

Chomsky: COVID-19 Has Exposed The US Under Trump As A “Failed State”



Noam Chomsky

The label “failed state” has started to fit the U.S. like a glove as the COVID-19 national health crisis continues to reveal the structural flaws and weaknesses of the United States, argues world-renowned public intellectual Noam Chomsky in this exclusive interview for *Truthout*. Meanwhile, the Trump administration continues to exact a high price in human lives due to its caricaturish but highly dangerous response to the crisis. In the interview that follows, Chomsky also analyzes what’s behind Trump’s encouragement of the “anti-lockdown” protests, discusses the right-wing determination to destroy the U.S. Postal Service, and lays out his views on the electoral “lesser of two evils” principle.

C.J. Polychroniou: Noam, it is widely accepted by now that the U.S. coronavirus response not only was delayed, but remains mired in contradictions as Trump battles with scientists over policy. Moreover, the country as a whole was shown to be completely unprepared for a major health crisis. Are we talking here not simply of an incompetent administration but also of a failed state?

Noam Chomsky: Fifteen years ago, I wrote a book called [Failed States](#), a common locution in the day, referring to states that are incapable of meeting the needs of citizens, in the most important case because of deep policy choices, and are a danger not only to their own citizens but the world. The prime example was the United States. Extensive evidence was reviewed. That’s not of course the

intended use of the phrase in the doctrinal system, just as “rogue state” means some enemy, not ourselves, the prime example.

I still stand by that judgment, which was not mine alone. A few years later, a Gallup/WIN international poll found that [the U.S. is regarded as the greatest threat to world peace](#), no one else even close. And the severe threats of government policy to the domestic population, already quite apparent when the book appeared, became much clearer a year later when the housing bubble burst and the financial crisis ensued — along with Obama’s response: bail out the perpetrators, who became richer and more powerful than before, and forget about the congressional legislation that called for some help to the many who had lost their homes in corporate scams facilitated by the [Clinton-Rubin-Summers deregulation](#) extravaganza, extending the neoliberal assault on the population that took off under Reagan.

That’s a large part of the background for what finally brought us the Trump malignancy — which may, quite literally, doom human society on Earth. We’ve discussed elsewhere why this is no exaggeration. I hope that the basic facts and their dread import are well understood, and won’t review them here.

Trump has indeed hit America with a hammer blow — and much of the world as well, a matter we should not overlook. Just keeping to the current COVID-19 crisis, it is remarkable to see how little attention has been given to his sadistic assault against poor and suffering people around the world in pursuit of his goal of enhancing his electoral prospects.

There has been some attention to his extending his vicious attacks against refugees fleeing from misery and oppression, appealing to a deluded voter base that has been led to believe that refugees are the source of their suffering under the programs to which Trump is passionately committed.

But there is hardly a word about his attack against poor people in Africa, where unknown numbers will die thanks to his [defunding of the World Health Organization](#) (WHO), which has been protecting them from a wide range of diseases, now this new plague. Or about [Palestinians in the occupied territories](#), victims of Israel’s racist [contempt for their health](#) and other basic needs, amplified by Trump’s defunding of their meager health, educational and support systems generally because — as he explained — they weren’t treating him with

enough respect while he's smashing them in the face.

Trump's withholding funds from the WHO was just the [first step in his campaign to destroy the organization](#). The campaign provides real insight into the deeply rooted malevolence not only of Trump but of the gang he has collected around him, most of whom cower in silence(though some speak out), sometimes even outdoing the boss. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has been in the forefront of demonizing the WHO in support of Trump's increasingly desperate efforts to find a scapegoat for his terrible crimes against Americans. It doesn't matter how many miserable people are slaughtered in Africa and elsewhere in the Global South as crucial WHO services are undermined. Just "shithole countries" anyway, as the Dear Leader has explained.

It is by now common understanding that the U.S. under Trump is a failed state that is a serious danger to the world. Diplomats speak in muted tones, not wanting to offend the raging beast in Washington who has unlimited power to destroy. But the meaning is clear when a "senior European official" says that "[The U.S. administration is very fixated on the reelection campaign](#) and on who can get blamed for this catastrophic covid-19 situation in the U.S. They are blaming WHO and China for it. Therefore it is very difficult to agree on a common language about the WHO."

The "common language" in question has to do with a UN Security Council resolution that the Trump administration is blocking. The resolution calls for "a [global ceasefire](#) pertaining to armed conflict in response to the pandemic [and urges] member states to 'share timely and transparent information regarding the outbreak of COVID-19.'" But the resolution is unacceptable to the White House, because it calls on countries to "support the full implementation of the WHO International Health Regulations." As the senior European official said, asking countries to implement procedures to contain the crisis is harmful to Trump's reelection campaign.

In brief, the dedication to slaughter poor and suffering people in pursuit of personal gain is so profound that even reference to WHO health regulations cannot be mentioned. The WHO is reaching the status of climate change, a phrase that has to be excised from official documents dealing with the environment. Across the board, Trump and his acolytes are echoing the words of Francisco

Franco's fascist Gen. Millán Astray: "[Down with intelligence! Long live death!](#)"

Turning directly to your question, I think "incompetent" is not the right word for Trump's malevolence, which turned serious problems in the U.S. into a devastating crisis. But we should not overlook the serious problems inherited by the cruel gang in today's White House. It's crucial to understand the background for the crisis if we hope to contain the next pandemic, likely to be worse than this one because of the impact of the global warming that is a far more severe threat.

At the root, there are three factors: general capitalist logic, the more brutal neoliberal variant, and reactions by individual governments.

In 2003, after the SARS epidemic, scientists were well aware that a pandemic is likely, probably a related coronavirus. They also understood how to prepare for it — just as [scientists today have a good idea as to how to prepare](#) for the coming one.

But it's not enough to know. Someone has to pick up the ball and run with it. The obvious candidate is Big Pharma, with huge resources, bloated with profits thanks to the exorbitant patent rights granted them under the highly protectionist "free trade" agreements. They're ruled out, however, by normal capitalist logic. There's no profit in preparing for a catastrophe down the road. And in fact it can be in their interest to [impede a constructive response](#).

Next, the government could step in, but that's blocked by the neoliberal intensification of capitalism's inherent inhumanity. As Reagan declaimed in his inauguration speech, government is the problem, not the solution. Translation: Take decision-making away from government, which is at least partially responsive to public influence, and hand it over to private tyrannies that are unaccountable to the public. An essential component of neoliberalism, overt since its origins in interwar Vienna, is that democracy is a threat that must be contained, even destroyed by state violence if necessary, principles advocated in word and action by the gurus of the movement: Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich Hayek and others. Furthermore, as Milton Friedman counselled in the Reagan years, the unaccountable tyrannies who control decision-making must be guided by sheer greed. Any concern for others would shake the foundations of civilization.

The creed was not strictly observed. Obama tried to evade it slightly, but the

efforts were quickly smashed by capitalist logic (the [ventilator-Covidien affair that we've discussed elsewhere](#) is an example). But government intervention was largely blocked.

The third factor is the reactions of individual governments. They varied. China very quickly provided the WHO and the world with all relevant information. By early January, Chinese scientists had identified the virus and sequenced the genome. Some countries at once reacted: Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, New Zealand, a few others, which now seem to have the crisis largely under control. Europe dithered but finally acted, with varying degrees of success.

At the bottom of the barrel is Trump, reflecting his dedication to his primary constituency, private wealth and corporate power, lightly hidden under a farcical display of "populism." Throughout his term in office, Trump has systematically pursued policies that enrich his primary constituency while harming others, including his adoring crowds. One part of this program was steadily defunding the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and dismantling programs that could have provided advance warning of what was likely to happen. As a result, the U.S. was singularly unprepared.

Though the U.S. and a few other failed states had all the information that led functioning societies to react appropriately, of course not all was entirely clear. That could hardly have been possible in such tumultuous circumstances. Like others, high U.S. health officials had some [uncertainty](#) about what exactly was happening and how best to handle it. Nevertheless, it was possible to take effective action, as shown by the record of governments that have some concern for their citizens. U.S. intelligence and health officials understood more than enough. Through January and February, they were trying to get through to the White House, but Trump was too busy watching his TV ratings. In the style of petty dictators, he has surrounded himself with sycophants or comical figures. So, nothing from them. Or from the Republican Party, now trembling in fear of the crowds that can be mobilized by Trump and his corporate sponsors.

When some dare to inject a little rationality into administration discussions, they quickly learn their lessons, like the physician in charge of developing vaccines who was [dismissed in April](#) for warning against one of the quack medicines that Trump was advertising.

“Down with intelligence! Long live death!”

Trump should be given credit for his considerable achievements. It's not easy to get away with holding up a banner with one hand saying “I love you, I'm our savior, I'm chosen by heaven to protect you,” while the other hand is stabbing you in the back. But Trump is doing it, brilliantly. He's the supreme con man, who makes P.T. Barnum look like an amateur. He's in a long tradition, back to trading tales for fun in the old West, to the self-declared King of France in Huckleberry Finn, to the guy who'll sell you the Brooklyn Bridge. Moving to a different sphere, we might also include the [president who won the “marketer of the year” award](#) from the Association of National Advertisers for his political campaign, easily defeating Apple and other amateurs, and went on to win a Nobel Peace Prize for some pleasant rhetoric.

But Trump is in a class by himself. Not just as a con man, but much more significantly as a dedicated enemy of the human race. That much is demonstrated by his policies on accelerating environmental catastrophe and dismantling the arms control regime that has provided some protection from terminal nuclear war, quite aside from a stream of peccadilloes of the kind already mentioned.

While praising Trump for his considerable achievements, we must also bear in mind that the health system that he has been wrecking was already in terrible shape. The privatized profit-driven health system in the U.S. was an international scandal long before Trump, with costs about twice as high as comparable countries and some of the worst outcomes. On the eve of the pandemic, the costs of this dysfunctional system were estimated at [\\$450 billion in wasted expense](#) and 68,000 deaths annually by *The Lancet*, one of the world's leading medical journals.

Beyond that, the neoliberal business model dictates that hospital care must be “efficient”: the minimum number of nurses and hospital beds to just get by in normal times — not much fun for patients even in normal times even at the world's best hospitals, as many can attest (myself included). And if anything goes wrong, tough luck.

It should be added that contrary to common belief, the U.S. does have universal health care. It's called “emergency rooms.” If you can drag yourself to one, they'll take care of you, often with superb care — and often a hefty bill. It's the most

cruel and expensive form of universal care known, but at least it's there.

Bad as the situation was that Trump inherited, he has been committed to making it worse. One illustration of the commitments (and moral level) of the White House is the budget it submitted for the coming year on February 10, while the pandemic was raging. It called for still further cuts for the CDC along with increased subsidies to the fossil fuel industries that are driving us to final catastrophe. And, of course, more funding for the bloated military and for the famous wall that will protect us from the rapists and murderers surging across the border.

That barely skims the surface. Failed state? Four more years?

Are the anti-lockdown protests, which Trump is openly encouraging, merely about the shutting down of the economy and quarantines?

We have enough experience to see that virtually everything Trump does is about himself — the country and the world be damned. In this case, one can detect a strategy behind the ongoing circus. Trump has been casting about to find someone to blame for his crimes. After evoking the [Yellow Peril](#) and laboring to destroy the WHO, with grim effects, he's pretty much run out of targets. A rational next step is to tell governors that it's your business: the federal government, which has all the resources, can't do anything for you. If anything goes wrong, it's your fault, not mine. And if something happens to go right somewhere, it demonstrates what a stable genius I am, and will be trumpeted by Sean Hannity as the most brilliant decision in human history.

This is similar to the strategy of saying one thing today and the opposite tomorrow, each echoed rapturously by *Fox News* while the liberal press dutifully tots up the lies (20,000?). If you shoot arrows at random, some may hit the target. And if one does? I'm vindicated and the scam goes on. You can't lose.

The governors' ploy is about the same: enforce lockdown, open up the economy (and protect our "Second Amendment rights," which has nothing to do with anything but pushes the right buttons). If it makes life harder for the governors and leads to many deaths, that's OK too. It's all the fault of the urban centers where diseases and other maladies fester among those who are poisoning our lily-white society.

Malevolent, but not stupid.

It's tempting to add the injunction to the states by [Mitch McConnell](#), the real evil genius of the Republican organization. Go bankrupt. The Republican Senate is not going to compensate you for your foolish decision to give pensions to firefighters, teachers, policemen and other undeserving takers. We have to save the money for the makers, like the airline industries that need \$50 billion because in the glory days of high profits, instead of improving services and building the enterprises, they spent close to \$50 billion in buybacks to inflate stock prices and compensation for management. After all, first things first. There's no need to elaborate. His vileness has been so egregious that there's been plenty of commentary in the mainstream press.

In defense of Trump, McConnell and rest of the merry gang, they are carrying to an extreme the only way of dealing with the dilemma that the Republicans have faced since they turned to pure service to the business world. It's hard to go to voters and say, "Look, we're the more extreme of the two business parties. We're designing policies to benefit our primary constituency of great wealth and corporate power, and to throw you into the waste bin. So vote for us."

Somehow, that doesn't work well. So it's important to divert attention to "cultural issues," to pretend to be adamantly opposed to abortion rights and love assault rifles, to be terrified of *them*, to dismiss global warming as a Commie plot, and all the rest. The word "pretend" is quite appropriate, but I won't go into that here.

The Democratic establishment has its own sins to answer for, but it is nothing like this; more like the moderate Republicans of the days before the Gingrich-Hastert-McConnell era. And it is subject to popular pressures, which have moved the party considerably to the left in recent years. That's not insignificant.

World leaders' approval rating has soared as a result of their handling of the coronavirus crisis, with the exception of Donald Trump. Could coronavirus be the determinant element that will put an end to four years of a nightmarish scenario written, directed, produced and carried out by the most dangerous buffoon this country has had for president? Trump's Waterloo, so to speak?

Trump benefited from the usual leadership bump when he finally acknowledged that the crisis was real, two months late, and assumed the proper presidential pose. His approval ratings have since receded to the norm from the beginning of

his presidency. That's a pretty impressive performance considering what he's done to the country. I can't guess where it will go from here. It's really hard to say. He's damned resilient, and his voting base and media echo chamber stay loyal. Current statistics show that he seems to be back to his norm of approval, which hasn't varied a great deal through his term. And if it looks bad, they might pull something before November. Like concocting an incident and bombing Iran.

Why is Trump bent on destroying the U.S. Postal Service (USPS)?

What does the postal service contribute to private wealth and corporate power (Trump's primary constituency)? Essentially nothing. Just means that they have to pay taxes for rural mail service and other services for ordinary people — insofar as they pay taxes, another interesting topic that I'll put aside. If the USPS is privatized, it can contribute to private wealth and corporate power, and they can run it "efficiently," like the health care system.

A good deal more is involved. It's important to them to drive out of people's heads the idea that democracy might work, that a public system can serve the needs of the general public. In much of the country, the local post office not only serves people's needs efficiently but is even a place where you can stop by and chat with a human being and meet your friends.

And — horror of horrors — activists might be able to help people realize why the postal service was set up by the founders. Its prime function in early years was to deliver journals and magazines cheaply, a subsidy to an independent press, what the founders seem to have had in mind in framing the First Amendment. These matters are explored in depth in scholarly work by Robert McChesney and [Victor Pickard](#), who carry the discussion right to the 20th century struggles to join the world in having vibrant public media, a critical matter for media activists today.

That's dangerous turf. Better to destroy the virus of democracy before it infects too many people.

Joe Biden expressed the fear last week that Trump might attempt to delay the November 2020 election. Is this a likely scenario? Does the sitting president have the authority to do so on account of a national crisis?

No constitutional authority, but Trump is quite capable of imitating his ludicrous friend Jair Bolsonaro and declaring "I am the Constitution." Unlike the Brazilian

judiciary, the Roberts Supreme Court might backsuch a statement up. And if granted another four years of court-packing up and down the line with young ultra-right figures, virtually anything will be possible. Anything, that is, but mildly progressive measures. Their fate will be dim for a generation or more.

It's also not beyond imagination that if Trump loses the electoral college (not just the popular vote), he'll declare the election illegitimate, claiming that the Democrats brought in undocumented immigrants, and insist on staying in office, surrounded by armed militias.

I can't verify it, but it's been credibly reported that if he has to leave the White House, Trump may be facing serious charges brought by states' attorneys. That aside, given his mental state, Trump might not be able to handle defeat and walk away like a normal human being.

Many on the left feel, naturally, and with much justification, extremely uncomfortable about Joe Biden. In fact, we hear now from some quarters the same arguments we heard in 2016 about Hillary Clinton, which is to say that it would be unconscionable for progressives to accept the "lesser of two evils" principle. How can we understand the political and conceptual context of electoral choices made by progressives and the left in November 2020?

These questions are plainly important. They are a matter of intense discussion and often impassioned debate on the left, and plenty of invective. That makes them worth discussing. To be quite frank, I don't see much other reason for discussing them. I've tried to explain in recent interviews, and judging by the reactions, have failed. So, I will repeat in more detail.

I've been around for a long time and can't think of a candidate about whom I was not "extremely uncomfortable," at least since FDR (and I was too young to have considered opinions then).

In Biden's case it's easy to think of reasons to be extremely uncomfortable. We can begin with his participation in the destruction of Libya and Honduras, in Obama's global assassination campaign, in breaking all records in deportation — and on from there. But while continuing with constant efforts to change that world, we have to take off a few minutes to each make our own choices on election day.

Let's think through the two concepts that lie behind the question: "unconscionable" and "lesser of two evils principle."

Let's start with "unconscionable." There are those — including close personal friends and long-time activists whom I greatly respect — who take the position that some actions are simply "unconscionable," whatever the consequences. I will ignore this position. To me, frankly, it seems not worth discussing. In the moral domain, what matters is the predictable consequences of your actions, those you are well aware of but choose to ignore. No one cares if you feel your conscience is clear.

Let's turn to the lesser of two evils principle.

Throughout my lifetime of activism (almost 80 years), I've been familiar with two doctrines about voting. One is the official doctrine.

Official doctrine holds that politics consists of showing up every few years, pushing a lever, then going back to one's private pursuits. Citizens are "spectators," not "participants in action," according to official doctrine. They can choose one or another member of the leadership class ("the responsible men") but that's the limit of popular participation. I happen to be quoting Walter Lippmann, a respected public intellectual of the 20th century (a Wilson-FDR-JFK liberal), in his "progressive essays in democracy," but the ideas are representative of prevailing liberal opinion. They trace back to the framers of the Constitution. That's why the "gold standard" in constitutional scholarship, a fine and illuminating study by Michael Klarman, is called "[The Framers' Coup](#)" — a coup against the popular demand for democracy.

On the right, views are much harsher.

A second doctrine is the one that has always prevailed on the left, call it "left doctrine." Politics consists in constant direct popular engagement in public affairs, including a wide variety of activism on many fronts. Occasionally an event comes up in the formal political arena called an "election." For left activists, that requires spending a brief period assessing the options (a very brief period for legitimate activists, who've been following everything relevant closely). Then comes a decision as to whether it's worthwhile to take a few minutes away from ongoing political work to push a lever in the quadrennial extravaganza. It's at most a brief departure from political engagement.

That's the doctrine that I've followed all my life, sometimes abstaining because the show didn't seem to matter and there's no point legitimizing the charade by participating, sometimes voting for a third party, sometimes voting for Jones if it's important to block Smith. I've sometimes voted for a Republican, in years when the Republicans were still a bone fide political party and had a better candidate.

There are, of course, myriad other cases, but the general point of left doctrine seems clear.

In recent years, a third doctrine has made an appearance and is now consuming much debate on the left: the lesser of two evils principle. I'd never heard of it before, in a lifetime of intensive political engagement (in the left doctrine sense). And it seems quite strange to me. It obviously is quite different from left doctrine, the prevailing doctrine on the left. The intensive debate about it falls within official doctrine, with its laser-like focus on the elections.

My own feeling about the lesser of two evils principle, of course, is that we should reject it in favor of left doctrine. It has no merits that I can see, so I think we can put it aside, along with the often-fevered debate about it.

Let's now consider the immediate case in hand. If the traditional left doctrine were applied to the current situation, it would require comparing Trump and his entourage with Biden and his, and asking whether there is a difference between them.

I personally think the difference is colossal. First and decisive, another four years of Trump and we'll have approached or possibly passed tipping points on the path toward environmental catastrophe toward which Trump is racing, his "party" in tow, virtually isolated in the world, certainly in the political system here. Just as important, the arms control regime will be dismantled, sharply increasing the threat of terminal war. The severe threats that Trump has incited in the Middle East will have increased, if not exploded. The Doomsday Clock, already reduced to seconds under Trump, will probably be close to abandoned. The reactionary international led by the White House that Trump is establishing will be well solidified. At home, the judiciary will be so packed by ultra-right young judges that no progressive initiatives will be able to be implemented for a generation. By the wayside we'll be observing other horrors, like children sent to concentration camps on the border, Black people murdered on a whim, etc.

An advocate of left doctrine will spend a few minutes reviewing the familiar facts, then take off another few minutes to push a lever, then go back to work.

I know of only one proposed counterargument. We have to put pressure on the Democratic establishment. To begin with, it's not a counterargument. It simply reiterates the main thesis of left doctrine: constant pressure. The only remaining question is how to impose pressure. There are, basically, two proposals on the table. The first is left doctrine. The second is refusing to vote for Biden.

Let's take a look at these.

First, left doctrine. We continue with what has been done, and has been very effective. One illustration is the Sanders campaign, which has been a remarkable success in shifting debate and policy choices to the left. The activism of the Sunrise Movement — aided by young congresswomen brought to office in the Sanders wave, notably Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez — has brought to the legislative agenda a Green New Deal, with the cooperation of liberal Democrat Ed Markey, senator from Massachusetts. Some version of a Green New Deal is essential for survival. There have also been significant shifts in other areas (health care, minimum wage, harsh repression in vulnerable communities, women's rights, on and on). We can, in fact, see this in Biden's program, which is well to the left of previous Democratic front-runners. That's why Biden is supported against Trump by Sanders (who had a large role in bringing the shift about) and also by longtime labor activists like Lawrence Mishel and Jared Bernstein. It's not my program, or yours, but we can hardly doubt that it is an improvement over what preceded.

Left doctrine efforts can work, as they often have before. We all know that that has been the main source of progress over the years, particularly when there were administrations susceptible to activist pressure.

It could be argued that political programs are just words. True, but irrelevant. Left doctrine efforts can keep Biden's feet to the fire, as has often happened in the past. And there will be opportunities to go far beyond, an urgent necessity.

In contrast, we can be sure that a Trump administration will be rock solid in opposition.

The second approach is to refuse to vote for Biden in the hope that withholding the vote will convince the Democratic establishment to take us seriously down the

road. I can't honestly construct a plausible version of this view, and it would be unfair to try.

Turning finally to your question, "How can we understand the political and conceptual context of electoral choices made by progressives and the left in November 2020?"

To me the answer seems clear. We should assess whether there is meaningful difference between the candidates, and also recognize that, for most of us, voting takes a few minutes. Then we go back to our real activist work.

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