

Chomsky: Biden's "Radical" Proposals Are Minimum Measures To Avoid Catastrophe



Noam Chomsky

Looking at the state of the world, one is struck by the stark contradiction of progress being made on some fronts even as we are facing massive disruptions, tremendous inequalities and existential threats to humanity and nature.

In this context, how do we evaluate the qualities of progress and decline? How significant is political activism to progress?

In this exclusive interview, Noam Chomsky, one of the world's greatest scholars and leading activists, shares his insights on the state of the world and the conundrum of activism and change, including the significance of the Black Lives Matter movement, the movement for Palestinian rights, the urgency of the climate crisis and the threat of nuclear weapons.

C.J. Polychroniou: It's been said by far too many, including myself, that we live in dark times. And for good reasons. We live in an era where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, authoritarianism is a global political phenomenon, and life on Earth is entering a state of collapse. From that perspective, human civilization is on an inexorable course of decline and nothing but a radical overhaul of the way humans conduct themselves will save us from a return to barbarism. Yet, there are at the same time signs of progress on numerous fronts, which are hard to overlook. Societies are becoming increasingly multicultural and also more aware of and sensitive to patterns of racism and discrimination. In the light of all this, do

we see the glass half empty or half full? Moreover, is it possible to evaluate the qualities of decline and progress scientifically, or do we have to rely purely on normative evaluations and value judgments?

Noam Chomsky: There are attempts to measure the contents of the glass. The best-known is the Doomsday Clock of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, with the hands placed a certain distance from midnight: the end. Each year that Trump was in office, the minute hand was moved closer to midnight, soon reaching the closest it had ever been, then going beyond. The analysts finally abandoned minutes and turned to seconds: 100 seconds to midnight, where the Clock now stands. That seems to me a fair assessment.

The analysts identify three major crises: nuclear war, environmental destruction and the deterioration of rational discourse. As we've often discussed, Trump has made a signal contribution to each, and the party he now owns is carrying his legacy forward. They are also currently hard at work to regain power by overcoming the dread danger of a government of the people, with plenty of [far right big money](#) at hand. If the project succeeds, emptying of the glass will be accelerated.

There has indeed been progress on many fronts. It is startling to look back and see what was regarded as proper behavior and acceptable attitudes not many years ago, even written into law. While substantial, the progress has not, however, been sufficient to contain and reverse the continuing assault on the social order, the natural world and the climate of rational discourse.

Without disparaging the great activist achievements, it's hard sometimes to suppress memory of an ironic slogan of the '60s: They may win the battles, but we have all the best songs.

The glass that is before our eyes is not an encouraging sight, to put it mildly. Take the state of the three major crises identified in the setting of the Clock.

The major nuclear powers are obligated by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty "to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control."

They are pursuing the opposite course.

In its latest annual survey, the prime monitor of global armament, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, [reports that](#) “The growth in total spending in 2020 was largely influenced by expenditure patterns in the United States and China. The USA increased its military spending for the third straight year to reach \$778 billion in 2020,” as compared with China’s increase to \$252 billion. In fourth place, below India, is the second U.S. adversary, Russia: \$61.7 billion.

The figures are instructive, but misleading. The U.S. is alone in facing no credible security threats. The threats that are invoked in the calls for even more military spending are at the borders of adversaries, which are ringed with U.S. nuclear-armed missiles in some of the 800 U.S. military bases around the world (China has one, Djibouti).

Further threats, in this case quite real, are the development of new and more dangerous weapons systems. They could be banned by treaties, which were effective, until they were mostly dismantled by Bush II and Trump.

The current mythology concocted to justify escalation of this suicidal enterprise is carefully dismantled by nuclear physicist [Lawrence Krauss](#), who for many years had the responsibility to present publicly the setting of the Clock. He also reminds us that “the US and Russia have both come within seconds of launching nuclear weapons due to software or human errors that erroneously indicated an incoming nuclear missile strike” and now have “more than 5,000 nuclear weapons each, with more than 1,000 of these on high alert, launch-on-warning status” just waiting for another accident or human decision. That might be by someone well down the chain of command, as we learned from Daniel Ellsberg in his essential book, *The Doomsday Machine*.

The bloated military budget could be sharply cut without harm to authentic security — in fact enhancing genuine security if undertaken as a project of international cooperation, which is not an idle dream as history reveals. That would free up badly needed funds for urgent necessities. But it is not to be. The military budget remains untouchable, the example of the cherished ideal of bipartisanship. For some, it is not enough. Three influential Republican senators have just introduced an amendment to the Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill (BIP) now being debated, calling for another [\\$50 billion](#) for the “undernourished” Pentagon.

One consequence is a substantial contribution to environmental destruction: [recent studies show](#) that “the US military is one of the largest polluters in history, consuming more liquid fuels and emitting more climate-changing gases than most medium-sized countries.”

That brings us to the one comparable threat to survival of organized human life: environmental destruction. In this case, unlike the nuclear menace, there is at least discussion and sometimes even corrective action, though nowhere near what is urgently needed. For years, scientists have been warning of a “climate emergency.” Thousands more are [joining the call](#) as the world is swept with disasters intensified by heating the atmosphere. A few weeks ago, we reviewed recent discoveries that show, once again, that the dire predictions of earlier studies were too conservative. Inexorably, the grim tale continues to unfold.

To mention a few more recent examples, new research has found that thawing of permafrost in rapidly heating Siberia may be releasing the “methane time bomb” that scientists have long feared — a rapid release of massive quantities of methane, which is not as long-lasting as carbon dioxide (CO₂) but far more destructive. The main surprise is that the release is from hard rock, not wetlands, as previously anticipated. The lead researcher cautions that data are still uncertain; interpreting it correctly, [he says](#), “may make the difference between catastrophe and apocalypse” as the climate crisis worsens.

Those are in fact the likely alternatives on our current course.

An accompanying report calls for a “global state of emergency” as temperatures continue to climb in Siberia and other Arctic regions. “Scientists have been shocked that the warm weather conducive to permafrost thawing is occurring roughly 70 years ahead of model projections,” the study warns. “The story is simple,” the report concludes. “Climate change is happening faster than anticipated. One consequence — the loss of ice in the polar regions — is also a driver for more rapid global heating and disastrously rapid global sea level rise.”

Turning elsewhere, [new studies](#) find alarming signs of collapse in major ocean currents that regulate global climates, possibly with an impact on the Gulf Stream, all with incalculable but likely far-reaching effects.

If we return to the topic in a few weeks, there will be more unpleasant news. Meanwhile, political leaders dither, or even act to amplify the threats.

That is the state of threats to survival — threats that could be overcome in a world of rational deliberation and judgment; we know the means.

That brings us to the third factor in the advance of the Doomsday Clock to midnight: the decline of rationality.

Illustrations are so numerous that any small sample will be hopelessly misleading. The most extreme form of irrationality is flat denial of what you don't like. In the case of nuclear weapons and climate, the word "denial" translates as *Doom*, and not in the distant future.

Lesser examples illustrate the depths to which the malady has penetrated.

One example has to do with nuclear weapons in the Middle East, an obsession of the political class and the media for years. Anyone in the vicinity of the real world knows that Israel has a substantial arsenal of nuclear weapons and that there is universal agreement among intelligence agencies that Iran has none.

Trump didn't get his "beautiful wall," but in protection of beliefs from reality, it may not be needed. [Polls reveal](#) that "more Americans think Iran possesses nuclear weapons than think Israel does ... 60.5%, including 70.6% of Republicans and 52.6% of Democrats, say Iran possesses nuclear weapons — compared to 51.7% who say Israel does, including 51.7% of Republicans and 51.9% of Democrats.

We have frequently discussed the obvious solution to the concern that Iran might develop nuclear weapons: a nuclear weapons-free zone (NWFZ) in the Middle East. In that case, there would be no constant tensions, no threat of major war, no murderous sanctions that the world must honor or be thrown out of the U.S.-run global financial system. In short, an ideal solution.

A few weeks ago, it seemed that there was finally a convert: the editorial board of *The New York Times*, who [concluded that](#), "Ideally, the result [of current negotiations] would be a nuclear-weapons-free zone in the Middle East."

The editors acknowledge that there are some problems, not least "Israel's unacknowledged and nonnegotiable possession of nuclear weapons" — also unacknowledged by the U.S. to avoid the embarrassment of opening the question of the status of U.S. military aid to Israel under American law. Unmentioned is

that Washington has unilaterally blocked moves toward the “ideal” solution for these reasons (notably Obama). And that the U.S. has some means to pressure Israel when it cares to, wielded by all pre-Obama presidents.

The editorial also states that there is an African NWFZ, failing to mention that it cannot go into effect because of the U.S. military base in Diego Garcia, part of Mauritius in Africa according to the World Court, the United Nations and the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea. But not according to the U.S. and its British client, which claims the island in order to provide Washington with the base.

Meanwhile the U.S.-U.K. righteously proclaim their leadership of the “[rules-based international order](#)” challenged by forces of evil.

Defiance of law is no minor matter in this case, not only for the expelled inhabitants and Mauritius, but also for the targets of U.S. bombing in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Nevertheless, at least the “ideal” solution is on the table, though it will plainly be a long struggle to free the public mind from the impressive grip of propaganda.

In a different domain, the gap between prevailing invented reality and old-fashioned reality is illustrated by the fealty of the Republican voting base to, for many of them, their bitter enemy.

Under Trump, the one legislative achievement of the self-declared party of the working man was the tax scam to enrich the very rich and harm the rest that we’ve already discussed. The practice now [extends to the BIP](#). It has to be funded somehow. “Congressional Republicans objected to tax hikes on the rich or corporations, while also eventually ruling out other measures proposed by the White House, such as stepped-up IRS enforcement on tax cheats. The White House, meanwhile, ruled out higher taxes on Americans earning under \$400,000, including a proposed gas tax.”

An instructive impasse.

Another illustration of deep loyalty, well reported, is the “stolen election” charade, still upheld by [nearly two-thirds](#) of Republicans.

A more subtle though highly consequential case is vaccine rejection, persisting in

the face of overwhelming evidence of the efficacy of the vaccines and the grave danger of refusal. The danger, of course, is not limited to the refuser. On a sufficient scale, refusal will prevent herd immunity so that the plague will persist, and worse, will expedite mutations that may reach beyond control. Inquiry has identified many factors in refusal. A careful [statistical study](#) by Anthony DiMaggio reveals that the culprit, for once, is not *Fox News*, which has had no statistically significant effect on refusal. Rather, the most salient sector is Republicans confined to social media bubbles, already primed for distrust of science by decades of right-wing propaganda.

Refusal is no small matter. Nearly 60 percent of Republicans say they are unwilling to get vaccinated. Meanwhile, Republican leaders continue to oppose vaccine requirements, arguing that it's up to the individual — whatever the lethal effect on others. The most outspoken is the new heroine of the party, Marjorie Taylor Greene, whose fans cheered when she heralded the low vaccination rate in Alabama, which [tossed 65,000 unused doses](#) — badly needed elsewhere — in the midst of another sharp spike in cases.

This is the barest sample. The task of restoring a measure of rationality is daunting, and a responsibility that cannot be shirked.

Should we accept social change as inevitable or is it completely a consequence of collective action? Moreover, given that social change occurs rather slowly in the course of history, in what context is radicalism of better use than pragmatism for achieving progressive social change?

There are some tendencies in history, rooted in the nature of institutions, but it does not follow a predetermined course. Human agency is essential for achieving progressive social change. Almost invariably, it crucially involves collective action. The great historian and activist Howard Zinn dedicated his life's work to "the countless small actions of unknown people" that lie at the roots of "those great moments" that enter the historical record, small actions almost always undertaken in concert. Labor historian Eric Loomis adds the crucial qualification that the labor actions that have commonly been in the forefront of the struggle for a better world have achieved success when a sympathetic administration contained state-business violence.

The usual path to success is a combination of radical goals and pragmatic choice

of tactics, but there cannot be a general formula for the proper course.

Looking at the state of the contemporary United States, one is struck by the nearly simultaneous explosion of two highly contradictory phenomena — white supremacist ideology and a new civil rights or social justice movement known as Black Lives Matter, respectively. How do you assess the historical significance of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, and do you see it as a pragmatic or a radical response to the plague of systemic racism?

Black Lives Matter has proven to be a highly significant social movement. The “simultaneous explosion” is real, and not too surprising. BLM is an activist manifestation of a long overdue reckoning with a shameful past and its bitter surviving legacy. Many want that history erased, and its legacy ignored. One salient reason, it seems, is fear of the “[Great Replacement](#).”

It’s easy to scoff at Great Replacement absurdities, and to condemn the demagogues and cynics who exploit them for their ugly purposes. But it’s not hard to see why they appeal to parts of the population — mostly rural, white, Christian, less educated, relatively affluent, often tending toward white supremacist commitments and Christian nationalism. The absurdities resonate because they rest on a core of fact: Those who have survived under the jackboot for centuries are demanding basic rights and are receiving more general support. BLM and its broad outreach have significantly advanced this cause. The “traditional way of life” that rests on denying these rights is facing threats, including demographic realities.

It’s not necessary here to trace how these conflicts have poisoned American society from its origins. They remain virulent, unpredictable, affecting many aspects of life and the social order.

A noticeable change is also being observed among a growing segment of American citizens, from both political parties, with regard to attitudes toward Israel and the Palestinians. How significant is this shift in public opinion, and how do we explain it?

Highly significant, and unmistakable. The poll I cited earlier on the astonishing perception of Middle East nuclear weapons [found](#) that the latest Israeli assault on Gaza “appears to have led to the largest increase to date in the number of Democrats, especially young Democrats, who want the U.S. to lean toward the

Palestinians.”

Each of the murderous Israeli assaults on Gaza has had that effect. The regular crimes of settlers and the army in the West Bank mostly pass under the radar. But the longtime tendency is very clear. In earlier years, even at moments where there was some recognition of the brutality of Israeli crimes, in the eyes of liberal America, Israel remained “a society in which moral sensitivity is a principle of political life” and which “through its tumultuous history” has been animated by “high moral purpose” (*New York Times*, *Time*, fall 1982, at the peak of condemnation of Israeli crimes after the Sabra-Shatila massacres).

That has changed. Now support for Israel has shifted to Evangelical Christians, right-wing nationalists and military-security sectors. The shift largely traces the drift to the ultranationalist right within Israel, along with the increasing difficulty of covering up its brutal actions and increased sensibility on a broad scale in the U.S.

The shift among the population has so far had little impact on policy, in fact runs counter to it. Obama was more supportive of Israel than his predecessors, even if not sufficiently so for the ascendant far right in Israel. Trump pulled out all the stops. Biden, so far, has scarcely modified his extremist stance. If the growing opposition to Israeli crimes crystallizes into an effective solidarity movement, it could bring about significant changes in U.S. policy. That could not fail to have major effects in Israel, which has been dependent on U.S. protection since the 1970s, when the Labor governments made the fateful decision to reject live diplomatic options, choosing instead expansion and construction of Greater Israel in violation of UN Security Council orders and international law.

Environmental activism is growing on a global scale and in various ways. Green political parties are flourishing in Europe, grassroots organizations such as the Sunrise Movement and Extinction Rebellion have emerged as crucial agents in the battle against the climate crisis, and even women in Latin America and the Caribbean have become active in defending the environment and fighting global warming. How do you assess the impacts of environmental movements so far to influence environmental policies and practices of governments and corporations?

There has been a notable impact, but it is nowhere near enough even to keep pace with the race to catastrophe, let alone to act decisively to avert it. There is

much more to do, and not much time to do it. We cannot emphasize too strongly the immensity of the stakes.

The so-called radical wing of the Democratic Party, which is most vocally represented by Sen. Bernie Sanders and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, is coming under rather enigmatic criticism, at least as far as I am concerned, by various left-minded groups and individuals for allegedly not doing enough to push forward a radical agenda of social change, which includes, among other things, Medicare for All. How justified is this criticism considering that the so-called radical wing of the Democratic Party consists of just a handful of individuals, which means that they obviously lack the power to be movers and shakers in Washington, D.C.?

Much of the criticism seems to me misguided in two respects: First, it focuses on alleged failures to achieve what is beyond reach under existing circumstances; and second, and more significant, it largely ignores very serious failures to achieve what is well within reach, and crucial for survival.

In the first category, it makes very good sense to strongly advocate for Medicare for All and other measures that would bring the U.S. into the “civilized” world, and enable it to realize its potential to become a leading force for progress, as it was in many ways in the New Deal years.

It is a stunning fact that despite its unique advantages, the United States ranks last among the rich societies in health care. The most recent international study of 11 high-income countries finds that, “The United States ranks last overall, despite spending far more of its gross domestic product on health care. The U.S. ranks last on access to care, administrative efficiency, equity, and health care outcomes, but second on measures of care process.” This scandal is mirrored in other measures of social justice. And efforts to overcome it are imperative.

Choice of measures to do so has to begin with assessment of social and political reality. The reality is that the levers of power are in the hands of concentrated wealth, the corporate world and their political representatives. The labor movement has been severely weakened by the neoliberal assault, and other popular movements are in no position to challenge concentrated political-economic power even when their goals are backed by a majority of the population. The Republican half of the Senate is opposed, rock solid, to change that impinges on the welfare of their actual constituency of private wealth and

corporate power (posturing aside). Simply look at their conditions on funding the BIP. And enough (so-called moderate) Democrats go along with them to block progressive legislation.

Vigorous advocacy should continue, accompanying the educational and organizational work that is needed to overcome dominant reactionary forces. It is idle, however, to direct criticism to a scattered few for failing to do what cannot be done until this foundational work is accomplished. To do that work is the proper task for the critics.

The second category of criticisms, which is largely lacking, should be directed at failures to undertake actions that are within reach and are of immense significance. I have already mentioned one: sharply cutting the Pentagon budget. A related concern is provocative foreign policy stances, dangerous and readily avoided in favor of diplomacy.

Keeping just to the domestic scene, there is a great deal that merits serious critical attention. The major Biden initiative is the BIP. As the [business press reports](#), referring to climate policy, “most of Biden’s plans for radical change can’t be found anywhere” in the bill. The “radical” proposals that can’t be found are in fact moderate measures that are essential for escape from catastrophe.

The few progressives in Congress, backed by Sunrise Movement, have said they will not vote for the BIP unless Congress moves on a subsequent legislation that includes the full range of necessary proposals. The fate of the contemplated larger bill is very much in doubt.

While this failure is receiving at least some attention, there is more that is passing in silence and is truly ominous. *AP* [reports](#) that, “Approvals for companies to drill for oil and gas on U.S. public lands are on pace this year to reach their highest level since George W. Bush was president, underscoring President Joe Biden’s reluctance to more forcefully curb petroleum production in the face of industry and Republican resistance.” The reference is to reserves already under lease but not authorized.

While there are legal issues about blocking prior leases, there seems to be plenty of room for executive action. Much had been hoped for from Interior Secretary Deb Haaland, who while in Congress had adamantly opposed drilling on federal lands and opposed fracking, and had co-sponsored the original Green New Deal.

But the signs so far are hardly encouraging — and one can't reiterate often enough that there is not much time.

In this domain, critical commentary is well warranted. And even more so, direct engagement and action.

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