

Merlijn Twaalfhoven - Het is aan ons ~ Waarom we de kunstenaar in onszelf nodig hebben om de wereld te redden.



*Merlijn Twaalfhoven. Ills.:
Joseph Sassoon Semah*

In zijn idealistische en bevlogen boek *'Het is aan ons'* beschrijft Merlijn Twaalfhoven hoe iedereen kan bijdragen aan het oplossen van wereldproblemen. Hij stelt zich ten doel de wereld te redden en analyseert hoe het kunstenaarschap hierbij kan helpen: kunst kan houvast bieden in onzekere tijden. Twaalfhoven spreekt niet over een mooi afgerond kunstwerk – kunst moet open zijn – en iedereen moet eraan mee kunnen doen. Kunst is een speeltuin, een laboratorium voor nieuwe verbintenissen en onbevangen vragen. Het proces verloopt van Waarnemen, Voelen, Denken naar Maken. Het komt samen in een praktisch idealisme.

Twaalfhoven is op zoek naar 'de verbinding van de nabijheid'.

Dat vereist een systeemverandering, een gezamenlijke toekomstvisie die op een waarachtige manier de menselijke waarden naar buiten brengt. Een praktisch, procesmatig idealisme.

Als componist en theatermaker organiseerde Merlijn Twaalfhoven wereldwijd voorstellingen. Hij ging de concertzaal uit en zette de muziek midden in de wereld. Als altviolist reisde hij in 1996 naar Bosnië, vlak nadat de vrede was getekend. Zijn concerten werden 'unieke ontmoetingen'. De plaats waar werd gespeeld, werd van cruciaal belang. Hij zag wat muziek kan betekenen, al was het natuurlijk niet voldoende om een blijvende verandering tot stand te brengen. Met zijn werk voegt hij 'een druppeltje toe aan een emmer die zich langzaam vult met vrede, moed, hoop, contact en gelijkwaardigheid'. Hij maakt ons deelgenoot van zijn reizen naar ook andere conflictgebieden waar kunst het verschil kan maken: zoals een Syrisch vluchtelingenkamp in Jordanië, de buitenwijken van Sarajevo, een huiskamerfestival in Jeruzalem, een oude pistolenfabriek in Zaandam, de Carnegie Hall in New York en een VN-conferentie in Alpbach, waar de kunstenaar werd uitgenodigd om te praten over de rol van kunst bij het halen van VN-doelen. De ontmoeting leidde helaas niet tot een concreet vervolg.

Het maken van kunst is vooral uitbesteed aan professionals, aldus Twaalfhoven. We lijken het vermogen te verliezen om zelf emoties, twijfels en dromen tastbaar te maken en vertraging te creëren. Maar schoonheid en verwondering verdienen een plek in ons leven.

Iedereen heeft een kunstenaar in zich, vrij vertaald naar Joseph Beuys. We hebben een 'kunstenaarsmindset' nodig, een speelse, onderzoekende, open en creatieve houding om bij te dragen aan een betere wereld. We hebben het allemaal in ons om krachten te bundelen, verhalen te vertellen, en iets van waarde te maken, tastbaar te maken wat in onszelf zit. Dan maken we het verschil.

'Het is aan ons', aldus Merlijn Twaalfhoven.



Hij sluit af met wat we kunnen leren van de kerk:

Ten eerste: markeer tijd en ruimte

Ten tweede: vind je houvast

Ten derde: spreek je idealen uit

Ten vierde: doe het samen

En ten slotte: vier je voortgang!

Merlijn Twaalfhoven is componist en oprichter van The Turn Club, een samenwerkingsverband van kunstprofessionals, veranderaars en bruggenbouwers. Hij werkte o.a. met Het Nationale Ballet, Toneelgroep Amsterdam en het Kronos Quartet.

De bijeenkomst in Paradiso (d.d. 1 november 2020) naar aanleiding van het verschijnen van het boek *'Het is aan ons. Waarom we de kunstenaar in onszelf nodig hebben om de wereld te redden.'*:

Linda Bouws – St. Metropool Internationale Kunstprojecten

Chomsky: Voting Is Not The End. It's Only The Beginning



Noam Chomsky

Joe Biden is the winner of the 2020 election. Yet while Trump has lost, the Democrats failed to materialize the blue wave some expected — and Trump fared extremely well despite the pandemic. In this exclusive interview, Noam Chomsky shares some of his insights about Trump's continuing popularity and what the left needs to do in the years ahead, emphasizing that voting is never an end — only a beginning.

C.J. Polychroniou: Although Biden has won the election, the Democrats failed to materialize a blue-wave landslide, and it is clear we will continue to deal with

large-scale Trumpism. Given that you were extremely skeptical of the polls from day one, what do you think contributed to the massive turnout for Trump, even as Biden saw an even more massive turnout? Or, to phrase the questions differently, why is nearly half the country continuing to support a dangerous charlatan leader with such a feverish passion?

Noam Chomsky: The very fact that someone could be considered a serious candidate after just having killed tens if not hundreds of thousands of Americans through a disastrous response to COVID-19 is an extraordinary victory for Trump — and a defeat for the country, for the world and for hopes for a decent future. Some of Trump’s victories are very revealing. A report on *NPR* discussed his victory in a solid Democratic county on the Texas-Mexico border with many poor Latinos that hadn’t voted Republican for a century, since Harding. The *NPR* analyst attributes Biden’s loss to his famous “gaffe” in the last debate, in which he said that we have to act to save human society from destruction in the not very distant future. Not his words, of course, but that’s the meaning of his statement: that we have to make moves to transition away from fossil fuels, which are central to the regional economy. Whether that’s the reason for the radical shift, or whether it’s attributable to another of the colossal Democratic organizing failures, the fact that the outcome is attributed to the gaffe is itself indicative of the rot in the dominant culture. In the U.S., it is [considered] a serious “gaffe” to dare to hint that we have to act to avoid a cataclysm.

Poor working people in the border area are not voting for the predictable consequences of Trump’s race toward cataclysm. They may simply be skeptical about what science predicts. Sixty percent of conservative Republicans ([35 percent](#) of moderate Republicans) believe that humans are contributing “not too much/not at all” to global warming. A poll reported in *Science* found that only 20 percent of Republicans trust scientists “a lot...to do what is right for the country.” Why then believe the dire predictions? These, after all, are the messages pounded into their heads daily by the White House and its media echo chamber.

South Texan working people may not be ready to sacrifice their lives and communities today on the basis of claims in elite circles that they are instructed not to trust. These tendencies cannot be blamed solely on Trump’s malevolence. They trace back to the failure of the Democratic Party to bring to the public a serious program to fend off environmental catastrophe while also improving lives and work — not because such programs don’t exist; they do. But because they

don't appeal to the donor-oriented Clintonite neoliberals who run the Democratic Party.

There's more. Trump has shown political genius in tapping the poisonous currents that run right below the surface of American society. He has skillfully nourished and amplified the currents of white supremacy, racism and xenophobia that have deep roots in American history and culture, now exacerbated by fear that "they" will take over "our" country with its shrinking white majority. And the concerns are deep. A careful [study](#) by political scientist Larry Bartels reveals that Republicans feel that "the traditional American way of life is disappearing so fast that we may have to use force to save it," and more than 40 percent agree that "a time will come when patriotic Americans have to take the law into their own hands."

Trump has also skillfully tapped reservoirs of anger and economic resentment among the working and middle classes who have been subjected to the bipartisan neoliberal assault of the last 40 years. If they feel that they have been robbed, they have good reason. The Rand Corporation recently estimated transfer of wealth from the lower 90 percent to the very rich during the four neoliberal decades: \$47 trillion, not small change. Looking more closely, the transfer was primarily to a small fraction of the very rich. Since Reagan, the top 0.1 percent has doubled their share of the country's wealth to an astonishing 20 percent.

These outcomes are not the result of principles of economics or laws of history but of deliberate policy decisions. If decisions are shifted from government ("government is the problem," as Reagan claimed) they do not disappear. They are placed in the hands of the corporate sector, which must be guided solely by greed (per neoliberal economic guru Milton Friedman). With such guidelines in place, results are not hard to anticipate.

On top of the near-\$50 trillion train robbery, the international economy ("globalization") has been structured to set American working people in competition with those in low-wage countries with no workers' rights while the very rich are granted protection from market forces, by exorbitant patent rights, to take one example. Again, the effects of this bipartisan enterprise are not a surprise.

Less educated workers may not know the details or understand the mechanisms

that have been designed to undermine their lives, but they see the outcomes. The Democrats offer them nothing. They long ago abandoned the working class and have been full collaborators in the racket. Trump in fact harms workers even more than the opposition, but he excoriates “elites” — while slavishly serving the super-rich and corporate sector, as his legislative program and executive orders amply demonstrate.

Apart from almost daily steps to chip away at the environment that sustains life and to pack the judiciary top-to-bottom with far right young lawyers, the main achievement of the Trump-McConnell administration has been the tax scam of 2017: “a delayed tax increase dressed up as a tax cut,” economist Joseph Stiglitz [explains](#). “The Trump administration has a dirty little secret: It’s not just planning to increase taxes on most Americans. The increase has already been signed, sealed and delivered, buried in the pages of the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act.”

The law was carefully designed to lower taxes initially so as to “hoodwink” Americans to think their taxes were being reduced, but with mechanisms to ensure that tax increases “would affect nearly everyone but people at the top of the economic hierarchy. All taxpayer income groups with incomes of \$75,000 and under — that’s about 65 percent of taxpayers — will face a higher tax rate in 2021 than in 2019.” It’s the same device that the George W. Bush Republicans used to sell their 2001 “tax cut” — for the rich.

What happens if Trump refuses to accept a Biden victory and seeks to settle the matter in the Supreme Court? And when corporate lawyers and the militias end up doing their thing, is it even remotely possible that the country could end up under martial law?

My uneducated guess is that it won’t come to that, but it’s a speculation with little basis or credibility. Trump has strong reasons — maybe even his personal future — to hold on to office by any possible means. We are not in the days of Richard Nixon, who had good reasons to question the legitimacy of the vote he lost in 1960, but had the decency to put the welfare of the country about his personal ambitions. Not Donald Trump. And the organization that grovels at his feet is not the political party of 60 years ago.

Trump still has two months to wield the wrecking ball that has already diminished the United States, harmed the world and severely threatened the future. His

penchant for wrecking everything he did not create, whatever the cost, is hard to miss. He might decide to go for broke.

What are the next steps for the left?

For the left, elections are a brief interlude in a life of real politics, a moment to ask whether it's worth taking off time to vote — typically against. In 2020, the choice was transparent, for reasons not worth reviewing. Then back to work. Once Trump is fully removed, the work will be to move forward to construct the better world that is within reach.

This interview has been lightly edited for clarity. It has also been updated to reflect Joe Biden's victory over Donald Trump in the 2020 election.

Source: <https://truthout.org/articles/chomsky-voting-is-not-the-end-of-our-work-its-only-the-beginning/>

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Irreconcilable Differences: The

2020 Elections Prove Again The U.S. As Outlier



CJ

Polychroniou

The most consequential election in modern U.S. history won't produce a winner for at least a few more days. And then, the result may be contested in the Supreme Court, with unforeseen consequences for the future of democratic order.

However, while much of the media and the public are consumed with scenarios as to how Biden, or Trump, can reach the magic number of 270 electoral votes, there are some highly disturbing trends and facts about the 2020 election that need to be analyzed if progressives in the U.S. can hope to advance a successful strategy in the years ahead.

First, the polls were wrong again. A blue wave did not materialize in spite of the highest voter turnout in a century and the huge demographic changes taking place all across the United States.

Second, Biden failed to perform as expected in spite of the country being in the midst of a catastrophic pandemic, with a criminally negligent president in charge who has misled the public about Coronavirus from day one and has intentionally spread dangerous information about it.

Third, Trump did much better than expected in spite of being a charlatan, the sort of a leader who says and does such outrageous and highly dangerous things that it is simply unimaginable that citizens in other advanced democracies would have tolerated him in their midst, let alone support with a feverous passion as so many Americans do.

The 2020 U.S. elections have revealed as strongly as possible that the country remains highly polarized, marked by irreconcilable differences between red and blue states. In fact, the U.S. is probably more divided today between red and blue than it was during the 1860s, and much of the credit for this accomplishment is due to the brilliant skills of the con artist occupying the White House for the last

four years. Trump has exploited the anxieties, frustrations, and fears of white America, with its toxic ideological notion of racial superiority, in a manner that would have made Joseph Goebbels feel like an amateur.

Racism has always been around. But it is more alive and kicking in today's USA than any other time since the 1950s or 1960s. This is why Trump's neo-fascist political posturing is found to be so appealing among such huge segments of 21 st century Americans. Democracy, for Trump and many of his supporters, is an unnecessary luxury if it would mean building a society where whites are the minority. In fact, in a survey cited in Larry Bartels's research article "Ethnic antagonism erodes Republicans' commitment to democracy", "most Republicans...agreed that "'the traditional American way of life is disappearing so fast that we may have to use force to save it.'"

<https://www.pnas.org/content/117/37/22752>

This is why there was a record turnout in the 2020 election: this was an election about white Americans, as Umair Haque, Director of the Havas Media Lab, artfully argued a few days ago in his essay "Is White America Really Ready to Reject Trump's

Fascism?" <https://eand.co/is-white-america-really-ready-to-reject-trumps-fascism-cf88d6f9b48d>

To be sure, the U.S. remains an outlier among highly advanced societies on many issues, because racism is the driving ideological force. The U.S. is the only country in the advanced industrialized world without a universal health care system, but with a warfare but no welfare state.

<https://www.salon.com/2020/08/08/as-the-pandemic-has-made-clear-america-has-no-welfare-state-but-we-sure-have-a-warfare-state/>

The U.S. is alone among western countries with its continued use of the death penalty (where racial disparities continue even though the death penalty usage has declined), it has not ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and has ratified fewer key human rights treaties than all other countries in the G20 group. Additionally, it never ratified the Equal Rights Amendment proposed in 1972, and it ranks 75th globally in women's representation in government.

<https://www.cnbc.com/2019/03/04/the-us-ranks-75th-in-womens-representation-in-government.html>

Indeed, white America is very different from the rest of the advanced world, as Haque points out in “Is White America Really Ready to Reject Trump’s Fascism?”, in profoundly striking ways: “Voters in Europe and Canada — white majorities there — can be relied upon to act with some modicum of decency and humanity and common sense. They back, over and over again, what the world now considers modern social contracts that make up functioning, sophisticated societies — healthcare, retirement, education, childcare, and so on, for all, not just themselves. It would be a massive, massive shock if voters anywhere else in the West began to act like America’s white majority — they are so far off the scale of conservatism, in formal terms, that it might as well not exist.”

In sum, what the 2020 elections demonstrate, regardless of who wins the election, is that Trumpism will remain the dominant ideological and political movement in the third decade of the 21 st century in the United States. With or without Trump in the White House, white America will surely remain vigilant in its attempt to “safeguard America’s traditional values” and, in that context, progressive forces will have their hands full.

In the light of this, the creation of a “Popular Front,” a coalition of all democratic forces of the sort that took place in Europe in the mid-1930s to combat the rise of fascism, should be embraced as possibly the only coherent strategy to roll back Trumpism. But in 21 st century USA, this would mean a commitment first and foremost to the norms and values of an inclusive democracy within the context of class-and environmental politics.

As such, “identity politics,” which has gone from inclusion to division and has led to political tribalism in U.S. society, needs to be reassessed in a manner where its positive attributes are incorporated into a broader political agenda. But this is a story for another time.

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The Winner Of The 2020 Election Won't Be Inheriting A Genuine Democracy



Today's election is widely regarded as the most important national election in recent U.S. history, voters remain divided and polarized over what should be essentially the future of the country. Issues over racism, immigration, guns, women's rights, police brutality and climate change are what essentially divide Republican

voters from Democrats. The former, galvanized by the extreme and divisive rhetoric of a racist and reactionary president, wish to preserve the values of "traditional America" (white supremacy and patriarchy, militarism, rugged individualism and religiosity), while Democrats worry that another four years of Donald Trump in office will spell the end of democracy.

Is destroying or saving U.S. democracy what the upcoming election is all about? In this interview, political scientist *C.J. Polychroniou* says it is high time that we did away with the political rhetoric when it comes to U.S. democracy and look at the facts: The U.S. has a highly flawed system of democratic governance and doesn't even rank among the top 20 democracies in the Western world, and thus is in dire need of major repair. In fact, Polychroniou argues, it is far more accurate to describe the United States as an oligarchy, a regime where an economic elite and powerful organized interests are in virtual control of the policy

agenda on most issues of critical importance to public interest while average people are mainly political bystanders.

Alexandra Boutri: The general consensus among a significant percentage of voters opposed to Donald Trump is that the upcoming election represents a pivotal moment in U.S. politics, for what is at stake is nothing else than the future of democracy itself. True, or an exaggeration?

C.J. Polychroniou: Trump's presidency has been marked from the beginning by lies, strong authoritarian impulses, contempt for the media and disdain for science, big gifts for the rich and big cuts for the poor, and complete disregard for the environment. His political posturing is outright neo-fascist, and, as such, this president surely has little concern about the subtleties of democratic governance. Of course, U.S. democracy was in a crisis long before Trump came to power. In fact, one could easily make the argument that the U.S. is not a true democracy at all (it qualifies as a mere procedural democracy), and was never meant to be when you get to understand the architecture of the Constitution, who the framers were, and why they opted to ditch, in the manner of a coup, the Articles of Confederation, during the Constitutional Convention of 1787. In fact, the drafting of the Constitution itself was not a democratic process: The delegates were sent there by state legislatures with a mandate to revise the Articles of Confederation, but, instead, they worked in total secrecy in producing an entirely new legal document for the future government of the United States.

The Constitution that the framers produced, with its system of checks and balances, was as a legal document way ahead of its time, since back then, monarchy was the prevailing form of political rule throughout the world. But in addition to designing a system of governance that would prevent the rise of an absolute ruler, the framers also wanted to make sure that the masses themselves would not be in a position to determine political outcomes. Indeed, the framers were seeking a form of government that would keep the elites safe both from the caprice of absolute rulers and from the whims of the rabble. They were indeed in complete agreement with the view of John Jay, one of the so-called Founding Fathers and the first Chief Justice, when he said, "Those who own the country ought to govern it." Hence the purpose behind the introduction of the Electoral College, which blatantly violates the very basic principle of democracy, i.e., one person, one vote; hence also the anti-democratic nature of the Senate, where states with very small populations get the same number of senators as states with

huge populations.

The U.S. is also the only democracy in the world where politicians are actively involved in manipulating the boundaries of electoral districts. Political gerrymandering has a long history in the U.S., but as Common Cause National Redistricting Director Kathay Feng pointedly put it, “In a democracy, voters should choose their politicians, not the other way around.”

In addition, federal election campaigns funded entirely by private money makes a mockery of the democratic process for electing public officials, while the “winner-take-all” system, which is not in the Constitution and therefore can be changed without a constitutional amendment, can easily be regarded as undemocratic under modern election law jurisprudence, as has correctly been pointed out by [former Republican governor of Massachusetts, William Weld, and law professor Sanford Levinson](#).

In sum, there is no other democracy in the advanced industrialized world with the “undemocratic” features of the system of democracy found in the U.S., including its two-party system which severely limits public dialogue and debate among competing political views. Little surprise, therefore, why even the conservative weekly magazine *The Economist* has labeled the U.S. a “flawed democracy.” As a matter of fact, U.S. democracy does not even rank among the top 20 democracies in the Western world, according to the Democracy Index compiled by the Economist Intelligence Unit. The U.S. form of governance fits far more perfectly with that of classical oligarchy, although in the last four years, the country also had a leader who behaved more in tune with the traits of the tyrannical man outlined in Plato’s *Republic*.

Why then is the U.S. Constitution treated as some sort of a sacred document? Why aren’t there calls for a constitutional amendment, or even for an entirely new constitution?

It’s amazing what propaganda and lack of knowledge can do to a citizenry and therefore to the prospects of a democratic polity. All sorts of myths have been built around the so-called Founding Fathers, while the idea of the United States as the “world’s greatest democracy” is echoed by every politician either running for or while in office. Only a handful of political analysts and legal scholars are raising the question of the undemocratic nature of the U.S. Constitution. I

suppose it's the similar mentality behind the pathetic habit of U.S. politicians ending every speech with "God Bless America." Here, the hypocrisy is quite striking since the framers of the Constitution were very specific about the separation of state and church. The word "God" does not even appear in the Constitution. But no one seems to be raising these issues in today's U.S. political culture. For the unfortunate fact is that it has always been something of a taboo in the U.S. to point out the flaws of the political system and its political culture. This is why the use of the term of "anti-Americanism" was invented in the first place: to frighten open-minded citizens from exposing the flaws in the workings of the U.S. political system and criticizing U.S. policies.

The U.S. Constitution is extremely difficult to amend: It requires a two-thirds vote in both chambers, then ratification by three-quarters of the states. Of course, scores of constitutional amendments have been introduced over the years, but not one has become part of the Constitution. But here is an interesting fact about what the man who drafted the Declaration of Independence thought of constitutions: Thomas Jefferson was of the view that any constitution has to lapse after every generation. The laws and constitutions drawn by previous generations, according to Jefferson, in a letter written to James Madison from Paris, should not be binding on future generations. Yet, the U.S. is stuck with the same Constitution for the last 231 years, with a Constitution drafted by men whose language and mode of thinking bear no resemblance whatsoever to the mindset of most 21st century Americans and to the dictates of contemporary democracy. On the other hand, an overwhelming majority of Chileans just voted to rewrite the country's constitution, which dates to the era of General Augusto Pinochet. This is how democracies ought to work.

How comparable are capitalism and democracy?

Capitalism can function under different forms of government, including brutal dictatorships. There is nothing inherent in the dynamics of a capitalist economy that allows democracy to flourish. Calls for the recognition of social rights and demands for freedom, political participation and democratic governance have always come in fact from those who were exposed to the cruelties and injustices which are naturally built into a capitalist system of economic and social life. Democratic rights were gained, advanced and secured under capitalism, almost everywhere in the world, through prolonged social and political struggles from below. They were not granted to the masses by the masters of capital themselves. The right of workers to unionize, for instance, has a long and bloody history behind it. The U.S., in fact, has had the bloodiest and most violent labor history of any industrialized capitalist country in the world. By the same token, there are limits to how far democracy can advance under capitalism. Direct participatory

democracy and economic democracy are anathema to a capitalist organization of socio-economic life. And under neoliberal capitalism — which is essentially a politico-economic project that aims to return society to the age of predatory capitalism when labor power was completely “free” — nature is totally at the mercy of unrestrained capital exploitation, and state policies cater exclusively to the interests and needs of the plutocrats, and thus democracy is a sham. Competition is seen as the defining characteristic of what it means to be human, citizens are turned into consumers, and society is dog-eat-dog.

How exactly would one go about proving that the U.S. is actually an oligarchy?

This is not very hard to prove if you approach the question with a critical eye instead of engaging in breast-beating about how great U.S. democracy is by virtue of the simple fact that we enjoy basic civil liberties and civil rights, which are the very basic elements of even the most rudimentary form of democracy. You can start by looking at the distribution of economic and political power. That is the most direct and obvious way to figure out whether a society functions democratically or is controlled by a power elite. The U.S. is one of the richest countries in the world, but also one with extreme levels of inequality. The richest 1 percent own 40 percent of the country’s wealth, according to a study produced a few years ago by economist Edward N. Wolff. By the same token, the top 1 percent incomes have grown in recent years to be five times as much as the bottom 90 percent incomes. Economic power, of course, translates almost automatically into political power. This does not mean that the capitalist state is by extension a mere tool in the hands of the capitalist class, as crude Marxism used to contend back in the era of the Comintern, but the government agenda is heavily influenced, if not outright shaped, by economic elite domination.

A few years ago, two mainstream political scientists, Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page, tested the different theories of U.S. politics (majoritarian democracy, pluralism and elite theory) by looking at a huge set of policy cases for a period covering more than 20 years (from 1981-2002). What they found is shocking even to those of us who are fully cognizant of the undemocratic nature of the U.S. political system: Economic elites and business interests had overwhelming impact on U.S. government policies, while average citizens had little or no independent influence. Another mainstream political scientist, Larry Bartels, also published recently a book, mainly an empirical study, titled *Unequal Democracy*, exposing the myths of U.S. democracy by showing how the political system favors overwhelmingly the wealthy.

In sum, there is no doubt about it: What drives U.S. politics and the framing of government policy is economic-elite domination. Moreover, average people seem somehow to be cognizant of this realization, which probably explains why such an overwhelming percentage of U.S. citizens do not bother to vote: “democracy” isn’t working for them.

If U.S. democracy is so highly flawed, what then is really at stake in the November elections?

There can be no denying that even procedural democracy has been facing a historic crisis under the reign of Donald Trump. When it comes to transparency and accountability, Trump has broken new grounds with his disregard for such democratic niceties. He has blatantly challenged the authority and independence of agency watchdogs overseeing his administration and has retaliated against officials who have exposed wrongdoings of his administration. He has encouraged actions to silence certain broadcast news outlets and individuals and even threatened to shut down social media industries. He has dispatched federal agents to cities to crush protests, and has even refused to accept that there would be a peaceful transition to power in the event he loses the November 2020 election. As I noted before, he has been acting as Plato’s tyrannical man in the *Republic*, which probably explains why he fancies so much dictators like North Korea’s Kim Jong-un and strongmen like Turkey’s Erdoğan and Russia’s Putin. No doubt, he is jealous of their authoritarian powers. But it should be pointed out that the Republican Party as a whole has moved so far to the right that it has become part of the illiberal political universe, as a [major study](#) just published by a Swedish university confirms.

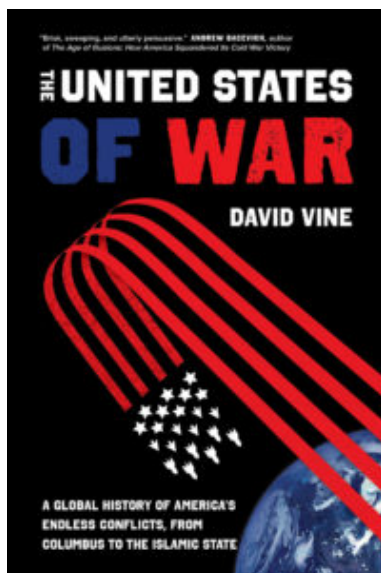
Be that as it may, much more is at stake in the upcoming election than democratic formalities. Aside from his catastrophic handling of the coronavirus pandemic — which has resulted in the death of more than 225,000 Americans, the highest total in the world — and the death figures continue to rise on an almost daily basis, Trump’s white supremacy vision will tear completely apart U.S. society, his economic policies will exacerbate even further the huge inequalities present in U.S. society and his nuclear posture will move us closer to Armageddon. Finally, and far more important, there are his anti-environmental policies and refusal to even acknowledge humanity’s greatest existential crisis, namely global warming. During his reign in power, he has initiated an unprecedented number of regulatory rollbacks, with complete indifference to their impact on the

environment and people's lives. In that sense, he doesn't pose just a threat to democracy. As Noam Chomsky never tires of repeating, Trump is a real menace to civilization, to organized human life, like no other leader has ever been in recent history anywhere in the world.

This interview has been lightly edited for clarity.

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The US Chose Endless War Over Pandemic Preparedness. Now We See The Effects



*The United States of War
- A Global History of
America's Endless
Conflicts, from
Columbus to the Islamic*

State. ISBN:
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The United States has the longest record of war-fighting in modern history. Why that is the case is not a question that has an easy answer; suffice to say, however, that militarism and violence run like a red thread throughout U.S. political history, with enormous costs both for the domestic economy and the world at large, as a recently [published book](#) by David Vine makes plainly clear. In fact, the militarist mentality is strongly reinforced by the Trump administration in spite of the fact that the current president claims to have an aversion to “endless wars.” In this exclusive *Truthout* interview, Vine, a professor of anthropology at American University in Washington, D.C., addresses critical questions about U.S. war culture and Trump’s own contribution to the violence that has always been foundational to U.S. culture.

*C.J. Polychroniou: Your latest book, *The United States of War: A Global History of America’s Endless Conflicts, from Columbus to the Islamic State*, is a detailed survey of the U.S.’s obsession with militarism and war. Have you come to a definite conclusion or explanation as to why the United States has been at war for about 225 of the 243 years since its independence?*

David Vine: There is, of course, no simple answer to this incredibly important question. According to my research, the U.S. military has been at war or engaged in other combat in all but 11 years of U.S. history — 95 percent of the years the United States has existed. My book shows how the huge collection of U.S. military bases abroad provides a key — or a kind of lens — to help understand why the United States has been fighting almost without pause since 1776. Bases abroad, bases beyond U.S. borders show how U.S. political, economic and military leaders — shaped by the forces of history, capitalism, racism, patriarchy, nationalism and religion — have used taxpayer money to build a self-perpetuating system of permanent, imperialist war revolving around an often-expanding collection of extraterritorial military bases. These bases have expanded the boundaries of the United States, while keeping the country locked in a state of nearly continuous war that has largely served the economic and political interests of elites and left tens of millions dead, wounded and displaced.

To be clear, my argument is not that U.S. bases abroad are the singular cause of this near-endless fighting. Indeed, my book shows how the answer to why the U.S.

government has fought so constantly lies in the capitalist profit-making desires of businesses and elites, in the electoral interests of politicians, and in the forces of racism, militarized masculinity, nationalism and missionary Christianity, among other dynamics.

U.S. bases abroad, however, have played a key and long overlooked role in the pattern of near-constant U.S. fighting: that is, since independence, bases that U.S. leaders have built beyond the borders of the United States not only have enabled wars but also have made offensive imperialist wars more likely. While U.S. leaders often portray bases abroad as defensive in nature, the opposite is generally the case: bases built on the territory of other peoples have tended to be offensive in nature, providing a launchpad for yet more wars. This has tended to create a pattern in which bases abroad have led to wars that have led to the construction of new bases abroad that have led to new wars that have led to new bases and so on.

Can you offer us a quick assessment of the overall costs of the “global war on terror?”

It's impossible to capture the immensity of the catastrophe that the so-called “global war on terror” has inflicted. Around 15,000 U.S. military personnel and contractors have died in wars the U.S. government has waged since invading Afghanistan in October 2001. Hundreds of thousands of troops have returned with amputations, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injuries, and other physical and mental damage. As of 2018, 1.7 million veterans had reported a wartime disability.

Across the countries where the U.S. military has fought, the death toll is at least 50 times higher than the U.S. death toll: In Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Pakistan and Yemen alone, an estimated 755,000 to 786,000 civilians and combatants have died as a result of combat. Total deaths may reach 3.1-4 million or more, including those who have died as a result of disease, hunger and malnutrition caused by the wars. Entire neighborhoods, cities and societies have been shattered by these wars. The number injured and traumatized surely extends into the tens of millions. At least 37 million people have been displaced from their homes during U.S. fighting in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, the Philippines, Somalia, Syria and Yemen. For perspective, 37 million is about as many people as live in California and in Texas and Virginia combined. Thirty seven million

displaced is more than those displaced by any war anywhere in the world since at least 1900, with the exception of World War II.

The U.S. government and the United States as a country are not single-handedly responsible for all the death, displacement and destruction of these wars. Other governments and combatants also bear significant responsibility. However, the U.S. government bears disproportionate responsibility, especially for the wars it has launched (Afghanistan, the overlapping war in Pakistan, and Iraq), the wars it has escalated (Libya and Syria), and the wars in which U.S. forces have been significant combatants (Yemen, Somalia and the Philippines). Alongside U.S. funding for and involvement in combat in a total of at least 24 countries since 2001, the rhetoric of the “war on terror” alone has also fueled wars and violence worldwide.

Alongside the human damage, the financial costs of the so-called war on terror are so large, they’re nearly incomprehensible. As of October 2020, the U.S. government has spent or obligated a minimum of \$6.4 trillion on the post-2001 wars, including the costs of future veterans’ benefits and interest payments on the money borrowed to pay for the wars. The actual costs are likely to run hundreds of billions or trillions more, depending on when we force our politicians to bring these seemingly endless wars to an end.

While it’s incredibly hard to fathom \$6.4 trillion in taxpayer funds vanished, the catastrophe is compounded when we consider how else the U.S. government could have spent such incredible sums of money. What could these trillions have done to provide universal health care, to rebuild public schools, to build affordable housing, to end homelessness and hunger, to rebuild crumbling civilian infrastructure, to prepare for pandemics? In addition to the 3-4 million who have likely died in the wars the U.S. government has fought since 2001, how many more have died because of the investments the U.S. government *did not* make? These are questions that, I have to say, should make us weep.

In trying to wrap our minds around the unbelievable human and financial costs of the so-called “war on terror,” we also have to remember that this war has also been a catastrophic failure on its own terms: the main result of the “war on terror” has been to spread terror and dramatically expand the number of groups and people who would engage in terrorist attacks on U.S. citizens and others civilians worldwide as a political tool. In Afghanistan, for example, there are at

least 10 times as many militant groups today as there were in 2001. Meanwhile, research has consistently shown that military action is rarely effective in shutting down militant “terrorist” groups. Responding to the attacks of 9/11 with what has now been an endless global war has been one of the most catastrophic and deadly mistakes in world history.

The United States is a violent society and is getting more violent, especially in the age of Trump. How is this connected to war culture and militarism?

In short, I would say the United States has always been a profoundly violent country, but that often this violence has been obscured or ignored, at least by some. In this way, just as Trump’s reign has exposed the racism, nativism and misogyny of the United States, Trump has also exposed the violence that has always been foundational — but not inevitable — to the United States.

A full, proper answer to this question would require a book of its own, but I would start by quoting the novelist William Faulkner’s words, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” Which is to say that the long history of wars waged by the United States — a history that actually dates to the arrival of Columbus in the Americas and to vicious religious wars waged by Europeans in Europe — has shaped the United States and daily life in the country in profound ways, including in the racist violence that we are seeing increasingly during Trump’s reign. A country’s military does not fight in nearly every year of the country’s existence in at least 135 foreign lands without this violence shaping the country profoundly.

To provide one illustration of the connections between the past and the present, it’s no coincidence that so many of the heavily armed, right-wing, white nationalist militant groups in the United States call themselves *militias*. These groups are invoking, and thus help to reveal, the connections between today’s violence and the role of organized militias in the imperialist expansion and genocidal colonization carried out by the 13 original U.S. states across North America.

That a growing number of right-wing groups and politicians are increasingly embracing the ideology of *white supremacy* in increasingly explicit ways is also a reminder of the foundational role of racist violence in U.S. history, from the violence of enslavement built into the U.S. Constitution, to the racist genocide inflicted on Native American peoples by the U.S. Army, state militias and Euro-

American settlers, to the racism that has shaped the hundreds of U.S. wars and combat actions pursued beyond today's U.S. borders against peoples who have overwhelmingly been people of color.

We can also see the connections between today's violence and the history of U.S. wars in the massive number of guns and other firearms in the United States, in the longstanding glorification of war and violence in U.S. popular culture, and in the growing militarization of the police, among many other connections.

Trump's political hypocrisy manifests itself on many fronts, and this includes criticizing generals and weapons manufacturers for the so-called "endless wars" and campaigning on a seemingly anti-war platform (witness the testaments to his aversion at the Republican National Convention) when he keeps increasing the military budget every consecutive year since he has been in office. In fact, he established a new branch of the military to oversee all space activities (Space Force) in opposition to the Pentagon's top brass. What's going on here? What's Trump's game over defense spending, which is literally out of control?

Trump's "game" is ironically an encouraging sign. Trump's criticism of generals, weapons manufacturers and the endless wars is indeed a campaign strategy built on his recognition that large majorities in the United States are now opposed to war — certainly to the kinds of large-scale invasions, occupations, and wars seen in Afghanistan and Iraq.

As you said, Trump is a complete hypocrite given the role he has played in continuing the endless wars and ploughing unprecedented sums of money into the military budget and the coffers of the weapons manufacturers. But his antiwar talk is a sign that much of the country has turned against war, that people across the political spectrum — from the left to anti-imperialist Republicans and libertarians — are demanding a different approach to foreign policy. Trump's antiwar talk is a sign that the pursuit of peace and the avoidance of war at all costs is increasingly popular. It's a sign that the pursuit of peace and the avoidance of war can be and should be the consensus among mainstream politicians of all stripes.

In your view, is there a connection between the amount of money the U.S. pours into its war machine and its inability to deal with the coronavirus pandemic? And to what extent are the military's activities actually exacerbating the spread of

COVID-19?

Clearly there is a deep connection between the war machine and the U.S. government's failure to protect the country against COVID. Trump is responsible for the unnecessary deaths of at least tens of thousands of people, but the responsibility is shared by past presidential administrations and the entire war system. As others have pointed out, spending \$6.4 trillion on the "war on terror" and trillions more on the annual military budget since 2001 has not protected us from COVID and other pandemics. Spending such immense sums on war has stolen money — and the time and energies of millions of Americans — from pandemic preparedness, from a properly robust public health infrastructure, and from the creation of a universal health care system that could have properly cared for the sick.

Beyond the post-2001 period alone, for decades U.S. leaders have built what is effectively a warfare state. While other wealthy nations have built social welfare states, U.S. politicians and elites have invested in a state dedicated above all to waging war and to preparations for waging war.

President Eisenhower was exactly right when he called this kind of diversion of funds a "theft." He said, "Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed." Today, every gun that is made signifies a theft from those with COVID, from those who might contract COVID, from all of us.

The military's daily activities are also exacerbating the spread of COVID in a variety of ways from spreading the disease among military personnel and endangering people living near U.S. military bases in places such as Okinawa, to continuing wars — in places such as Afghanistan, Syria and Yemen — that are destroying public health infrastructure, causing displacement and generally creating humanitarian disasters that are exacerbating the vulnerability of millions of people to coronavirus.

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Noam Chomsky: Trump Is Willing To Dismantle Democracy To Hold On To Power



Noam Chomsky

While it's still too early to predict the likely outcome of the November 2020 presidential election, Donald Trump continues to fall behind in national polls while pulling dirty electoral tricks in the hope of defeating Democratic challenger Joe Biden. Much of Trump's hope for victory rests with his "law and order" campaign, which promotes lies about mail-in-voting fraud in order to preemptively discredit the election results if they are in Biden's favor. In this exclusive interview for *Truthout*, Noam Chomsky discusses the national and international

significance of Trump's refusal to commit to a "peaceful transition to power" and his reliance on conspiracy theories.

C.J. Polychroniou: Noam, with slightly more than two weeks away from the most important national elections in recent U.S. history, Trump's campaign continues to harp on the message of "law and order" — a political tactic that authoritarian leaders have always relied on in order to control people and to strengthen their grip on a country — but refuses to accept a "peaceful transition to power" if he loses to Biden. Your thoughts on these matters?

Noam Chomsky: The "law and order" appeal is normal, virtually reflexive. Trump's threat to refuse to accept the result of the election is not. It is something new in stable parliamentary democracies.

The fact that this contingency is even being discussed reveals how effective the Trump wrecking ball has been in undermining formal democracy. We may recall that Richard Nixon, not exactly revered for his integrity, had some reason to suppose that victory in the 1960 election had been stolen from him by Democratic Party machinations. He did not challenge the results, placing the welfare of the country above personal ambition. Al Gore did the same in 2000. The idea of Trump placing anything above his personal ambition — even caring about the welfare of the country — is too ludicrous to discuss.

James Madison once said that liberty is not protected by "parchment barriers" — words on paper. Rather, constitutional orders presuppose good faith and some commitment, however limited, to the common good. When that is gone, we've moved to a different sociopolitical world.

Trump's threats are taken quite seriously, not only in extensive commentary in mainstream media and journals, but even within the military — which might be compelled to intervene, as in the tinpot dictatorships that are Trump's model. A striking example is [an open letter to the country's highest ranking military officer](#), Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Mark Milley, from two highly regarded retired military commanders, Lt. Colonels John Nagl and Paul Yingling. They warn Milley: "The president of the United States is actively subverting our electoral system, threatening to remain in office in defiance of our Constitution. In a few months' time, you may have to choose between defying a lawless president or betraying your Constitutional oath" to defend the Constitution against all enemies, "foreign and domestic."

The enemy today is domestic: a “lawless president,” Nagl and Yingling continue, who “is assembling a private army capable of thwarting not only the will of the electorate but also the capacities of ordinary law enforcement. When these forces collide on January 20, 2021, the U.S. military will be the only institution capable of upholding our Constitutional order.”

With Senate Republicans “reduced to supplicant status,” having abandoned any lingering shreds of integrity, General Milley should be prepared to send a brigade of the 82nd Airborne to disperse Trump’s “little green men,” Nagl and Yingling advise. “Should you remain silent, you will be complicit in a coup d’état.”

Hard to believe, but the very fact that such thoughts are voiced by sober and respected voices, and echoed throughout the mainstream, is reason enough to be deeply concerned about the prospects for U.S. society. I rarely quote *New York Times* senior correspondent Thomas Friedman, but when he asks whether this might be our last democratic election, he is not joining us “wild men in the wings” — to quote McGeorge Bundy’s term for those who don’t automatically conform to approved doctrine.

Meanwhile, we should not overlook how leading elements of Trump’s “private army” are showing their mettle in their usual terrain of deployment: the cruel Arizona desert to which the U.S., since Clinton, has driven miserable people fleeing from our destruction of their countries so that we may evade our responsibility — both legal and moral — to offer them an opportunity for asylum.

When Trump decided to terrorize Portland, Oregon, he didn’t send the military, probably expecting that it would refuse to follow his orders, as had just happened in Washington, D.C. He sent paramilitaries, the most fierce of them the tactical unit BORTAC of the Border Patrol, which is given virtually free rein with the “damned of the earth” as its targets.

Immediately on returning from carrying out Trump’s orders in Portland, BORTAC returned to its regular pastimes, smashing up a flimsy medical aid center in the desert where volunteers seek to provide some medical aid, even water, to desperate people who managed somehow to survive.

Not content with this achievement, BORTAC soon returned to the task. Perhaps those who may be facing Trump’s private army might want to learn more about

them. Here's an excerpt from [an authoritative report from the scene](#) offered by the humanitarian organization [No More Deaths](#):

After sunset yesterday, October 5th, U.S. Border Patrol entered No More Deaths' humanitarian aid station, Byrd Camp, with a federal warrant, for a second nighttime raid in two months. Volunteers were held for 3 hours while 12 people who were receiving medical care, food, water, and shelter from the 100+ degree heat were apprehended.

In a massive show of armed force, Border Patrol, along with the Border Patrol Tactical Unit (BORTAC), descended on the camp with an armored tank, ATVs, a helicopter, and many marked and unmarked vehicles. Agents, armed with assault rifles, chased and terrorized those who were receiving care, all while the helicopter hovered low above them kicking up dust and debris, making it nearly impossible to see. Border Patrol smashed windows, broke doors, and destroyed essential camp infrastructure as well as supplies. This was after heavily surveilling the camp and patrolling its perimeter, creating an antagonistic and distressing environment for those receiving care, since late Saturday night on the 3rd.

Since the previous raid on July 31st, Border Patrol has [refused on multiple occasions to meet with volunteers](#) to discuss previous shared agreements that upheld the right to provide humanitarian aid. The Tucson sector chief sent No More Deaths representatives a formal letter asserting this refusal.

Those are the professional elements of Trump's private army, buttressed by the armed militias that are upholding the doctrines of white supremacy that the FBI and Department of Homeland Security regard as [the major domestic threat in the U.S.](#), sharply increasing during the Trump years from 20 percent of terrorism-related crimes in 2016 to close to 100 percent by 2019.

Those are the forces that may be upholding "law and order" if in fact the top military command decides to be "complicit in a coup d'état." It seems unimaginable, but, regrettably, not inconceivable.

Meanwhile Trump and his Republican cohorts are working overtime to implement their strategy of undermining the election or discrediting it if it comes out the wrong way, setting the stage for a possible coup.

In preparation, an "[Army for Trump](#)" is being mobilized to descend on polls to

intimidate the wrong voters. What was once the Justice Department is [easing election fraud inquiry constraints](#) in case that path becomes necessary.

In general, no stone is left unturned in Trump's campaign to dismantle democratic forms and hold on to power.

Perhaps there is some slight comfort in the fact that we are not alone. Other major democracies are also decaying, also falling into the hands of leaders with traits of fascism, if not the ideologies (many, including leading scholars of fascism, regard this characterization of Trump as much too charitable).

The world's largest democracy, India, is now run by a Trump-style wrecker, Narendra Modi, who is destroying Indian secular democracy and turning India into a cruel ethnocracy, while also crushing Kashmir.

The world's oldest democracy, Britain, has not approached Trump's demolition job, but Prime Minister Boris Johnson is trying to join the club. His dismissal of Parliament so that he could ram through his version of Brexit, quickly overturned by the Supreme Court, caused outrage in British legal circles, with charges that he was undermining the presumption of good faith on which the British constitutional order has rested for centuries. He has since moved on to violating international law — admittedly, but only “a little bit” — by reversing a crucial provision of the agreement he had just reached with the EU, which is now suing Britain for this breach.

We may add the second largest democracy in the western hemisphere, run by a Trump clone who tries in every way to imitate his model, for example, by trying to fire investigators for daring to look the corruption and alleged criminality that surrounds him and his family. [Jair] Bolsonaro was blocked by the Supreme Court. The U.S. has gone farther down the road toward autocracy. When inspectors general tasked with overseeing executive malfeasance followed the same course, the would-be dictator in the White House simply fired them. He did so without a peep from the Republican Senate that had instituted this effort to protect the public, by now “reduced to supplicant status.”

Perhaps it is mere coincidence, but there is a remarkable correlation between the dedication of leaders to demolish the democratic order and their expediting the slaughter of their own populations by COVID-19. The current ranking of cases and deaths, reported by the authoritative *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), are,

from the top:

United States: 7,551,428 cases, 211,844 deaths

India: 6,835,655 cases, 105,526 deaths

Brazil: 5,000,694 cases, 148,228 deaths

They are followed far behind by a stellar democracy, Russia: 1,253,603 cases, 21,939 deaths. Others are left in their wake.

This is of course not the full picture. It's important to factor in death rates and other variables. But the general picture, and the correlation, are hard to overlook.

What is happening in the U.S., India and Brazil also cannot fail to evoke memories of the early 1930s — for me, bitter personal memories. One common feature is the fanatic adoration of the Maximal Leader by his loyal followers. There is one curious difference. Mussolini and Hitler were providing their worshippers with something: social reforms, a place in the sun. Trump is stabbing them in the back with virtually every legislative and executive action, and seriously harming the U.S. in the international arena. The same is true of his companions in arm in India and Brazil.

Trump's commitment to cause maximal suffering to the American population is stunning to behold. It goes well beyond his truly colossal crimes: racing towards the abyss of environmental catastrophe and sharply increasing the threat of nuclear war. In far lesser ways, once again no stone is left unturned in ways to cause severe harm to the public.

Let's just keep to the pandemic, the least of the grave crises humanity faces. There is an international consortium, Covax, working to facilitate the search for vaccines by cooperative efforts and to give at least some consideration to the distributional problems, ensuring that potential vaccines and other treatments will be available to those who need them rather than monopolized by the rich.

Trump's contribution? The usual one: [to withdraw from the effort by over 170 countries](#).

The wrecker-in-chief always has a pretext: In this case, the World Health Organization (WHO) is involved, and the WHO serves Trump as a scapegoat as he flails around to deflect attention from his slaughter of tens of thousands of Americans.

Aside from the characteristic cruelty in pursuit of self-interest, withdrawal means

that Americans will be deprived if vaccines are developed elsewhere — perhaps in China, which according to some reports may be in the lead.

As in 2003, after the SARS epidemic, scientists are now warning that another coronavirus pandemic is likely, probably more severe than this one. We've discussed before how Trump dismantled the protections that were in place against the current pandemic, leaving the U.S. singularly unprepared. He is now resolutely pursuing the same course, not just by withdrawing from Covax.

The countries of the world are now participating in a UN Biodiversity Summit "to try and slow humanity's rapid destruction of nature." The UN official leading the convention, Elizabeth Maruma Mrema, emphasizes that averting another pandemic is one crucial target. If we want to avoid another COVID, [she warns](#), "we have to take action.... We either conserve and protect that nature, biodiversity, or it will make us suffer as we do now."

Trump is again helping out in the usual way: by refusing to take part.

The media are also helping in this case. The cited two minutes on *NPR* may have exhausted the coverage, a cursory search suggests.

Meanwhile "humanity's destruction of nature" proceeds apace. [A major study of the destruction of biodiversity](#) by the Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew found that "Two-fifths of the world's plants are at risk of extinction.... We are `ignoring the potential treasure chest of wild species' that offers potential fuels, foods and medicines to humanity, says conservation scientist Colin Clubbe."

This study received 3 minutes on *BBC*. We have to keep to priorities, after all.

Trump's approach to international conventions and initiatives is simple: If I didn't create it, demolish it, claiming it's the worst deal in history. If I created it, it's "the deal of the century," the greatest achievement in memory. And with his media echo chamber, and congressional supplicants, he can get away with it. Pity the country, and the world.

True, Trump's methods are achieving something. Waving the big stick does sometimes bring results. When the U.S. approached the UN Security Council to demand that it renew harsh sanctions against Iran, it refused with almost total unanimity, including even Britain. No matter. Secretary of State Pompeo, in good Mussolini-Hitler fashion, returned to the Security Council to inform them that the UN sanctions are renewed.

"The United States took this decisive action," [Pompeo instructed his Security](#)

[Council servants](#), “because, in addition to Iran’s failure to perform its JCPOA commitments, the Security Council failed to extend the UN arms embargo on Iran.” Such disobedience of course cannot be tolerated by the Dear Leader of the world.

More broadly, the Trump administration is steadily firming up the reactionary international headed by Washington, the one geo-strategic initiative that can be detected in the administrative chaos. Prime members are Trump’s companions Modi and Bolsonaro. In the Middle East, they are joined by Egypt’s General al-Sisi, Trump’s “[favorite dictator](#),” who has driven Egypt to new depths of despair. And of course the Gulf dictatorships, headed by the estimable Mohammed bin Salman, responsible for Khashoggi’s brutal murder as one of his lesser crimes. Another welcome member is Israel, now scarcely concealing its drift to the far right. The recent formalization of tacit relations between Israel and the Gulf dictatorships finds its natural place in this system. There are also members beyond, like Viktor Orbán’s Hungarian illiberal democracy, and waiting in the wings, such attractive figures as Italy’s Mario Salvini, celebrating the drowning of thousands of the damned in the Mediterranean, not without Italy’s contributions to Europe’s genocidal record.

On the bright side, Trump’s reactionary international is now countered by the new Progressive International, which grew from the Sanders movement in the U.S. and a European counterpart, DiEM25, a transnational movement seeking to preserve and strengthen what is of value in the European Union while overcoming its severe flaws. It has also drawn in a wide range of representatives from the Global South. Its first international conference just took place in Iceland, where the prime minister is a member. Though it of course lacks the resources of violence and wealth of the reactionary international, it has promise to become a people’s representative in the global class war that is underway to determine the contours of the post-pandemic world.

CJP: Typical of authoritarian leaders, Trump relies heavily on the use and promotion of conspiracy theories, apparently fully aware of the fact that conspiracy theories intensify political polarization. Why do conspiracy theories thrive in politics, and what do they mean for political reality at the end of the second decade of the 21st century in the United States?

NC: One reason why conspiracy theories flourish is that people want

explanations, sometimes out of intellectual curiosity, sometimes for more personal and often wrenching reasons. That's particularly true when things fall apart. That's happened in many ways.

Consider the neoliberal disaster of the past 40 years. Its essence was announced with much clarity by Thatcher and Reagan, and their economic guru Milton Friedman, right at the start: *There is no society; individuals have to face the ravages of the market alone, with no defense, surely not labor unions, which have to be destroyed. Governments are the problem, flawed by the fact that they are partially responsive to the public. Decisions therefore have to be transferred to private hands, in effect, the corporate sector. Corporations must be dedicated solely to self-enrichment — not a principle of economics, but an ethical judgment.*

There are further nuances, but this is the essence. Putting these principles together, it is not hard to draw some conclusions about likely consequences.

The Rand Corporation has just released [a study on the scale of the \(hardly unexpected\) effects](#). They estimate the sum “transferred” from the middle and working classes to the very rich since Reagan-Thatcher-Friedman to be \$47 trillion. “Robbery” might be a more accurate term.

Rand takes the very rich to be the top 10 percent. That's misleading. It is overwhelmingly a tiny fraction of these. The top 0.1 percent have seen their share of the nation's wealth double since Reagan, to 20 percent.

This is only part of the grim story, amplified by Clinton's radically anti-labor globalization program, post-Thatcher austerity, Obama's bailout of the perpetrators of the housing crash and rejection of legislation to help the victims as well, and much else.

It should not come as a great surprise that the epidemic of “deaths of despair” that has plagued the U.S., primarily among white men of working age, is [now beginning to haunt Britain](#). Nor that much of the world is consumed by rage, resentment, contempt for institutions. This offers fertile territory to demagogues and con men — sometimes, like Trump, highly skilled — who can parade as the saviors of the public while slavishly serving their oppressors. With ample help from the information system, they can divert attention away from the sources of popular discontent to the standard scapegoats, exploiting deep-seated prejudices and fears. No need to review how it is done.

In such a climate, conspiracy theories can flourish.

There are other factors to consider. The real world is complex. Pick any event you like and even the most solid accounts will have plenty of loose ends, odd coincidences, unexplained features. That's why scientists do experiments, abstracting radically from the observed phenomena. Again, that encourages conspiracy theories.

Furthermore, some of the theories might have some validity. Adam Smith was consciously exaggerating when he declared that "People of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public, or in some contrivance to raise prices." But he wasn't concocting a fantasy. It happens all the time. Some of these escapades are well documented. In many other cases there are grounds for suspicion.

To take just one current example, the staid and respectable German national broadcaster *Deutsche Welle* recently interviewed the prominent U.S. political scientist Norman Ornstein of the American Enterprise Institute on [some curious doings](#) involving Trump, Deutsche Bank and the U.S. Supreme Court.

To quote the opening words:

The explosive New York Times report on the tax situation of U.S. President Trump is raising some uncomfortable questions for Germany's largest lender, Deutsche Bank, namely: why did Deutsche Bank loan Mr. Trump 2 Billion dollars at the same time other banks, including all U.S. banks, were not willing to do so? And while Deutsche Bank may be handling the loans, we cannot say tonight who or what is behind that money. In other words, we don't know who owns the debt of U.S. President Donald Trump. And adding to the puzzle is the role played by the son of a former Supreme Court Justice. Justin Kennedy, son of former Justice Anthony Kennedy, was a division head and contact for Trump at Deutsche Bank. Kennedy was close to the then future president while continuing to lend him money.

Another part of the puzzle, as Ornstein elaborates, is the premature retirement of Justice Kennedy, the swing vote on the Court, permitting Trump to nominate the young far right Brett Kavanaugh, Justin Kennedy's protégé, to replace him.

"The optics look terrible," Ornstein concludes, calling for investigation by the State of New York, not the Federal Prosecutors, who are now in the pockets of

Trump's legal representatives, formerly known as the Justice Department.

It's not a conspiracy theory, but can easily be recrafted as one.

In brief, in a fetid swamp, conspiracy theories flourish, and some might turn out to have considerable bearing on the world that has been created by systems of state and private power.

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