

Noam Chomsky: Trump's First 100 Days Are Undermining Our Prospects for Survival



Donald Trump

Photo: wikipedia.org

The first 100 days are considered to be a benchmark for presidential performance. This is part of the legacy of FDR, who managed to reshape the US government's role in the economy within the first 100 days of his administration. However, the fact of the matter is that usually, a first-time president doesn't have the slightest inkling of what governing from the Oval Office is all about. There's no better proof of that than the early records of the most recent US presidents, from Nixon to Obama. Nonetheless, no recent US president has demonstrated such an overwhelming ignorance about governing as the current occupant of the White House.

But is Trump's apparent inability to govern and conduct himself in a remotely conventional manner an innate character flaw or part of a well-conceived strategy aimed at a society that loves reality TV? Is Trump's fondness for Putin simply an "infatuation" with a strongman and admiration for autocratic rule, or something of a more political and strategic nature? And what does Trump mean when he says "jobs?" In this exclusive Truthout interview, world-revered public intellectual

Noam Chomsky shares for the first time his views about the first 100 days of the Trump administration.

C. J. Polychroniou: The first 100 days of Donald Trump in the White House are characterized by complete disrespect for the truth and the freedom of the press and, overall, a style of political leadership that is not merely authoritarian but also smacks of fascism. In your view, is all this part of a preconceived strategy or simply a reflection of the whims of a person with a very fragile ego?

Noam Chomsky: I don't pretend to have any special insight into the mind of this strange person, though the people around him have been fairly coherent, in particular Steve Bannon, who seems to be the shadowed figure behind the throne.

What is happening before our eyes appears to be a two-pronged operation, I presume planned.

Bannon/Trump (and the pathetic Sean Spicer, who has to defend the latest shenanigans in public) have the task of dominating TV and headlines with one wild performance after another, the assumption apparently being that his fabrications will quickly be forgotten as the next episode displaces them, and the base will be satisfied for a time, believing that their champion is standing up for them. So, who remembers the millions of undocumented immigrants who "voted for Clinton," or the charge that that really bad guy Obama ("sad!") literally wiretapped poor Trump — a claim now downgraded to irrelevance, but not withdrawn — and so on? Look how well the birther tales played for many years, ending hilariously with Trump blaming Clinton for initiating the farce.

Meanwhile, the real work is going on more quietly, spearheaded by Paul Ryan, a different and more malicious kind of posturer, who represents the most brutal fringe of the Republican establishment and somehow manages to present himself as a man of ideas, maybe because — as Paul Krugman argues — he rolls up his sleeves and uses PowerPoint. The ideas are quite familiar. They are the standard fare of the component of the Republican establishment dedicated with unusual ferocity to enriching the rich and powerful — bankers, CEOs, and other types who matter — while kicking in the face the vulnerable, the poor and Trump's rural and working-class constituency. All of this abetted by the ultra-right billionaire cabinet and other appointees, selected very carefully to destroy whatever within their domains might be helpful to mere humans, but not to the chosen few of

extreme wealth and power.

The consistency is impressive, if not breathtaking.

With the collapse of the shameful GOP health care proposals, we are likely to see this scenario enacted with real passion. The White House and its congressional allies have many ways to undermine the current health care system, which, with all its flaws, is a considerable improvement over what preceded it though still well behind comparable societies, let alone what the population wants and deserves, [as polls continue to show](#): a rational single-payer universal health care system. That is a fairly resilient phenomenon over many years, with some variation, quite remarkable in that there is virtually no articulate elite advocacy of this sane and popular position.

Of course, undermining the system will harm a great many people, but that cannot be a consideration. After all, Ryancare was going to add some 24 million to the ranks of uninsured, which might kill more than 40,000 people annually according to [an analysis](#) by health care specialists Steffie Woolhandler and David Himmelstein. If the health system can be substantially damaged, and people really do suffer sufficiently, then the propaganda drumbeat can proceed to blame the disaster on the political opposition, and maybe even get away with it. A good deal is possible in the era of “alternative facts.” We are already witnessing the early stages.

The lead character in the show does indeed present himself as a thin-skinned megalomaniac whose only ideology is Me. But his appointments, and the policies for which all of this is a cover, are too systematic to be merely random shots.

As I mentioned, the policies being formulated and enacted are drawn from the playbook of the most reactionary fringe of the Republican establishment. The abject service to private wealth and power is accompanied with an authoritarian and fundamentalist program to transform US society. The project is driven by the Bannon-Sessions vision of a society devoted to Judeo-Christian roots and white supremacy, eliminating such pernicious and threatening nonsense as arts and humanities, upholding the Betsy DeVos doctrine that public education has to be dismantled, while if science conflicts with religion, then too bad for science. Meanwhile, we are to wave a mailed fist at the world while cowering behind walls and rebuilding the “depleted military” that is the most powerful force in human

history, dwarfing any collection of competitors. All of this resonates with at least parts of a society that has long been the safest and most terrified in the world.

The fundamentalist project goes well beyond getting rid of arts and humanities. Science is also in the crosshairs. Trump's budget cuts medical research. There's been considerable attention to his dismantling of the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency], now pretty much in the hands of associates of James Inhofe, the Senate's leading climate denier, who has explained that if God has decided to warm the Earth, so be it. But that's the least of it. For action and research on climate, EPA is a small actor. Far more important is the Department of Energy. Its Office of Science is scheduled to lose \$900 million, nearly 20 percent of its budget. DOE's \$300 million ARPA-Energy program is eliminated completely. That's in addition to deep cuts to the research programs at the EPA and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and a 5 percent cut to NASA's earth science budget.

In Congress, the science-deniers can scarcely contain their glee now that the wrecking ball has opened the path for demolition of the heresies of the modern world. Lamar Smith, who for years has used his position as chair of the House science committee to harass scientists, now feels free to [openly acknowledge](#) that "the committee is now a tool to advance his political agenda rather than a forum to examine important issues facing the U.S. research community."

An appropriate comment on all of this was made by Stephen Colbert, when the Republican-run legislature in North Carolina responded to a scientific study predicting rapid sea level rise by barring state and local agencies from developing regulations or planning documents anticipating a rise in sea level. "This is a brilliant solution," Colbert said. "If your science gives you a result that you don't like, pass a law saying the result is illegal. Problem solved."

Most important of everything that is happening is the attack against future generations, in fact even against those coming of age today, as Trump and allies, departing from the world, cheerily lead the race to environmental destruction while the rest take at least halting steps toward averting a looming catastrophe — which doesn't weigh in the balance against fabulous profits tomorrow for the select few.

A few years ago Republican governor of Louisiana Bobby Jindal took a little time

off from his campaign to drive the state even deeper into the abyss to warn that Republicans are becoming “the stupid party.” The respected conservative analyst [Norman J.] Ornstein of the American Enterprise Institute described the current party as a “radical insurgency” that has abandoned parliamentary politics.... Has any other organization dedicated itself with such enthusiasm to undermining our prospects for decent survival? And not in the distant future.

What do you make of Trump’s recent attacks over FBI Russia leaks? Clearly, this is not the sort of thing one would ever expect from a US president, so what do you think it’s all about?

Very little that comes out of the White House would be expected from a US president. But another question comes to mind as well. What is this all about? When Obama was presenting himself to the public before the 2008 primaries, one of his proudest accomplishments — in fact, one of the very few of his senatorial career — was impassioned support for Israel’s murderous invasion of Lebanon. He even went so far as to cosponsor legislation calling for strong action against any country that might impede the assault. Has anyone on the Trump team been accused of similar support for Russian crimes? True, there have been some entirely improper acts, notably Michael Flynn’s failure to register as an agent of Turkey. But that is not the focus of the anger of the Democrats, whose primary concern in this affair seems to be to extinguish one of the few rays of light in the Trump performances, his indications of concern to reduce tensions with Russia that might well explode to terminal nuclear war. It’s perhaps of some interest that one may turn to the leading establishment journal, Foreign Affairs, to find an [informed analysis of the fierce liberal opposition to such sensible moves](#) and its background.

An argument could be made that a major part of the explanation for Trump’s apparent infatuation with Vladimir Putin is not only the fact that “The Donald” is naturally drawn to strongmen, but also that he sees Russia and the United States as the only stalwarts left that are able and willing to halt what they see as the “decline” of Western Christian civilization by targeting large numbers of Muslims, thereby preventing the alleged “Islamization” of the Western world. Do you see any validity behind this way of conceptualizing Trump’s mindset?

As I said, I don’t claim any particular insight into his thinking. The term “infatuation” seems to me too strong, at least on the basis of what I have seen,

though he has expressed admiration for Putin, much like Marine Le Pen and other unsavory political figures who are rising in the West. If Trump's concern is "rolling back the Muslim hordes," he need go no further than Europe, where [a majority of the population favors a complete ban on Muslim immigrants](#), including those fleeing from countries ravaged by Europe, in some cases for centuries. These are among the signs of the severe moral-cultural crisis of the West that is mislabeled a "refugee crisis."

NATO troops recently held a military exercise near the Norwegian-Russian border. This is clearly an act of provocation, so one wonders if Trump supported this move. Any thoughts on the matter?

Very clearly. These are among the provocations that increased under Obama-Clinton and apparently continue without change under Trump. I don't think he and his associates have had much to say about these provocations, which trace back to NATO expansion after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The mounting provocations on both sides of the border underscore the wisdom of European historian Richard Sakwa's observation that NATO's prime mission today is "to manage the risks created by its existence." And it's worth remembering that it's the Russian border, not the Mexican border, and a border that is on the invasion route through which Russia was virtually destroyed twice by Germany alone in the past century.

In Trump's "America first" vision, military superiority over other nations includes the US being "on top of the pack" on nuclear weapons. Do you think we will see the end of Pax Americana under Donald Trump's presidency?

Trump's position on nuclear weapons is unclear, but many of his comments have been worrisome, in particular his dismissal of the New START treaty on mutual Russia-US reduction of nuclear weapons as a bad deal for the US, in a phone call with Putin. The treaty is a good deal not only for the US but for the world, even though partial. And it would be bad news indeed if Trump chooses not to renew it. In general, on nuclear programs he seems to have kept so far to Obama's dangerous modernization program. And being "on top of the pack" on nuclear weapons means little, since even a small number would be enough to destroy everything.

Trump has, of course, proposed sharp increases in the already bloated military

budget, at the cost of social programs despised by the establishment Republicans who pretty much run the show. And he has relaxed conditions on use of force, removing oversight, decisions that have already led to several major atrocities.

As for Pax Americana, it has hardly been much of a Pax. It is not coming to an end, but it is continuing to decline, just as American power has declined since its peak at the end of World War II.

In this connection, however, it is important to bear in mind revealing insights developed in recent work by political economist Sean Starrs, exploring some significant consequences of the neoliberal globalization of the world economy of the past generation. As he discusses, corporate ownership of the world's wealth is becoming a more realistic measure of global power than national wealth as the world departs more than before from the model of nationally discrete political economies. The results of his investigations are quite striking. It turns out that in virtually every economic sector — manufacturing, finance, services, retail and others — US corporations are well in the lead in ownership of the global economy. Overall, their ownership is close to 50 percent of the total, roughly the maximum figure of estimated US national wealth in 1945. This was the figure used by the revered figure of American diplomacy George Kennan, for example, when he advised in 1948 that our central policy goal must be to maintain the “position of disparity” that separated our enormous wealth from the poverty of others, referring specifically to Asia, though the import was more general. To achieve that goal, he advised, “We should cease to talk about vague and ... unreal objectives, such as human rights, the raising of the living standards, and democratization,” and must “deal in straight power concepts,” not “hampered by idealistic slogans” about “altruism and world-benefaction.”

Kennan was soon removed from the decision-making apparatus because he was considered too soft-hearted to deal with this harsh world. Much as today, there may then have been real opportunities for détente at the time, dismissed in favor of much harsher policies. These soon contributed to threats registered by the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists expert advisers, who moved the hands of the famous doomsday clock forward to two minutes to midnight in 1953 after the US and Russia exploded hydrogen bombs. That's the closest it has ever been to terminal disaster. It is hardly comforting to note that a few days into Trump's term, the clock was moved again to 2 ½ minutes to midnight, the closest to doom since 1953, advancing from an ominous three minutes to midnight during the two

preceding years.

Returning to Pax Americana, American decline is real, in state power, while US ownership of the world economy is overwhelming. These changes in the nature of world order, commonly overlooked, are of no slight significance.

Trump ran on an “anti-establishment” platform, yet his budget cut proposals and overall economic policy agenda favor the rich and will make life for struggling Americans even more difficult. First, what are your thoughts on his budget cuts, and, second, do you think this will make his supporters realize that he pulled the biggest trick on them in the history of US politics?

Trump’s budget proposals are very clear: expand the military and lavish gifts on the rich and powerful, while the rest are somehow to fend for themselves, including his rural and working class constituency. For the moment, they seem to be keeping to the faith that somehow Trump meant what he said and will bring back jobs. On this matter, we should recall that for a long time the word “jobs” in US political discourse has been the conventional way to pronounce an obscene seven-letter word — which I will not spell, out of concern for the thought police. It begins “p-r-o” and ends “f-i-t-s.” The resort to the euphemism goes back many years. Some will remember George H.W. Bush’s trip to Asia in order to gain “jobs, jobs, jobs,” as he proclaimed. Others fall into line, including the media.

It will take creative propaganda initiatives to sustain the con game in Trump’s case. Sooner or later, the veil will fall away, just as it did with Obama’s “hope” and “change,” at that time shifting working-class votes to their bitter class enemy. If that happens, we can expect that the Trump-Bannon crowd will seek to divert attention in one of the many familiar ways — perhaps conjuring up some threat to American security (or if there is one, exploiting it). Or, perhaps, scapegoating the most vulnerable: immigrants, Muslims, welfare recipients (one of Reagan’s disgusting techniques), and other available targets. That could turn very ugly. It could lead to the “friendly fascism” that sociologist Bertram Gross predicted 30 years ago. Or worse.

At the same time, there are very promising opportunities ahead. A serious program to heal the pathologies of the neoliberal era could attract very broad popular support. There already is popular support for progressive programs. One example I’ve already mentioned: Most Americans continue to prefer a government

health care program of the kind that functions far better than ours in other developed countries.

Another example was provided recently by Fox News. [They conducted a poll](#) asking who is the most popular political figure in the country. In the lead, by a very large margin, was Bernie Sanders — even more so among the young, the hope for the future.

The success of the Sanders campaign was quite remarkable, a sharp break from political history. For over a century, elections in the US have been mostly bought. But here was someone who was scarcely known, who had virtually no support from the wealthy or corporate sector and was dismissed by the media, and even used the scare word “socialism.” He would very likely have won the Democratic nomination had it not been for the shenanigans of the Obama-Clinton clique that dominates the party — and that has almost ruined it at local and state levels in recent years. And he might very well have become president.

Sanders called for a “political revolution,” and with the sharp rightward drift of the past 30 years of the neoliberal assault, the term may not be inappropriate. His basically New Deal proposals, however, would not have surprised Dwight Eisenhower. It is useful to recall the nature of conservatism at the outset of Eisenhower’s term in 1952, when he said, for example, that he has

no use for those — regardless of their political party — who hold some foolish dream of spinning the clock back to days when unorganized labor was a huddled, almost helpless mass.... Today in America unions have a secure place in our industrial life. Only a handful of unreconstructed reactionaries harbor the ugly thought of breaking unions. Only a fool would try to deprive working men and women of the right to join the union of their choice.

And more generally, Eisenhower held that those who question New Deal policies have no place in the US political system.

Such ideas are not far below the surface, even as the political class has shifted very far to the right, with Clinton Democrats becoming what used to be called “moderate Republicans,” and Republicans mostly drifting off the spectrum. They can be revived. The Sanders campaign was a dramatic illustration — not the only one. And those are by no means the limits of legitimate aspirations.

It's easy to succumb to a sense of futility and despair, but objective circumstances provide no justification for that stance. There have been many gains over past years thanks to struggles undertaken under far harsher conditions than those of today. These gains provide us with a legacy that offers a great many opportunities to avoid the worst, and to move on to a much better future.

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About the author:

C.J. Polychroniou is a political economist/political scientist who has taught and worked in universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. His main research interests are in European economic integration, globalization, the political economy of the United States and the deconstruction of neoliberalism's politico-economic project. He is a regular contributor to Truthout as well as a member of Truthout's Public Intellectual Project. He has published several books and his articles have appeared in a variety of journals, magazines, newspapers and popular news websites. Many of his publications have been translated into several foreign languages, including Croatian, French, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and Turkish.