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BY TOM ENGELHARDT

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## *An All-American Horror Story*

Yes, once upon a time I regularly absorbed science fiction and imagined futures of wonder, but mainly of horror. What else could you think, if you read H.G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* under the covers by flashlight while your parents thought you were asleep? Of course, that novel was a futuristic fantasy, involving as it did Martians arriving in London to take out humanity. Sixty-odd years after secretly reading that book and wondering about the future that would someday be mine, I'm living, it seems, in that very future, however Martian-less it might be. Still, just in case you hadn't noticed, our present moment could easily be imagined as straight out of a science-fiction novel that, even at my age, I'd prefer not to read by flashlight in the dark of night.

I mean, I was barely one when Hiroshima was obliterated by a single atomic bomb. In the splintering of a moment and the mushroom cloud that followed, a genuinely apocalyptic power that had once rested only in the hands of the gods (and perhaps science-fiction authors) became an everyday part of our all-too-human world. From that day on, it was possible to imagine that we — not the Martians or the gods — could end it all. It became possible to imagine that we ourselves were the apocalypse. And give us credit. If we haven't actually done so yet, neither have we done a bad job when it comes to preparing the way for just such a conclusion to human history.

Let's put this in perspective. In the pandemic year 2020, 76 years after two American atomic bombs left the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in ashes, the world's nuclear powers actually increased spending on nuclear weapons by \$1.4 billion more than they had put out the previous year. And that increase was only a small percentage of the ongoing investment of those nine — yes, nine — countries in their growing nuclear arsenals. Worse yet, if you happen to be an American, more than half of the total 2020

“investment” in weaponry appropriate for world-ending scenarios, \$37.4 billion to be exact, was plunked down by our own country. (A staggering \$13.3 billion was given to weapons maker Northrop Grumman alone to begin the development of a new intercontinental ballistic missile, or ICBM, the one thing our thoroughly troubled world obviously needs.) In all, those nine nuclear powers spent an estimated \$137,000 a minute in 2020 to “improve” their arsenals — the ones that, if ever used, could end history as we know it.

### **In the Dust of the History of Death**

Imagine for a second if all that money had instead been devoted to creating and disseminating vaccines for most of the world’s population, which has yet to receive such shots and so be rescued from the ravages of Covid-19, itself a death-dealing, sci-fi-style nightmare of the first order. But how could I even think such a thing when, in the decades since this country dropped that first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, it’s learned its atomic lessons all too well? Otherwise, why would its leaders now be planning to devote at least \$1.7 trillion over the next three decades to “modernizing” what’s already the most modern nuclear arsenal on the planet?

Let me just add that I visited Hiroshima once upon a time with a Japanese colleague who had been born on an island off the coast of atomically destroyed Nagasaki. In 1982, he took me to the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, which, despite exhibiting a carbonized child’s lunchbox and permanently imprinted human shadows, can obviously offer a visitor only a hint of what it was actually like to experience the end of the world, thanks to a single bomb. And yet I found the experience so deeply unsettling that, when I returned home to New York City, I could barely talk about it.

Admittedly, though nine countries now possess nuclear weapons, most of them significantly more powerful than the single bomb that turned Hiroshima into a landscape of rubble, not one has ever been used in war. And that should be considered a miracle on a planet where, when it comes to weapons and war, miracles of any sort tend to be few and far between. After all, it’s estimated that, in 2020, this country alone had more than 5,000 nuclear weapons, at least 1,300 of them deployed and ready to use — enough, that is, to destroy several worlds.

Consider it an irony of the first order, then, that U.S. leaders have spent years focused on trying to keep the Iranians from making a single nuclear weapon, but not for a day, not for an hour, not for a second on keeping this country from producing ever more of them and the delivery systems that would distribute them anywhere on this planet. In that light, just

consider, for instance, that, in 2021, the U.S. is preparing to invest more than \$100 billion in producing a totally new ICBM, whose total cost over its “lifespan” (though perhaps the correct word would be “deathspan”) is already projected at [\\$264 billion](#) — and that’s before the cost overruns even begin. All of this for a future that... well, your guess is as good as mine.

Or consider that, only recently, the American and Russian heads of state, the two countries with by far the biggest nuclear arsenals, met in Geneva, Switzerland, and talked for hours, especially about cyberwar, while spending little appreciable time considering how to rein in their most devastating weaponry and head the planet toward a denuclearized future.

And keep in mind that all of this is happening on a planet where it’s now commonplace scientific knowledge that even a nuclear war between two regional powers, India and Pakistan, could throw so many particulates into the atmosphere as to create a nuclear winter on this planet, one likely to starve to death billions of us. In other words, just one regional nuclear conflict could leave the chaos and horror of the Covid-19 pandemic in the unimpressive dust of the history of death.

### **A Slow-Motion Hiroshima?**

And yet, here’s perhaps the strangest thing of all: we’re still convinced that, since the obliteration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, no matter how much world-ending weaponry has been stockpiled by China, France, India, Israel, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, none has been used. Unfortunately, that should increasingly be seen as a Martian-less fantasy of the first order.

While it’s seldom thought of that way, climate change should really be reimagined as the equivalent of a slow-motion nuclear holocaust. Hiroshima took place in literally seconds, a single blinding flash of heat. Global warming will prove to be a matter of years, decades, even centuries of heat.

That all-too-apocalyptic phenomenon was set off in the nineteenth century via the coal-burning that accompanied the industrial revolution, first in Great Britain and then elsewhere across the planet. It’s only continued over all these years thanks to the burning, above all, of fossil fuels — oil and natural gas — and the release of carbon (and methane) into the atmosphere. In the case of climate change, there are no ICBMs, no nuclear-missile-armed submarines, no nuclear bombers. Instead, there are oil and natural gas companies, whose CEOs, regularly abetted by governments, have proven all too ready to destroy this planet for record profits. They’ve been perfectly willing to burn fossil fuels in a criminal fashion until, quite literally, the end of time. Worse yet, they generally

knew just what kind of harm they were causing long before most of the rest of us and, in response, actively supported climate denialism.

No, there was no mushroom cloud, but rather a “cloud” of greenhouse gases forming over endless years beyond human vision. Still, let’s face it, on this planet of ours, not in 2031 or 2051 or 2101 but right at this very moment, we’re beginning to experience the equivalent of a slow-motion nuclear war.

In a sense, we’re already living through a modern slo-mo version of Hiroshima, no matter where we are or where we’ve traveled. At this moment, with an increasingly fierce megadrought gripping the West and Southwest, the likes of which hasn’t been experienced in at least 1,200 years, among the top candidates for an American Hiroshima would be Phoenix (118 degrees), Las Vegas (114 degrees), the aptly named Death Valley (128 degrees), Palm Springs (123 degrees), and Salt Lake City (107), all record temperatures for this season. A recent report suggests that temperatures in famed Yellowstone National Park are now as high or higher than at any time in the past 20,000 years (and possibly in the last 800,000 years). And temperatures in Oregon and Washington are already soaring in record fashion with more to come, even as the fire season across the West arrives earlier and more fiercely each year. As I write this, for instance, California’s Big Sur region is ablaze in a striking fashion, among growing numbers of western fires. Under the circumstances, ironically enough, one of the only reasons some temperature records might not be set is that sun-blocking smoke from those fires might suppress the heat somewhat.

You should know that you’re on a different planet when even the most mainstream of news sources begins to put climate change in the lead in environmental pieces, as in this recent first sentence of a CNN report: “The incredible pictures of a depleted Lake Mead, on the Nevada-Arizona border, illustrate the effects of drought brought on by climate change.”

You could also imagine our modern Hiroshimas in the Florida Keys, where inexorably rising sea levels, due in part to the massive melting of ice in Greenland and Antarctica, are already threatening that especially low-lying part of that southern state. Or perhaps the Gulf Coast would qualify, since the heating waters of the Atlantic are now creating record tropical-storm and hurricane seasons that, like the heat and fires in the West, seem to arrive earlier each year. (One Florida city, Miami, is already contemplating building a massive seawall to protect itself against devastating future storm surges.)

In this desperately elongated version of nuclear war, everything being experienced in this country (and in a similar fashion around the world, from Australia's brutally historic wildfires to a recent heat wave in the Persian Gulf, where temperatures topped 125 degrees) will only grow ever more extreme, even if, by some miracle, those nuclear weapons are kept under wraps. After all, according to a new NASA study, the planet has been trapping far more heat than imagined in this century so far. In addition, a recently revealed draft of an Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report suggests that our over-heating future will only grow worse in ways that hadn't previously been imagined. Tipping points may be reached — from the melting of polar ice sheets and Arctic permafrost (releasing vast amounts of methane into the atmosphere) to the possible transformation of much of the Amazon rain forest into savannah — that could affect the lives of our children and grandchildren disastrously for decades to come. And that would be the case even if greenhouse-gas releases are brought under control relatively quickly. Once upon a time, who could have imagined that humanity would inherit the kinds of apocalyptic powers previously left to the gods or that, when we finally noticed them, we would prove eerily unable to respond? Even if another nuclear weapon is never used, we stand capable, in slow-motion fashion, of making significant parts of our world uninhabitable — or, for that matter, if we were to act soon, keeping it at least reasonably habitable into the distant future.

Imagine, just as a modest start, a planet on which every dollar earmarked for nuclear weapons would be invested in a green set of solutions to a world growing by the year ever warmer, ever redder, ever less inhabitable.

*This column was distributed by [TomDispatch](#).*

**Tom Engelhardt** is a co-founder of the American Empire Project and the author of *The United States of Fear* as well as a history of the Cold War, [The End of Victory Culture](#). He is a fellow of the [Nation Institute](#) and runs [TomDispatch.com](#). His latest book is [Shadow Government: Surveillance, Secret Wars, and a Global Security State in a Single-Superpower World](#).

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