

# Suicide Watch on Planet Earth

As the Flames Began to Rise, the Arsonists Appeared

By [Tom Engelhardt](#)

Theme: [Environment](#)

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*As Notre Dame burned, as the [flames leapt](#) from its roof of ancient timbers, many of us watched in grim horror. Hour after hour, on screen after screen, channel after channel, you could see that 850-year-old cathedral, a visiting spot for [13 million](#) people annually, being gutted, its roof timbers flaring into the evening sky, its steeple [collapsing](#) in a ball of fire.*

*It was dramatic and deeply disturbing — and, of course, unwilling to be left out of any headline-making event, President Trump promptly [tweeted](#) his advice to the French authorities: “Perhaps flying water tankers could be used to put it out. Must act quickly!” No matter that water from such planes would probably have taken the cathedral’s towers down and endangered lives as well — “the equivalent,” [according to](#) a French fire chief, “of dropping three tons of concrete at 250 kilometers per hour [on] the ancient monument.”*

Still, who could doubt that watching such a monument to the human endeavor being transformed into a shell of its former self was a reminder that everything human is mortal; that, whether in a single lifetime or 850 years, even the most ancient of our artifacts, like those in [Iraq](#) and [Syria](#) recently, will sooner or later be scourged by the equivalent of (or even quite literally by) fire and sword; that nothing truly lasts, even the most seemingly permanent of things like, until now, Notre Dame?

That cathedral in flames, unlike so much else in our moment (including you-know-who in his every waking moment), deserved the front-and-center media attention it got. Historically speaking, it was a burning event of the first order. Still, it’s strange that the most unnerving, deeply terrifying burning underway today, not of that ancient place of worship that lived with humanity for so many tumultuous centuries but of the planet itself, remains largely in the background.

When the cathedral in which Napoleon briefly [crowned himself](#) emperor seemed likely to collapse, it was certifiably an event of headline importance. When, however, the cathedral (if you care to think of it that way) in which humanity has been nurtured all these tens of thousands of years, on which we spread, developed, and became what we are today — I mean, of course, the planet itself — is in danger of an unprecedented sort from fires we continue to set, that’s hardly news at all. It’s largely relegated to the back pages of our attention, lost any day of the week to headlines about a disturbed, suicidal young woman [obsessed](#) with the Columbine school massacre or an attorney general [obsessed](#) with protecting the president.

And let’s not kid ourselves, this planet of ours is beginning to burn — and not just last week or month either. It’s been smoldering for decades now. Last summer, for instance, amid [global heat records](#) (Ouargla, Algeria, 124 degrees Fahrenheit; Hong Kong, over 91 degrees

Fahrenheit for 16 straight days; Nawabsha, Pakistan, 122 degrees Fahrenheit; Oslo, Norway, over 86 degrees Fahrenheit for 16 consecutive days; Los Angeles, 108 degrees Fahrenheit), wildfires [raged](#) inside the Arctic Circle. This March, in case you hadn't noticed — and why would you, since it's gotten so little attention? — the temperature in Alaska was, on average, [20 degrees](#) (yes, that is not a misprint) above normal and typical ice roads between villages and towns across parts of that state were melting and [collapsing](#) with deaths ensuing.

Meanwhile, in the Antarctic, ice is [melting](#) at a rate startling to scientists. If the process accelerates, global sea levels could rise far faster than expected, beginning to drown coastal cities like Miami, New York, and Shanghai more quickly than previously imagined. Meanwhile, globally, the wildfire season is [lengthening](#). [Fearsome fires](#) are [on the rise](#), as are [droughts](#), and that's just to begin to paint a picture of a heating planet and its ever more extreme weather systems and [storms](#), of (if you care to think of it that way) a Whole Earth version of Notre Dame.

### The Arsonists Arrive

As was true with [Notre Dame](#), when it comes to the planet, there were fire alarms before an actual blaze was fully noted. Take, for example, the advisory panel of scientists reporting to President Lyndon Johnson on the phenomenon of global warming back in 1965. They would, in fact, predict with [remarkable accuracy](#) how our world was going to change for the worse by this twenty-first-century moment. (And Johnson, in turn, would [bring the subject up](#) officially for perhaps the first time in a Special Message to Congress on February 5, 1965, 54 years before Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's [Green New Deal proposal](#).) As that panel wrote at the time, "Through his worldwide industrial civilization, Man is unwittingly conducting a vast geophysical experiment. Within a few generations he is burning the fossil fuels that slowly accumulated in the earth over the past 500 million years..." In other words, the alarm was first sounded more than half a century ago.

When it comes to climate change, however, as the smoke began to appear and, in our own moment, the first flames began to leap — after all, the last four years have been the [hottest on record](#) and, despite the [growth](#) of ever less expensive alternative energy sources, carbon dioxide emissions into the atmosphere are still [rising](#), not falling — no firemen arrived (just [children](#)). There were essentially no adults to put out the blaze. Yes, there was the Paris climate accord but it was largely an agreement in principle without [enforcement power](#) of any genuine sort.

In fact, across significant parts of the planet, those who appeared weren't firefighters at all, but fire feeders who will likely prove to be the ultimate arsonists of human history. In a way, it's been an extraordinary performance. Leaders who vied for, or actually gained, power not only refused to recognize the existence of climate change but were quite literally eager to aid and abet the phenomenon. This is true, for instance, of the new president of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, who came to power prepared to turn the already endangered [carbon sink](#) of the Amazon rain forest into a [playground](#) for corporate and agricultural destroyers. It is similarly true in Europe, where right-wing populist movements have begun to [successfully oppose](#) gestures toward dealing with climate change, gaining both attention and votes in the process. In Poland, for instance, just such a party led by President Andrzej Duda has come to power and the [promotion](#) of coal production has become the order of the day.

And none of that compared to developments in the richest, most powerful country of all, the one that [historically](#) has put more greenhouse gas emissions into the atmosphere than any other. On taking office, Donald Trump [appointed](#) more climate-change deniers to his cabinet than might have previously seemed possible and swore fealty to “[American energy dominance](#),” while working to [kneecap](#) the development of alternative energy systems. He and his men tried to [open](#) new [areas](#) to oil and gas drilling, while in every way imaginable striving to remove what limits there had been on Big Energy, so that it could release its carbon emissions into the atmosphere unimpeded. And as the planetary cathedral began to burn, the president set the mood for the moment (at least for his vaunted “base”) by [tweeting](#) such things as “It’s really cold outside, they are calling it a major freeze, weeks ahead of normal. Man, we could use a big fat dose of global warming!” or, on [alternative energy](#), “You would be doing wind, windmills, and if it doesn’t if it doesn’t blow you can forget about television for that night... Darling, I want to watch television. I’m sorry, the wind isn’t blowing.”

Among those who will someday be considered the [greatest criminals in history](#), don’t forget the Big Energy CEOs who, [knowing the truth](#) about climate change from their own hired scientists, did everything they could to [increase](#) global doubts by [funding](#) climate-denying groups, while continuing to be among the most profitable companies around. They even [hedged their bets](#) by, among other things, investing in alternative energy and using it to more effectively drill for oil and natural gas.

Meanwhile, of course, the planet that had proven such a comfortable home for humanity was visibly going down. No, climate change won’t actually destroy the Earth itself, just the conditions under which humanity (and so [many other species](#)) thrived on it. Sooner or later, if the global temperature is indeed allowed to rise a catastrophic seven degrees Fahrenheit or four degrees Celsius, as an environmental impact statement from the Trump administration [suggested](#) it would by 2100, parts of the planet could become uninhabitable, hundreds of millions of human beings could be set in [desperate motion](#), and the weather could intensify in ways that might be nearly unbearable for human habitation. Just read David Wallace-Wells’s [The Uninhabitable Earth](#), if you doubt me.

This isn’t even contestable information anymore and yet it’s perfectly possible that Donald Trump could be elected to a second term in 2020. It’s perfectly possible that more right-wing populist movements could sweep into power in Europe. It’s perfectly possible that Vladimir Putin’s version of great powerdom — a sagging Russian petro-state — could continue on its present globally warming path well into the future.

Understand this: Trump, Bolsonaro, Duda, Putin, and the others are just part of human history. Sooner or later, they will be gone. Climate change, however, is not part of human history (whatever it may do to civilization as we know it). Its effects could, in human terms, last for [almost unimaginable](#) periods of time. It operates on a different time scale entirely, which means that, unlike the tragedies and nightmares of human history, it is not just a passing matter.

Of course, the planet will survive, as will some life forms (as would be true even if humanity were to succumb to that other possible path to an apocalypse, a nuclear holocaust resulting in “[nuclear winter](#)”). But that should be considered small consolation indeed.

Putting the Planet on a Suicide Watch

Consider global warming a story for the ages, one that should put Notre Dame's near-destruction after almost nine centuries in grim perspective. And yet the planetary version of burning, which should be humanity's crisis of all crises, has been met with a general lack of media attention, reflecting a lack of just about every other kind of attention in our world (except by those [outraged children](#) who know that they are going to inherit a degraded world and are increasingly making their displeasure about it [felt](#)).

To take just one example of that lack of obvious attention, the response of the mega-wealthy to the burning of Notre Dame was an almost instantaneous burst of giving. The euro equivalent of nearly a [billion dollars](#) was raised more or less overnight from the wealthiest of French families and other .01%ers. Remind me of the equivalent for climate change as the planet's spire threatens to come down?

As for arsonists like Donald Trump and the matter of collusion, there's not even a question mark on the subject. In the United States, such collusion with the destroyers of human life on Planet Earth is written all over their actions. It's beyond evident in the [appointment](#) of former [oil and gas lobbyists](#) and fellow travelers to positions of power. Will there, however, be the equivalent of a Mueller investigation? Will the president be howling "witch hunt" again? Not a chance. When it comes to Donald Trump and climate change, there will be neither a Mueller Report, nor the need for a classic [Barr defense](#). And yet collusion — hell, yeah! The evidence is beyond overwhelming.

We are, of course, talking about nothing short of the ultimate crime, but on any given day of our lives, you'd hardly notice that it was underway. Even for an old man like me, it's a terrifying thing to watch humanity make a decision, however inchoate, to essentially commit suicide. In effect, there is now a suicide watch on Planet Earth. Let's hope the kids can make a difference.

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