equipment back and then tried to figure out how to serve the legal papers.

The scientists and engineers in Foggie's MOP eventually persuaded Foggie to drop the pipeline idea in favor of a big, and that meant really big, space-going supertanker. The final meeting on this was pretty tense, but Foggie was finally persuaded by the proposal to make them out of the large number of empty fuel tanks currently in earth orbit and in various eccentric, inclined, and otherwise cockeyed earth-grazing orbits around the sun. They were left over from many launches of spacecraft into earth orbit and of robotic missions to other planets. Foggie could at least swallow the earth orbit part of this, and although he had doubts that anything could be in a solar orbit, he gave in anyway.

There was around a thousand such fuel tanks drifting around by that time, and armies of space workers were recruited to round them up. The entire fleet of shuttles was pressed into service to snare any such tank that happened to float by. Before long, a group of fifty tanks was lashed together in a ring as the shuttles continued to find more. Another group of fifty soon made up another ring attached to the first one, and almost before anyone could say WTF, the rings of fifty tanks, all lashed together, stretched to more than a mile.

This contraption would not be a space ship without fuel and engines. Humans had mastered the art of making rocket engines, but there was still the problem of where to put the fuel. The plan was to put it into the space within the rings of tanks, but unfortunately there were far too few floating, used tanks to fill up that space. So they made a big baggie instead. Actually it was several really big baggies interspersed with some extra metal fuel tanks. People had become really good at making baggies by that time. They could be used as long as the outer ring gave the structure some rigidity. Unfortunately, that outer ring kept bending into funny shapes because it was so long. The clever engineers sort of solved that with some ultra-modern, high strength, light-weight plastic rods. Well, there was that and welding all the tanks in each row together to form 50, mile-long, continuous tubes. In Las Vegas, they started taking bets about what kind of waves and knots would be set up in the contraption as it flew.

That left two problems. One was how to get the oil from Mars up to the tankers, and the other was how to get the oil from earth orbit down to the actual earth. The answer to the second of these seemed to be some version of firing it out of the tanks with enough reverse velocity to make it fall out of orbit into the ocean – maybe even without a spaceship in some early versions of this proposal. Spills of oil into the oceans had become so common and methods of reclaiming the oil so well-developed that the ocean seemed to be a perfect receptacle in which to plunk the oil. But the engineers eventually settled on developing another kind of big baggie, one of which would line each mile-long tube. After the tanker entered earth orbit full of oil, astronauts would attach some rockets and heat shields to eject it from the tubes and carry it out of orbit. They hoped the baggie would survive and float on the water. It might, however, break on impact, something that was not seen as a problem.

On Mars, Albright told everyone, "Well, it ain't rocket science, but maybe it will w--. Aw, never mind. It ain't rocket science."

He also wondered how they were going to dig the oil out of the Martian ground and get it from the surface to orbit. Actually, this was related to President Duckworth's determination to arrest the traitorous

Martian astronauts and return them to Earth for trial. There needed to be a large expedition to Mars for both purposes. It could ride in a couple of converted tanks embedded in all the fuel baggies.

The two presidential commissions combined into one and decided on a first step of issuing a toughly worded ultimatum to the newly minted Martians to relinquish any and all claims to the oil and to get home immediately for trial and punishment.

Harvey Albright was a former ship's captain who was now retired and working for the space program. Actually, he was no longer working for that either. Besides being indicted, they had also been fired. But he did receive the ultimatum and was puzzled. For one thing, he had made no claim to most of the oil – other than a bit of it for lubricant and fertilizer. Besides, none of the Martians could return to Earth even if they wanted to. They had carefully brought all of their spacecraft to the surface even though most of them were never designed to land and had required much converting. They had been modified for various daily living tasks, and at most only a couple of them could still fly, and then no farther than to orbit.

The Martians had been divided on the subject of the oil. A slim majority didn't really care if someone from the earth came and dug it out, but they knew that they had no time for it themselves. That was before the ultimatum and the threats of arrest and trial. Now not a single Martian wanted a single visitor from Earth to set a single foot on the surface of their planet. The question was how to prevent it.

“At least,” Harvey told them towards the beginning of all the planning, “they will need time. They have no ships, no astronauts trained for this kind of mission, and probably no money. So we have time to make plans.”

In his reply to president Duckworth, Harvey tried to make things clear. Among other things, he said that no one should see their actions as a revolt but rather as another, indefinite extension of their mission. “We know we have freely walked into a very difficult and dangerous task. We know we must work long and hard to even survive, and we may fail. We do have oil. Apparently, according to our studies, we have vast quantities of it. But it is of no use in our situation, and we simply have no time to work on oil recovery now. Eventually both Earth and Mars can benefit – Earth from the oil and Mars from many specialized products and services that we will need. You should see this as a mutually beneficial exercise and not a revolt or separation.”

He continued, “Part of our mission has always been to discover how the earth can benefit from Mars. We are simply devoting more time than originally planned to that end. But right now we need to devote full time to establishing ourselves here. So please stay away and do not keep us from our struggle to survive. You should not need the oil for some time anyway. Later, when you do need it, we can certainly help you with it. But not yet.”

After the message was received and released worldwide, newsfeeds of all kinds screamed information such as:

Mars rebels say “NO” to oil. Maybe later.

“Devoting full time to ourselves,” says Albright.

“Mars is ours. Stay out and drop dead!”

All of this started a war. It was not a war between Earth and Mars. It was between hawks who wanted to invade Mars immediately and doves who wanted to forget that and develop the earth's oil resources more completely. A number of political moderates and independents tried for a bipartisan compromise. They assumed that Albright would surrender when an invasion force was about half-way to Mars. So they proposed sending such a force half way.

President Duckworth ignored all of this and sent a reply claiming possession of the oil and ordering the Martians to keep their hands out of it and return immediately to earth. That produced the consensus on Earth that Duckworth was pretty weak. According to the hawks, she should have declared war and threatened the death penalty. The doves wanted her impeached for not drilling, or at least digging, for more oil. Moderates thought it would be enough to design a bigger shovel. In Pittsburgh, everyone said, "not here!"

Albright's reply pointed out that there was no time for his people to stick their hands into the oil except for a little for lubricant and fertilizer and that when he used his head in the way it was designed, he knew that the earth could survive until his colony had time to produce oil. Generally the news feeds reported that he had no time for the people of the earth and probably had his head stuck in a bag of fertilizer. There followed many publicly expressed opinions of where else he could put his head along with more calls for the aforementioned head. More than a few suggested that it was Albright with holes in his head. Albright's head became a popular topic of conversation.

Duckworth said that the oil belonged to the earth and that the Martians would have to pay a fee for any oil that they used for lubricant or fertilizer. She also repeated her call to get back home. The political opposition called that much too weak and a few people wondered if Foggie would make a better president. He had, after all made a campaign speech in which he called Albright "Not-all-bright" as well as "All-dim" and "Bright Cheeks". No one was sure just what that last one meant, but it did catch on.

Bright Cheeks Albright said no to paying for the oil and that there was no way to return to Earth. He also said that, although he had personally advised against it, the people there were reacting so badly to the tone of the earth's messages that they wanted to call a meeting to declare independence.

That caused a panic on Earth. The stock market crashed. Several leaders of nations that had contributed astronauts to the mission said that the Martians couldn't declare independence because their countries already owned Mars. When they all realized that they were all claiming the same territory, they backtracked a bit to call a conference to divide Mars up among them but still said Albright couldn't declare independence.

A couple of days later, Albright did just that, or rather, he said, the people in his group had done it in a meeting. They were also drawing up a declaration of independence, and Albright was supposed to read it over the radio as soon as it was ready. Duckworth said don't bother, and if you do I will ignore it. Most of the news media said, "Go ahead and read it, Bright Cheeks."

Albright answered, "I will when it is finished. And, 'Bright Whats?' What the hell does that mean?" Generally the public comment on Earth held that he must be stupid and evil in addition to the holes in his head. After all, he didn't even recognize his own name. Also he shouldn't say, "Hell" in public since children were listening. There were more calls for war.

Duckworth said Albright should stop being a dumb ass and show some respect. Almost immediately, Duckworth was vilified in the media for saying, “ass”.

All this talking back and forth took some time. The two planets are too far apart to allow a radio signal to pass between them quickly, and the distance constantly shifts in spite of what Foggie might have thought.

It seemed to most members of the media that Albright was losing his marbles and might turn dangerous. There were many ideas about how to control him. Although none of them seemed very practical, there were many entertaining fights about it. That does not mean debates. The news media had moved well beyond debates. They often staged fist fights between opposing political factions.

President Duckworth, under the impression that she had been hired to think, put some of her thoughts quietly into action. Partly these thoughts were inspired by the progress at Foggie’s MOP in designing the tanker as well as a process for actually obtaining the oil.

Much of that oil was under pressure under the Martian surface, so holes blown in the surface at the correct points would produce gushers. They wanted to blow the holes and then use a series of tubes to feed the spurting oil into tanks that could be sent into orbit and emptied into the interplanetary supertanker. Those tubes were called “fish” by the engineers. Nobody knew why, but it probably had something to do with fishing for oil. The surface to orbit tanks would be powered by rocket engines that ran on hydrogen and oxygen which, in turn, could be made from the frozen water under the Martian surface.

The construction of the tanker in earth orbit was almost finished, and it would soon be ready to leave filled with explosives, other equipment, oil workers, soldiers, weapons, and even handcuffs for the Martians. It was fueled by hydrogen and oxygen made from water in the orbiting comet parts that had been moved into earth orbit sometime earlier. A suitable comet had once made a close approach. That episode had inspired much alarm about a conspiracy of some sort to destroy the earth or at least water someone’s plants. That was supposed to involve a dangerous rain from heaven that would drown a lot of people or maybe get them wet. But everyone survived and there was no rain.

There were a couple of highly secret radio frequencies available that were originally intended for use for private family communication especially if some disaster left the astronauts sick or dying. These transmitters and receivers also had encoding and decoding capabilities. So President Duckworth started communicating directly with Albright through one such channel. She told him that she had no intention of arresting him or his group and that there was no need for his people to take time away from their own work. However they had to cooperate with the oil workers. She also let him know that earth really needed the Martian oil more quickly than he realized because those pesky microbes that were accidentally designed to eat oil were doing exactly that at an ever increasing rate.

She also let Albright know that she was aware of something else. The number of people in his colony was about to grow by one, and although there were doctors available, there was no pediatrician. The impending birth was still several months away, and there was still time to get one out to Mars in the big tanker. As it happened, there was a pediatrician who actually wanted to join the Martians and who would bring some badly needed medical supplies. She promised that, at the last minute, the soldiers and weapons on the ship would be replaced with medical supplies and a pediatrician. Actually, that left a lot of extra room, and Albright held out for a variety of other supplies including more food. The pediatrician

was actually an old friend of Albright's who would contact him to verify that the president was living up to her end of the deal.

So Duckworth and Albright struck a deal, and the big oil ship went through its final preparations. There were a couple more conditions. Albright and the Martians couldn't say anything about the deal on any radio frequency that someone on earth might hear. Also, the Martians needed to ignore any statements that Duckworth might make to other Earthlings about the oil ship. She then told everyone that she was sending the ship whether Albright wanted it or not and he had no choice but to accept it. Anti-Martian passions were running so strong on earth that everyone there ate it up. She was no longer thought of as too weak.

She couldn't admit to sending the medical supplies and food, so she made up various stories about the extra packages. One story held that she was sending liquid refreshments for the oil workers, but that they couldn't touch them until the tanker was loaded with oil on Mars. She displayed a large beer barrel with a very large cork and watched it as it was loaded into an orbital shuttle. Of course, the barrel actually contained some of the food, medical supplies, and other items that Albright needed. The rest of the supplies were smuggled aboard in various other ways, because no one would have believed that even the oil workers could drink that much beer.

Later, when the pediatrician inspected his cargo, he discovered that the cork was missing from the barrel. Of course, it really wasn't needed, but he went into a panic that someone might find it and figure out that the barrel couldn't be full of beer. He searched hard for it all through the warehouses and loading areas without finding it until he had to give it up for the big launch. Unfortunately, he had asked a couple of people whether they had seen the cork. One of them was a friend of Foggie's, but he didn't realize that beer should be spilling from the barrel without the cork. At least he didn't realize it yet.

Time went by. The tanker left earth orbit with rocket engines not roaring exactly in the vacuum of space but at least vibrating. As it pulled away, observers debated whether it looked more like a question mark or, when the sun hit it just right, a dollar sign. In Vegas, people started collecting on their bets.

The pediatrician arrived, the baby was born, some tanks were put in place, the fish –er, tubes – were laid down, and the first hole was blown in the surface to the first oil chamber. The tube that was supposed to catch the oil was blown to pieces and the oil spewed from its underground chamber all over the Martian surface. Some of it evaporated into what passes for an atmosphere on Mars, and a big mass of oily tar rolled down the slope from where the hole in the surface had been blasted. This was at the site of the original oil strike, and the oil was rolling directly toward Albright's new Martian village.

Albright started to call the earth on the radio to demand that Duckworth do something about the avalanche of tar descending upon his house. But the oil workers, who were much too embarrassed to admit to the earth what had happened, persuaded him that they could stop the flow. So they all got to work, dug up a lot of the Martian surface, and used it to dam up the avalanche. It seemed to work, but then they started to wonder why the thick stuff kept rising toward the top of the dam where it would soon spill over. Oh, right, they realized, the oil is still coming out of the ground.

When they tried to attach one of the fish tubes to the top of the gusher in order to contain and direct it toward a suitable tank, the tube slipped and so did all the workers. They all started sliding downhill along

with the tube. After some mad scrambling and slipping, they got the tube back up to the gusher and tried to push it in place. By this time their Martian suits, which allowed them to breathe, were covered with tar, and they all looked like walking oil spills. But some of them did manage to hold the tube in place long enough for someone else to bolt it down to a foundation that had been previously fixed in the surface. The oil flowed into the tube instead of onto the surface. The gusher seemed to be controlled by this procedure, which in oil company jargon was known as the “fish kill”.

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief inside their helmets. Then they noticed oil shooting out of the other end of the tube. They had forgotten to attach this end to the tanks destined for orbit. After much oily slipping and sliding, they finally they attached the tube and created a continuous line to the tanks. As each tank was filled, it was fired into orbit, unloaded, and parachuted back toward the surface, where it landed with a big thud because, face it, what passes for a Martian atmosphere is practically not even there.

When this relay had finally filled the orbiting tanker, it left orbit, assumed a funny shape, and headed for earth. Unfortunately the oil was still running through the tube and spilling out the far end. So they filled the tanks again, but there was nothing in orbit to empty them into. So the oil from the ground continued to spill onto the sand and roll down toward the dam that protected the village. Then it rolled over the dam and down the hill.

In the medical supplies, someone found a big cork. It was stuffed into the tube and the flow stopped. But, as they watched, the cork started to move. Then it blew out and flew away. The oil spill resumed. No one knew where the cork had gone, but a couple of people started splashing around in the spilled oil looking for it. Others searched the medical supplies for another one. When they asked the pediatrician where another one might be, he muttered, “Aw jeez, is that where it went? It was on the ship the whole time?”

They built another wall out of the Martian sand to dam the flow. When the oil neared the top, they built it higher. Again the oil approached the top and again they built it higher. And higher. And higher. But the oil level continued to climb.

The sand wall made a huge “U” from the top of the hill, down most of the way, across in front of the village, and then back up the hill. This big “U” continued to fill with oil, and everyone realized what a flood would descend on the village if and when the dam failed. They could build dwellings elsewhere, but it was going to flood the food growing region as well, and they were not sure they could move the plants. They had not prepared any soil in any other location.

All this took enough time for the big space supertanker, on a fast course to earth, to approach its destination. It reached orbit and, with the supervision of the MOP, the plan for bringing the oil to earth was put into operation.

By that time Foggy had become more powerful than ever, because the negotiations between President Duckworth and Albright had been exposed along with her promise not to arrest him and her decision to not even send the soldiers. It all started when Foggie heard about the cork and a friend explained carefully that there may not really have been beer in the barrel. Quiet investigations followed, and the truth finally emerged. With every passing day it became more likely that she would be impeached if she didn't resign first. Vice President Foggy was quietly preparing to take on the job of president.

Workers in orbit had prepared the baggies for the trip to the surface. They were fitted with some retrorockets and heat shields. After the rockets burned to slow them down, the mile-long baggies, all fifty of them, entered the atmosphere in a big, strangely bent and tangled mess. Mostly everything worked, and soon the atmospheric drag had slowed the fifty oil-bearing balloons down to subsonic speed. Unfortunately, by that time, the plastic bags had ripped away – all of them. Fifty oil globs descended through the atmosphere, becoming flattened by air pressure, mostly merging into a miles-long, amoeba-shaped glob of oil, twisting and turning, changing shape, splitting and remerging, and there was nothing much left but a big glob of oil. It all spiraled down through the atmosphere toward whatever happened to be in the way on the surface.

What was in the way was Washington DC. Duckworth was holding an unscheduled press conference in front of the White House where a number of press representatives had surprised and cornered her. As they asked questions such as “Well did you promise not to arrest him, or didn’t you” and “Did you really send medical supplies” and “Where is the cork”, Foggie stood to one side and listened. He was very pleased with himself, because he was the one who had alerted the press when Duckworth was going to try to sneak out for a mud bath. Just as a reporter asked if she were looking for mud again, a big glob of oil hit Foggie right in the face.

More globs followed. The president and all the reporters ducked. They covered themselves with their arms, and ran about. However, one glob after another splashed into first this reporter, then that one, then the president, then another reporter, then Foggie again. As the shower of oil became thicker, members of the secret service tried to shield the president and instead turned into a little mountain of oil that was slowly sliding toward the White House door.

As Foggie’s own secret service detail tried to help him inside, he thought that maybe he shouldn’t have aimed the load of oil at the Chesapeake Bay. He only did that to make it easy for him to travel to the delivered oil shipment and have his picture taken with it. Besides the Chesapeake Bay had become a fairly large target given the way that the recently rising sea had expanded its size. As he thought about this and slowly slipped and slid toward the White House, a reporter took his picture with the oil as someone else shielded the camera with an umbrella.

At the time no one in Washington knew about the oil spill on Mars, because the Martians had not said anything about it. But about the time that Washington was turning into the owner of some of the world’s largest oil reserves, the dam on Mars was about to fail. Martian people desperately pushed more sand into place in front of the wall, but the cracks, tunnels, and eroded crevasses were enlarging at an ever increasing rate that was about to exceed the rate of piling up new sand. Besides the pool of oil had reached the top and started to spill over carrying sand away with it. For Albright and his workers, it was a case of throw on a bucket of sand, duck a spurt of oil, throw on a bucket of sand, duck a spurt of oil.

Finally, and just in time, Albright yelled “Get out” through his helmet radio, and everyone ran away from a gigantic, 60-foot sand bulge in the center of the dam. The bulge grew and grew and turned into a red, Martian sand explosion. It gradually turned black as a 60-foot wall of oil followed and replaced the sand. The dam peeled back left and right of the break producing two moving red sand gushers each of which turned black as oil overtook sand. The wall of oil tumbled down the hill albeit at a slow pace because of the low Martian gravity. In spite of the pace, there was nothing more that the Martian people could do to keep it from swamping the field where the food was growing.

The houses had been moved or rebuilt out of the way, and nearly all of the equipment was safe. The people had frantically picked any food in the field that was ready or nearly ready, and had moved the previous stores to safety. But when the advancing oil wall reached the field, most of the plants were still there and still growing. A short time later, they were no longer growing. However, they were still there.

Later, after the oil had spread out and thinned out, Albright walked through the remains of the field poking at the remains of plants and sniffing oil-soaked leaves. He reached down and picked up a large, oil-soaked cork and said, "So that's where it went."

Meanwhile huge puddles of oil were growing in Washington DC, running off the hills, and collecting in low places. There was a levee around the central part of the city to keep the rising Potomac River out. It filled with oil creating a lake that deepened and widened. The oil came in long, irregular, sort-of connected strands that mostly missed the suburbs but splashed into the central part of the city and spread out as the suburban residents watched from a distance and as the strands became shorter while breaking up and spreading out at ground level.

Buses at the bus station had all the oil they needed, but no one could enter them any more. Passengers decided they would rather be on the roofs.

The Smithsonian had a supertanker on display in the river just beyond the levee, but the oil had long since been drained out of it. Now the oil was back, and a group of oil blobs that used to be tourists continued to inspect the ship.

In some low areas, the oil was deep enough to threaten people with drowning. Rescue workers used long ropes to haul them up. An oily rain drained from the Capitol Building's dome and onto the steps and walkways below bothering tourists, senators, and lobbyists alike. The big Lincoln in his memorial looked puzzled. Tourists on top of the Washington Monument decided to stay there. The city's emergency personnel, well trained in what to do for any possible problem, stood around scratching their heads.

By the time it was over, Marjorie Duckworth, Foggie, members of the media, and various others were watching from the White House roof. It was no longer white. The part of the city inside the levee, the main target of the oil strands, was now a lake of oil averaging about five feet in depth.

Later, when it became possible, Marjorie contacted Albright and discussed the situation. Their conversation was, as always, slow due to the time delay for a radio signal to pass between the two planets. But, without the delays, some of it went like this:

"The whole field, huh?"

"Yeah. The whole city, huh?"

"Spared the 'burbs. Most of it is a big lake inside the levee. Its aim was pretty good. And there is another problem. I'm going to be impeached unless I resign first. They are going to cancel that deal about you not being arrested. They want to adapt that same tanker to sending the army to Mars to get you."

"I'm going to have to save them the trouble. We have to come home. We only have a couple of months of food. I was going to ask for the tanker to come and get us."

“Well, don’t do that. I need you to stay put.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to move to Mars. I’ve had it with this planet.”

“How can you do that?”

“They want me to quit and get out of here, so I still have some bargaining power. I can use that tanker to bring a big load of supplies up there – if “up” is the word – and am told that I can get it to you in a couple of months plus just a little. We’ll use some of the oil tanks for extra fuel and some for cargo. So we can pick up a lot of speed. And the planets are lined up well enough to allow a quick passage. So if you can hold out just a little longer, I can come to the rescue.”

“What about the army?”

“Hey, I pulled a big switch the last time didn’t I? I have a group of people who want to join you. I’ll sneak them into army uniforms and aboard the ship. Most of them are from Pittsburgh, so they are on your side. Plenty of room for the extra supplies, too. So what if Foggy thinks they are army supplies?”

“Won’t the army object?”

“Nope. The army is on my side. We have sent them into so many crazy foreign wars that they are tired of it. Why would they want to go to Mars to fight one? So can you hold out until we get there?”

“Sure, we can hold out. Barely, but we’ll make it. Can you start soon?”

“Sure. But, you know, I have a question. Instead of trying to hold back all that oil half-way up the hill, why didn’t you build a levee around your garden?”

“You mean we could do that? Huh. Well, of course, we could have done that. I never thought of that.”

“We do it on Earth all the time. Especially now with all the storms and floods. I hear they didn’t have nearly as much of that 50 years ago. Of course, we didn’t know we had to build a levee facing the sky.”

“Well,” said Albright, “I have a question too. Did you know that your people here were using sunlight to separate water into hydrogen and oxygen for rocket fuel to lift that oil off of Mars?”

“Sure.”

“Do you know how many kilograms of water they used for each kilogram of oil they lifted off?”

“I’m not an engineer. Half a kilogram, maybe?”

“No, it was about nine. That was just to get it off of Mars.”

“Wow, are you going to run out of water?”

“No, we got the water back. The hydrogen and oxygen burned in the rockets and spit out water, which just froze out on the surface again. All they used was sunlight.”

“Was that your question?”

“No, my question is this: Why even bother with the oil if you can use hydrogen that way? Oil is a lot of trouble. Why don’t you just use sunlight to make hydrogen fuel, or something, and burn that?”

“You mean we could do that? Huh. Well, of course, we could have done that. I never thought of that.”

“We do it on Mars all the time.”

“Well, I’ll mention it to Foggie. He’s going to take over.”

But later when she told Foggie she had a suggestion about fuel, he interrupted with, “Don’t worry about that. I still have my MOP. I am going to clean that spill up with my MOP.”

I just knew he was going to say that, sooner or later, she thought. To Foggie, she suggested that he might want to think about some other fuel besides oil, some alternative.

“Are you kidding,” he said. “Look at this oil lake. We can still clean it up and sell it. We’re rich! Rich, I say. Rich. Do you mean just throw that away? Oil is what we do. And we’re rich. And when that ship of yours comes back, we’ll have more.”

Marjorie decided not to tell him that his oil lake was just about a one day supply for the country. If he started thinking clearly, he might suspect that she was about to hijack his tanker and it wouldn’t be returning. So he would not be getting any more Martian oil. And there was nothing to make another tanker out of. There was really only one thought that interested her. It was, “Get me off of this fog-brained planet.”

She did get off the planet. The ship blasted out of orbit full of settlers with many new skills and supplies, much of which were valuable and specialized such as movies and construction equipment. When it was about half way to Mars, Foggy realized that the soldiers he thought were on it were actually still waiting for their orders from the Secretary of Defense. When he asked where the Secretary was, the answer came back, “On the ship.” Foggy then screamed that the only reason he couldn’t think straight was that it was so hot. “Why is it so hot?” he wanted to know. Nobody knew.

He soon forgot all this because he was so busy cleaning up the streets, storing the oil, trying to keep germs from eating it, dealing with all the people who were trying to get Washington to give them more oil, and trying to figure out why so many people didn’t even know that Mars orbits around the earth.