

A potentially world-ending president

Though who even notices?

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OPINION

Imagine for a moment a nuclear weapon exploding over... well, you name it: Pakistan, India, or, for that matter, Ukraine, Russia, or the United States. I guarantee you one thing: The news headlines would be (and I use the word advisedly) explosive for days (weeks, months?) on end, assuming, of course, that any media was left to cover it. And yet, here's the strange thing: At this very moment, the slow-motion equivalent of a vast nuclear explosion is occurring over this planet of ours, and, remind me, where are the stunning headlines? Where is the shock? Why is it so eternally passing news (or no news at all)? Why doesn't climate change make the headlines, except in the rarest of cases (or — itself a rare case — in the Guardian, which has an actual "climate crisis" section highlighted atop its daily online edition)? Yes, in the mainstream media, you can certainly read about the melting glaciers and surging glacial lake near Juneau, Alaska, or the floods and growing rainy season in northern China, or the stunning heat and fires this summer in Europe, or the Trump administration's assault on wind power, or the recent unbelievable nights of record temperatures in the Middle East, and, if you want, you can add it all up yourself. But don't wait for our media to do the same, not in the sort of continuous headline-busting fashion that might suit the unfolding disaster we increasingly face on this planet of ours, even if in the weather equivalent of slow motion. And when climate change is indeed in the news, it's rare indeed — unlike, say, the Covid epidemic once upon a time — for it to be covered on a global basis. When was the last time, for instance, that you saw all the fierce or even record fires on this planet put together in a single article? Yes, I know, on occasion there are indeed overview stories about climate change, but compared to the daily screaming headlines about whatever passing thing Donald Trump did or said days (or even hours) ago, they barely exist. In news terms, in fact, his second presidency might be considered the news equivalent of an atomic explosion. Think of him, if you want, as President Headline, hour after hour, day after day, week after week, month after month, without cease and in a

way no other American president has ever truly been treated. In fact, in news terms, his presidency has been distinctly atomic, both figuratively and, in some sense, literally. After all, he's been determined to ensure that fossil fuels in America (and the world) remain the energy source of choice and, when it comes to his career as president, an explosive financial resource of the never-ending moment. (In that context, no one should be shocked that the fossil-fuel industry invested an estimated \$445 million in supporting and influencing his last election campaign and those of his followers in Congress.) No surprise, then, that the second time around, he's made quite an effort to expand oil, gas, and coal production in the US, including signing "four executive orders in April to help revive the beleaguered and polluting coal industry". Meanwhile, he's been doing his damndest to set back green energy in any way imaginable, including by putting in place new Treasury Department "restrictions on tax subsidies for wind and solar projects". And that is just to start down a long list. The Union of Concerned Scientists estimates that his handouts to the fossil-fuel industry will cost Americans \$80 billion over the next decade, and, of course, they'll cost the planet we live on so much more. All too sadly, thanks to both Donald Trump and the media, most of the time all too many of us barely sense that, as I write this and you read it, the slow-motion equivalent of atomic weapons is going off on this planet of ours. Meanwhile, the president remains everybody's screaming headline (both literally and figuratively) every day of the week. And yes, he does indeed matter. But does he truly matter as much as the almost literal, if slow-motion, end of the world, at least as we've known it all these endless centuries, that he's taking such a distinctive (if generally under-reported) hand in bringing about? I don't think so. Unfortunately, judging by the past election (and so much else), I seem to be in the distinct minority in this country when it comes to such subjects. However, I doubt that if, between his two presidencies, the media had dealt with the catastrophic development of climate change as it should have, a man who wildly favors the production of oil, natural gas, and coal — the ultimate sources of most of the greenhouse gas emissions now blanketing the planet — would ever have been elected presi-

dent a second time. Generally, though, unlike Donald Trump or, say, the war in Ukraine, climate change gets only the equivalent of a second thought or a passing mention in the stream of daily news. Who cares if, with such a distinctive helping hand from our president, we're in the process of essentially devastating this planet as a livable place for humanity and so much else?

Heading for 'global nuclear winter'?

I don't, however, want to focus on Donald Trump alone, which would mean taking credit away from the rest of us. As a start — and give us full credit here — it's no small thing that, in our time, we humans have come up with two distinct and painfully distinctive ways of doing in planet Earth. Consider it something of a genuine miracle (though all too seldom written about) that the atomic way hasn't been used again since the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were obliterated on August 6 and 9, 1945, to end World War II. It's almost less than human of us to have let 80 years go by without taking another shot at obliterating something atomically. Mind you, that hasn't stopped eight more countries from developing devastating, potentially world-ending nuclear arsenals (with, undoubtedly, more to come). As of now, there are an estimated 12,000 or so nuclear weapons of various kinds on this planet — enough, that is, to do in an almost unimaginable number of planets. Worse yet, two of the countries that possess them, India and Pakistan, only recently came close to launching a full-scale war with each other, even exchanging rounds of conventionally armed missiles, before agreeing to a cease-fire. And keep in mind that, if those countries were to use nuclear weaponry against each other in what would still pass for a "limited" nuclear war, it would most likely result not just in almost unimaginable local destruction but planetary devastation. Massive clouds of dust from those nuclear explosions could potentially block the sun, leaving us in what has come to be known as a global "nuclear winter" in which more than two billion people on this planet might indeed die. And although he's seldom thought of that way, Donald Trump isn't just a distinctly dystopian president but a potentially end-of-the-world one, too. No, I'm not even thinking about that recent moment when



he announced that he was moving two US nuclear submarines armed with nuclear missiles closer to... oops, I almost wrote the Soviet Union (and that shows you how desperately old I am — slightly older, in fact, than the first use of nuclear weapons on this planet). Yes, the correct word is, of course, Russia or, as he put it, closer to the "appropriate regions" in response to what he termed "highly provocative" comments by former Russian president Dmitry Medvedev. And consider that not just a threatening but a potentially world-ending gesture. (No matter that he himself has long been disturbed by atomic weaponry, warning repeatedly of the possibility of "World War III".) And don't forget that, only recently, this country also decided to once again station some of its nuclear weaponry in Great Britain (already a nuclear power). Of course, Russian President Vladimir Putin responded to those submarine comments by insisting that his country "no longer considers itself bound by a self-imposed moratorium on the deployment of nuclear-capable intermediate range missiles." And mind you, at this moment, China has the third largest and fastest growing arsenal of all. In some sense, given the ongoing growth of such arsenals and the spread of such weaponry across much of the planet (not to speak of the recent US and Israeli attacks on Iran's nuclear facilities), the danger of nuclear conflict seems distinctly on the rise.

A coming hell on earth?

Someday, if we humans are even here to remember the Trumpian moment in history and that first method of ultimate destruction hasn't been used again, humanity will undoubtedly find itself facing the second version head-on. After all, whatever he might not (yet) have done when it comes to nukes, Donald Trump has gone all in on that second global nightmare. Think of it as his urge to create a world not of nuclear winter but of climate-change summer. Or perhaps it would be better and more bluntly accurate to simply think of our future as a distinct and potentially all too literal hell on earth. Just imagine the global heat, fires, floods, you name it, that are in our future. Yes, some countries are indeed working hard to put in place other forms of energy that won't throw greenhouse gases into the atmosphere and turn this planet into an inferno and a half, but even the ones

doing so aren't doing it faintly fast enough. Take China. Its green energy emplacement, its solar and wind power, is not just greater than that of any other country on the planet, but all of them combined. What it's done in terms of the building of new green energy facilities couldn't be more stunning, as is its production of electric cars (at the moment unparalleled on this planet, with more than 60% of such vehicle sales globally). And yet, before you start to feel too upbeat, consider this as well: No country, not even all the rest of them put together, burns more coal than China or is putting in place the number of new coal-powered plants that country is still planning to open. In 2023, it accounted for 95% of new coal construction, a trend that seems to have continued to the present. Can you even believe it? And then, think of my own country, the (increasingly dis-)United States of America. It had done remarkably little when it came to getting rid of fossil fuels, even before Donald Trump entered the White House a second time. After all, it was already the globe's largest producer of crude oil and exporter of natural gas when Joe Biden became president, and, despite his administration's modest attempts to deal with climate change, oil and gas production were — yes! — even higher when he left office (as was true of Donald Trump in his first term). And so it goes, it seems. It should be so much stranger than it feels at this moment to be living in a time when a slow-motion apocalypse of an almost unimaginable sort is actually taking place and with a distinctly world-ending president in the White House raising a storm daily (about anything but climate change). Yes, the fires, floods, heatwaves, and droughts are all growing more intense on planet Earth. And on a globe that, in its own fashion, appears to be going to (an all too literal) hell in a handbasket, Donald Trump seems distinctly ready and willing to make that reality so much worse. Even if no atomic weapons are ever used, it seems as if we're nonetheless heading for what might be thought of as the very opposite of a global nuclear winter. Think of it as a global climate change summer, a slow-motion version of hell on earth. Can you believe it? I'm sweating at the very thought of it.

The illustration shows US President Donald Trump surrounded by images of various negative consequences of climate change.
● BARBARA GIBSON/
THE NEW STATESMAN

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British newspapers report the news of Donald Trump's first victory following the 2016 US Presidential election.
● THE NEW YORKER



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