

# STORM WARNINGS

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## Fly the Plane

In this article, our publisher, R. Michael Conley, will share with you some valuable lessons he learned as an instrument-rated private pilot, and how these lessons can be effectively used to frame, address, and navigate many of the significant global challenges we face today.

**WTS:** Before starting, can you say a word about your flying experiences and lessons you've learned that have helped you address many of the global challenges you now write about?

**Conley:** I logged a little over a thousand hours as a private pilot and became instrument-rated along the way—something I'd recommend for any pilot interested in improving their skills.

Several of the lessons learned—too many to fully cover today—have helped me to frame and better understand the global issues I write about, and I am delighted to share some of them with our readers in this interview.

**WTS:** What are some of the more critical piloting lessons you've learned and how have they helped you address the global challenges you cover?

**Conley:** The flying environment is a complex organism of moving parts, and many people have lost their lives through pilot error and other avoidable accidents. As the saying goes, "there are old pilots, and there are bold pilots, but there are few old, bold pilots." Risk mitigation is crucial in any aspect of life, and lessons learned from flying can be easily applied to global challenges:

1. Flying is a team endeavor that no pilot should ever ignore,

2. Situational awareness is an absolutely critical part of flying,
3. Trust your instruments and not your instincts, and
4. Fly the plane with a profound respect for the aviation operating environment.

**WTS:** Okay, let's start with your claim that flying is a team endeavor. How does that relate to the geopolitical world we live in today?

**Conley:** A pilot relies on a number of people, systems, and agencies for a safe flight: The aircraft mechanics, meteorologists, air traffic control specialists, airport maintenance personnel, dependence on other pilots to follow the rules, and so forth. Teamwork is everything, and no good pilot ever forgets that.

Geopolitically, the team concept takes form in leveraging efforts through alliances, trade agreements, cultural ties, coalition building, and collaborative efforts that'll help produce an outcome that exceeds whatever a nation could do on its own. Not even superpowers can go it alone, and good relationships require mutual trust, respect, and predictable consistency.

NATO, a 75-year-old alliance of 32-nations—bound by Article Five that says "an attack on one is an attack on all"—is a perfect example of generating military strength that cannot be achieved by any one nation alone. The European Union (EU) has become an economic juggernaut by virtue of its collective efforts. In Eurasia, the Shanghai Cooperative—a Russian and Chinese creation—is growing with a block of Eurasian allies. BRICS—

Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—is growing its membership base with trade-friendly protocols, and OPEC has generated tremendous leverage for its several oil producing nations for decades.

Conversely, Isolationism, treaty-breaking, and an overly aggressive use of tariffs and economic sanctions can turn lethal in an age of globalism. With artificial intelligence, weaponized drones, and asymmetric cyber-warfare, the risk of miscalculations and unintended consequences are enormous. Global cooperation and good communications can help mitigate this risk. Climate change initiatives, in particular, require a collaborative framework and common commitment. In all of these challenges, critical mass matters—and teamwork is essential to that effort.

**WTS:** Switching gears, can you say more about “situational awareness,” and how this aviation concept is applicable to the global operating environment?

**Conley:** In aviation, it refers to a pilot’s awareness of all the circumstances pertaining to flight performance. Weather conditions, air traffic control, flight patterns, aircraft performance, fuel and cockpit management, etc, are all situational factors pilots must coordinate for a safe flight.

Geopolitically, situational awareness refers to a full understanding of the global environment, its moving parts, and how they interrelate with each other. In a fluid, dynamic environment where nothing is static, it recognizes an action in one area will create repercussions in other areas. It supports a decision-making bias strategically geared to the big picture versus a bevy of random, quick-fix transactional actions that may do more harm than good. It also accounts for oft-neglected forces with a potential for creating adverse consequences in the future.

**WTS:** With respect to your last point, are there areas where the United States may be paying too little attention to threats of potentially longer-term consequences?

**Conley:** Yes. I’m concerned with our lack of appreciation for our role as the holder of the world’s Reserve Currency—the dollar (USD). For clarity, it’s the currency most favored by the world for denominating international transactions, and the dollar dominates all other currencies in this respect. As such, the central banks of the world keep large reserves of dollars on hand for transactional purposes—an enormous financial advantage for the USA.

It provides America with access to cheap capital, and a steady flow of Treasury purchases from foreign countries and central banks. It enables us to incur huge deficits and debts without cratering the value of the USD—through “printing” money as needed and knowledge that the demand for our dollars will remain high for reasons mentioned. It also gives us greater control over mechanisms of global trade—not available to others—and the power to levy sanctions and shape policy. Unfortunately, it has also led to sloppy financial practices on our part.

Needless to say, the USD’s Reserve Currency status, and the power it confers, is resented by many nations. Our adversaries are making significant efforts to “de-dollarize” global trade and form alliances for trading in alternative currencies. China is in the vanguard of this effort and making headway in repositioning and upgrading the Yuan’s status as a world Reserve Currency.

While the USD is too powerful to fall overnight, our relative economic strength is eroding. In 1960, for instance, America’s share of the global GDP was about 40%. It’s now somewhere under 25%. In terms of international transactions denominated in dollars, America’s market share dropped from 72% in 1999 to 59% by the end of 2021. The recent demise of the Petrodollar Agreement with Saudi Arabia could further weaken our Reserve Currency status.

**WTS:** What repercussions will follow if the downward trend of the USD continues indefinitely?

**Conley:** It will play out something like this: As the demand for the dollar lessens, the central banks of the world will start to dump the dollars it no longer needs, and replace them with a basket of other currencies. As the demand for dollars drop, so too will their value, and it'll take more dollars to buy the same level of goods and services. Inflationary, it'll cost more to attract investments in our Treasuries, and the cost of debt will cause interest rates to rise.

Our Reserve Currency position should never be taken for granted, and it might be a good time to recalibrate our overly aggressive monetary and fiscal policies with respect to the negative impact they have on our dollar's status. We might also rethink our aggressive overuse of economic sanctions that'll encourage other nations to seek alternative currencies in retaliation, and we'll need to address the recent demise of the Petrodollar Agreement and the ultimate impact it could have on our Reserve Currency position.

**WTS:** Before continuing, can you say a little more about the Petrodollar status?

**Conley:** Historically, after going off the gold standard in the early 70s, the United States cut a deal with the Saudi's that, essentially, provided military support in return for them transacting their oil trades in dollars. OPEC quickly followed, and the Petrodollar ruled supreme. Countries buying oil from OPEC had to exchange their currencies for dollars to purchase oil, and their central banks had to have vast reserves of dollars on hand to cover the oil purchases. We were also a huge beneficiary of surplus OPEC petrodollars dollars recycled back into our economy.

Due to the fungibility and acceptance of the American Dollar, the Saudis are unlikely to crater the petrodollar system overnight, but they're already transacting oil purchases in Yuan and other currencies and may well migrate to a weighted basket of currencies to replace the dollar as the denomi-

national backbone of their oil transactions. In any event, we lose.

**WTS:** Moving on, can you speak to your "Trust your instruments and not your instincts" lesson?

**Conley:** When flying by instruments without visual references, the instruments, in effect, become our eyes. Our bodily instincts, however, can play tricks on us—called spacial disorientation—and tell us things at odds with our instruments; like we're climbing while, in reality, we're rapidly descending. Pilots are trained to disregard bodily instincts and trust their instruments—knowing that a denial of instrument readings is a sure prescription for disaster.

A blatant non-aviation example of this is the manner in which our climatological instruments are screaming out that something is horribly wrong, but we're not responding with the urgency of what our instruments are telling us.

Without getting into a barrage of telltale metrics, our climate instruments are showing an accelerated build-up of heat-producing greenhouse gases, record-setting global land and sea temperatures, massive worldwide ice melts, rising sea levels, ecosystem destruction, and intensification of conditions causing, floods, droughts, wildfires, and those "once-in-a century" storms that now happen with great regularity.

On the fringe of irreversible tipping points, fueled by aggressive feedback loops that are intensifying and accelerating the pace of climate change, we're not reading into our instruments the urgency they convey. Our instincts to think and act in linear terms are being surpassed by the accelerated threats now exponentially growing, and we're falling behind the curve.

Our climatological instruments, in addition to providing hard, real-time data, often provide longitudinal data to provide a comparative context for gauging the trendlines. As just one example, the historical measurement of heat-producing CO<sub>2</sub> levels—expressed in parts per million (ppm)—show

that in at least the past million years, the level never exceeded 300 ppm. It now stands at over 425 ppm and the alarm bells are ringing.

Like a prudent pilot, we'd be wise to trust our instruments and respond with the sense of urgency needed to mitigate the sharper edges of this growing threat.

**WTS:** This brings us to your last lesson: Fly the plane and respect the operational environment in which it flies. Tell us about that.

**Conley:** NTSB studies of airplane crashes have found that it's not uncommon to see an element called "overfixation" factor into a crash. It happens when a pilot over-fixates on one instrument reading or event to the exclusion of all others. The basics, such as airspeed, altitude, and direction may be overlooked with fatal consequences. Pilot training emphasizes an order of priorities through the mantra of; "aviate, navigate, and communicate." While risk evaluation and mitigation are paramount in any emergency, the pilot can never forget to fly the plane.

In the non-aviation world, our leaders would do well to operate with their own version of the slogan to "fly the plane"—like maybe "run the government." Congress, in particular, gets sidetracked on partisan issues, and neglect key responsibilities such as passing budgets and enacting legislation. Core issues like national security, good governance, sound fiscal and monetary management, law and order, prudent management of scarce resources and infrastructures, and adhering to our democratic values and principles are sometimes short-changed. A healthy dose of bipartisanship could help the cause and keep us focused.

This flying lesson also referenced the need to respect the operating environment, and that also applies to the need for institutional integrity and belief in our democratic values. It was not that many years ago that trust in the Supreme Court, FBI, judicial system, democratic processes—like the peaceful transfer of power—were all givens. But now, with a

fixation on conspiracies, and distrust of politicians and anyone else not in our specific "tribe," we find ourselves in a zero-sum game where Side A can win only if Side B gets smashed. Compromise seems to be a dirty word, and "running the government" too often of secondary importance.

**WTS:** Thank you for sharing and applying your lessons learned from flying to other areas of life. It's obvious that you really loved flying, and we're wondering why you ever decided to quit.

**Conley:** There were a few reasons, but the one overwhelming consideration boiled down to the guilt I started to feel once I learned that I was putting out about 30,000 pounds of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions annually from my personal and, frankly, nonessential flying. Put another way, I didn't feel right about leaving my grandkids and their grandkids with the residue of something I so completely enjoyed. Sounds corny, but that's the way it was for me.

We could use a little more common sense, wisdom, and civility in our approach to decision-making and how we look at things, and the four lessons I learned from flying support all of these components. Please visit our website at [weatheringthestorm.net](http://weatheringthestorm.net) for more information.

Take care, and my best to all,

R. Michael Conley  
Founder, Weathering the Storm, LLC