

Noam Chomsky: The Supreme Court Is Wielding Illegitimate Authority In The US



Noam Chomsky

Former president Jimmy Carter deemed the U.S. as having become “[an oligarchy with unlimited political bribery](#)” in the aftermath of the Supreme Court’s 2014 decision to strike down limits on campaign contributions, and the wielding of illegitimate authority within our political system has only grown more extreme in the eight years that have passed since then.

“Illegitimate authority” is often construed to be a trait of non-democratic societies and failed or collapsed states. In reality, however, illegitimate authority can be quite widespread in so-called democratic polities such as that of the United States.

The U.S. Supreme Court, for example, has the authority to issue judicial writs that go against the public interest and even violate human rights. Public policy is overwhelmingly affected by economic elites and powerful interest groups, with the general public having little or no independent influence as [scholarly research has shown](#). The legitimacy of political authority in the U.S. is indeed very dubious when we consider the dynamics of decision-making and the rules at play.

In the interview that follows, Noam Chomsky — a public intellectual regarded by millions of people as a national and international treasure — gives us a real tour de force *exposé* of largely unknown facts in U.S. legal history while boldly revealing how many of our governing institutions and leaders wield illegitimate and undemocratic authority over much of the country’s contemporary political

and economic landscape. Let's keep in mind that we should assume that all authority is illegitimate, unless it can justify itself. Indeed, the burden of proof is on advocates of authority, not on those question it, as Chomsky often points out whenever he discusses the topic of authority.

In this interview, Chomsky shares his insights about activism and the urgency of undertaking a transition toward a sustainable future. Chomsky is institute professor and professor of linguistics emeritus at MIT and currently laureate professor at the University of Arizona, and has published some 150 books in linguistics, political and social thought, political economy, media studies, U.S. foreign policy and international affairs.

C.J. Polychroniou: Noam, over the past couple of decades, we've been witnessing a surge of illegitimate authority. And I am not thinking so much about the increasing influence of transnational corporations on democratic processes as about decisions made by a handful of appointed or elected individuals that affect the lives of millions of people. For example, a few people sitting at the Supreme Court were appointed for life by presidents that lost the popular vote, and they often enough issue decisions that go against the majority of voters' preferences. Another example is members of the U.S. Congress who block bills aimed at the improvement of the economic well-being of citizens and the protection of the environment, choosing instead to introduce legislation catered to the interests of powerful lobby groups. Can you comment about this most despairing state of affairs in the U.S. political landscape?

Noam Chomsky: The Supreme Court has traditionally been a reactionary institution. There is some deviation, but it's rare. The Warren Court's major decisions greatly enhanced freedom and basic rights, but not in isolation: There were popular movements, primarily African American but joined by others to a degree, which made it possible for the Warren Court's rulings to be implemented. Today's reactionary Roberts Court is reverting to the norm with its dedicated efforts to reverse this deviation. And it can do so thanks in large measure to the conniving and deceit of the leading anti-democratic figure in the Republican organization — no longer an authentic political party: Mitch McConnell.

All of this is, or should be, well known. I'll return to a few comments about it.

Less well known is how far back this goes. Some of the story is familiar, but not

all. It's familiar that the enormous power of the Supreme Court traces back to Justice John Marshall's decision in *Marbury v. Madison* to make the judiciary the arbiter of the meaning of the law, powers going well beyond what is granted in the Constitution. His appointment by John Adams, and his own immediate appointments and decisions, were designed to undercut the newly elected Jefferson administration.

Shades of McConnell.

Marshall's opinions had a major impact in shaping the constitutional order as it in fact is interpreted. His imprint on the court is unmatched.

All of that is again well known.

Much less well known are the assumptions that lie behind Marshall's major decisions. In fact, these have only recently been revealed in legal scholarship by the important work of Paul Finkelman, who did the first systematic study of Marshall's rulings on a central element of American history: slavery, which is likely to be expunged from history curricula if Republicans regain power and can implement their totalitarian initiatives to [determine what cannot be taught in schools](#).

Finkelman explores "Chief Justice John Marshall's personal and political commitment to slavery, as a lifelong buyer and seller of human beings, and his deep hostility to the presence of free blacks in America." He then proceeds to show that in his judicial rulings, Marshall "always supported slaveowners when blacks claimed to be free. Similarly, he consistently failed to enforce the federal prohibitions on American participation in the African slave trade or, after 1808, the absolute prohibition on bringing new slaves into the United States." As Finkelman points out, Marshall's harsh and brutal rulings were "[consistent with his lifelong personal and political support for slavery](#)."

Apart from the immediate impact on the lives of those treated as less than human in his day and throughout American history, Marshall was no ordinary justice. It is an understatement to say that he is "[perhaps the Supreme Court's most influential chief justice](#)."

This is not the place to review the long and often sordid history of the court. It's enough to remember that it hardly accords with the patriotic slogans we are

enjoined to chant by the new totalitarians in Washington.

As for Congress, the story is mixed. One constant feature is service to the rich and powerful, relying on means of the kind you mention. Popular activism has sometimes proved to be an effective counterforce, with major effects on civilizing the country. The New Deal period from the '30s through the '60s is the most recent case. Though the business classes worked hard to whittle New Deal measures away, they retained strong political support, including from the last authentic conservative president, Dwight Eisenhower. In [his view](#), "Should any political party attempt to abolish social security, unemployment insurance, and eliminate labor laws and farm programs, you would not hear of that party again in our political history. There is a tiny splinter group, of course, that believes you can do these things. . . . [But] their number is negligible and they are stupid."

Eisenhower's attitudes illustrate how far his party has declined in recent years, meanwhile defaming the term "conservatism."

One current illustration of the drift of the party to the far right is its love affair with the racist "illiberal democracy" of Viktor Orbán's Hungary. It is not confined to Tucker Carlson and the like but goes far beyond. As one illustration, the American Conservative Union "convenes in Budapest next month [June] to celebrate a European leader accused of undermining democracy and individual rights." Justly accused, but Orbán regards it as praise, not accusation, and today's "conservatives" appear to agree.

Eisenhower's prognosis was wrong. The "splinter group" — which unfortunately was far from that — was not merely waiting in the wings. It was gnawing away at measures to benefit the public, often effectively. By the late Carter years, its influence was strongly felt. The Democrats had by then pretty much abandoned any authentic concern with working people, becoming increasingly a party of affluent professionals.

Reagan opened the doors wide to those whom Eisenhower had bitterly condemned, launching the powerful neoliberal assault on the general population of the past 40 years, which is still vigorously underway. This is not the place to review its impact once again. It is encapsulated in the Rand Corporation study that we have discussed, which found that these programs have "transferred" close to \$50 trillion from the middle and working classes to the ultrarich in 40

years, a pretty impressive feat of highway robbery.

Today's Republican organization can barely control its enthusiasm at the prospect of carrying the assault further, concealed with cynical populist slogans.

All of this is transpiring before our eyes, quite openly. The congressional GOP virtually goose-steps in obedience to McConnell's explicit and public orders, reprised from the Obama years. There is one and only one legislative priority: regain power. That means ensuring that the country is ungovernable, and that any legislation that might benefit the general population must be blocked. Then failure to achieve anything can be blamed on Democrats — a few of whom participate in the sham.

The most striking current example is the Build Back Better program, a quite respectable initiative that would have greatly helped the population when it left Bernie Sanders's desk. Whittled away step-by-step under the McConnell principle, now not even shreds remain.

Meanwhile the GOP leadership established their red lines: (1) defund the IRS, so that it cannot interfere with the massive tax cheating by the prime GOP constituency, the very rich; (2) don't touch the one legislative achievement of the Trump years, what Joseph Stiglitz called "the donor relief bill of 2017," a massive giveaway to the very rich and corporate sector, stabbing everyone else in the back. This giveaway to the rich also hurt the right's own voters, whom the GOP has labored to keep in line since Nixon by diverting attention from its actual programs to "cultural issues" that appeal to Christian nationalists, white supremacists, Evangelicals, avid gun lovers, and segments of the working class devastated by neoliberal programs and long abandoned by the Democrats.

The court has played its role in reviving the ugliest elements of the history we are instructed to suppress. Probably the most egregious decision of the Roberts Court was to dismantle the Voting Rights Act on ridiculous grounds (*Shelby*), offering the South the means to restore Jim Crow. *Citizens United* extended the Buckley doctrine that money is speech — very convenient for the very rich particularly — to giving virtually free rein to those sectors in a position to buy elections.

Next on the chopping block is *Roe v. Wade*. The effects will be extreme. A right regarded by most women, and others, as solidly established is to be wiped out. That's almost unprecedented. Undermining of the right of Black people to vote by

the *Shelby* decision is a partial precedent.

Justice Alito's leaked draft is based primarily on the principle that court decisions should give primacy to what is "deeply rooted in this Nation's history and tradition." And he is quite right that women's rights do not satisfy this condition. The founders adopted British common law, which held that a woman is property, owned by her father, ownership transferred to her husband. One early argument for denying the vote to women was that it would be unfair to unmarried men, since a married man would have two votes, his own and his "property's." (The infamous three-fifths human provision granted that right to slaveowners.) It wasn't until 1975 that the Supreme Court granted full personhood to women, granting them the right to serve on federal juries as "peers."

This ultra-reactionary judicial doctrine is, like others, quite flexible. One illustration is Antonin Scalia's *Heller* decision, which reversed a century of precedent and established personal gun ownership as Holy Writ. In his very learned opinion, Scalia succeeded in ignoring all of the rich "history and tradition" that lies behind the decree that "A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed."

The history and tradition are hardly a secret, from the founders through the 19th century, though of course they have no relevance to American history since: (1) the Brits are coming; (2) militias are needed to attack, expel and exterminate the Indigenous nations once the British constraint on expansion was removed, arguably the primary reason for the revolution — though later they were displaced by a more efficient killing machine, the U.S. Cavalry; (3) slaves had to be controlled by force, a threat that was becoming severe with slave revolts in the Caribbean and the South; (4) before the constitutional system was firmly established, there was concern that the British model might be imposed (as Alexander Hamilton had suggested) and might lead to a tyranny that would have to be resisted by popular forces.

None of this "history and tradition" had any relevance by the 20th century, at least in semi-rational circles. But it was surely there in history and tradition, not just *there* but a central part of the history that is scheduled for cancellation as the GOP marches downwards. All of this proceeds with the help of the reactionary judiciary that has been constructed carefully by McConnell and allies, with the

goal of imposing a barrier to anything like the deviation of Eisenhower for a long time.

Michael Waldman, president of the Brennan Center for Justice and a specialist on the Second Amendment, observes that since Scalia reversed long-standing precedent by ignoring history and tradition, the court has had little to say about the gun issue, much to the discomfiture of the extreme right on the court. But that, Waldman suggests, may be about to change. The court is considering a case that might overturn a 1913 New York law that restricts carrying a concealed weapon in public places. From Alito's comments in oral argument, and Thomas's well-known positions, Waldman suspects that the 1913 ruling may be overturned. We'll then enjoy [a world in which concealed weapons are everywhere](#).

It's worth remembering that today's frenzied gun culture is largely the creation of the public relations industry, in fact one of its first great triumphs, a revealing history explored in depth by Pamela Haag in [*The Gunning of America: Business and the Making of American Gun Culture*](#).

Guns were indeed used for definite purposes, those just described. And individual farmers could use an old musket to scare away critters attacking cattle. For them a gun was a tool, like a shovel. Arms manufacturers were meanwhile developing advanced weapons, but for armies, not the public, which had little interest in them.

By the late 19th century, a problem was arising. After the Civil War, the domestic market largely collapsed for advanced armaments. Peace in Europe undermined another market. The U.S. army was not engaged in major wars. The nascent PR industry was enlisted to the cause. It concocted an exciting image of a Wild West that never existed, with brave cowboys and sheriffs fast on the draw, and the rest of the familiar fantasies, later exploited by Hollywood and TV. The subtext was that your son is dying to have a Winchester rifle so that he can be a real man, and his sister must have a little pink pistol. It worked, brilliantly, as many of us can attest from childhood memories, if not beyond.

The mythology was later expanded as part of the awesome GOP propaganda campaign to divert attention away from their actual policies and commitments. Scalia's radical departure from "history and tradition" then turned the Second Amendment into the only part of the Constitution that is worshipped fervently,

that is even known by much of the population.

What are the boundaries of political authority? Why is there a surge of illegitimate authority in today's "democracies"? And how should concerned citizens disobey illegitimate decisions made by politicians and the Supreme Court?

Class war never ceases. One participant, the business classes — the “masters of mankind” in Adam Smith’s phrase — is constantly engaged in the conflict, with no little passion in a country like the U.S. that has an unusually high level of business class consciousness. As Smith pointed out 250 years ago, they strive to control state policy and employ it for their own interests, commonly succeeding, though with occasional partial setbacks. If their victims are beaten down or retire from the struggle, they win enormous victories for themselves. We have just experienced that during the neoliberal regression, which undermined democracy along with the huge robbery. That’s a basic factor in the surge of “illegitimate authority” in today’s declining democracies, and in the pervasive anger, resentment and distrust of authority.

There is of course a lot to say about why and how this stunning victory was achieved, but that goes beyond the bounds of this discussion. We should, however, be aware of the fraudulence of standard shibboleths like “letting the market reign” and other phrases that barely count as caricatures.

The “boundaries” of this triumph of illegitimate authority can only be set by an engaged public, just as happened in the ‘30s and at other periods of history when the “masters” were somewhat tamed. There are no general answers to questions about appropriate measures. There are general guidelines and aspirations, but tactical decisions depend on circumstances. And they are not to be disparaged as “merely tactical.” Those are the decisions on which people’s lives depend — in the present era, even survival.

Surveys reveal that an overwhelming majority of Americans want to see major changes to the country's political system. How can we fix the U.S. political system? What rules, for instance, need to be changed?

I don’t feel confident about what the majority want. Furthermore, what people want is shaped by the range of options they perceive. These, in turn, are largely structured by the reigning institutions, which are in substantial measure in the hands of the “masters of mankind.”

For example, today the options are “get a job or starve,” so getting a job is perceived to be one of the highest goals in life. In the early days of the industrial revolution, Americans regarded “getting a job” as an intolerable attack on human rights and dignity. They understood that it meant subordinating yourself to a master for most of your waking hours. And they had alternatives in mind. The slogan of the Knights of Labor, the first great labor organization, was that “those who work in the mills should own them.” Anything less than that was intolerable.

Meanwhile farmers in what was then mostly an agrarian country sought to create a “cooperative commonwealth” in which farmers would work together, free from the northern bankers and market managers. That’s the authentic populist movement, which began to establish contacts with the Knights. Their efforts were crushed by state and private violence, another defeat of radical democracy. And “what people want” then changed, as the options they could envision reduced.

The task of organizers and activists is first of all to break the fetters of ideological control and to help people understand that there are ways of looking at the world that are different from those constructed by the masters and their ideological institutions. That will enable changes in what people want. Then come the crucial questions of what should be changed, and how.

The climate crisis is intensifying. To take just a few random examples, heat waves are shattering records across major sections of the United States and a recent report on France’s drought shows that climate change is “spiraling out of control.” Unsurprisingly, climate protests worldwide have become more common and more aggressive. Do disruptive climate protests help or hinder the acceleration of a sustainable transition?

Here we face difficult questions of tactics, which as always are of critical importance. What kinds of tactics will bring more people to become actively engaged in fending off the Sixth Extinction, and saving human society from the imminent disaster to which the masters are driving it? And what tactical choices will undermine this essential goal by alienating people? There’s no algorithm, no general answer. It has to be thought through carefully. There will be different answers in different places and times.

We cannot stress often enough, or intensely enough, how critical this matter is. We are hurtling to disaster at a terrifying rate, sharply accelerated by recent

events. The Russian invasion of Ukraine had an enormously consequential effect on fossil fuel production, which will soon destroy us if not curbed. The war reversed the limited steps to avert the catastrophe. If that is permitted to continue, we are doomed.

Is there a reason to suspect that the next stage of economic development, based perhaps on a green revolution, will actually have greater legitimacy and be more democratic than the present socio-economic order?

A prior question is whether there will be a next stage of economic development. Or, in fact, a next stage of human history at all aside from *saute qui peut*: Grab what you can for yourself and maybe escape the destruction and chaos by hitching a ride on Elon Musk's last spaceship to Mars.

The next stage will be either that, or it will be a green revolution, a real one: no greenwashing, none of the fakery in which the fossil fuel and financial industries are highly skilled. We know what has to be done and can be done, feasibly. The means are available. What is in question is the will and commitment.

If we can make it that far, there are lots of reasons to expect that an authentic green revolution can lead to a much more humane social order, and a much better life.

Our choice, and not much time to delay.

Copyright © Truthout. May not be reprinted without [permission](#).

C.J. Polychroniou is a political scientist/political economist, author, and journalist who has taught and worked in numerous universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. Currently, his main research interests are in U.S. politics and the political economy of the United States, European economic integration, globalization, climate change and environmental economics, and the deconstruction of neoliberalism's politico-economic project. He is a regular contributor to *Truthout* as well as a member of *Truthout's* Public Intellectual Project. He has published scores of books and over 1,000 articles which have appeared in a variety of journals, magazines, newspapers and popular news websites. Many of his publications have been translated into a multitude of different languages, including Arabic, Chinese, Croatian, Dutch, French, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Turkish. His latest

books are *Optimism Over Despair: Noam Chomsky On Capitalism, Empire, and Social Change* (2017); *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal: The Political Economy of Saving the Planet* (with Noam Chomsky and Robert Pollin as primary authors, 2020); *The Precipice: Neoliberalism, the Pandemic, and the Urgent Need for Radical Change* (an anthology of interviews with Noam Chomsky, 2021); and *Economics and the Left: Interviews with Progressive Economists* (2021).

Alicia Garza: “The Shooter Wrote A Manifesto, And My Name Was Included In It”



Photo: aliciagarza.com

The 18-year-old white supremacist who traveled to Buffalo to shoot Black shoppers at the local supermarket didn't only target the 10 Black people whom he killed. His hate-filled manifesto made clear that he aimed to target all Black people in the U.S. — and also mass organizing for racial justice.

“Black communities and Black families must once again grieve the loss of loved ones — mothers, fathers, partners, siblings, friends — at the hands of white supremacy and racialized violence,” Radical organizer and activist Alicia Garza, cofounder of Black Lives Matter and Principal of Black Futures Lab, told *Truthout* in the wake of the attack. “I am heartbroken and my heart extends to every family who lost a loved one in this weekend’s senseless violence.”

Garza added: “The shooter wrote a manifesto, and my name was included in it. This is the second time in two years that this has occurred. The first time, I was targeted along with several others in a plot to cause violence and destruction.”

According to the [New York Times](#), the manifesto published by the mass shooter, Payton S. Gendron, stated that he had decided to target east Buffalo “because it held the largest percentage of Black residents near his home in the state’s Southern Tier, a predominately white region that borders Pennsylvania.” The killer’s manifesto praised the white supremacist who [killed nine Black churchgoers in Charleston, South Carolina, in 2015](#) and also praised the [white supremacist shooter who killed 51 Muslims in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 2019](#).

The attack has spurred [renewed calls for mass organizing](#) across the country. Garza is also calling for swift action to curtail the proliferation of racial terror and broader participation in ongoing mass organizing efforts in the U.S. to push back against the emboldening of white supremacists nationwide.

Garza emphasizes that combatting the emboldened forces of white supremacy in the U.S. while simultaneously confronting other forms of inequality, poverty, climate crisis and environmental injustice will require building broad-based social movements with the power to significantly alter how capitalist institutions function and the strategic vision to initiate a transition toward a new socioeconomic order beyond capitalism. These have never been easy tasks, yet they are even more important in our own time as global neoliberalism has intensified economic and social contradictions and the climate crisis threatens to end organized human life.

In the interview that follows, Garza explains why racism continues to play such a critical role in our society, how to build independent Black political power, which is the mission of Black Futures Lab, and what is needed in the face of attacks like

the white supremacist shooting in Buffalo.

C.J. Polychroniou: What words would you like to offer up in this moment, as people absorb the horrifying news of the anti-Black mass shooting in Buffalo?

Alicia Garza: White nationalist violence is escalating — and the leadership of this country refuses to do anything significant about it. For the last six years, the former president, his supporters and like-minded politicians have taken up a bullhorn to work up white nationalists, white supremacists and vigilantes. They have gained political capital by stoking the fears of people who fear demographic change, and given political and moral cover to those who respond to these changes — and to their fear of and anxiety about this country’s undeniable future — with violence. This is not new. We know the backlash that occurs when Black communities flex our power. The response has always been racialized terror and racialized violence, and it is being used on purpose.

While the president tours the country encouraging states to spend COVID dollars on expanding police forces, white supremacists are wreaking havoc in our government and in our lives. White supremacists are emboldened when they know that there are no significant consequences for their actions, and when they realize they have sympathizers and allies in our government. Which political party will take real action to save lives and to save this country? We don’t need any more empty words, statements, or symbolic gestures. We need action, and we deserve real change.

Companies like Wikipedia and Facebook are also complacent, as they shelter and provide information that allows white nationalists to carry out racial terror. The existence of a profile I did not initiate has been leveraged to obtain sensitive information about myself and my family for the second time. Despite our safety being compromised, Wikipedia continues to refuse to do anything about it, ostensibly in the name of free speech and protecting “user generated content.” But what happens when those users are white supremacists? I am not the only one Wikipedia will not protect — journalists and other activists are experiencing these same challenges on their site. They are just one of a few sites that excuse and condone the invasion of our privacy and leave us vulnerable to attacks from people who want to harm us because of the work we do.

Without swift and decisive action, we will continue to see racial terror proliferate,

and more innocent lives will be stolen.

You have been an organizer and a civil rights activist for over two decades. You are the co-creator of Black Lives Matter (BLM) and principal at Black Futures Lab (BFL). Could you share your thoughts on why racism remains a foundational feature of U.S. society?

Racism remains a foundational feature of U.S. society because it is key in distributing power. Power is the ability to make the rules and change the rules, and racism helps to determine who gets to make the rules. Racism provides the justifications for why some people have and some people don't, why some people live longer than others, have roofs over their heads and jobs, why some people can be doing really well while others are really struggling. Racism keeps us from fighting back, together, against these rigged rules, because racism helps to obscure that the rules are rigged in the first place.

Tell us about Black Futures Lab. How did it come about and what are its primary aims and ultimate goals?

The Black Futures Lab works to make Black communities powerful in politics, so that we can be powerful in the rest of our lives. We work to equip Black communities with the tools we need to undo the rules that are rigged against us, and to replace rigged rules with new rules that move all of us forward, together.

I started the Black Futures Lab, and another political organization, the Black to the Future Action Fund, to build independent Black political power — that means to put Black communities in a position to make the rules and change the rules, and to be a part of deciding who gets what, when, and why. At the Black Futures Lab, we have a few strategies that we employ to build Black political power. We collect recent and relevant data about who our communities are and what we want from our government — the Black Census Project is a part of that work.

With the Black Census Project, we are working to collect 200,000 responses from Black communities across the nation, to learn more about what we're experiencing every day, and what we want to see done about it. We do policy and legislative advocacy work, taking the information from our research and using it to inform policy that would improve the lives of Black communities. We also train our communities how to write, win and implement new rules that would improve our lives in cities and states. We design good public policy and work to get it

passed in order to motivate and activate Black communities to vote. And we invest in our communities with the resources we need to be powerful. We provide resources for organizing that folk may not have access to otherwise.

Through our first Black Census Project, we provided Black organizations with resources to hire organizers, and the technology they needed to reach as many people as possible; we're doing the same with this year's Black Census Project. This year, we'll be moving about \$2 million to Black organizing work, to Black-led organizations across the country.

The problem of low wages is considered to be the most pressing one among Black respondents who took part in a recent Black Census initiated by BFL. What do you consider to be the best strategies for raising wages and improving labor standards for people of color?

In order to address the problem of low wages that are not enough to support a family, Black Census respondents favored raising the minimum wage to \$15/hour and increasing government participation in providing housing and health care. In the most recent Temperature Check polls run by the Black to the Future Action Fund, respondents want to see an extension of the COVID-19 stimulus bill in the form of monthly \$2,000 checks until the pandemic is over. Respondents indicate that they would use that stimulus check for matters of survival — rent/mortgage, utilities, healthcare. We also see a desire to strengthen unions and regulate workplaces and corporations in order to address labor standards and wages.

Black communities and people in poverty have disproportionately high exposure to health and environmental risks. Given that environmental racism is very real in the U.S., what do you envision to be the role of Black Futures Lab in the struggle against environmental racism and in the broader task of building a global climate movement?

Black communities are disproportionately impacted by environmental racism. We found in our Temperature Check Polls that Black people understood the environment to be about more than weather — it was also about having access to the things we need to live well. A third of our respondents said that lack of access to clean drinking water was a major concern for them, and 31 percent said that a lack of access to healthy food was one of their primary concerns related to environmental racism. Our role is to show the impact on Black communities, and

ensure that the resolution to those impacts present themselves in public policy that we win and implement in cities and states across the country.

Forging a common identity among people from diverse communities, with a shared worldview and a shared strategy in the pursuit of justice and radical social change, defined the mission of social movements worldwide during the 1960s and 1970s. I may be wrong, but I don't see this being the case with many of today's social movements, which seem to concentrate overwhelmingly on single issues and are indeed deprived of an overarching agenda for transforming our world. What are your own thoughts on this matter? Is it possible to build a broad and inclusive social movement in the political, social, economic and cultural landscape of the 21st century that challenges the existing socioeconomic order while envisioning a future that works for all?

I can completely understand why it feels like our movements are siloed — and I do think that there are and have been many efforts at creating and advancing an overarching agenda to change the world. Because so much of our work happens in nonprofit vehicles that are forced to rely on philanthropy and philanthropic dollars, our work begins to reflect the challenges we face in funding it. Philanthropy is largely divided into single issues, and if our movement is dependent on philanthropy to survive, it means we will likely be organized in this way as well. We also have to keep rebuilding our infrastructure to account for the attacks we experience from the state and, frankly, from inside our own ranks. History is not linear, and there are a lot of different factors that contribute to our state of being. But, from the Movement for Black Lives to Grassroots Global Justice Alliance, there are seeds being planted that aim to coalesce our movements into something coherent and cohesive and hopefully, one day, unstoppable. And that is something that gives me a lot of hope.

Copyright © Truthout. May not be reprinted without [permission](#).

C.J. Polychroniou is a political scientist/political economist, author, and journalist who has taught and worked in numerous universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. Currently, his main research interests are in U.S. politics and the political economy of the United States, European economic integration, globalization, climate change and environmental economics, and the deconstruction of neoliberalism's politico-economic project. He is a regular contributor to *Truthout* as well as a member of *Truthout's* Public Intellectual Project. He has published scores of books and over 1,000 articles which have

appeared in a variety of journals, magazines, newspapers and popular news websites. Many of his publications have been translated into a multitude of different languages, including Arabic, Chinese, Croatian, Dutch, French, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Turkish. His latest books are *Optimism Over Despair: Noam Chomsky On Capitalism, Empire, and Social Change* (2017); *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal: The Political Economy of Saving the Planet* (with Noam Chomsky and Robert Pollin as primary authors, 2020); *The Precipice: Neoliberalism, the Pandemic, and the Urgent Need for Radical Change* (an anthology of interviews with Noam Chomsky, 2021); and *Economics and the Left: Interviews with Progressive Economists* (2021).

Attie S. van Niekerk & Sytse Strijbos (Eds.) - We cannot continue like this: Facing modernity in Africa and Europe



Synopsis

The book is based on the view that the present trajectory of modern development cannot continue as it is now because it is ecologically unsustainable, it continues to enlarge the gap between rich and poor, and the decolonialisation movement has drawn our attention again to the specific role of religion, culture and value in human affairs and the need for a robust element of indigenisation and contextualisation. This book is strongly focused on the context of Africa, with two chapters that are written by authors from the Netherlands, for the purpose of presenting a North-South dialogue. The book contains reflection on approaches followed in building sustainable human communities in general and reflection on

specific efforts to solve sustainability issues. It seeks to integrate academic reflection and insights gained from practical involvement with sustainability issues in local communities and low-income households, with contributions from Theology and Natural and Social Sciences.

Download the book (open access):

<https://books.aosis.co.za/index.php/ob/catalog/book/283>

Preface

This book is the first result of a quite unique and emerging research collaboration between three organisations, NOVA, the International Institute for Development and Ethics (IIDE) and the Centre for Faith and Community (CFC) that is housed at the Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria. The central aim is to chart an innovative course in the debate on 'sustainability and development'. NOVA and IIDE are independent entities that both want to operate as an intermediate between the university and broader society.

The organisations at a glance

About NOVA

NOVA Institute NPC1 is a not-for-profit company that was established in 1994. Our vision is a healthy household culture in Southern Africa. NOVA's overarching strategic goal is to be the professional partner of choice for households and other stakeholders working towards improving the quality of life of low-income communities. NOVA has more than 20 years of experience in co-creating solutions for everyday problems with low-income households in a trans-disciplinary research and development process, and in implementing such solutions on a large scale in a phased approach, as well as in monitoring and evaluating the impact of these solutions against a defensible project baseline.

About the IIDE

The early roots of the IIDE go back to 1995 when an international group of about 15 scholars, junior and senior researchers from different disciplines (philosophy, technology and engineering science, management and systems science) came together in Amsterdam. This meeting became the start of a formal cooperation between scholars affiliated with several universities and institutions in different countries and various cultural spheres of the world.

During its first phase, this cooperation has been active as a network under the

name CPTS (Centre for Philosophy Technology and Social Systems). After a decade of operations, the CPTS was transformed in 2004 into the IIDE, registered in the Netherlands as a Public Benefit Organisation, in Dutch an Algemeen Nut Beogende Instelling. With the aim of stimulating North-South exchange, an independent IIDE partner organisation has been established in South Africa and is housed at the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein.

About the Centre for Faith and Community

The CFC is based in the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria. Its vision is healthy communities through the formation of community and faith-based leaders. It works towards this through a bouquet of basic courses and specialised programmes, aimed at grassroot practitioners and understanding theology as change-making. It also hosts various engaged research programmes, working in and with communities, in support of their emancipatory and transformational processes. Our research themes include faith in the city, pathways out of homelessness, social justice and reconciliation, doing theology with children, spirituality and healthcare and sustainable communities. We host the Urban Studio, using the city as classroom and focusing on six geographical sites in the City of Tshwane. We also manage the Unit for Street Homelessness, doing research on street homelessness locally and nationally, contributing to policy-making processes and facilitating the Pathways Operational Centre, supporting the city and NGOs in their evidence-based homeless interventions.

Charting the course

The collaboration between NOVA, IIDE and CFC deliberately did not start with a sharply defined and detailed programme. To initiate the research process, it was decided to carry out an exploratory project, linking up to fieldwork of NOVA, IIDE and other partners in building sustainable communities. It is expected that by working together in a process of academic reflection as well as learning by doing, a programme will evolve, paving the way for the longer term. An important goal of the research is to enable local churches and other entities to get involved in their local communities in a meaningful way. This includes developing resources such as skills, knowledge, funds and networks.

Acknowledgements

First of all, we gladly acknowledge Prof. Jerry Pillay, the Dean of the Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, for his financial contribution that has made the publication of this book possible. We also thank the Publisher, Prof.

Andries van Aarde, Dr Anna Azarch and Mrs Trudie Retief and Mr Michael Maart of AOSIS for their friendly and professional assistance, as well as the professional language practitioner, Corrie Geldenhuys.

Finally, we wish to thank the anonymous reviewers for their constructive engagement with our work.

Chapters

Introductory Part

Introduction

We cannot continue like this

Attie S. van Niekerk, Sytse Strijbos

Chapter 1

Where do you feel Africa's heartbeat? The World Bank, Africa and the Christian mission

Attie S. van Niekerk

Chapter 2

Re-Integrating Technology and Economy in Human Life: On the Disclosure of Society

Sytse Strijbos

Part 1: Issues

Chapter 3

Energy transition challenges in South Africa: A study of residential coal use practices

Kristy Langerman, Farina Lindeque, Montagu Murray, Christiaan Pauw

Chapter 4

Towards a complementary approach in sustainable food production

Betsie le Roux, Mike Howard

Chapter 5

Partnerships that flourish or fail: A case study of social entrepreneurship in the Eastern Free State, South Africa

Deidré van Rooyen, Willem F. Ellis

Chapter 6

Stones, bricks and windows: Searching for a sacred place

Willem Jan de Hek

Part 2: Approaches

Chapter 7

From isolation to relation: A trans-disciplinary analysis of an improved cookstove project in Molati, South Africa

Pierre Reyneke

Chapter 8

Decolonising the engineering curriculum at the university

Willem van Niekerk, Attie S. van Niekerk

Chapter 9

Mobilising people to emerge as transformation agents for society building: A reflection on a missional team practice

Luc Kabongo

Chapter 10

The quest of sustainability in this present 'wicked world': How to overcome Enlightenment modernity?

Sytse Strijbos

Download the book (open access):

<https://books.aosis.co.za/index.php/ob/catalog/book/283>

Chomsky: To Tackle Climate, Our Morality Must Catch Up With Our

Intelligence



Noam Chomsky

This week, the World Meteorological Organization warned that the world has a 50 percent chance of seeing warming of 1.5 degrees above preindustrial levels in the next five years. Even those who view the glass as half full tend to agree that efforts undertaken so far by the world's countries to combat the climate crisis, while significant in some respects, are not enough. Indeed, the global economy continues to rely extensively on fossil fuels, which still provide about 80 percent of the energy supply.

The warnings about an impending climate catastrophe included in the second and third segments of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) latest review of climate science, which were released on February 28 and April 4, 2022, respectively, went completely ignored amid the war in Ukraine and soaring energy costs.

In the United States, the Biden administration's response to soaring gas prices was to renew oil and gas drilling on federal lands and to announce "the largest-ever release of oil from the strategic petroleum reserves." The rest of the world has also responded with short-term thinking to the consequences of the war in Ukraine.

World-renowned scholar-activist Noam Chomsky grapples with the consequences of this short-term thinking amid escalating military tensions, in this exclusive interview for *Truthout*. Chomsky is the father of modern linguistics and one of the most cited scholars in modern history, and has published some 150 books. He is institute professor and professor of linguistics emeritus at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and currently laureate professor at the University of

Arizona.

The following transcript has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

C.J. Polychroniou: Noam, the war in Ukraine is causing unimaginable human suffering, but it is also having global economic consequences and is terrible news for the fight against global warming. Indeed, as a result of rising energy costs and concerns about energy security, decarbonization efforts have taken a back seat. In the U.S., the Biden administration has embraced the Republican slogan “drill, baby, drill,” Europe is set on building new gas pipelines and import facilities, and China plans to boost coal production capacity. Can you comment on the implications of these unfortunate developments and explain why short-term thinking continues to prevail among world leaders even at a time when humanity could be on the brink of an existential threat?

Noam Chomsky: The last question is not new. In one or another form, it has arisen throughout history.

Take one case that has been extensively studied: Why did political leaders go to war in 1914, supremely confident of their own righteousness? And why did the most prominent intellectuals in every warring country line up with passionate enthusiasm in support of their own state — apart from a handful of dissidents, the most prominent of whom were jailed (Bertrand Russell, Eugene Debs, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht)? It wasn't a terminal crisis, but it was serious enough.

The pattern goes far back in history. And it continues with little change after August 6, 1945, when we learned that human intelligence had risen to the level where it soon would be able to exterminate everything.

Observing the pattern closely, over the years, a basic conclusion seems to me to emerge clearly: Whatever is driving policy, it is not security — at least, security of the population. That is at best a marginal concern. That holds for existential threats as well. We have to look elsewhere.

A good starting point, I think, is what seems to me to be the best-established principle of international relations theory: Adam Smith's observation that the “Masters of Mankind” — in his day the merchants and manufacturers of England — are the “principal architects of [state] policy.” They use their power to ensure

that their own interests “are most peculiarly attended to” no matter how “grievous” the effects on others, including the people of England, but most brutally the victims of the “savage injustice of the Europeans.” His particular target was British savagery in India, then in its early stages, already horrifying enough.

Nothing much changes when the crises become existential. Short-term interests prevail. The logic is clear in competitive systems, like unregulated markets. Those who do not play the game are soon out of it. Competition among the “principal architects of policy” in the state system has somewhat similar properties, but we should bear in mind that security of the population is far from a guiding principle, as the record shows all too clearly.

You are quite right about the horrific impact of the criminal Russian invasion of Ukraine. Discussion in the U.S. and Europe focuses on the suffering in Ukraine itself, quite reasonably, while also applauding our policy of accelerating the misery, not so reasonably. I’ll return to that.

The policy of escalating the war in Ukraine, instead of trying to take steps to end it, has a horrific impact far beyond Ukraine. As widely reported, Ukraine and Russia are major food exporters. The war has cut off food supplies to populations in desperate need, particularly in Africa and Asia.

Take just one example, the world’s worst humanitarian crisis according to the UN: Yemen. Over 2 million children face imminent starvation, the World Food Program reports. Almost 100 percent of cereal [is imported] “with Russia and Ukraine accounting for the largest share of wheat and wheat products (42%),” in addition to re-exported flour and processed wheat from the same region.

The crisis extends far beyond. Let’s try to be honest about it: Perpetuation of the war is, simply, a program of mass murder throughout much of the Global South.

That’s the least of it. There are [discussions in purportedly serious journals](#) about how the U.S. can win a nuclear war with Russia. Such discussions verge on criminal insanity. And, unfortunately, US-NATO policies provide many possible scenarios for quick termination of human society. To take just one, Putin has so far refrained from attacking the supply lines sending heavy weapons to Ukraine. It won’t be a great surprise if that restraint ends, bringing Russia and NATO close to direct conflict, with an easy path to tit-for-tat escalation that could well lead to

a quick goodbye.

More likely, in fact highly probable, is slower death through poisoning of the planet. The most recent IPCC report made it crystal clear that if there is to be any hope for a livable world, we must stop using fossil fuels right now, proceeding steadily until they are soon eliminated. As you point out, the effect of the ongoing war is to end the far-too-limited initiatives underway, indeed to reverse them and to accelerate the race to suicide.

There is, naturally, great joy in the executive offices of the corporations dedicated to destroying human life on Earth. Now they are not only freed from constraints and from the carping of annoying environmentalists, but they are lauded for saving the civilization that they are now encouraged to destroy even more expeditiously. Arms producers share their euphoria about the opportunities offered by the continuing conflict. They are now encouraged to waste scarce resources that are desperately needed for humane and constructive purposes. And like their partners in mass destruction, the fossil fuel corporations, they are raking in taxpayer dollars.

What could be better, or from a different perspective, more insane? We would do well to recall President Dwight D. Eisenhower's words in his "Cross of Iron" speech in 1953:

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. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. The [cost](#) of one modern heavy bomber is this: a modern brick school in more than 30 cities. It is two electric power plants, each serving a town of 60,000 population. It is two fine, fully equipped hospitals. It is some fifty miles of concrete pavement. We pay for a single fighter with a half-million bushels of wheat. We pay for a single [destroyer](#) with new homes that could have housed more than 8,000 people.... This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron.

These words could hardly be more appropriate today.

Let's return to why "world leaders" pursue this mad course. First, let's see if we can find any who deserve the appellation, except in irony.

If there were any, they would be devoting themselves to bringing the conflict to an end in the only way possible: by diplomacy and statecraft. The general outlines of a political settlement have long been understood. We [have discussed them before](#) and have also documented the dedication of the U.S. (with NATO in tow) to undermine the possibility of a diplomatic settlement, quite openly, and with pride. There should be no need to review the dismal record again.

A common refrain is that “Mad Vlad” is so insane, and so immersed in wild dreams of reconstructing an empire and maybe conquering the world, that there’s no point even listening to what Russians are saying — that is, if you can evade U.S. censorship and find some snippets on Indian state TV or Middle East media. And there is surely no need to contemplate diplomatic engagement with such a creature. Therefore, let’s not even explore the only possibility for ending the horror and just continue to escalate it, no matter what the consequences for Ukrainians and the world.

Western leaders, and much of the political class, are now consumed with two major ideas: The first is that Russian military force is so overwhelming that it may soon seek to conquer Western Europe, or even beyond. Thus, we have to “fight Russia over there” (with Ukrainian bodies) so that “we don’t have to fight Russia here” in Washington, D.C., or so we are warned by House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence Chair Adam Schiff, a Democrat.

The second is that Russian military force has been shown to be a paper tiger, so incompetent and frail, and so poorly led, that it can’t conquer cities a few kilometers from its border defended largely by a citizens’ army.

The latter thought is the object of much gloating. The former inspires terror in our hearts.

Orwell defined “doublethink” as the capacity to hold two contradictory ideas in mind and to believe them both, a malady only imaginable in ultra-totalitarian states.

Adopting the first idea, we must arm ourselves to the teeth to protect ourselves from the demonic plans of the paper tiger, even though Russian military spending is a fraction of NATO’s, even excluding the U.S. Those suffering memory loss will be delighted that Germany has finally gotten the word, and [may soon surpass](#) Russia in military spending. Now Putin will have to think twice before conquering

western Europe.

To repeat the obvious, the war in Ukraine can end with a diplomatic settlement, or with the defeat of one side, either quickly or in prolonged agony. Diplomacy, by definition, is a give-and-take affair. Each side must accept it. It follows that in a diplomatic settlement, Putin must be offered some escape hatch.

We either accept the first option, or we reject it. That at least is not controversial. If we reject it, we are choosing the second option. Since that is the near-universal preference in Western discourse, and continues to be U.S. policy, let's consider what it entails.

The answer is straightforward: The decision to reject diplomacy means that we will engage in an experiment to see whether the irrational mad dog will slink away quietly in total defeat, or whether he will use the means that he certainly has to destroy Ukraine and set the stage for terminal war.

And while conducting this grotesque experiment with the lives of Ukrainians, we will ensure that millions starve from the food crisis, we will toy with the possibility of nuclear war, and we will race on enthusiastically to destroying the environment that sustains life.

It is of course conceivable that Putin will just surrender, and that he'll refrain from using the forces at his command. And perhaps we can simply laugh off the prospects of resort to nuclear weapons. Conceivable, but what kind of person would be willing to take that gamble?

The answer is: Western leaders, quite explicitly, along with the political class. That has been obvious for years, even stated officially. And to make sure that all understand, the position was forcefully reiterated in April at the first monthly meeting of the "Contact Group," which includes NATO and partner countries. The meeting was not held at NATO headquarters in Brussels, Belgium. Rather, all pretenses were dropped, and it was held at the U.S. Ramstein Air Base in Germany; technically German territory, but in the real world belonging to the U.S.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin opened the meeting by [declaring](#) that "Ukraine clearly believes it can win and so does everyone here." Therefore, the assembled dignitaries should have no hesitation in pouring advanced weapons into Ukraine and persisting in the other programs, proudly announced, to bring Ukraine

effectively within the NATO system. In their wisdom, the attending dignitaries and their leader guarantee that Putin will not react in ways they all know he can.

The record of military planning for many years, in fact centuries, indicates that “everyone here” may indeed hold these remarkable beliefs. Whether they do or not, they are, clearly, willing to carry out the experiment with the lives of Ukrainians and the future of life on Earth.

Since we are assured on this high authority that Russia will passively observe all of this with no reaction, we can take further steps to “integrate Ukraine into NATO de facto,” in accord with the goals of the Ukrainian defense ministry, [establishing](#) “full compatibility of the Ukrainian army with the armies of NATO countries” — thereby also guaranteeing that no diplomatic settlement can be reached with any Russian government, unless Russia is somehow turned into a U.S. satellite.

Current U.S. policy calls for a long war to “weaken Russia” and ensure its total defeat. The policy is very similar to the Afghan model of the 1980s, which is, in fact, now explicitly advocated in high places; [by former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton](#) for example.

Since that is close to current U.S. policy, even a working model, it is worthwhile to look at what actually happened in Afghanistan in the ‘80s when Russia invaded. Fortunately, we now have a [detailed and authoritative account](#) by Diego Cordovez, who directed the successful UN programs that ended the war, and the distinguished journalist and scholar Selig Harrison, who has extensive experience in the region.

The Cordovez-Harrison analysis completely overthrows the received version. They demonstrate that the war was ended by careful UN-run diplomacy, not by military force. Soviet military forces were fully capable of continuing the war. The U.S. policy of mobilizing and funding the most extremist radical Islamists to fight the Russians amounted to “fighting to the last Afghan,” they conclude, in a proxy war to weaken the Soviet Union. “The United States did its best to prevent the emergence of a U.N. role,” that is, the careful diplomatic efforts that ended the war.

U.S. policy apparently delayed the Russian withdrawal that had been contemplated from shortly after the invasion — which, they show, had limited

objectives, with no resemblance to the awesome goals of world conquest that were conjured up in U.S. propaganda. “The Soviet invasion was clearly not the first step in an expansionist master plan of a united leadership,” Harrison writes, confirming the [conclusions of historian David Gibbs](#) based on released Soviet archives.

The chief CIA officer in Islamabad, who ran the operations directly, put the main point simply: The goal was to kill Russian soldiers — to give Russia their Vietnam, as proclaimed by high U.S. officials, revealing the colossal inability to understand anything about Indochina that was the hallmark of U.S. policy for decades of slaughter and destruction.

Cordovez-Harrison wrote that the U.S. government “was divided from the start between ‘bleeders,’ who wanted to keep Soviet forces pinned down in Afghanistan and thus to avenge Vietnam, and ‘dealers’, who wanted to compel their withdrawal through a combination of diplomacy and military pressure.” It’s a distinction that shows up very often. The bleeders usually win, causing immense damage. For “the decider,” to borrow W. Bush’s self-description, it is safer to look tough than to appear to be too soft.

Afghanistan is a case in point. In the Carter administration, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance was a dealer, who suggested far-reaching compromises that would have almost certainly prevented, or at least sharply curtailed, what was intended to be a limited intervention. National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski was the bleeder, intent on avenging Vietnam, whatever that meant in his confused world view, and killing Russians, something he understood very well, and relished.

Brzezinski prevailed. He convinced Carter to send arms to the opposition that was seeking to overthrow the pro-Russian government, anticipating that the Russians would be drawn into a Vietnam-style quagmire. When it happened, he could barely contain his delight. When asked later whether he had any regrets, he dismissed the question as ridiculous. His success in drawing Russia into the Afghan trap, he claimed, was responsible for the collapse of the Soviet empire and ending the Cold War — mostly [nonsense](#). And who cares if it harmed “some agitated Muslims,” like the million cadavers, putting aside such incidentals as the devastation of Afghanistan, and the rise of radical Islam.

The Afghan analogy is being publicly advocated today, and more importantly, is being implemented in policy.

The dealer-bleeder distinction is nothing new in foreign policy circles. A famous example from the early days of the Cold War is the conflict between George Kennan (a dealer) and Paul Nitze (a bleeder), won by Nitze, laying the basis for many years of brutality and near destruction. Cordovez-Harrison explicitly endorse Kennan's approach, with ample evidence.

An example close to Vance-Brzezinski is the conflict between Secretary of State William Rogers (a dealer) and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger (a bleeder) over Middle East Policy in the Richard Nixon years. Rogers proposed reasonable diplomatic solutions to the Israel-Arab conflict. Kissinger, whose ignorance of the region was monumental, insisted on confrontation, [leading to the 1973 war](#), a close call for Israel with a serious threat of nuclear war.

These conflicts are perennial, almost. Today there are only bleeders in high places. They have gone as far as to [enact a huge Lend Lease Act](#) for Ukraine, passed almost unanimously. The terminology is designed to evoke the memory of the enormous Lend-Lease program that brought the U.S. into the European war (as intended) and linked the European and Asian conflicts into a World War (unintended). "Lend Lease tied together the separate struggles in Europe and Asia to create by the end of 1941 what we properly call World War II," writes Adam Tooze. Is that what we want in today's quite different circumstances?

If that is what we want, as seems to be the case, let us at least reflect on what it entails. That is important enough to repeat.

It entails that we reject out of hand the kind of diplomatic initiatives that in reality ended the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, despite U.S. efforts to impede them. We therefore undertake an experiment to see whether integration of Ukraine into NATO, total defeat of Russia in Ukraine, and further moves to "weaken Russia," will be observed passively by the Russian leadership, or whether they will resort to the means of violence they unquestionably possess to devastate Ukraine and set the stage for possible general war.

Meanwhile, by extending the conflict instead of seeking to end it, we impose severe costs on Ukrainians, drive millions of people to death by starvation, hurtle the burning planet even more rapidly to the sixth mass extinction, and — if we are

lucky — escape terminal war.

No problem, the government and political class tell us. The experiment carries no risk because the Russian leadership is sure to accept all of this with equanimity, passing quietly into the ash heap of history. As for the “collateral damage,” they can join the ranks of Brzezinski’s “agitated Muslims.” To borrow the phrase made famous [by Madeleine](#) Albright: “This is a very hard choice, but the price — we think the price is worth it.”

Let’s at least have the honesty to recognize what we are doing, eyes open.

Global emissions rose to record high in 2021, so the world went back to a “business-as-usual” approach once the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic subsided — for now. How hardwired is human behavior? Are we capable of having moral duties toward future people?

It is a deep question, the most important question we can contemplate. The answer is unknown. It may be helpful to think about it in a broader context.

Consider Enrico Fermi’s famous paradox: In simple words, where are they? A distinguished astrophysicist, Fermi knew that there are a huge number of planets within the reach of potential contact that have the conditions to sustain life and higher intelligence. But with the most assiduous search, we can find no trace of their existence. So where are they?

One response that has been seriously proposed, and cannot be dismissed, is that higher intelligence has developed innumerable times, but has proven to be lethal: It discovered the means for self-annihilation but did not develop the moral capacity to prevent it. Perhaps that is even an inherent feature of what we call “higher intelligence.”

We are now engaged in an experiment to determine whether this grim principle holds of modern humans, a very recent arrival on Earth, some 200,000-300,000 years ago, a flick of an eye in evolutionary time. There is not much time to find the answer — or more precisely, to determine the answer, as we will do, one way or the other. That is unavoidable. We will either act to show that our moral capacity reaches as far as to control our technical capacity to destroy, or that it does not.

An extraterrestrial observer, if there were one, would unfortunately conclude that the gap is too immense to prevent species suicide, and with it the sixth mass extinction. But it could be mistaken. That decision is in our hands.

There is a rough measure of the gap between capacity to destroy and capacity to contain that death wish: the Doomsday Clock of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists. The distance of the hands from midnight can be regarded as an indication of the gap. In 1953, when the U.S. and Soviet Union exploded thermonuclear weapons, the minute-hand was set to two minutes to midnight. It did not reach that point again until Donald Trump's term in office. In his last year, the analysts abandoned minutes and switched to seconds: 100 seconds to midnight, where the clock now stands. Next January it will be set again. It's not hard to make a case that the second-hand should move closer to midnight.

The grim question arose with brilliant clarity on August 6, 1945. That day provided two lessons: 1.) human intelligence, in its glory, was approaching the capacity to destroy everything, an achievement reached in 1953; and 2.) human moral capacity lagged far behind. Few even cared, as people of my age will remember very well. Viewing the hideous experiment to which we are enthusiastically committed today, and what it entails, it is hard to see improvement, to put it mildly.

That doesn't answer the question. We know far too little to answer it. We can only observe closely the one case of "higher intelligence" that we know of, and ask what it suggests about the answer.

Far more importantly, we can act to determine the answer. It is within our power to bring about the answer that we all hope for, but there is no time to waste.

Copyright © Truthout. May not be reprinted without [permission](#).

C.J. Polychroniou is a political scientist/political economist, author, and journalist who has taught and worked in numerous universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. Currently, his main research interests are in U.S. politics and the political economy of the United States, European economic integration, globalization, climate change and environmental economics, and the deconstruction of neoliberalism's politico-economic project. He is a regular contributor to *Truthout* as well as a member of *Truthout's* Public Intellectual Project. He has published scores of books and over 1,000 articles which have appeared in a variety of journals, magazines, newspapers and popular news websites. Many of his publications have been translated into a multitude of

different languages, including Arabic, Chinese, Croatian, Dutch, French, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Turkish. His latest books are *Optimism Over Despair: Noam Chomsky On Capitalism, Empire, and Social Change* (2017); *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal: The Political Economy of Saving the Planet* (with Noam Chomsky and Robert Pollin as primary authors, 2020); *The Precipice: Neoliberalism, the Pandemic, and the Urgent Need for Radical Change* (an anthology of interviews with Noam Chomsky, 2021); and *Economics and the Left: Interviews with Progressive Economists* (2021).

Chomsky: US Is Prioritizing Its Jockeying With Russia, Not Ukrainians' Lives



Noam Chomsky

Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine is an utter disaster for Ukraine, and the war is not going well for the Russian forces who are experiencing heavy losses and may be running low on both supplies and morale. Perhaps this is the reason why Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, also encouraged by the support that Ukraine has received from Western countries, claimed a few days ago on the Greek state-run broadcaster *ERT* that "the war will end when Ukraine wins."

In this exclusive interview, world-renowned scholar and leading dissident Noam

Chomsky considers the implications of Ukraine's heroic stance to fight the Russian invaders till the end, and why the U.S. is not eager to see an end to the conflict.

Chomsky, who is internationally recognized as one of the most important intellectuals alive, is the author of some 150 books and the recipient of scores of highly prestigious awards, including the Sydney Peace Prize and the Kyoto Prize (Japan's equivalent of the Nobel Prize), and of dozens of honorary doctorate degrees from the world's most renowned universities. Chomsky is Institute Professor Emeritus at MIT and currently Laureate Professor at the University of Arizona.

C.J. Polychroniou: After months of fighting, it's obvious that the invasion is not going according to the Kremlin's plans, hopes and expectations. NATO figures have claimed that Russian forces have already suffered as many deaths as they did during the entire duration of the Afghan war, and the position of the Zelenskyy government now seems to be "peace with victory." Obviously, the West's support for Ukraine is key to what's happening on the ground, both militarily and in terms of diplomatic solutions. Indeed, there is no clear path to peace, and the Kremlin has stated that it is not seeking to end the war by May 9 (known as Victory Day, which marks the Soviets' role in defeating Nazi Germany). Don't Ukrainians have the right to fight to death before surrendering any territory to Russia, if they choose to do so?

Noam Chomsky: To my knowledge, no one has suggested that Ukrainians don't have that right. Islamic Jihad also has the abstract right to fight to the death before surrendering any territory to Israel. I wouldn't recommend it, but it's their right.

Do Ukrainians want that? Perhaps now in the midst of a devastating war, but not in the recent past.

President Zelenskyy was elected in 2019 with an overwhelming mandate for peace. He immediately moved to carry it out, with great courage. He had to confront violent right-wing militias who threatened to kill him if he tried to reach a peaceful settlement along the lines of the Minsk II formula. Historian of Russia Stephen Cohen points out that if Zelenskyy had been backed by the U.S., he could have persisted, perhaps solving the problem with no horrendous invasion. The

U.S. refused, preferring its policy of integrating Ukraine within NATO. Washington continued to dismiss Russia's red lines and the warnings of a host of top-level U.S. diplomats and government advisers as it has been doing since Clinton's abrogation of Bush's firm and unambiguous promise to Gorbachev that in return for German reunification within NATO, NATO would not expand one inch beyond Germany.

Zelenskyy also sensibly proposed putting the very different Crimea issue on a back burner, to be addressed later, after the war ends.

Minsk II would have meant some kind of federal arrangement, with considerable autonomy for the Donbass region, optimally in a manner to be determined by an internationally supervised referendum. Prospects have of course diminished after the Russian invasion. How much we don't know. There is only one way to find out: to agree to facilitate diplomacy instead of undermining it, as the U.S. continues to do.

It's true that "the West's support for Ukraine is key into what's happening on the ground, both militarily and in terms of diplomatic solutions," though I would suggest a slight rephrasing: The West's support for Ukraine is key into what's happening on the ground, both militarily and in terms of *undermining instead of facilitating* diplomatic solutions that might end the horror.

Congress, including congressional Democrats, are acting as if they prefer the exhortation by Democratic Chair of the House Permanent Select Committee of Intelligence Adam Schiff that we have to aid Ukraine "so that we can fight Russia over there, and we don't have to fight Russia here."

Schiff's warning is nothing new. It is reminiscent of Reagan's calling a national emergency because the Nicaraguan army is only two days marching time from Harlingen, Texas, about to overwhelm us. Or LBJ's plaintive plea that we have to stop them in Vietnam or they will "[sweep over the United States and take what we have.](#)"

That's been the permanent plight of the U.S., constantly threatened with annihilation. Best to stop *them over there*.

The U.S. has been a leading provider of security assistance to Ukraine since 2014.

And last week, President Biden asked Congress to approve \$33 billion to Ukraine, which is more than double what Washington has already committed since the start of the war. Isn't it therefore safe to conclude that Washington has a lot riding on the way the war ends in Ukraine?

Since the relevant facts are virtually unspeakable here, it's worth reviewing them.

Since the Maidan uprising in 2014, NATO (meaning basically the U.S.) has "provided significant support with equipment, with training, 10s of 1000s of Ukrainian soldiers have been trained, and then when we saw the intelligence indicating a highly likely invasion Allies stepped up last autumn and this winter," before the invasion, [according to](#) NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg).

I've already mentioned Washington's refusal to back newly elected President Zelenskyy when his courageous effort to implement his mandate to pursue peace was blocked by right-wing militias, and the U.S. refused to back him, preferring to continue its policy of integrating Ukraine into NATO, dismissing Russia's red lines.

As we've discussed earlier, that commitment was stepped up with the official U.S. policy statement of September 2021 calling for sending more advanced military equipment to Ukraine while continuing "our robust training and exercise program in keeping with Ukraine's status as a NATO Enhanced Opportunities Partner." The policy was given further formal status in the November 10 U.S.-Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership signed by Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

The State Department has [acknowledged](#) that "prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the United States made no effort to address one of Vladimir Putin's most often stated top security concerns — the possibility of Ukraine's membership into NATO."

So matters continued after Putin's criminal aggression. Once again, what happened has been reviewed accurately by Anatol Lieven:

A U.S. strategy of using the war in Ukraine to weaken Russia is also of course completely incompatible with the search for a ceasefire and even a provisional peace settlement. It would require Washington to oppose any such settlement and to keep the war going. And indeed, when in late March the Ukrainian government put forward a very reasonable set of [peace proposals](#), the lack of public U.S.

support for them was extremely striking.

Apart from anything else, a Ukrainian treaty of neutrality (as proposed by President Zelensky) is an absolutely inescapable part of any settlement — but weakening Russia involves maintaining Ukraine as a de facto U.S. ally. U.S. strategy as indicated by [Defense Secretary] Lloyd Austin would risk Washington becoming involved in backing Ukrainian nationalist hardliners against President Zelensky himself.

With this in mind, we can turn to the question. The answer seems plain: judging by U.S. actions and formal pronouncements, it is “safe to conclude that Washington has a lot riding on the way the war ends in Ukraine.” More specifically, it is fair to conclude that in order to “weaken Russia,” the U.S. is dedicated to the grotesque experiment that we have discussed earlier; avoid any way of ending the conflict through diplomacy and see whether Putin will slink away quietly in defeat or will use the capacity, which of course he has, to destroy Ukraine and set the stage for terminal war.

We learn a lot about the reigning culture from the fact that the grotesque experiment is considered highly praiseworthy, and that any effort to question it is either relegated to the margins or bitterly castigated with an impressive flow of lies and deceit.

Copyright © Truthout. May not be reprinted without [permission](#).

C.J. Polychroniou is a political scientist/political economist, author, and journalist who has taught and worked in numerous universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. Currently, his main research interests are in U.S. politics and the political economy of the United States, European economic integration, globalization, climate change and environmental economics, and the deconstruction of neoliberalism’s politico-economic project. He is a regular contributor to *Truthout* as well as a member of *Truthout’s* Public Intellectual Project. He has published scores of books and over 1,000 articles which have appeared in a variety of journals, magazines, newspapers and popular news websites. Many of his publications have been translated into a multitude of different languages, including Arabic, Chinese, Croatian, Dutch, French, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Turkish. His latest books are *Optimism Over Despair: Noam Chomsky On Capitalism, Empire, and*

Social Change (2017); *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal: The Political Economy of Saving the Planet* (with Noam Chomsky and Robert Pollin as primary authors, 2020); *The Precipice: Neoliberalism, the Pandemic, and the Urgent Need for Radical Change* (an anthology of interviews with Noam Chomsky, 2021); and *Economics and the Left: Interviews with Progressive Economists* (2021).

Noam Chomsky: Propaganda Wars Are Raging As Russia's War On Ukraine Expands



Noam Chomsky

Since World War I, propaganda has played a crucial role in warfare. Propaganda is used to increase support for the war among citizens of the nation that is waging it. National governments also use targeted propaganda campaigns in an attempt to influence public opinion and behavior in the countries they are at war with, as well as to influence international opinion. Essentially, propaganda, whether circulated through state-controlled or private media, refers to techniques of public opinion manipulation based on incomplete or misleading information, lies and deception. During World War II, both the Nazis and the Allies invested heavily in propaganda operations as part of each side's overall effort to win the war.

The war in Ukraine is no different. Both Russian and Ukrainian leaders have undertaken a campaign of systematic dissemination of warfare information that can easily be designated as propaganda. Other parties with a stake in the conflict, such as the United States and China, are also engaged in propaganda operations, which work in tandem with their apparent lack of interest in diplomatic undertakings to end the war.

In the interview that follows, leading scholar and dissident Noam Chomsky, who, along with Edward Herman, constructed the concept of the "[propaganda model](#)," looks at the question of who is winning the propaganda war in Ukraine. Additionally, he discusses how social media shape political reality today, analyzes whether the "propaganda model" still works, and dissects the role of the use of "whataboutism." Lastly, he shares his thoughts on the case of Julian Assange and what his now almost certain extradition to the United States for having committed the "crime" of releasing public information about the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq says about U.S. democratic principles.

Chomsky is internationally recognized as one of the most important intellectuals alive. His intellectual stature has been compared to that of Galileo, Newton and Descartes, as his work has had tremendous influence on a variety of areas of scholarly and scientific inquiry, including linguistics, logic and mathematics, computer science, psychology, media studies, philosophy, politics and international affairs. He is the author of some 150 books and the recipient of scores of highly prestigious awards, including the Sydney Peace Prize and the Kyoto Prize (Japan's equivalent of the Nobel Prize), and of dozens of honorary doctorate degrees from the world's most renowned universities. Chomsky is Institute Professor Emeritus at MIT and currently Laureate Professor at the University of Arizona.

C.J. Polychroniou: Wartime propaganda has become in the modern world a powerful weapon in garnering public support for war and providing a moral justification for it, usually by highlighting the "evil" nature of the enemy. It's also used in order to break down the will of the enemy forces to fight. In the case of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Kremlin propaganda seems so far to be working inside Russia and dominating Chinese social media, but it looks like Ukraine is winning the information war in the global arena, especially in the West. Do you agree with this assessment? Any significant lies or war-myths around the Russia-Ukraine conflict worth pointing out?

Noam Chomsky: Wartime propaganda has been a powerful weapon for a long time, I suspect as far back as we can trace the historical record. And often a weapon with long-term consequences, which merit attention and thought.

Just to keep to modern times, in 1898, the U.S. battleship *Maine* sank in Havana harbor, probably from an internal explosion. The Hearst press succeeded in arousing a wave of popular hysteria about the evil nature of Spain. That provided the needed background for an invasion of Cuba that is called here “the liberation of Cuba.” Or, as it should be called, the prevention of Cuba’s self-liberation from Spain, turning Cuba into a virtual U.S. colony. So it remained until 1959, when Cuba was indeed liberated, and the U.S., almost at once, undertook a vicious campaign of terror and sanctions to end Cuba’s “successful defiance” of the 150-year-old U.S. policy of dominating the hemisphere, as the State Department explained 50 years ago.

Whipping up war myths can have long-term consequences.

A few years later, in 1916, Woodrow Wilson was elected president with the slogan “Peace without Victory.” That was quickly transmuted to Victory without Peace. A flood of war myths quickly turned a pacifist population to one consumed with hatred for all things German. The propaganda at first emanated from the British Ministry of Information; we know what that means. American intellectuals of the liberal Dewey circle lapped it up enthusiastically, declaring themselves to be the leaders of the campaign to liberate the world. For the first time in history, they soberly explained, war was not initiated by military or political elites, but by the thoughtful intellectuals — them — who had carefully studied the situation and after careful deliberation, rationally determined the right course of action: to enter the war, to bring liberty and freedom to the world, and to end the Hun atrocities concocted by the British Ministry of Information.

One consequence of the very effective Hate Germany campaigns was imposition of a victor’s peace, with harsh treatment of defeated Germany. Some strongly objected, notably John Maynard Keynes. They were ignored. That gave us Hitler.

In a [previous interview](#), we discussed how Ambassador Chas Freeman compared the postwar Hate Germany settlement with a triumph of statesmanship (not by nice people): The Congress of Vienna, 1815. The Congress sought to establish a European order after Napoleon’s attempt to conquer Europe had been overcome.

Judiciously, the Congress incorporated defeated France. That led to a century of relative peace in Europe.

There are some lessons.

Not to be outdone by the British, President Wilson established his own propaganda agency, the Committee on Public Information (Creel Commission), which performed its own services.

These exercises also had a long-term effect. Among the members of the Commission were Walter Lippmann, who went on to become the leading public intellectual of the 20th century, and Edward Bernays, who became a prime founder of the modern public relations industry, the world's major propaganda agency, dedicated to undermining markets by creating uninformed consumers making irrational choices — the opposite of what one learns about markets in Econ 101. By stimulating rampant consumerism, the industry is also driving the world to disaster, another topic.

Both Lippmann and Bernays credited the Creel Commission for demonstrating the power of propaganda in “manufacturing consent” (Lippmann) and “engineering of consent” (Bernays). This “new art in the practice of democracy,” Lippmann explained, could be used to keep the “ignorant and meddlesome outsiders” — the general public — passive and obedient while the self-designated “responsible men” will attend to important matters, free from the “trampling and roar of a bewildered herd.” Bernays expressed similar views. They were not alone.

Lippmann and Bernays were Wilson-Roosevelt-Kennedy liberals. The conception of democracy they elaborated was quite in accord with dominant liberal conceptions, then and since.

The ideas extend broadly to the more free societies, where “unpopular ideas can be suppressed without the use of force,” as George Orwell put the matter in his (unpublished) introduction to *Animal Farm* on “literary censorship” in England.

So it continues. Particularly in the more free societies, where means of state violence have been constrained by popular activism, it is of great importance to devise methods of manufacturing consent, and to ensure that they are internalized, becoming as invisible as the air we breathe, particularly in articulate educated circles. Imposing war-myths is a regular feature of these enterprises.

It often works, quite spectacularly. In today's Russia, according to reports, a large majority accept the doctrine that in Ukraine, Russia is defending itself against a Nazi onslaught reminiscent of World War II, when Ukraine was, in fact, collaborating in the aggression that came close to destroying Russia while exacting a horrific toll.

The propaganda is as nonsensical as war myths generally, but like others, it relies on shreds of truth, and has, it seems, been effective domestically in manufacturing consent.

We cannot really be sure because of the rigid censorship now in force, a hallmark of U.S. political culture from far back: the "bewildered herd" must be protected from the "wrong ideas." Accordingly, Americans must be "protected" from propaganda which, we are told, is so ludicrous that only the most fully brainwashed could possibly keep from laughing.

According to this view, to punish Vladimir Putin, all material emanating from Russia must be rigorously barred from American ears. That includes the work of outstanding U.S. journalists and political commentators, like Chris Hedges, whose long record of courageous journalism includes his service as *The New York Times* Middle East and Balkans bureau chief, and astute and perceptive commentary since. Americans must be protected from his evil influence, because his reports appear on *RT*. They have now been expunged. Americans are "saved" from reading them.

Take that, Mr. Putin.

As we would expect in a free society, it is possible, with some effort, to learn something about Russia's official position on the war — or as Russia calls it, "special military operation." For example, via India, where Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov had a [long interview](#) with *India Today TV* on April 19.

We constantly witness instructive effects of this rigid indoctrination. One is that it is *de rigueur* to refer to Putin's criminal aggression in Ukraine as his "unprovoked invasion of Ukraine." A Google search for this phrase finds "About 2,430,000 results" (in 0.42 seconds).

Out of curiosity, we might search for "unprovoked invasion of Iraq." The search yields "About 11,700 results" (in 0.35 seconds) — apparently from antiwar

sources, a brief search suggests.

The example is interesting not only in itself, but because of its sharp reversal of the facts. The Iraq War was totally unprovoked: Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld had to struggle hard, even to resort to torture, to try to find some particle of evidence to tie Saddam Hussein to al-Qaeda. The famous disappearing weapons of mass destruction wouldn't have been a provocation for aggression even if there had been some reason to believe that they existed.

In contrast, the Russian invasion of Ukraine was most definitely provoked — though in today's climate, it is necessary to add the truism that provocation provides no justification for the invasion.

A host of high-level U.S. diplomats and policy analysts have been warning Washington for 30 years that it was reckless and needlessly provocative to ignore Russia's security concerns, particularly its red lines: No NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine, in Russia's geostrategic heartland.

In full understanding of what it was doing, since 2014, NATO (meaning basically the U.S.), has “provided significant support [to Ukraine] with equipment, with training, 10s of 1000s of Ukrainian soldiers have been trained, and then when we saw the intelligence indicating a highly likely invasion Allies stepped up last autumn and this winter,” before the invasion, [according to NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg](#).

The U.S. commitment to integrate Ukraine within the NATO command was also stepped up in fall 2021 with the official policy statements we have already discussed — kept from the bewildered herd by the “free press,” but surely read carefully by Russian intelligence. Russian intelligence did not have to be informed that “prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the United States made no effort to address one of Vladimir Putin's most often stated top security concerns — the possibility of Ukraine's membership into NATO,” as the State Department conceded, with little notice here.

Without going into any further details, Putin's invasion of Ukraine was clearly provoked while the U.S. invasion of Iraq was clearly unprovoked. That is exactly the opposite of standard commentary and reporting. But it is also exactly the norm of wartime propaganda, not just in the U.S., though it is more instructive to observe the process in free societies.

Many feel that it is wrong to bring up such matters, even a form of pro-Putin propaganda: we should, rather, focus laser-like on Russia's ongoing crimes. Contrary to their beliefs, that stand does not help Ukrainians. It harms them. If we are barred, by dictate, from learning about ourselves, we will not be able to develop policies that will benefit others, Ukrainians among them. That seems elementary.

Further analysis yields many other instructive examples. We [discussed](#) Harvard Law Professor Lawrence Tribe's praise for President George W. Bush's decision in 2003 to "aid the Iraqi people" by seizing "Iraqi funds sitting in American banks" — and, incidentally, invading and destroying the country, too unimportant to mention. More fully, the funds were seized "to aid the Iraqi people and to compensate victims of terrorism," for which the Iraqi people bore no responsibility.

We didn't go on to ask how the Iraqi people were to be aided. It is a fair guess that it is not compensation for U.S. pre-invasion "genocide" in Iraq.

"Genocide" is not my term. Rather, it is the term used by the distinguished international diplomats who administered the "Oil-for-Food program," the soft side of President Bill Clinton's sanctions (technically, via the UN). The first, Denis Halliday, resigned in protest because he regarded the sanctions as "genocidal." He was replaced by Hans von Sponeck, who not only resigned in protest with the same charge, but also wrote a very important book providing extensive details of the shocking torture of Iraqis by Clinton's sanctions, *A Different Kind of War*.

Americans are not entirely protected from such unpleasant revelations. Though von Sponeck's book was never reviewed, as far as I can determine, it can be purchased from Amazon (for \$95) by anyone who has happened to hear about it. And the small publisher that released the English edition was even able to collect two blurbs: from John Pilger and me, suitably remote from the mainstream.

There is, of course, a flood of commentary about "genocide." By the standards used, the U.S. and its allies are guilty of the charge over and over, but voluntary censorship prevents any acknowledgment of this, just as it protects Americans from international Gallup polls showing that the U.S. is regarded as by far the greatest threat to world peace, or that world public opinion overwhelmingly opposed the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan (also "unprovoked," if we pay attention),

and other improper information.

I don't think there are "significant lies" in war reporting. The U.S. media are generally doing a highly creditable job in reporting Russian crimes in Ukraine. That's valuable, just as it's valuable that international investigations are underway in preparation for possible war crimes trials.

That pattern is also normal. We are very scrupulous in unearthing details about crimes of others. There are, to be sure, sometimes fabrications, sometimes reaching the level of comedy, matters that the late Edward Herman and I documented in extensive detail. But when enemy crimes can be observed directly, on the ground, journalists typically do a fine job reporting and exposing them. And they are explored further in scholarship and extensive investigations.

As we've discussed, on the very rare occasions when U.S. crimes are so blatant that they can't be dismissed or ignored, they may also be reported, but in such a way as to conceal the far greater crimes to which they are a small footnote. The My Lai massacre, for example.

On Ukraine winning the information war, the qualification "in the West" is accurate. The U.S. has always been enthusiastic and rigorous in exposing crimes of its enemies, and in the current case, Europe is going along. But outside of U.S.-Europe, the picture is more ambiguous. In the Global South, the home of most of the world's population, the invasion is denounced but the U.S. propaganda framework is not uncritically adopted, a fact that has led to considerable puzzlement here as to why they are "out of step."

That's quite normal too. The traditional victims of brutal violence and repression often see the world rather differently from those who are used to holding the whip.

Even in Australia, there's a measure of insubordination. In the international affairs journal *Arena*, editor Simon Cooper reviews and deplores the rigid censorship and intolerance of even mild dissent in U.S. liberal media. He concludes, reasonably enough, that, "This means it is almost impossible within mainstream opinion to simultaneously acknowledge Putin's insupportable actions *and* forge a path out of the war that does not involve escalation, and the further destruction of Ukraine."

No help to suffering Ukrainians, of course.

That's also nothing new. That has been a dominant pattern for a long time, notably during World War I. There were a few who didn't simply conform to the orthodoxy established after Wilson joined the war. The country's leading labor leader, Eugene Debs, was jailed for daring to suggest to workers that they should think for themselves. He was so detested by the liberal Wilson administration that he was excluded from Wilson's postwar amnesty. In the liberal Deweyite intellectual circles, there were also some who were disobedient. The most famous was Randolph Bourne. He was not imprisoned but was barred from liberal journals so that he could not spread his subversive message that "war is the health of the state."

I should mention that a few years later, much to his credit, Dewey himself sharply reversed his stand.

It is understandable that liberals should be particularly excited when there is an opportunity to condemn enemy crimes. For once, they are on the side of power. The crimes are real, and they can march in the parade that is rightly condemning them and be praised for their (quite proper) conformity. That is very tempting for those who sometimes, even if timidly, condemn crimes for which we share responsibility and are therefore castigated for adherence to elementary moral principles.

Has the spread of social media made it more or less difficult to get an accurate picture of political reality?

Hard to say. Particularly hard for me to say because I avoid social media and only have limited information. My impression is that it is a mixed story.

Social media provide opportunities to hear a variety of perspectives and analyses, and to find information that is often unavailable in the mainstream. On the other hand, it is not clear how well these opportunities are exploited. There has been a good deal of commentary — confirmed by my own limited experience — arguing that many tend to gravitate to self-reinforcing bubbles, hearing little beyond their own beliefs and attitudes, and worse, entrenching these more firmly and in more intense and extreme forms.

That aside, the basic news sources remain pretty much as they were: the

mainstream press, which has reporters and bureaus on the ground. The internet offers opportunities to sample a much wider range of such media, but my impression, again, is that these opportunities are little used.

One harmful consequence of the rapid proliferation of social media is the sharp decline of mainstream media. Not long ago, there were many fine local media in the U.S. Mostly gone. Few even have Washington bureaus, let alone elsewhere, as many did not long ago. During Ronald Reagan's Central America wars, which reached extremes of sadism, some of the finest reporting was done by reporters of the *Boston Globe*, some close personal friends. That has all virtually disappeared.

The basic reason is advertiser reliance, one of the curses of the capitalist system. The founding fathers had a different vision. They favored a truly independent press and fostered it. The Post Office was largely established for this purpose, providing cheap access to an independent press.

In keeping with the fact that it is to an unusual extent a business-run society, the U.S. is also unusual in that it has virtually no public media: nothing like the *BBC*, for example. Efforts to develop public service media — first in radio, later in TV — were beaten back by intense business lobbying.

There's excellent scholarly work on this topic, which extends also to serious activist initiatives to overcome these serious infringements on democracy, particularly by Robert McChesney and Victor Pickard.

Nearly 35 years ago, you and Edward Herman published Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media. The book introduced the "propaganda model" of communication which operates through five filters: ownership, advertising, the media elite, flak and the common enemy. Has the digital age changed the "propaganda" model? Does it still work?

Unfortunately, Edward — the prime author — is no longer with us. Sorely missed. I think he would agree with me that the digital age hasn't changed much, beyond what I just described. What survives of mainstream media in a largely business-run society still remains the main source of information and is subject to the same kinds of pressures as before.

There have been important changes apart from what I briefly mentioned. Much

like other institutions, even including the corporate sector, the media have been influenced by the civilizing effects of the popular movements of the '60s and their aftermath. It is quite illuminating to see what passed for appropriate commentary and reporting in earlier years. Many journalists have themselves gone through these liberating experiences.

Naturally, there is a huge backlash, including passionate denunciations of “woke” culture that recognizes that there are human beings with rights apart from white Christian males. Since Nixon’s “Southern strategy,” the GOP leadership has understood that since they cannot possibly win votes on their economic policies of service to great wealth and corporate power, they must try to direct attention to “cultural issues”: the false idea of a “[Great Replacement](#),” or guns, or indeed anything to obscure the fact that we’re working hard to stab you in the back. Donald Trump was a master of this technique, sometimes called the “thief, thief” technique: when you’re caught with your hand in someone’s pocket, shout “thief, thief” and point somewhere else.

Despite these efforts, the media have improved in this regard, reflecting changes in the general society. That’s by no means unimportant.

What do you make of “whataboutism,” which is stirring up quite a controversy these days on account of the ongoing war in Ukraine?

Here again there’s a long history. In the early postwar period [World War II], independent thought could be silenced by charges of [comsymp](#): you’re an apologist for Stalin’s crimes. It’s sometimes condemned as McCarthyism, but that was only the vulgar tip of the iceberg. What is now denounced as “cancel culture” was rampant and remained so.

That technique lost some of its power as the country began to awaken from dogmatic slumber in the '60s. In the early '80s, Jeane Kirkpatrick, a major Reaganite foreign policy intellectual, devised another technique: moral equivalence. If you reveal and criticize the atrocities that she was supporting in the Reagan administration, you’re guilty of “moral equivalence.” You’re claiming that Reagan is no different than Stalin or Hitler. That served for a time to subdue dissent from the party line.

Whataboutism is a new variant, hardly different from its predecessors.

For the true totalitarian mentality, none of this is enough. GOP leaders are working hard to cleanse the schools of anything that is “divisive” or that causes “discomfort.” That includes virtually all of history apart from patriotic slogans approved by Trump’s 1776 Commission, or whatever will be devised by GOP leaders when they take command and are in a position to impose stricter discipline. We see many signs of it today, and there’s every reason to expect more to come.

It’s important to remember how rigid doctrinal controls have been in the U.S. — perhaps a reflection of the fact that it is a very free society by comparative standards, hence posing problems to the doctrinal managers, who must be ever alert to signs of deviation.

By now, after many years, it’s possible to utter the word “socialist,” meaning moderately social democrat. In that respect, the U.S. has finally broken out of the company of totalitarian dictatorships. Go back 60 years and even the words “capitalism” and “imperialism” were too radical to voice. Students for a Democratic Society President Paul Potter, in 1965, summoned the courage to “name the system” in his presidential address, but couldn’t manage to produce the words.

There were some breakthroughs in the ‘60s, a matter of deep concern to American liberals, who warned of a “crisis of democracy” as too many sectors of the population tried to enter the political arena to defend their rights. They counseled more “moderation in democracy,” a return to passivity and obedience, and they condemned the institutions responsible for “indoctrination of the young” for failing to perform their duties.

The doors have been opened more widely since, which only calls for more urgent measures to impose discipline.

If GOP authoritarians are able to destroy democracy sufficiently to establish permanent rule by a white supremacist Christian nationalist caste subservient to extreme wealth and private power, we are likely to enjoy the antics of such figures as Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, who [banned](#) 40 percent of children’s math texts in Florida because of “references to Critical Race Theory (CRT), inclusions of Common Core, and the unsolicited addition of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in mathematics,” according to the official directive. Under pressure, the State

released some terrifying examples, such as an educational objective that, “Students build proficiency with social awareness as they practice with empathizing with classmates.”

If the country as a whole ascends to the heights of GOP aspirations, it will be unnecessary to resort to such devices as “moral equivalence” and “whataboutism” to stifle independent thought.

One final question. A U.K. judge has formally approved Julian Assange’s extradition to the U.S. despite deep concerns that such a move would put him at risk of “serious human rights violations,” as Agnès Callamard, former UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions, had warned a couple of years ago. In the event that Assange is indeed extradited to the U.S., which is pretty close to certain now, he faces up to 175 years in prison for releasing public information about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Can you comment on the case of Julian Assange, the law used to prosecute him, what his persecution says about freedom of speech and the state of U.S. democracy?

Assange has been held for years under conditions that amount to torture. That’s fairly evident to anyone who was able to visit him (I was, once) and was [confirmed](#) by the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture [and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment] Nils Melzer in May 2019.

A few days later, Assange was [indicted](#) by the Trump administration under the Espionage Act of 1917, the same act that President Wilson employed to imprison Eugene Debs (among other state crimes committed using the Act).

Legalistic shenanigans aside, the basic reasons for the torture and indictment of Assange are that he committed a cardinal sin: he released to the public information about U.S. crimes that the government, of course, would prefer to see concealed. That is particularly offensive to authoritarian extremists like Trump and Mike Pompeo, who initiated the proceedings under the Espionage Act.

Their concerns are understandable. They were explained years ago by the Professor of the Science of Government at Harvard, Samuel Huntington. He observed that, “Power remains strong when it remains in the dark; exposed to the sunlight it begins to evaporate.”

That is a crucial principle of statecraft. It extends to private power as well. That is

why manufacture/engineering of consent is a prime concern of systems of power, state and private.

This is no novel insight. In one of the first works in what is now called political science, 350 years ago, his “First Principles of Government,” David Hume wrote that,

Nothing appears more surprising to those, who consider human affairs with a philosophical eye, than the easiness with which the many are governed by the few; and the implicit submission, with which men resign their own sentiments and passions to those of their rulers. When we enquire by what means this wonder is effected, we shall find, that, as Force is always on the side of the governed, the governors have nothing to support them but opinion. It is therefore, on opinion only that government is founded; and this maxim extends to the most despotic and most military governments, as well as to the most free and most popular.

Force is indeed on the side of the governed, particularly in the more free societies. And they'd better not realize it, or the structures of illegitimate authority will crumble, state and private.

These ideas have been developed over the years, importantly by Antonio Gramsci. The Mussolini dictatorship understood well the threat he posed. When he was imprisoned, the prosecutor announced that, “We must prevent this brain from functioning for 20 years.”

We have advanced considerably since fascist Italy. The Trump-Pompeo indictment seeks to silence Assange for 175 years, and the U.S. and U.K. governments have already imposed years of torture on the criminal who dared to expose power to the sunlight.

Copyright © Truthout. May not be reprinted without [permission](#).

C.J. Polychroniou is a political scientist/political economist, author, and journalist who has taught and worked in numerous universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. Currently, his main research interests are in U.S. politics and the political economy of the United States, European economic integration, globalization, climate change and environmental economics, and the deconstruction of neoliberalism's politico-economic project. He is a regular contributor to *Truthout* as well as a member of *Truthout's* Public Intellectual

Project. He has published scores of books and over 1,000 articles which have appeared in a variety of journals, magazines, newspapers and popular news websites. Many of his publications have been translated into a multitude of different languages, including Arabic, Chinese, Croatian, Dutch, French, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Turkish. His latest books are *Optimism Over Despair: Noam Chomsky On Capitalism, Empire, and Social Change* (2017); *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal: The Political Economy of Saving the Planet* (with Noam Chomsky and Robert Pollin as primary authors, 2020); *The Precipice: Neoliberalism, the Pandemic, and the Urgent Need for Radical Change* (an anthology of interviews with Noam Chomsky, 2021); and *Economics and the Left: Interviews with Progressive Economists* (2021).