

Chomsky: Coup Attempt Hit Closer To Centers Of Power Than Hitler's 1923 Putsch



Noam Chomsky

Even as the Biden administration takes the reins of power, the fact remains that authoritarianism and a fascist strain of political thinking have taken firm root on U.S. soil among a large proportion of its citizens. This utterly disturbing development will, according to Noam Chomsky in this exclusive interview for *Truthout*, be hard to contain. A recent poll shows that the overwhelming majority of Republicans continues to give a thumbs up to Donald Trump, even after the storming of the Capitol. In the wake of the attempted coup, and on the cusp of a new administration, what do the current political currents mean for the future?

C.J. Polychroniou: Noam, you had been warning all along of a potential coup in the event that Trump would lose the 2020 election. In this context, are you surprised at all by what took place on Capitol Hill on the Electoral College vote count?

Noam Chomsky: Surprised, yes. I'd expected a strong reaction from Trump's voting base, raised to a fever pitch by his latest antics. But hadn't expected the attempted coup to reach this level of violence, and I suspect most of the participants didn't either. Many seemed to have been caught up in the excitement of the moment when the leaders of the crowd surged into the hated Capitol to drive out the demons who were not just "stealing the election" but "stealing" their country from them: their white Christian country.

That it was an attempted coup is not in question. It was openly and proudly proclaimed as just that. It was an attempt to overturn an elected government. That's a coup. True, what was attempted was not the kind of coup regularly backed by Washington in its dependencies, a military takeover with ample bloodshed, torture, "disappearance." But, nevertheless, it was an attempted coup. True, the perpetrators regarded themselves as defending the legitimate government, but that's the norm, even for the most vicious and murderous coups, like the U.S.-backed coup in Chile on the [first 9/11](#) - which was actually much worse in virtually every dimension than the second one, the one that we remember and commemorate. The first one is best forgotten on the principle of "wrong agents": Us, not some radical Islamic fundamentalists.

The emotions of those attempting the [Capitol] coup were apparent. Belief that the election was stolen was plainly held with real fervor. And it is understandable among people who live in passionately pro-Trump areas where he is revered as their savior, and for some, even chosen by God, [as he once declared](#). Many may scarcely have seen a Biden sign, or heard anything from *Fox News* or Rush Limbaugh to suggest some possible flaw in their beliefs.

In some respects, these beliefs are not as bizarre as they may look at first. A shift of tens of thousands of votes in a few counties might have swung the election the other way in a deeply undemocratic system such as ours, where 7 million votes can be swept aside along with an unknown number of others eliminated by purging, gerrymandering, and the many other devices that have been devised to steal the election from the "wrong people," effectively authorized by the Supreme Court in its shameful 2013 decision nullifying the Voting Rights Act ([Shelby County v Holder](#)).

As we've discussed before, the malevolent figure in charge deserves credit for his talent in tapping the poisonous streams that run not far below the surface of American society, with sources that are deep in U.S. history and culture.

I have to say that I was also surprised by the quick reaction of those who own the country and have a large share of responsibility for the malaise that broke forth on January 6. In no small part, it is a consequence of the neoliberal assault since Reagan, amplified by his successors, that has devastated the rural areas that are the homes of many who stormed the Capitol. Those who hold the levers of the

private power that dominates the society and political system never liked Trump's behavior, which harmed the image they project as humanists dedicated to the common good. But they were willing to tolerate the vulgar performance as long as Trump and his accomplices delivered the goods, lining their pockets by robbing the public.

And that they did. The "transfer of wealth" from the lower 90 percent to the ultra-rich since Reagan opened the doors for highway robbery reaches almost \$50 trillion, according to a [recent Rand corporation study](#). No one can place numbers on the vastly greater cost of environmental destruction that was a high priority of the Trump-McConnell years of service to the very rich and corporate sector.

But January 6 was apparently too much, and the marching orders were delivered swiftly by the Big Guns.

One has to have some sympathy for the legislators caught between powerful contending forces. On the one hand, they see the angry hordes whipped to a frenzy by Trump's performances, and still in his pocket, poised to wreak vengeance on those who betray their leader. And on the other hand, looking down on them from above, are the captains of finance and industry who fund their elections and dangle before them many other privileges to keep them in line. (How many members of Congress leave office to become truck drivers or secretaries?)

The dilemma is particularly harsh for senators, who are more reliant on the large donors. And their defection from the ranks of obsequious Trump loyalists has been somewhat greater.

Apparently, D.C. Council members had been briefed by the U.S. Attorney for the District of Columbia that Donald Trump might invoke the Insurrection Act to seize control of the city police, but did not expect an attack on the Capitol itself. In your own view, what explains the enormous security failures that led to the Capitol siege, and do the events of January 6, 2021, qualify as a putsch?

An attempted putsch, though the connotations of the term putsch may be too strong. The events reminded many, including historians of fascism, of Hitler's failed Beer Hall Putsch of 1923, which actually did not so easily penetrate the centers of power as the attempted coup of January 6.

The reasons for the security failures are being debated. I have no special insight. Black members of the Capitol police, who showed great courage along with many of their white colleagues, have charged for years that the force has been infiltrated with white supremacists. There may have been some collusion, and possibly serious corruption higher up the chain of command.

If Trump incited an insurrection against elected officials of the U.S. government, is it enough that he has been impeached again? Shouldn't he be facing sedition charges since inciting an insurrection against the government is a criminal act under Title 18 of the U.S. Code?

I presume the Joint Chiefs of Staff chose their words carefully in their [message on the "violent riot"](#) on January 6, "a direct assault on the U.S. Congress, the Capitol building, and our Constitutional process," an act of "violence, sedition and insurrection." They surely considered the fact that incitement to sedition and insurrection carries a heavy prison sentence. I presume that they also weighed the evidence that such incitement took place from the Oval Office.

Many questions arise about how to pursue such barely concealed charges, but we should be careful to avoid the Watergate trap. The Nixon impeachment procedures were initiated by [Massachusetts] Rep. Robert Drinan, S.J., charging him with the bombing of Cambodia, a truly monstrous crime, of Nuremberg Trial caliber. That charge was struck down by Congress. The prime charge against Nixon was that he organized thugs to invade one of two seats of political power in the country, the Democratic Party headquarters. This attack on the foundations of the Republic was overcome in a "stunning vindication of our constitutional system" (famed liberal historian Henry Steele Commager).

In short, the powerful can rise to their own defense. The victims of truly monstrous crimes can look elsewhere for recourse. Maybe history, with luck.

Incitement of an attempted coup is no laughing matter, but it scarcely weighs in the balance against a dedicated effort to destroy the environment that sustains life on earth or demolition of the arms control regime that mitigates the threat of nuclear war.

Do you believe that Trump is finished as a political figure? Or, to put the question slightly differently, was the Washington putsch of January 6, 2021, the beginning of the end of the rise of Trumpism?

Far from it. Whether Trump will survive the error of judgment that turned major power centers against him is unclear. He may well do so. The voting base of the Party seems to remain loyal, maybe with even greater fervor after this attack on their hero by the “deep state.” Local officials too. He was cheered on his visit to the Republican National Committee the day after the Capitol riot. He has other resources.

Whatever the fate of the individual, Trumpism will not be so easily contained. Its roots are deep. The anger and resentment raised to a frenzy by this talented con man is not limited to the U.S. The \$50 trillion robbery is only the icing on the cake of the neoliberal disaster, which itself is built on foundations of deep injustice and repression. We are not out of the woods, by far.

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