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I'm not a TikTok person. I'm too old. But when I finally ventured onto that popular but much-maligned app, which traffics in short videos and hot takes, I was surprised to find many videos about the Doomsday Clock. It's nothing like a conventional timepiece, of course. It's meant to show how close humanity has come to nuclear Armageddon — to the proverbial “midnight.”

When it comes to TikTok content providers, I wouldn't normally think of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*

It's a deeply serious organization

[founded](#)

in 1945 by physicists in the wake of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The clock was invented two years later by landscape artist

[Martyl Langsdorf](#)

as a way of graphically illustrating the dangers posed by nuclear weapons. In its 76 years of existence, its

[hands](#)

have been moved 25 times, but

[never more ominously](#)

than in January of this year!

And no need to look further than TikTok to see what happened. Amid all the tweens trying to jumpstart the next viral craze, a [30-second video](#) features five representatives of the *Bulletin's science and security board*

frozen in place as a voice intones: “We move the clock forward, the closest it has ever been to midnight.” Then two of them pull a cloth off it and add, “It is now 90 seconds to midnight.”

On TikTok, versions of this video got hundreds of thousands of “likes” and thousands of comments. Mind you, that's a blip compared to the videos of even minor celebrities. Still, I found myself scrolling through the comments, many of them versions of “Does this mean I don't have to pay my mortgage/bills/ taxes?” Others had lines like “Someone call the Avengers” or

asked if it had anything to do with Taylor Swift's [Midnights](#) album. This being the Internet, there was all too much cursing and all too many oblique emojis, as well as people poking fun at the awkward staging and long stretch of silence in the video.

Mixed with such inanity were expressions of genuine fear, confusion, and distress over the possible immanence of nuclear war. That is, of course, what the clock, as a salient piece of public art, is supposed to do: generate conversation, spark inquiry, and [lead to action](#). As artist

[am Heydt](#)

observes, the Doomsday Clock should remind us that "the edge is closer than we think. In a time marked by mass extinction, diminishing resources, global pandemic, and climate change, the future isn't what it used to be."

## Tick, Tock Indeed!

One hallmark of TikTok is reaction videos where creators split the screen to show their response. [In one](#), a young white woman reacts this way: "Are we supposed to be scared? My generation is never going to have retirement, never going to own a home. I'm living in a van." I get it: there's so much that seems more immediate in our world:

[school](#)

[shootings](#)

[police violence](#)

[bank collapses](#)

, and inflation, to name just a few. Who even has time to notice now that the future isn't what it used to be?

But embedded somewhere in any of those in-your-face issues, whether we know it or not, are nuclear weapons, threatening the end to it all. Certainly, the Pentagon knows it, since (whether you've noticed or not), it continues to invest your tax dollars in nuclear weapons, big time.

Between 2019 and 2028, the United States is on track to spend at least \$494 billion on its nuclear forces, or about \$50 billion a year, according to a Congressional Budget Office [assessment](#).

Analysts actually estimate that Pentagon plans to "modernize" — yes, that's the term — its nuclear arsenal could cost you as much as

[\\$1.5 to \\$2 trillion](#)

in the coming decades.

The clock has never been so close to midnight and the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* is using every tool at its disposal to keep clanging the alarm bell. It even has a Doomsday Clock

[playlist](#)

on Spotify, while its 90-second clock announcement was briefly front-page news at the

[Washington Post](#)

(the front of their Science section, anyway) and the

[New York Times](#)

. Still, we live in such an atomized (excuse me for that!) and polarized media environment that it's increasingly hard to penetrate the noise cloud.

Nuclear weapons, once a top-of-the-line issue for so many Americans, have faded into, at best, [a background hum](#)

. So, I wonder, what happens after the Doomsday Clock reaches midnight? What's next for that metaphor? Or as the seconds are shaved away amid a war in Ukraine that could

[always go nuclear](#)

, is it time for an entirely new metaphor, something (excuse me again!) more explosive?

Then, of course, there's that [other great danger](#) to us all, climate change, which, it seems, doesn't even need a metaphor. The alarm of raging wildfires, unbelievable floods, megadroughts, fiercer storms, fast-melting glaciers, and disappearing rivers leaves the very idea of metaphors in the dust. Climate scientists are blunt to the point of bruising on this. What part of "there is a rapidly closing window of opportunity to secure a livable and sustainable future for all" don't you understand? That, of course, is what the recently released report of the

[Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#)

asserted with "high confidence." Tick, tock, indeed!

Come to think of it, maybe nuclear weapons don't need a new metaphor either. After all, we already have the [mushroom cloud](#), the haunted eyes of that [child in Hiroshima](#), the shadow of a dead person left

[on that rock](#)

, and the unnatural silence that followed the wall of sound and flame incinerating thousands of human beings in an instant. That's no exaggeration. That was Hiroshima in 1945.

In 2023, when we consume news and images in almost real-time, it's hard to imagine that the now-iconic [images](#) from Hiroshima and Nagasaki were censored and treated as contraband by our government at the time. It wasn't until 1952 that the searing images of photographer

[Yoshito Matsushige](#)

were finally published,

[first](#)

in the Japanese magazine

*Asahi Gurafu*

and then in

*Life*

magazine. And there's so much that none of us will ever see. After all, Matsushige spent 10 hours walking through his devastated city of Hiroshima but took only seven pictures. "It was such a cruel site," he

[said later](#)

, "that I couldn't bring myself to press the shutter."

### It's Three Minutes to Midnight and You Want to Do What?

I recently met a group of college students from all over the country. To my shock, none of them seemed to have heard of nuclear weapons before I mentioned them. I couldn't relate. I'm no Martyl Langsdorf, but thanks to my family, I've grown up with the Doomsday Clock in a way few other people have. I don't remember a day of my life that I haven't thought about nukes and this country's ability to literally obliterate humanity.

Some dads say things like "money doesn't grow on trees" when their kids ask for permission to see a film. My dad was [Phil Berrigan](#), a [nuclear abolitionist](#) and peace activist. So, he would say: "It's three minutes to nuclear midnight and you want to go to the movies?" Imagine living as if your personal choices made a difference when it came to nuclear war. That's certainly how [my parents](#) and their friends in the Catholic Left lived and how a small subculture continues to live today.

My mom and dad, Elizabeth McAlister and Philip Berrigan, a former nun and a priest, refused to pay "[war](#)

[taxes](#)

," trespassed onto military installations to

[protest](#)

our world-ending ways, held vigils at weapons manufacturing plants, and protested during the stockholder meetings of giant weapons-making corporations, while taking care of the victims of skewed U.S. policies by organizing soup lines and opening their doors to the unhoused.

By reminding me of where the hands on the Doomsday Clock stood at any moment, my dad

helped me integrate concerns about nuclear weapons into my daily life. He helped me measure out the energy I had for any worry. I mean, why fork over \$8 (now \$28?) at a movie box office to get scared by a horror story on the celluloid screen when the real world is scary enough for free?

## 76 Years of the Doomsday Clock in 25 Moves

So, [nuclear timekeeping](#) started in 1947 at seven minutes to midnight.

By 1949, as the Cold War heated up and the Soviet Union got the bomb, the hands on that clock were moved to three minutes to midnight, code for distinctly too close! As the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* wrote after Russia exploded its first nuclear device, “We think that Americans have reason to be deeply alarmed and prepare for grave decisions.” The nuclear arms race was off and running.

In 1953, after the U.S. and the Soviets developed and tested massive hydrogen bombs, those hands were moved to two minutes.

In 1960, sustained international cooperation and the successful negotiation of arms control treaties between the superpower rivals compelled the scientists to move the clock hands back to seven minutes to midnight.

In 1963, in the wake of the Cuban missile crisis and the terror of near-nuclear war, the U.S. and USSR signed new agreements, ending atmospheric nuclear tests. The world sighed with relief as the clock was moved back to 12 minutes.

But in 1968, as the Vietnam War fanned global tensions, the Soviets expanded their nuclear arsenal, and France and China both developed nuclear weapons, it was at seven minutes again.

1969 brought another sigh of relief as the [Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty](#) (NPT) was signed and the nations with such weaponry committed to future nuclear disarmament talks. The clock inched back to 10 minutes.

In 1972, when the U.S. and Soviet Union signed the disarmament agreement that came to be known as the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty, or SALT, [the clock](#) made it to 12 minutes.

## My Life and the Doomsday Clock

In 1974, however, India tested a nuclear device painfully code-named “[Smiling Buddha](#)” and that minute hand was moved to nine again. I was born just a few weeks before that Indian test, which spurred neighbor and rival Pakistan to launch its own nuclear program. By the following summer, my parents would carry my infant brother and me as they marched with friends, hauling full-sized replicas of the nuclear weapons that had destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki through the streets of Washington, every day for almost a week to mark the 30th anniversary of the atomic bombings.

In 1981, as the Soviets continued their war in Afghanistan and Americans elected Ronald Reagan as president, the clock ominously moved to four minutes. I was seven and my brother six when our father was [sentenced to 10 years](#) in jail (later reduced) for his part in a 1980 action. A group that called itself the Plowshares Eight had walked into the General Electric Space Technology Center in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania, with the early morning rush of workers. There, they [symbolically disarmed](#) some model nuclear weapons. Their trial was later [made into a movie](#) starring Martin Sheen (with my dad playing himself).

In 1984, the clock was moved to three minutes to midnight as President Reagan pumped money into Star Wars technology as a way to win a future nuclear war. Just a month after I turned 10, my mom [went on trial](#) for her Plowshares action a year earlier at Griffiss Air Force base in upstate New York. That summer, my family and their friends also tried to maintain a round-the-clock presence at the Pentagon concourse.

In 1988, the *Bulletin's* scientists reset the Doomsday Clock at six minutes to midnight as the

work of a growing global antinuclear movement started to deliver dividends in agreements to cut back the number of deployed long-range nuclear weapons. That summer, when I was 14, we built a rough, shed-like house and brought it to the Pentagon Parade Ground to call for “homes, not bombs.” We stayed all night and watched the rats take over the Pentagon grounds as it grew dark.

By 1990, in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the clock was readjusted to 10 minutes to midnight, the furthest from disaster since 1968.

In 1991, in the wake of the Cold War, the U.S. and Russia signed the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) and began to cut back their nuclear arsenals as the Soviet Union faded into history. Appropriately enough, the *Bulletin* moved the clock to a breathtaking [17 minutes to midnight](#), writing: “the illusion that tens of thousands of nuclear weapons are a guarantor of national security has been stripped away.”

In 1995, a [close call](#) and human error led the scientists to nudge the clock to [14 minutes](#) and, in 1998, nine minutes, while [calling on](#) the United States, Russia, and other nuclear states to “fully commit” to “control the spread of nuclear weapons.”

In 2002, in response to the 9/11 terror attacks and growing concerns about loose nuclear materials, the science and security board adjusted the clock to seven minutes. My father [died](#) that December, after a lifetime of anti-war activism. He spent the last year of his life trying to jumpstart a “[national strike](#)” for nuclear disarmament.

In 2007, after North Korea [tested its first nuclear device](#), the *Bulletin* moved the clock ominously to five minutes to midnight and the science and security board added human-made climate change to the doomsday formula. In that announcement, [they wrote](#), “As we stand at the brink of a second nuclear age and at the onset of an era of unprecedented climate change, our way of thinking about the uses and control of technologies must change... The clock is ticking.”

In 2010, the *Bulletin* [inched](#) the minute hand back up to six, thanks to the [Copenhagen accord](#) on climate change and new negotiations between the U.S. and Russia on arms reductions.

Between six minutes and five minutes to nuclear midnight, [I got married](#), pledging to work for the abolition of such weaponry with my husband, who grew up in southeastern Connecticut, protesting at submarine [christenings](#) and [launches](#) at a U.S. naval base on the Thames River.

Thanks to new North Korea aggressiveness and general global intransigence on climate-change commitments, 2012 saw a modest drop to five minutes. That was a “time” that took on a new kind of urgency for me after the [Sandy Hook school shootings](#) that killed six teachers and 20 kids about the same age as my dear stepdaughter in nearby Newtown, Connecticut. Her school [beefed up](#) security in response, checking IDs and barring parents from the building. Every day, when I carried my newborn son to pick up his sister, I had to go through an elaborate process at dismissal time in a state of near panic, flinching at any loud noise and feeling both the fragility of my kindergartener’s life and the threat to all life from nuclear weapons. After all, the Sandy Hook killer had but a small arsenal compared to what the United States threatened the world with every day.

By 2015, Russia and the U.S. had both announced [new spending](#) to “modernize” their nuclear arsenals and, in climate terms, it was the [hottest year on record](#). The *Bulletin* ominously moved the hands of the clock to three minutes to midnight for the first time since the Cold War year of 1984.

By then, I was the mother of two toddlers, born in 2012 and 2014, and my stepdaughter was 9. Those three wonders helped me stay focused on the beauty of each day and the extraordinary web of life that the growing nuclear arsenals on this planet eternally hold hostage. I



recommitted myself then to taking the nuclear threat seriously, but without hectoring my kids about the Doomsday Clock the way my dad had done with me.

In 2017, the *Bulletin* moved those clock hands 30 seconds closer to midnight, its first half-minute move ever [in response](#) to President Donald Trump's inflammatory nuclear rhetoric, soaring Pentagon budgets, and new threats to the global climate.

A year later, in 2018, we lost another 30 seconds and the clock hit two minutes to midnight, as the *Bulletin* pointed out that international diplomacy had been "reduced to name-calling, U.S.-Russia relations featured more conflict than cooperation, the Iran deal was imperiled, and greenhouse gas emissions rose anew."

Though no longer a kid, I still found myself watching a parent being hauled off to jail. This time, it was my [mother](#), then 79, arrested for trespassing with six friends at the [Kings Bay Naval Base](#) in Georgia in a move to symbolically disarm the Trident nuclear submarines there.

In 2020, the *Bulletin's* clock moved to 100 seconds to midnight, while citing the two existential dangers of climate change and nuclear weapons in its press statement.

Over the next two years, the magazine did something new. It didn't change the hands on the clock but issued press releases about why they remained at 100 seconds. Meanwhile, in 2021, the kids and I helped make 68 signs thanking each of the nations that had [adopted](#) the U.N. Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. My kids poured their hearts into those works of art, adorning them with silver paint and sparkles. That treaty celebration day in New London where we live was

[cold and windy](#)

and the two little ones were almost hidden behind their signs, while they asked me lots of questions about Honduras and the island of

[Nauru](#)

which I gamely tried to answer without resorting to Wikipedia. An adage attributed to Mark Twain came to my mind then: "War is how Americans learn geography." I smiled, thinking that my kids were learning geography through protest and peacemaking.

And then, this January, the *Bulletin's* science and security board again shaved the time by seconds, announcing that it was now 90 seconds to midnight.

### **What's Next (Or Do I Mean Last)?**

In the 76 years since its creation, the minute and second hands of the Doomsday Clock have moved 25 times, back and forth — tick, tock, tick, tock — from 17 minutes to midnight at its furthest from imminent danger to the present 90 seconds to midnight. What lies on the other side of midnight?

On a normal clock, 12:01 would simply begin a new day, a new chance to learn from the past and adjust your path to the future. The question now is whether such a 12:01, a future without the Doomsday Clock, without the existential threats of nuclear weapons and climate change is even imaginable.