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FOREIGNERS

The Man Who Would Be King

Virginian Jeremiah Heaton went viral last year by proclaiming himself king of “North Sudan.” Now he says he did it all to save mankind.

BY JOSHUA KEATING

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Emily Heaton, 7, poses at her home in Abingdon, Virginia, on July 19, 2014, next to the flag of “North Sudan,” the territory between Sudan and Egypt that her father, Jeremiah Heaton, claimed for her.

Photo by William Edwards/AFP/Getty Images

Last summer, the Internet was briefly captivated by [the story](#) of a Virginia farmer who traveled to an uninhabited patch of desert known as Bir Tawil in northeast Africa to plant a

flag and proclaim the new “Kingdom of North Sudan,” with himself as king and his daughter, Emily, as princess.

Most of the coverage, including mine, was fairly dismissive, treating the farmer’s flag-planting and princess-crowning as either a bid for viral attention or an extreme case of overindulgent parenting. But, after I wrote about another recently self-declared nation, Jeremiah Heaton contacted me to say that he had been misunderstood. It was never just about making Emily a princess, he says. He has something far grander in mind: Heaton envisions North Sudan as an audacious experiment to help humanity survive climate change.

“I was not prepared for this story to go viral. I posted one Facebook post about it, then the local newspaper picked it up, and from there it went to the AP wire,” he says.

“Unfortunately, the media was very focused on me making Emily a princess, and we never had the opportunity to delve into detail about what our plans are.”

In a bid to put those plans into action, Heaton launched an IndieGogo campaign this month for what he’s calling the “world’s first crowdfunded nation,” devoted to finding innovative solutions for energy efficiency and growing food in an era of climate change. Heaton is currently aiming to raise \$250,000, for “concept development.” If that comes together, he says he will go on to “identify and solicit the world’s best agricultural scientists, renewable energy experts, water purification specialists, plant nutritionists, social scientists, geologists, climatologists urban planners, regional experts and other consultants needed to create the North Sudan Scientific Fund Committee.”

If Heaton’s plan sound a little (or a lot) pie-in-the-sky—well, it is. “With this experiment, we get to see what happens when you fully fund a nation to be energy efficient from the very beginning,” Heaton tells me, noting that even in the green belt of Virginia, more erratic weather patterns have made growing crops more difficult. “With climate getting worse and worse, if you can overcome the difficulties of growing food in the desert, you can take those lessons and apply them to more temperate areas.” He points to Japan’s experiments with LED-powered indoor farms as a potential model.

Heaton told me that he envisions “a city in the desert that maximizes the use of space and maximizes energy efficiency,” providing a “home for people who have a love for this Earth that want to work to help advance this science.” He says he hopes to one day foster efficiency innovation “in a very similar way to how Elon Musk developed the electric car,”

though he concedes that “the difference between myself and Elon is that we need to raise the money, and he’s already got it available.”

Heaton did recently get some money from Disney, which bought the rights to make *The Princess of North Sudan* into a feature film. Given that he felt too much attention had been paid to the princess angle before, I asked if the film would also include his environmental plans. “Due to contractual obligations I cannot discuss the movie project at this time,” he answered. News of the Disney deal prompted an online backlash, with critics objecting to a movie presenting a white American man claiming territory in Africa as a heartwarming fairy tale. Heaton dismisses the notion of colonialism leveled at him. “Bir Tawil was not a country nor does it have a population,” he told me. “Basically, colonialism is when one country takes over another for purposes of exploitation of people and resources. My actions do not fit the definition of colonialism in any way. The term for what I have done is establishment of a new nation, something that has not been seen using *terra nullius* land in hundreds of years.” He says he has “never viewed the world through any type of racial lens.”

Heaton also rejects the notion that his project was an overindulgence of his daughter’s interest in princesses. “Some people tried to equate what I did to someone who spends a million dollars on their child’s Sweet 16, but I can assure you that would never happen in this house.”

“We’re just average people,” Heaton says of the royal family of North Sudan, including the princess. “Sometimes, we’ll be in a store and someone will recognize us, but life has not changed at all. She still has chores she has to do.”

Currently, Heaton is living in Virginia, but says he plans to return to North Sudan for a visit this summer and will eventually relocate there, after the full team is in place. “Even though I’m the king, I’m relinquishing a lot of these decisions to people who have a much broader skill set. I’m the visionary. I’m at the tip of the spear who will lead the charge and get beat up, but ultimately they’re the ones who will decide what will wind up happening.”

The fate of North Sudan might not really be up to the visionary or the skilled. North Sudan is located on a patch of land on the border between Sudan and Egypt that, due to an odd quirk of geopolitical history, is claimed by neither country. Heaton claims he has spoken with Egyptian officials and that once funding is in place, “we’ll formalize our diplomatic ties.” He acknowledges that things could be more complicated with Sudan, given tensions between that country and the United States. “At the end of the day, I still have the United States of America stamped on my passport. I have to be very careful as leader of North

Sudan in developing business relations in ways that won't fall afoul of sanctions," he says. Heaton says he's also in touch with the leaders of Liberland, that recently proclaimed microstate I wrote about, located on a similarly unclaimed patch of land, but this one falling between Serbia and Croatia. Liberland, however, may be something of a cautionary tale: Its president was recently arrested by Croatian police for trespassing an international border into his own "country."

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