

Noam Chomsky: GOP's Soft Coup Is Still Underway One Year After Capitol Assault



Noam Chomsky

In the third and final presidential debate of 2016, Donald Trump had signaled that he might not concede the election should he lose to Hillary Clinton. However, he did say to his supporters a day later that he would definitely accept the results of the election if he won.

Trump's threat to reject democratically run election results should have disqualified him from running for the highest office in the land.

But instead he went on to win the 2016 election and then divide the country like no other incoming president. And when he lost the 2020 election to Joe Biden, he not only refused to concede defeat, but he also sought to block the certification of the electoral vote by urging his fanatical supporters gathered at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, to "stop the steal" of the election. Months earlier, he had already put his base on high alert by saying, "The only way we're going to lose this election is if the election is rigged."

Under a less incompetent wannabe strongman, the assault on the Capitol could have led to the actual overthrow of the U.S. system of representative democracy. But the January 6 attack instead featured Trump's hallmark disorganization and lack of a coherent plan.

A day after the attempted coup, Trump announced that there would be an

“orderly transition” of power on January 20, but that did not mean that he had plans to “go gentle into that good night.” On the contrary, he continued to spread lies about the 2020 election, which he himself called the “Big Lie,” even after he had failed to convince officials in Georgia and Arizona to overturn those states’ results. Trump’s personal lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, also tried to convince a federal judge in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, to overturn hundreds of thousands of votes in the state.

Trump’s position was quite simple: *If democracy fails to give me the desired election results, damn democracy!*

Trump’s “Big Lie” continues to hold sway over the overwhelming majority of Republican voters, and the Republican Party itself is increasingly unwilling to accept defeat. Subsequently, states with Republican legislatures have passed waves of new laws restricting voting and are taking over local and state election boards. These developments speak volumes of the anti-democratic mindset that has become the trademark of the GOP in the Trump era.

In the interview that follows, Noam Chomsky reflects on the anniversary of the January 6 insurrection and offers us his own insights on what may lie ahead in a country where a very sizable segment of the population still believes in Trump’s lies.

Noam 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, and 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 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: A year ago, on January 6, 2021, a mob of Donald Trump’s supporters broke into the U.S. Capitol in an attempt to block certification of the electoral votes — a routine procedure following a presidential election — that

would have formalized Joe Biden's victory. The Capitol building had been breached on a few occasions in the past, but this was the first time in the history of the country that an assault on democracy was actually incited by an outgoing president. In fact, months later, former President Trump would go so far as to condemn the criminal prosecution of those who took part in the Capitol attack that day even though he had denounced the insurrection after he had been impeached over it. From your perspective, Noam, how should we understand what happened on January 6, 2021?

Noam Chomsky: Participants in the assault on the Capitol doubtless had varying perceptions and motives, but were united in the effort to overthrow an elected government; in short, an attempted coup, by definition. It was furthermore an attempt that could have succeeded if a few prominent Republican figures had changed their stance and gone along with the coup attempt, and if the military command had made different decisions. Trump was making every effort to facilitate the coup, which would surely have been applauded by a large majority of Republican voters and by the Republican political leadership, which, with a few exceptions, grovels at his feet in a shameful display of cowardice.

Implications for the future are all too clear. The Republican organization — it's hard to regard them any longer as an authentic political party — is now carefully laying the groundwork for success next time, whatever the electoral outcome may be. It's all completely in the open, not only *not* concealed but in fact heralded with pride by its leaders. And regularly reported, so that no one who is interested enough to pay attention to the American political scene can miss it. To mention just the most recent discussion I've seen, the *Associated Press* describes how the GOP is carrying out a "[slow-motion insurrection](#)" and has become "an anti-democratic force," something that has not happened before in American politics. A few weeks earlier, Barton Gellman [outlined](#) the plans in detail in *The Atlantic*.

There is no need to review the many well-known flaws of the formal democratic system: the radically undemocratic Senate, the enormous role of concentrated wealth and private power in determining electoral outcomes and legislation, the structural advantages provided to a traditionalist rural minority, and much else. But there are also broader issues.

What was progressive in the 18th century is by now so antiquated that if the U.S. were to apply for membership in the European Union, it would probably be

rejected as not satisfying democratic norms. That raises questions that merit more attention than they receive.

With all due respect for the Founders, one question — raised by Thomas Jefferson in his own terms — is why we should revere the sentiments of a group of wealthy white male 18th-century slaveowners, particularly now that the amendment system has succumbed to the deep flaws of the formal political system. No less curious are the legal doctrines of originalism/textualism that call on us to decipher their pronouncements with little regard to social and economic conditions as a decisive guide to judicial action. Looking at our political culture from a distance, there is a lot that would seem passing strange.

But even the tattered system that still survives is intolerable to GOP wreckers. Nothing is overlooked in their systematic assault on the fragile structure. Methods extend from [“taking hold of the once-overlooked machinery of elections”](#) at the ground level, to passing laws to bar the “wrong people” from voting, to devising a legal framework to establish the principle that Republican legislatures can “legally” determine choice of electors, whatever the irrelevant public many choose.

In the not-too-distant background are calls to “save our country” by force if necessary, where “our country” is a white supremacist Christian nationalist patriarchal society in which non-white folk can take part as long as they “know their place”; not at the table.

[White people’s] fear of “losing our country” is [in part a response to] demographic tendencies that are eroding white majorities, resisting even the radical gerrymandering that is imposed to amplify the structural advantages of the scattered conservative rural vote. Another threat to “our country” is that white supremacy is increasingly rejected, particularly by younger people, [as is devotion to religious authority](#), even church membership.

So while the charges of right-wing propagandists are largely fantasy and delusion, they have enough of a basis in reality to enflame those who see their familiar world of dominance disappearing before their eyes. And with the social order crumbling under the neoliberal assault, these fears can easily be manipulated by demagogues and opportunists — while their masters in the executive suites and mansions relish the opportunity to carry forward the highway robbery that they

have engaged in for 40 years if future challenges can be beaten down, by state and private violence if necessary.

That's a world that may not be remote, though it won't last long with the supreme climate denialists in charge. When Hungary, the current darling of the right, descends towards fascism, it's bad enough. If the U.S. does, long-term survival of human society is a dim prospect.

What does the January 6 Capitol attack tell us about the state of U.S. democracy in the 21st century? And do you agree with the view that Trump was the product of bad political institutions?

It tells us that the limited political democracy that still exists is hanging by a delicate thread.

If political institutions — more generally, intertwined socioeconomic-political institutions — can yield a President Trump, they are infected with profound malignancies. A moment's reflection shows that the malignancies are so profound that they are driving organized human society to suicide, and not in the distant future, with Trump and his acolytes and apologists enthusiastically in the lead. By now it takes real literary talent to exaggerate.

What are these institutions? That's much too far-reaching an inquiry to undertake here, but there are some instructive highlights.

The so-called Founders outlined clearly enough the kind of society they envisioned: "those who own the country ought to govern it" and ensure that "the minority of the opulent are protected from the majority" (John Jay, James Madison, respectively). Their model was England, where the reigning institutions had been described accurately a few years earlier by Adam Smith in words that bear repetition: The "masters of mankind," the merchants and manufacturers of England, are the "principal architects" of government policy and ensure that their own interests are "most peculiarly attended to" no matter how "grievous" the impact on others, including the people of England but also, much more severely, the victims of "the savage injustice of the Europeans," notably the people of India, then the richest country in the world, which England was robbing and despoiling for the benefit of the masters. Under the protection of the state they control, the masters can pursue their "vile maxim": "All for ourselves and nothing for other people," the maxim of the feudal lords adopted by the masters of mankind who

had been replacing them since the “glorious revolution” of the preceding century.

The masters of mankind have always understood that free-market capitalism would destroy them and the societies they owned. Accordingly, they have always called for a powerful state to protect them from the ravages of the market, leaving the less fortunate exposed. That has been dramatically plain in the course of the “bailout economy” of the past 40 years of class war, masked under “free market” rhetoric.

These core features of the reigning state capitalist institutions have been exacerbated by the rot spreading from interwar Vienna, adopting the term “neoliberalism” in the international Walter Lippmann symposium in Paris in 1938, then in the Mont Pelerin Society. The ideas were implemented under almost perfect experimental conditions during Augusto Pinochet’s murderous dictatorship in Chile, crashing the economy in half a dozen years, but no matter. By then, they had bigger game in sight: the global economy in the era of vigorous class war launched by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher and carried forward by Bill Clinton and other successors, establishing more firmly the vile maxim and dismantling such troublesome impediments as a limited welfare system and labor unions.

That’s the kind of terrain in which a Trump can appear, though there are of course multiple factors of varied nature that interact.

It seems that political violence has become an accepted norm among many Americans today. Firstly, what do you think are Trump’s motives for continuing to spin the “Big Lie”? Secondly, do you share the view that neo-fascism is gaining ground and that election subversion remains a real threat?

Trump’s motives are clear enough. We don’t need a degree in advanced psychiatry to know that a sociopathic megalomaniac must always win; nothing else can be contemplated. Furthermore, he’s a canny politician who understands that his worshippers will easily accept the “Big Lie.”

Many have wondered at the willingness of two-thirds of Republicans to believe the ludicrous pretense that the election was stolen. Should we really be surprised? Have a look at the views of Republicans on other matters. For example, on whether humans were *created* as they are today: [about half of Republicans](#). Or on whether Muslims are seeking to impose Sharia law on the

U.S.: [60 percent of Republicans who trust Fox News](#). Or on a host of other pre-modern beliefs in which the U.S. (mostly Republicans) stands virtually alone among comparable societies.

So why not a stolen election?

Election subversion is not merely a threat. It's happening in the "soft coup" that is underway right now. As is the drift toward a form of fascism. There is [evidence](#) that general attitudes of Trump voters on a range of issues are similar to those of European voters for far right parties with fascist origins. And these sectors are now a driving force in the GOP.

There's also substantial evidence that this drift to the far right may be driven in part by blind loyalty to Trump. That seems to be the case on the most critical issue that humans have ever faced: environmental destruction. During Trump's years in office, Republican recognition of climate change as a "serious issue," already shockingly low, [declined by 20 percent](#), even as nature has been issuing dramatic warnings, loud and clear, that we are racing toward disaster.

The phenomenon is deeply disturbing, and not without grim precedent. A century ago, Germany was at the peak of Western civilization, producing great contributions to the sciences and the arts. The Weimar Republic was regarded by political scientists as a model democracy. A few years later, Germans were worshipping Der Führer and accepting the vilest lies, and acting on them. That included some of the most respected figures, like Martin Heidegger; I recall very well my shock when I started to read his 1935 *Introduction to Metaphysics* when it appeared in English 60 years ago. And I'm old enough to remember hearing similar atrocious thoughts as a child in the '30s, close to home. Sinclair Lewis's 1935 classic on how fascism might be implanted in America by Christian nationalists (*It Can't Happen Here*) was not mere fantasy when it appeared, and it's no surprise that it has been returning to the best-seller lists in the Trump era.

State-level contests have moved to the very center of U.S. politics, but the Democrats are failing to catch up with this new reality. What's going on? Why do state politics matter more these days, and why do the Democrats seem to have embarked on a suicide mission as far as political strategy is concerned?

The neglect of state politics by Democrats seems to have taken off under Barack Obama. That critical area of American politics was handed over to Republicans

who, by that time, were already moving toward their current stance of rejecting democratic politics as an impediment to their task of “saving the country” (the version for the voting base) and maintaining power so as to serve the rich and the corporate sector (the understanding of the leadership).

So far, there have been, surprisingly enough, no breakthroughs in the House committee investigation of the January 6 attack. Do you think that the congressional select committee involved in this task will establish accountability for what happened on that infamous day? And if it does, what could be the political implications of such an outcome?

The Republican leadership has already neutralized the select committee by refusal to participate on acceptable terms, then by rejecting subpoenas — a sensible strategy to delay the proceedings by court proceedings until they can simply disband the committee, or even better, reshape it to pursuing their political enemies. That’s the kind of tactic that Trump has used successfully throughout his career as a failed businessman, and it is second nature to corrupt politicians.

That aside, the events of January 6 have been investigated so fully, and even visually presented so vividly, that nothing much of substance is likely to be revealed. Republican elites who want to portray the insurrection as an innocent picnic in the park, with some staged violence by antifa to make decent law-abiding citizens look bad, will persist no matter what is revealed. And though there is more to learn about the background, it is not likely to have much effect on what seems now a reasonably plausible picture.

Suppose that the select committee were to come up with new and truly damning evidence about Trump’s role or other high-level connivance in the coup attempt. The Rupert Murdoch-controlled mainstream media would have little difficulty in reshaping that as further proof that the “Deep State,” along with the “Commie rats” and “sadistic pedophiles” who supposedly run the Democratic Party, have conspired to vilify the “Great Man.” His adoring worshippers would probably be emboldened by this additional proof of the iniquity of the evil forces conniving at the “Great Replacement.” Or whatever fabrication is contrived by those capable of converting critical race theory into an instrument for destroying the “embattled white race,” among other propaganda triumphs.

My guess is that the committee's work will end up being a gift to the proto-fascist forces that are chipping away at what remains of formal democracy, much as the impeachment proceedings turned out to be.

It's worth proceeding for the sake of history — assuming that there will be any history that will even care if the plan to establish lasting Republican rule succeeds.

No exaggeration.

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