INCHING CLOSER TO DOOMSDAY:

The Doomsday Clock just moved from 11:53 to 11:55, two minutes closer to midnight. By this measure, the world is now closer to self-annihilation than at any time since 1984, when the Reagan administration rattled nuclear sabers with the dying Soviet Union. At the moment, planet Earth has five minutes left to get its act together.

The big news about this announcement for me is that the geopolitical instabilities being caused by climate change have finally been recognized as a significant threat to world peace.

As recently as two years ago, climate change was seen largely as an environmental issue, around which the scientific community was reaching consensus. Last year, climate change came to be seen as an economic issue, especially after Kofi Annan (then secretary general of the United Nations) endorsed a report by Sir Nicholas Stern, the former chief economist of the World Bank. Annan wrote in The Washington Post that Stern "called climate change `the greatest and widest-ranging market failure ever seen,' with the potential to shrink the global economy by 20 percent and to cause economic and social disruption on par with the two world wars and the Great Depression." This year, and thanks to the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists who created the Doomsday Clock, climate change is being properly seen as a strategic military issue.

The clock analogy can be understood by anyone who remembers his or her last New Year's Eve party. From what I remember about mine, the mood was one of casual fun right up through the final half-hour. But the mood changed when 10 or 15 minutes remained. People began to monitor their watches. They quieted slightly as thoughts of past and future crossed their minds. Near the end, revelers moved closer to those they cared most about. At the end, everyone stared at the clock ... tick ... tick ... tick ... anticipating the unknown.

Now fast-forward to the end of this calendar year. But instead of anticipating the start of something arbitrary, imagine the press of red buttons that launch weapons of mass destruction. In the chaos that follows, the U.S. might be able to defend its turf from invasion. But it will not be able to defend its atmosphere or its oceans from radioactive contamination. Friends will become enemies. The world will slide into so many versions of martial law. This is the scenario that the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists worries about.

Having created atomic weapons, these distinguished scientists believe it is their responsibility to warn us of the potential consequences of nuclear war. The device they invented was a clock that doesn't actually run, but which tells us how much time we've got left. At the moment, we've got five minutes, less than after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The clock also tells us whether the world is edging closer to brink or farther away. We've just edged closer.

This Doomsday Clock -- created in 1947 during the aftermath of nuclear bombing to end World War II -- was initially set at 11:53. The closest it ever got to midnight was 11:58. That was in 1953, during the bellicosity associated with hydrogen bomb testing by the Soviet Union and the United States.

In 1991, the U.S. emerged as the world's only superpower at the end of the Cold War. That's when the clock was set back to 11:43, its furthest ever. The clock's been changed only 18 times during the past 60 years, most recently in 2002.

The recent move closer to midnight is partially a response to North Korea's recent bomb tests, Iran's nuclear intentions, the simmering world stockpile of nuclear weapons, America's experimentation with strategic warheads and the international challenge of monitoring the traffic of nuclear materials.
But for the first time ever, part of the decision to move the clock forward involved the destabilizing effects of climate change caused by a bloated energy diet that simply cannot continue.

Global warming -- in and of itself -- isn't the problem. I, for one, would rather live in the present interglacial epoch than the last glacial one. The problem is that we must prevent the atmospheric climate from getting ridiculously hot, and the geopolitical climate from reaching a full boil.