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[www.afgazad.com](http://www.afgazad.com)

[afgazad@gmail.com](mailto:afgazad@gmail.com)

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Tom Engelhardt

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## *What will we remember from 2022? The (dis)construction of the nation and the (dis)construction of the planet (USA style)*

With 2022 in its infancy, I can only hope so, which, in itself, could not be a sadder summary of our times.



*Let me start the year 2022 by going back – very, very far back – for a moment.*

It is easy to forget since when this world has been a dangerous place for human beings. I thought about it recently, when I stumbled upon a small journal that my Aunt Hilda scribbled, decades ago, in a small notebook. In it he commented, as if in passing: "I

graduated during that horrible flu epidemic of 1919, and I got infected." And it was serious enough to spoil his entry into high school. It doesn't say much more about it.

Still, I was surprised. In all the years that my father and sister lived and occasionally talked about the past, they had never (nor had my mother, by the way) mentioned the disastrous "[Spanish flu](#)" pandemic of 1918-1920. I had no idea that anyone in my family had been affected by her. In fact, until I read John Barry's 2005 book, *The Great Influenza*, I didn't even know that a pandemic had devastated America (and the rest of the world) at the beginning of the last century, in a remarkably similar, but even worse, way than covid-19 (at least until now), before being essentially discarded from history and most families' memory books.



Un hospital en Kansas durante la epidemia de gripe española en 1918. Otis Historical Archives National Museum of Health & Medicine

Esto debería sorprender a cualquiera. Al fin y al cabo, en aquella época, se calcula que una quinta parte de la población mundial, posiblemente [50 millones de personas](#), murieron a causa de las oleadas de esa temida enfermedad, a menudo de forma espantosa, e incluso en este país fueron enterradas a veces en [fosas comunes](#). Mientras tanto, algunas de las controversias que hemos vivido recientemente sobre, por ejemplo, las [mascarillas](#), se desarrollaron de forma igualmente amarga entonces, antes de que aquel desastre global fuera superado y olvidado. Casi nadie que conozca cuyos padres vivieran aquella pesadilla había oído hablar de ella mientras crecía.

Agacharse y cubrirse

Sin embargo, el breve comentario de mi tía me recordó que desde hace mucho tiempo habitamos un mundo peligroso y que, en ciertos aspectos, el peligro no ha hecho sino aumentar con el paso de las décadas. También me hizo pensar en cómo, al igual que con aquella gripe mortal de la época de la Primera Guerra Mundial, olvidamos a menudo (o al menos dejamos convenientemente de lado) tales horrores.

Después de todo, en mi infancia y juventud, tras la destrucción nuclear de [Hiroshima](#) y [Nagasaki](#), este país comenzó a construir un asombroso arsenal nuclear y pronto sería seguido, en ese camino, por la Unión Soviética. Estamos hablando de un armamento que podría haber destruido este planeta muchas veces y, en aquellos tensos años de la Guerra Fría, a veces daba la sensación de que ese destino podría ser el nuestro. Todavía recuerdo haber [escuchado](#) al presidente John F. Kennedy en la radio cuando comenzó la crisis de los misiles cubanos de 1962 -yo era un estudiante de primer año en la universidad-, y pensar que todos los que conocía en la Costa Este, incluido yo mismo, pronto estaríamos bien fritos (¡y [casi lo estuvimos!](#)).



La sala de guerra en la película de Stanley Kubrick *Dr. Strangelove* (1964)

To put that potential fate in perspective, it must be borne in mind that, just two years earlier, the US military had developed a [Single Integrated Operational Plan](#) for a nuclear war against the Soviet Union and China. Based on that plan, a first strike of 3,200 nuclear weapons would be "spread" over 1,060 targets located in the communist world, including at least 130 cities. If all went "well", these cities would have ceased to exist. Official casualty estimates were 285 million dead and 40 million injured; and, considering all that was not known then about the effects of radiation, let alone the "[nuclear winter](#)" that such

an attack would have created on this planet, such figures were undoubtedly a grotesque underestimate.

When you think about it now (if at all), that plan – to steal [Jonathan Schell's](#) famous phrase – and the fate of the land that accompanied it should continue to stun us. After all, until August 6, 1945, Armageddon had been left in the hands of the gods. However, in my youth, the possibility of a human-caused calamity wiping out the world was hard to forget, and not just because of the Cuban missile crisis. At school we participated in nuclear drills ("[crouching and covering](#)" under [our desks](#)) and fires, just as today most schools conduct drills in front of [an active shooter](#), fearing the possibility of mass killing on the premises. Similarly, when you strolled, you occasionally came across the [symbol](#) of a nuclear shelter, while the media regularly reported on people [discussing](#) whether, in the event of a nuclear alert, they should let their neighbors into their private backyard shelters or arm themselves to keep them out.

However, even before the end of the Cold War, the idea that we could all be expelled from this planet faded into a distant background, while the weaponry itself [spread](#) throughout the world. Just ask yourself: In these pandemic days, how often do you think about the fact that we are always one or two fingers away from nuclear annihilation? And this is especially true now that we know that even a regional nuclear war between, say, India and Pakistan, could lead to a [nuclear winter](#) scenario in which billions of us could end up starving.

Yet even as this country plans to invest nearly [\\$2 trillion](#) in what some call the "modernization" of its nuclear arsenal, except [for news](#) about a possible future Iranian bomb (but never about Israel's actual nuclear weapons), such weapons rarely occupy anyone's mind. At least for now, the nuclear-style end of the world is essentially forgotten history.

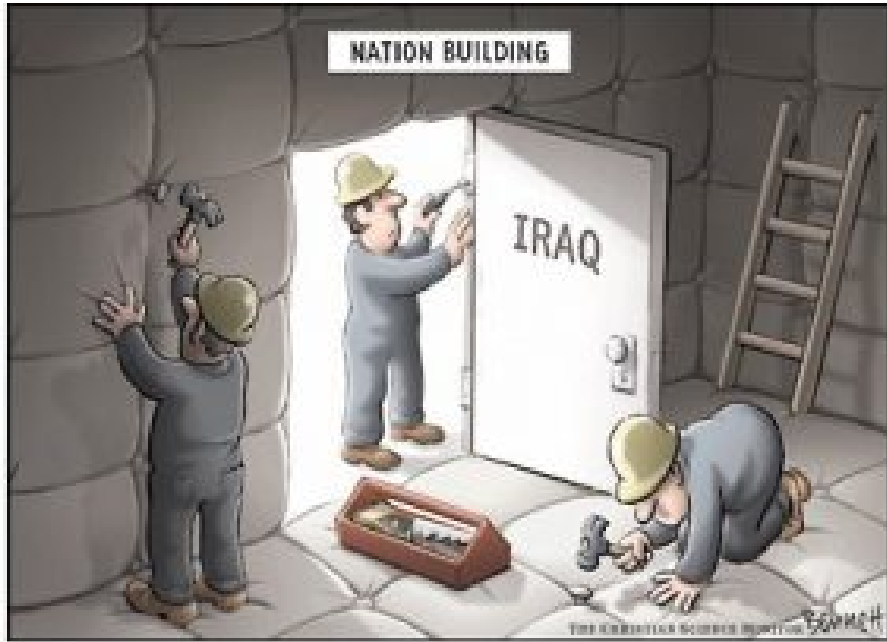
### The Old Impulse to Build a Nation

Right now, of course, the strenuous terror present in all our minds is the updated version of that 1918 pandemic. And with it has come another terror: the nightmare of the current version of the Republican Party that opposes vaccination, masks, social distancing and whatever comes to mind, so extreme that his followers without a mask [boo](#) even former President Donald Trump for suggesting they get vaccinated.

The question is: What do most GOP leaders really represent? What terror do they embody? In a sense, the answer is anything but complicated. Too literally, they are murderers. The urgency of Republican governors and other legislators, national and local, to cancel vaccination mandates, belittle the mask in schools and the like, has functionally turned them into [serial killers](#), the disease equivalents of our endless rounds of [mass shooters](#). But leaving all that aside for a moment, what *else* do they represent?

Let me try to answer that question indirectly, and I will not begin with the terror they now represent, but with America's "Global War on Terror." It was, of course, launched by President George W. Bush and his senior officials after the September 11 attacks. Like his neoconservative supporters, they were convinced that, with the Soviet Union relegated to the history books, the world was rightfully theirs to shape it as they wished. The United States was often referred to as the "only superpower" on planet Earth and thought it was time for it to act accordingly. As Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld [suggested](#) to his aides before the ruins of the Pentagon on Sept. 11: "Attack en masse: sweep everything, whether it's related or not."

He was referring, of course, not only to Al Qaeda, whose hijackers had just torn down the World Trade Center and part of the Pentagon, but to Iraq's autocratic ruler, Saddam Hussein, who had nothing to do with that terrorist group. In other words, for those then in power in Washington, that murderous attack offered the perfect opportunity to demonstrate how, in a world of dwarves, the planet's military and economic giant should act.



Nation Building, by Clay Bennett, *The Christian Science Monitor*

It was a time, as it was said then, for "[nation-building](#)" at the point of a sword (or drone) and President Bush (who had once opposed such attempts) and his senior officials were in favor of them in full. As he later put it, the invasion of Afghanistan was "the ultimate mission of nation-building," as would the invasion of Iraq a year and a half later.

Of course, we now know very well that the most powerful country on the planet, through its arms might and [exceptionally well-funded](#) army, would prove incapable of building anything, let alone a new set of national institutions in distant lands that were subordinate to this country. In terms of great power, if left alone on planet Earth, the United States would prove to be the ultimate (de)builder of nations, a world-class destroyer. Compared to Saddam's Iraq, that country is now in chaos; while Afghanistan, a poor but reasonably stable and decent place (even home to the "[hippy route](#)") before the Soviets and Americans clashed there in the 80s and the UNITED States invaded it in 2001, is now an almost unimaginable [catastrophic zone](#).



### The Republican Party deconstructs the United States

The strangest thing of all, however, was this: Somehow, that powerful all-American twenty-first century impulse not to build, but to undo nations, seems to have migrated home from our global war against (or, [if you prefer](#), in favor of) terror. As a result, although it is not an Iraq or an Afghanistan, the United States has begun to resemble a nation in the process of deconstruction.

I have no doubt that you know what I mean. Think of it this way: thank God Donald Trump's party was never called the Democratic Party, as it is now immersed in a process of doing "legally" ([law by law](#)) everything possible to dismantle the American democratic system as we have known it and, as far as that party is concerned, the process has evidently [only just begun](#).

Keep in mind that Donald Trump would never have reached the White House, nor would that process be so advanced if, under previous presidents, this country had not put its taxpayers' money to work on dismantling the political and social systems of distant lands in such a striking way. Without the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, not to mention the ongoing war against ISIS, al-Shabaab and other proliferating terrorist groups, without the [diversion](#) of our money into a military-industrial complex and the radical growth of inequality in this country, a swindling and bankrupt guy would never have set foot [in](#) the Oval Office. It would have been equally inconceivable that, [more than five years later](#), "up

to 60% of Republican voters [continued] to believe their lies" in an essentially religious way.

In a sense, in November 2016, Donald Trump was elected to undo a country that was already beginning to crumble. In other words, it shouldn't have been the surprise it was. A presidential version of the autocracy had been growing here before he approached the White House, or how could his predecessors have fought those wars abroad without some input from Congress?

And now, naturally, the Republicans, with the help of that failed former president and coup plotter, are tearing this nation apart in a big way with full effectiveness. They already have absolute dominance in too many states, with the possibility of regaining Congress in 2022 and the presidency in 2024.

And let's not forget the obvious. In the midst of a devastating pandemic and a deconstruction of the nation on a bewildering scale here at home, there is another kind of deconstruction that couldn't be more dangerous. After all, we live on a planet that is crumbling in a surprising way. In the holiday season that has just passed, for example, news of extreme weather conditions around the world – from a [devastating typhoon](#) in the Philippines to [shocking flooding](#) in some areas of Brazil and the possible [melting of](#) the Thwaites Glacier in Antarctica – has been, to say the least, dramatic.

Similarly, in this country, in the last weeks of 2021, the word "record" was associated with weather phenomena ranging from [tornadoes](#) of an unprecedented type to [winter heat waves](#), through [blizzards](#) and torrential rains and, precisely [in Alaska](#), very high temperatures. And so we go, having to face an unprecedented climate emergency, with those Republicans and that "moderate" Democrat Joe Manchin too willing not only to undo a nation, but a world, with the help and complicity of the worst criminals in history. And no, in this case, I'm not thinking about Donald Trump and his team, as bad as they are, but about the [CEOs](#) of fossil fuel companies.

So, here's what I wonder: Assuming Armageddon doesn't really come, leaving us all in the dust (or in the water or in the fire), if one day they tell their grandchildren about this world of ours and what we've lived through, will they forget about the 2020-Pandemic? And the climate crisis of 1900-2021? Many decades from now, could those nightmares be relegated to the scribbled notes found in the account of the life of some former relative?



With 2022 in its infancy, I can only hope so, which, in itself, could not be a sadder summary of our times.

Tom Engelhardt

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Translated by [Sinfo Fernández](#)

Edited by [María Piedad Ossaba](#)

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