

A Planetary Crisis Awaits the Next President

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By Stephen Markley

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In the 12 years it took me to write “The Deluge,” my novel of the climate crisis, I watched as chaotic weather, record temperatures and shocking political events outpaced my imagination. The book depicts the human tipping point, when the damage becomes irreversible and the foundations of our economy, our politics and our world begin to crack. The plot points I was concocting in 2010 would become a constant drumbeat of headlines into 2024.

Last year alone, the warning signs included soaring ocean temperatures, a record loss of Antarctic sea ice and the highest global average temperature in recorded human history. Wildfires, droughts, floods and extreme weather of every variety [have come to shock](#) even the scientists who study the shocking stuff. This is not the history we want to be living through.

Yet here we are, and those gears of history will grind together again this year as another presidential election meets our permanent emergency. The stakes of the climate crisis render the cliché of “This is the most important election of our lifetimes” increasingly true because every four years those stakes climb precipitously alongside the toppling records of a radically new climatic regime.

The White House may soon be recaptured by Donald Trump, who called the climate crisis a “hoax” and even when backing off that assertion [insisted](#), “I don’t know that it’s man-made.” He has demonstrated his thinking again and again, as when he [told a scientist](#), “It’ll start getting cooler, you just watch.”

There has recently been a great deal of reporting on [Project 2025](#), a 900-plus-page road map for a second Trump administration assembled by the conservative Heritage Foundation. On climate, the report is succinct: “The Biden administration’s climate fanaticism will need a whole-of-government unwinding.”

The report recommends a repeal of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act and Inflation Reduction Act, which would shred the tax credits that have led to hundreds of billions of dollars in investments in clean energy, the jump-starting of factory openings and the creation of jobs in virtually every corner of the country. Also lost will be investments in environmental justice, those measures that aim to reduce pollution in marginalized communities, provide affordable clean energy and create jobs in low-income neighborhoods. As for electric cars, which are critical to meeting the nation’s climate goals, the report recommends an end to all federal mandates and subsidies.

A second Trump administration would most likely grant permits for fossil fuel drilling and pipelines basically anywhere it has the say-so, [scrap the methane fee](#) on oil and gas

producers and dismantle new pollution limits on cars, trucks and power plants. It would almost certainly revoke California's waiver to approve higher standards under the Clean Air Act, seek repeal of the Antiquities Act used to protect endangered landscapes and attempt to gut the Endangered Species Act.

But perhaps most ominously, a Trump presidency would impede Americans' ability to find out what's being done to them. Project 2025 proposes dismantling and privatizing parts of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, a federal agency that studies and monitors the climate, and using an executive order to "reshape" the Global Change Research Program, apparently to muddy its [assessments](#) of the pace of climate change and the potential impact. We would walk into this new dark era with a blindfold on.

Mr. Trump is at heart a billionaire doing favors for other billionaires by cutting their taxes and eliminating or not enforcing rules that protect the rest of us from asthma and cancer. During his four years in office, he managed to dismantle or degrade over 100 environmental rules, which brought real-world death and suffering. The medical journal *The Lancet* estimated that in the year 2019 alone these policies led to [22,000 excess deaths](#) from heart disease, asthma and lung cancer, among other causes.

For all the damage that was done, Mr. Trump and his administration fortunately proved incompetent at making the government fulfill his intentions. We shouldn't delude ourselves with thinking that he and his allies will be caught as flatfooted as they were by their surprise victory in 2016. What Project 2025 demonstrates is that an enormous amount of thinking has gone in to how to destroy the government's capacity to enforce environmental protections, conduct research or even assess the scientific reality of our situation. Of course, the worst-case scenario, a full or partial repeal of the Inflation Reduction Act, will depend on the composition of Congress.

My advice is to not tell yourself comforting bedtime stories about the political resiliency of that law when so many of its benefits lie in the years ahead.

One can hold up a document like Project 2025 and shout from the rooftops just how extreme it is. One can attempt to use numbers to describe this danger. But everyone will fall short — and, surely, I've fallen short — in describing just how frightening a second Trump presidency could actually be.

Do not limit your imagination.

Mr. Trump himself offered a glimpse in a recent meeting with oil and gas executives at Mar-a-Lago, where, [The Washington Post](#) reported, he said, "I hate wind." He also told the executives that they should contribute to his campaign, that his policies would be much better for oil and gas than President Biden's and that he'd do much of what they wanted "on Day 1."

History will fork, and in a single day our window of opportunity for keeping the climate crisis from spiraling out of control could very well slam shut. Global emissions must peak this decade and begin a rapid decline for the world to have any chance of avoiding catastrophic warming. When I began writing my novel, we had something like 20 years to accomplish that task. After the election, we will have 62 months.

This makes the 2024 election a singular event in the climate crisis. Despite a number of headwinds, renewable energy capacity boomed last year, increasing 50 percent globally. According to the International Energy Agency, global renewable capacity is on course to be at two and a half times current levels by 2030, which means the world is edging closer to achieving a key climate target of [tripling renewable energy capacity](#) by 2030. The risks of the crisis are growing rapidly, but so is our capacity to confront this challenge at the speed and scale necessary. We must accelerate that momentum at all costs.

The other major candidate in the race, President Biden, has been a steadfast proponent of that acceleration.

I fully admit, Mr. Biden was not my first, nor even my seventh, choice in the 2020 Democratic primary. Yet when it came to the immense challenge of confronting this crisis, I am forever grateful that he proved me wrong, delivering a game-changing victory with the narrowest of congressional margins. Even as much of the rest of Mr. Biden's ambitious policy agenda got hacked away in Congress, one thing remained: re-industrialization through clean energy investment.

This led to the passage of the Inflation Reduction Act, the most significant climate legislation the country has ever seen and a more important achievement than the Paris climate accord. In just two years, that bill has galvanized clean energy investment in the United States and set a pace for the rest of the world to compete in the growing clean energy economy. These [investments](#) are expected to create more than [nine million jobs](#) over the next decade. That growth in clean energy is not only breaking records by the year but also by the quarter, with the end of 2023 seeing a [40 percent increase](#) in investments in clean energy and transportation over the last quarter of 2022.

As those industries of decarbonization spread to [every state](#) and to many congressional districts, people's lives and livelihoods increasingly will become intertwined and invested in clean energy. When a Texas congressman can't survive an election in a solidly Republican district without the backing of the wind and solar industries, when a [battery factory in Hardin County, Ky.](#), is employing 5,000 people, when the fossil fuel economy is falling to the zero-carbon infrastructure we demand, that will change a politician's calculations. The increasing political and economic clout of those clean energy industries will challenge the fossil fuel status quo. We are at the beginning of an absolute revolution of the American economy that will send manufacturing soaring and pollution plummeting.

Any [climate hawk](#) could try to encumber my argument with caveats, unaddressed pet issues and whatabouts, but as far as our shared atmosphere is concerned, there are only

three pieces of relevant information: who Joe Biden is, who Donald Trump is, and the urgency of the crisis before us. While it's true the United States continues to produce record amounts of fossil gas and near-record amounts of oil, these numbers reflect the all-of-the-above energy policies of the past 15 years. The Inflation Reduction Act and several critical regulations from Mr. Biden's Environmental Protection Agency will drive the decarbonization that should put us within striking distance of our Paris climate agreement target by 2030, something that seemed unfathomable four years ago.

It's worth dissecting how we achieved such progress. This stunning victory was made possible only by Stacey Abrams's tenacious work in Georgia to flip two U.S. Senate seats in 2020, giving Mr. Biden a Senate majority on top of a House majority (which he narrowly lost in 2022).

Work is also underway on the state and local levels. In the last four years, Democrats have led efforts in Colorado, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan and Washington to pass ambitious climate laws when voters demanded it. In major cities, we see aggressive action like Minneapolis's [Climate Equity Plan](#) and Chicago's push to [end natural gas hookups](#) for new construction.

From small cities like Athens, Ohio, [which has a citywide carbon fee](#), to high school students campaigning for solar panels and electric buses, citizens can drive the movement to electrify everything and crush demand for fossil fuels. State public utility commissions remain ignored players with their hands on the controls of enormous amounts of carbon, ripe for campaigns to elect or appoint climate-oriented members. Whether we're voting for president or state legislator or dogcatcher, we should vote for a dogcatcher who recognizes the imperative of the climate crisis.

The lesson being that the only thing that has worked, and must continue to work, is democracy at every level. None of us have the option to be cynical, to disdain electoral politics or to pretend we're not making a distinct moral choice when voting for a third-party candidate or sitting out an election.

Right now, this means electing Democrats. The expiration of many of the Trump tax cuts in 2025 could create the leverage to push climate efforts even farther. We must look at this election and understand that it's now or never — that we can create the opportunity for the United States to smash past its emission reduction goals and spur the rest of the world to follow. The climate movement can either fight like hell for Mr. Biden's re-election or watch as Mr. Trump and his allies set fire to the planet.

Climate is not just another issue. I do not deny that we live in a complex and precarious world or that our consciences are torn by a web of domestic challenges and geopolitical upheavals. But we are in denial if we do not recognize that this is the crisis that will define this century, and if we fail, the entire human future. Our fossil fuel system is driving the planet to a set of conditions that humanity has never experienced, where even the imagination of novelists will fail us.

And yet the climate crisis is also the foundation on which we can build a more just, equitable and prosperous world. Every election is precious, every ballot we cast a moral record of what we did in this crucial historical moment. Do not sit on your hands, do not deny the stakes, do not waste that vote.

Stephen Markley is the author of “The Deluge” and “Ohio: A Novel.”