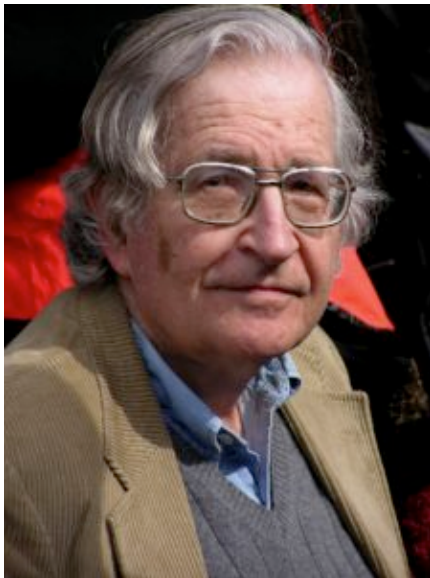


Noam Chomsky On Fascism, Showmanship And Democrats' Hypocrisy In The Trump Era



Noam Chomsky

After 18 months of Trump in the White House, American politics finds itself at a crossroads. The United States has moved unmistakably toward a novel form of fascism that serves corporate interests and the military, while promoting at the same time a highly reactionary social agenda infused with religious and crude nationalistic overtones, all with an uncanny touch of political showmanship. In this exclusive *Truthout* interview, world-renowned linguist and public intellectual Noam Chomsky analyzes some of the latest developments in Trumpland and their consequences for democracy and world order.

C.J. Polychroniou: Noam, I want to start by asking for your reading of what took place at the Singapore summit, and the way this event was covered in the US media.

Noam Chomsky: It's reminiscent of Sherlock Holmes and the dog that didn't bark. What was important was what *didn't* happen. Unlike his predecessors, Trump did not undermine the prospects for moving forward. Specifically, he did not disrupt the process initiated by the two Koreas in their historic April 27 [Panmunjom]

Declaration, in which they “affirmed the principle of determining the destiny of the Korean nation on their own accord” (repeat: *on their own accord*), and for the first time presented a detailed program as to how to proceed. It is to Trump’s credit that he did not undermine these efforts, and in fact made a move toward facilitating them by cancelling the US-South Korean war games, which, as he correctly said, are “very provocative.” We would certainly not tolerate anything of the sort on our borders – or anywhere on the planet – even if they were not run by a superpower which not long before had utterly devastated our country with the flimsiest of pretexts after the war was effectively over, glorying in the major war crimes it had committed, like bombing major dams, after there was nothing else to bomb.

Beyond the achievement of letting matters proceed, which was not slight, no “diplomatic skills” were involved in Trump’s triumph.

The coverage has been quite instructive, in part because of the efforts of the Democrats to outflank Trump from the right. Beyond that, the coverage across the spectrum illustrates quite well two distinct kinds of deceit: lying and not telling relevant truths. Each merits comment.

Trump is famous for the former, and his echo chamber is as well. Liberal commentators exult in totting up and refuting Trump’s innumerable lies and distortions, much to his satisfaction since it provides the opportunity for him to fire up his loyal — by now almost worshipful — base with more evidence of how the hated “Establishment” is using every possible underhanded means to prevent their heroic leader from working tirelessly to defend them from a host of enemies.

A canny politician, Trump surely understands well that the base on which he relies, by now almost the entire Republican Party, has drifted to a surreal world, in part under his influence. Take the major Trump-Ryan legislative achievement, the tax scam — “The US Donor Relief Act of 2017,” as Joseph Stiglitz termed it. It had two transparent aims: to enrich the very wealthy and the corporate sector while slamming everyone else, and to create a huge deficit. The latter achievement — as the main architect of the scam Paul Ryan helpfully explained — provides the opportunity to realize the cherished goal of reducing benefits that serve the general population, already very weak by comparative standards, but still an unacceptable infringement on the prerogatives of the 1%. The congressional Joint Committee on Taxation [estimates](#) that the law will add \$1

trillion to deficits over the next decade. Virtually every economist generally agrees. But not 80 percent of Republican voters, of whom half believe that the deficit will be *reduced* by the gift their leader has lavished upon them.

Or consider something vastly more significant, attitudes toward global warming (apologies for the obscenity: climate change), which poses a severe threat to organized human life, and not in the distant future.

Half of Republicans believe that what is plainly happening is not happening, bolstered by virtually the entire leadership of the Party, as the Republican Primary debates graphically revealed. Of the half who concede that the real world exists, barely half think that humans play a role in the process.

Such destructive responses tend to break through the surface during periods of distress and fear, very widespread feelings today, for good reason: A generation of neoliberal policies has sharply concentrated wealth and power while leaving the rest to stagnate or decline, often joining the growing precariat. In the US, the richest country in history with unparalleled advantages, [over 40 percent](#) of the population don't earn enough to afford a monthly budget that includes housing, food, child care, health care, transportation and a cell phone. And this is happening in what's called a "booming economy."

Productivity has risen through the neoliberal period, even if not as much as before, but wages have stagnated or declined as wealth is funneled to a few bulging pockets. Distress is so severe that among white middle-aged Americans, mortality is actually increasing, something unheard of in functioning societies apart from war or pestilence. There are similar phenomena in Europe under the "business first" ("neoliberal"/"austerity") assault.

Returning to forms of deceit, one technique is simply lying, honed to a high art by the Maestro. Another technique is not telling parts of the "whole story" that matter.

To illustrate, consider the [analysis of "Trump's claims about the North Korea deal"](#) by the expert and highly competent fact-checker of The Washington Post, Glenn Kessler. His article originally ran under the title of "Not the Whole Story," with the title presented in extra-large letters to emphasize the ignominy. Kessler's acid (and accurate) critique of Trump's distortions and inventions opens by declaring (again correctly) that "North Korea has a long history of making

agreements and then not living up to its obligations,” citing the most crucial case, the September 2005 US-North Korea agreement (under six-power auspices), in which, in the official wording, “The DPRK [North Korea] committed to abandoning all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs and returning, at an early date, to the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons and to IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] safeguards.”

As Kessler points out, the North Koreans did not live up to these promises, and in fact, soon returned to producing nuclear weapons. Obviously, they can’t be trusted.

But this is “Not the Whole Story.” There is a rather significant omission: Before the ink was dry on the agreement, the US undermined it. [To repeat the unwanted facts from our earlier discussion of the matter](#), “the Bush administration broke the agreement. It renewed the threat of force, froze North Korean funds in foreign banks and disbanded the consortium that was to provide North Korea with a light-water reactor. Bruce Cumings, the leading US Korea scholar, writes that ‘the sanctions were specifically designed to destroy the September pledges [and] to head off an accommodation between Washington and Pyongyang’.” The whole story is well-known to scholarship, but somehow doesn’t reach the public domain.

Kessler is a fine and careful journalist. His evasion of “the whole story” appears to be close to exceptionless in the media. Every article on the matter by The New York Times security and foreign policy experts is the same, as far as I’ve seen. The practice is so uniform that it is almost unfair to pick out examples. To choose only one, again from a fine journalist, Washington Post specialist on Korea Anna Fifield [writes](#) that North Korea “signed a denuclearization agreement” in 2005, but didn’t stick to the agreement (omitting the fact that this was a response to Washington’s breaking the agreement). “So perhaps the wisest course of action,” she continues, “would be to bet that it won’t abide by this one, either.” And to complete the picture with a banned phrase, “So perhaps the wisest course of action would be to bet that [Washington] won’t abide by this one, either.”

There are endless laments about the deceitfulness and unreliability of the North Koreans; many are cited in [Gareth Porter’s review of media coverage](#). But it would be hard to find a word about the rest of the story. This is only one case.

I don’t incidentally suggest that the deceit is conscious. Much more likely, it’s just

the enormous power of conformity to convention, to what Gramsci called hegemonic “common sense.” Some ideas are not even rejected; they are unthinkable. Like the idea that US aggression is aggression; it can only be “a mistake,” “a tragic error,” “a strategic blunder.” I also don’t want to suggest this is “American exceptionalism.” It’s hard to find an exception to the practice in the history of imperialism.

So far, at least, Trump has kept from disrupting the agreement of the two Koreas. Of course, all of this is accompanied by boasts about his amazing deal-making abilities, and the brilliance of his skillful tactics of threatening “fire and fury” in order to bring the dictator to the negotiating table. There are many accolades by others across the spectrum for this triumph — which is about on a par with the standard claims that Obama’s harsh sanctions forced Iran to capitulate by signing the joint agreement on nuclear weapons, claims effectively refuted by Trita Parsi (*Losing an Enemy*). Whatever the factual basis, such claims are necessary to justify harsh measures against official enemies and to reinforce the general principle that what we do is *right* (with occasional tragic errors).

In the present case too, there is good evidence that the truth is almost the opposite of the standard claims, and that the harsh US stance has impeded progress toward peaceful settlement. There have been many opportunities in addition to the 2005 agreement. In 2013, in a meeting with senior US diplomats, North Korean officials outlined steps toward denuclearization. One of those who attended the meeting, former US official and Stimson Center Senior Fellow Joel Wit [reports that](#), “Not surprisingly, for the North Koreans, the key to denuclearization was that the United States had to end its ‘hostile policy’.”

While the US maintains its threatening stance, the North Korean leadership — “not surprisingly” — has sought “to develop a nuclear arsenal as a shield to deter the US while they moved to develop the economy.” The North Korean government, in June 2013, “issued an important new pronouncement that it was open to negotiations on denuclearization,” Wit writes, adding that, “The Obama administration dismissed it at the time as propaganda.” He adds further that “the North Koreans have given a great deal of thought to denuclearization and almost certainly have a concrete plan of action for the upcoming [Singapore] summit, whether the White House does or not.” In fact, at the 2013 meetings, “the North Korean officials actually laid out a concrete plan to achieve denuclearization,” Wit reports.

Not the only case. China's "double freeze" proposal, supported by Russia, Germany and others, has been on the table for years, rejected by Washington — until the Singapore summit.

Trump's diplomacy, such as it is, has been subjected to withering attack, especially by liberal opinion: *How could the US president agree to meet on friendly terms with a brutal dictator? How could he fail to demand that North Korea end its human rights violations, which are indeed horrendous?*

Willingness to look at "the whole story" suggests some other questions, of course unasked — in fact, unthinkable: *How could Kim agree to meet on friendly terms with the head of the state that world opinion overwhelmingly regards as the greatest threat to peace? How could North Korea fail to demand that the US end its human rights violations, also horrendous? Has North Korea done anything remotely like invading Iraq, the worst crime of this century? Or destroying Libya? Has it been condemned by the ICJ [International Court of Justice] for international terrorism ("unlawful use of force")? And a lot more that is easy enough to reel off.*

It made perfect sense for North Korea not to bring up US crimes as a condition for moving forward. The proper goal of the meeting was to expedite the efforts of the two Koreas to pursue the directions outlined in their April 27 Declaration. And the argument cuts both ways.

Interestingly enough, while Trump seeks to appease his political doppelgänger in Pyongyang, he has succeeded in alienating most of the US's major Western allies, including Canada, France and Germany. Is this the consequence of his alleged foreign policy doctrine ["We are America, bitch"](#)?

There are extensive efforts to try to discern some coherent doctrine that guides Trump's behavior, but I suspect it's a fool's errand. A very good predictor of Trump policy is [his fixation on] ... reversing anything associated with the despised "Kenyan Muslim" he replaced: in foreign policy, tearing up the successful Iran deal and accepting the long-standing possibilities for addressing the serious North Korea crisis (proclaiming to have created an astonishing breakthrough). Much the same is true of other actions that look like random shots when the driving forces are ignored.

All of this has to be done while satisfying the usual Republican constituencies: primarily the business world and the rich. For Trump, that also means unleashing

the more brutal wing of the Republican Party so that they can dedicate themselves even beyond the norm to the interest of private wealth and corporate power. Here the technique is to capture the media with attention-grabbing antics, which can be solemnly exposed while the game goes on — so far, quite effectively.

Then comes the task of controlling the so-called “populist” base: the angry, frightened, disillusioned white population, primarily males. Since there is no way for Trumpism to deal with their economic concerns, which are actually being exacerbated by current policy-formation, it’s necessary to posture heroically as “standing up” for them against “malevolent forces” and to cater to the anti-social impulses that tend to surface when people are left to face difficult circumstances alone, without institutions and organizations to support them in their struggles. That’s also being done effectively for the time being.

The “We are America, bitch” posture appeals to chauvinistic instincts and the white supremacy that is a deeply rooted feature of American culture and is now exacerbated by concern that whites might even become a minority. The posture can also delude working people into believing that their tough-guy protector will bring back the world they’ve lost. Such propaganda exercises cannot, of course, target those actually responsible for the plight of the victims of neoliberal globalization. On the contrary, attention has to be diverted away from corporate managers who largely shape state policy while establishing complex global supply chains to maximize profit at the expense of working people. More appropriate targets are desperate people fleeing horrors for which we are largely responsible: “foreigners” who have been “robbing us” with the connivance of “treacherous liberals” and other assorted devils that can be conjured up in periods of social breakdown.

Allies, friends, who cares? There is no need for policies that are “coherent” in any traditional sense. Consequences don’t matter as long as the primary goals are met.

After months of harsh rhetoric against China’s trade practices, Trump has decided to impose tariffs of \$50 billion on Chinese imports, prompting Beijing, subsequently, to declare that the US has embarked on a trade war and to announce in turn that it will retaliate with similar measures against US imports. First, isn’t it true that China is merely practicing today the same sort of mercantilist policies that the US and Great Britain practiced in the past on their

way to global ascendancy? Second, is the targeting of tariffs expected to have any impact either on China's economy or on the size of the US trade deficit? And lastly, if a new era of protectionism is about to take off, what could the consequences of such development be for the reign of global neoliberalism?

Several questions arise. First, what is Trump's motive? If it were concern about China's economic management and trade policies, he wouldn't be going out of his way to alienate allies with tariffs and insults but would be joining with them to confront China on the issues of concern. If, however, the driving force is what I discussed earlier, then targeting both China and allies with abuse and tariffs has a certain logic: It may play well in the rust belt, contributing to the delusion that our hero is fighting to ensure jobs for working people — though it's a tricky strategy, because it harms other parts of his loyal base, mainly farmers, and also, though more subtly, because it imposes a new tax on consumption, which is what tariffs amount to.

As for China's economic policies, yes, they are similar to those that have been used by developed societies generally, beginning with Britain and then its former North American colony. Similar, but more limited. China lacks the means available to its predecessors. Britain stole superior technology from India, [the Low Countries](#), Ireland, and by force and severe protectionism, undermined the Indian economy, then the world's most advanced along with China. The US, under the [Hamiltonian system](#), resorted to high tariffs to bar superior British goods, and also took British technology in ways barred by the current US-initiated global trading system. Economic historian Paul Bairoch describes the US as "the mother country and bastion of protectionism" into the 1920s, well after it had become far and away the richest country in the world.

The general practice is called "kicking away the ladder" by economic historians: first use the practices to develop, then bar others from following.

Earlier, Britain's economic development relied on large-scale piracy, now considered by its former practitioner to be the most heinous of crimes. Keynes wrote that the booty of English pirates, like the famed and admired Sir Francis Drake, "may fairly be considered the fountain and origin of British foreign investments." Piracy was also a standard practice in the American colonies. Both British and US economies also relied crucially on the most hideous system of slavery in human history. Cotton was the oil of the industrial revolution, providing

the basis for manufacturing, finance, commerce, retail. Such practices are not available to China.

Like Britain before it, the US called for “free trade” when it recognized that the playing field was tilted properly in its direction. After World War II, when the US had incomparable power, it promoted the “liberal world order” that has been an enormous boon to the US corporate system, which now owns about half of the global economy, an astonishing policy success.

Again, following the British model, the US hedged its commitment to “free trade” for the benefit of domestic private power. The British-dominated “free trade” system kept India as a largely closed protectorate. The US-dominated system imposes an extreme patent system (“intellectual property”) that provides virtual monopoly power to major US industries. The US government also provides huge subsidies to energy industries, agribusiness and financial institutions. While the US complains about Chinese industrial policy, the modern high-tech industry has relied crucially on research and development in the publicly subsidized sector of the economy, to such an extent that the economy might fairly be regarded as a system of private subsidy, private profit. And there are many other devices to subsidize industry. Procurement, for example, has been shown to be a significant device. In fact, the enormous military system alone, through procurement, provides a huge state subsidy to industry. These comments only skim the surface.

Britain abandoned laissez-faire when it could no longer compete with Japanese competition, part of the background for World War II in the Pacific. Some in the US are having similar qualms today, concerns that Trump is cynically exploiting. But not the powerful corporate sector that relies crucially on the US-designed global economic order.

The corporate sector relies so extensively on the global economy it has designed that it is sure to use its enormous power to try to head off a major trade war. The Trump tariffs and the retaliation might escalate, but it’s likely that the threat will be contained. Trump is quite right, however, in proclaiming that the US would “win” a limited trade war, given the scale of the US economy, the huge domestic market and unique advantages in other respects. The “We are America, bitch” doctrine is a powerful weapon of intimidation.

The Trump administration is moving full speed ahead with its intent on cracking

down on unauthorized entries to the country by separating immigrant children from their parents. More than 2,000 children have been separated from their parents during the last seven weeks, and Attorney General Jeff Sessions sought recently to justify Trump's immigration policy by citing a verse from the Bible. What can one say about an advanced Western society in which religion continues to crowd out reason in shaping public policy and public attitudes? And didn't the Nazis, although they were no believers, also use Christianity to justify their immoral and criminal acts?

The immigration policy, always grotesque, has descended to levels so revolting that even many of those who foster and exploit xenophobia are running for cover — like Trump, who is desperately trying to blame it on the Democrats, and like the First Lady, who is [appealing to "both sides of the aisle"](#) to come together to stop the obscenity. We should, however, not overlook the fact that Europe is crawling through much the same gutters.

One can quote scripture for almost any purpose one likes. Sessions doubtless knows that "all the law" hangs on two commandments: loving God and "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." But that is not the appropriate thought for the occasion.

It is true, however, that the US is unique among developed societies in the role of religion in social life, ever since the Puritans landed.

Recently, Trump stated that he had the absolute right to pardon himself (after he had already said that he could shoot someone on New York's 5th Avenue and not lose any support), while his lawyer, former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani, said the president could even commit murder in the Oval Office and still not be prosecuted for it. Your thoughts?

After praising Kim [Jong Un] effusively as a strong leader who "speaks and his people sit up at attention," Trump added: "I want my people to do the same." When the predictable reaction followed, he said he was kidding. Maybe. I hope we don't have an opportunity to find out.

While it is clear that the country is well on its way to becoming a pariah nation, the Democrats continue to focus their attention primarily on Trump's alleged collusion with Russia and unethical behavior, all the while trying to outflank the president on the jingoist front, adopting new restrictions for the 2020 elections so

they can keep away the likes of Bernie Sanders, and of course, playing masterfully the fundraising game that works in a plutocracy. With all this in mind, how would you describe the nature of contemporary US politics?

Much as in Europe, the centrist political institutions in the United States, which have long been in the driver's seat, are in decline. The reasons are not obscure. People who have endured the rigors of the neoliberal assault — austerity in the recent European version — recognize that the institutions are working for others, not for them. In the US, people do not have to read academic political science to know that a large majority, those who are not near the top of the income scale, are effectively disenfranchised, in that their own representatives pay little attention to their views, hearkening rather to the voices of the rich, the donor class. In Europe, anyone can see that basic decisions are made by the unelected Troika, in Brussels, with the northern banks peering over their shoulders.

In the US, respect for Congress has long been hovering in single digits. In recent Republican primaries, when candidates emerged from the base, the Establishment was able to beat them down and obtain their own candidate. In 2016, that failed for the first time. True, it's not far from the norm for a billionaire with enormous media support and almost \$1 billion in campaign funding to win an election, but Trump was hardly the choice of the Republican elites. The most spectacular result of the election was not the Trump phenomenon. Rather, it was the remarkable success of Bernie Sanders, breaking sharply with US political history. With no support from big business or the media, Sanders might well have won the Democratic nomination had it not been for the machinations of Obama-Clinton party managers. Similar processes are apparent in recent European elections.

Like it or not, Trump is doing quite well. He has the support of [83 percent of Republicans](#), which is without precedent apart from rare moments. Whatever their feelings may be, Republicans dare not cross him openly. His general support in the low 40s is not far from the norm, about the same as Obama's going into his first midterm. He is lavishing gifts on the business world and the wealthy, the authentic constituency of the Republicans (with the Democrat leadership not far behind). He has thrown enough crumbs to keep the Evangelicals happy and has struck the right chords for racist/white supremacy elements. And he has, so far, managed to convince coal miners and steel workers that he is one of them. In fact, his support among union members has increased to 51 percent.

It is hardly in doubt that Trump cares almost nothing about the fate of the country or the world. What matters is *me*. That's clear enough from his attitude toward global warming. He is perfectly well aware of the dire threat — to his properties. His application for a [seawall](#) to protect his Irish golf course is based explicitly on the threat of global warming. But pursuit of power impels him to lead the race to destruction, quite happily, as is evident from his performances. The same holds of other serious, if lesser, threats, among them the threat that the country may be isolated, despised, declining — with dues to pay after it's no longer his concern.

The Democrats are now torn between a popular base that is largely social democratic and a New Democrat leadership that panders to the donor class. Under Obama, the party was reduced to shambles at the local and state level, a particularly serious matter because the 2020 elections will determine redistricting, offering opportunities for gerrymandering even beyond today's scandalous situation.

The bankruptcy of the Democrat elite is well-illustrated by the obsession with alleged Russian meddling with our sacred elections. Whatever it might amount to — apparently very little — it cannot begin to compare with the “meddling” of campaign funding, which largely determines electoral outcomes, as extensive research has shown, particularly the careful work of [Thomas Ferguson](#), which he and his colleagues have now extended to the 2016 elections. As Ferguson points out, when Republican elites realized that it was going to be Trump or Clinton, they responded with a huge wave of last-minute money that not only led to Clinton's late October decline but also had the same effect on Democratic candidates for Senate, “virtually in lock step.” It is “outlandish,” Ferguson observes, that former FBI Director James Comey or the Russians “could be responsible for both collapses” in the final stage of the campaign: “For the first time in the entire history of the United States, the partisan outcome of Senate races coincided perfectly with the results of every state's presidential balloting.” The outcome conforms very well to Ferguson's well-supported “Investment theory of party competition.”

But facts and logic matter little. The Democrats are bent on revenge for their 2016 failure, having run such a rotten campaign that what looked like a “sure thing” collapsed. Evidently, Trump's severe assault against the common good is a lesser matter, at least to the party elite.

It's sometimes been noted that the US not only regularly meddles in foreign elections, including Russian ones, but also proceeds to subvert and sometimes overthrow governments it doesn't like. Horrifying consequences abound, to the present, from Central America to the Middle East. Guatemala has been a horror story since a US-backed coup overthrew its elected reformist government in 1954. Gaza, declining in misery, may become unlivable by 2020, [the UN predicts](#), not by acts of God. In 2006, Palestinians committed a grave crime: They ran the first free election in the Arab world, and made the "wrong" choice, handing power to Hamas. Israel reacted by escalating violence and a brutal siege. The US reverted to standard operating procedure and prepared a military coup, pre-empted by Hamas. In punishment for this new crime, US-Israeli torture of Gaza sharply increased, not only with strangulation but also regular murderous and destructive US-backed Israeli invasions, on pretexts that quickly collapse on examination. Elections that come out the wrong way plainly cannot be tolerated under our policy of "democracy promotion."

In recent European elections, there has been much concern about possible Russian meddling. That was particularly true of the 2017 German elections, when the far-right party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) did surprisingly well, winning 94 seats in the Bundestag, the first time it had won seats. One can easily imagine the reaction had Russian meddling been detected behind these frightening results. It turns out that there was indeed foreign meddling, but not from Russia. AfD hired a Texas media firm (Harris Media) known for support of right-wing nationalist candidates (Trump, Le Pen, Netanyahu). The firm enlisted the cooperation of the Berlin office of Facebook, which provided it with detailed information about potential voters for use in microtargeting those who might be receptive to AfD's message. It may have worked. The story seems to have been ignored, apart from [the business press](#).

If the Democratic Party cannot overcome its deep internal problems and the slow expansion of the economy under Obama and Trump continues without disruption or disaster, the Republican wrecking ball may be swinging away at the foundations of a decent society, and at the prospects for survival, for a long time.

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