

Noam Chomsky On The Long History Of US Meddling In Foreign Elections



Noam Chomsky

A wide range of politicians and media outlets have described the alleged Russian interference in the last US presidential election (by way of hacking) as representing a direct threat to American democracy and even to national security itself. Of course, the irony behind these concerns about the interference of foreign nations in the domestic political affairs of the United States is that the US has blatantly interfered in the elections of many other nations, with methods that include not only financial support to preferred parties and the circulation of propaganda but also assassinations and overthrows of even democratically elected regimes. Indeed, the US has a long criminal history of meddling into the political affairs of other nations — a history that spans at least a century and, since the end of World War II, extends into all regions of the globe, including western parliamentary polities. This interview with Noam Chomsky reminds us that the United States is no stranger to election interference; in fact, it is an expert in this arena.

C. J. Polychroniou: Noam, the US intelligence agencies have accused Russia of interference in the US presidential election in order to boost Trump's chances, and some leading Democrats have actually gone on record saying that the Kremlin's canny operatives changed the election outcome. What's your reaction to all this talk in Washington and among media pundits about Russian cyber and propaganda efforts to influence the outcome of the presidential election in Donald Trump's favor?

Noam Chomsky: Much of the world must be astonished — if they are not collapsing in laughter — while watching the performances in high places and in media concerning Russian efforts to influence an American election, a familiar US government specialty as far back as we choose to trace the practice. There is, however, merit in the claim that this case is different in character: By US standards, the Russian efforts are so meager as to barely elicit notice.

Let's talk about the long history of US meddling in foreign political affairs, which has always been morally and politically justified as the spread of American style-democracy throughout the world.

The history of US foreign policy, especially after World War II, is pretty much defined by the subversion and overthrow of foreign regimes, including parliamentary regimes, and the resort to violence to destroy popular organizations that might offer the majority of the population an opportunity to enter the political arena.

Following the Second World War, the United States was committed to restoring the traditional conservative order. To achieve this aim, it was necessary to destroy the anti-fascist resistance, often in favor of Nazi and fascist collaborators, to weaken unions and other popular organizations, and to block the threat of radical democracy and social reform, which were live options under the conditions of the time. These policies were pursued worldwide: in Asia, including South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, Indochina and crucially, Japan; in Europe, including Greece, Italy, France and crucially, Germany; in Latin America, including what the CIA took to be the most severe threats at the time, "radical nationalism" in Guatemala and Bolivia.

Sometimes the task required considerable brutality. In South Korea, about 100,000 people were killed in the late 1940s by security forces installed and directed by the United States. This was before the Korean war, which Jon Halliday and Bruce Cumings describe as "in essence" a phase — marked by massive outside intervention — in "a civil war fought between two domestic forces: a revolutionary nationalist movement, which had its roots in tough anti-colonial struggle, and a conservative movement tied to the status quo, especially to an unequal land system," restored to power under the US occupation. In Greece in the same years, hundreds of thousands were killed, tortured, imprisoned or expelled in the course of a counterinsurgency operation, organized and directed

by the United States, which restored traditional elites to power, including Nazi collaborators, and suppressed the peasant- and worker-based communist-led forces that had fought the Nazis. In the industrial societies, the same essential goals were realized, but by less violent means.

Yet it is true that there have been cases where the US was directly involved in organizing coups even in advanced industrial democracies, such as in Australia and Italy in the mid-1970s. Correct?

Yes, there is evidence of CIA involvement in a virtual coup that overturned the Whitlam Labor government in Australia in 1975, when it was feared that Whitlam might interfere with Washington's military and intelligence bases in Australia. Large-scale CIA interference in Italian politics has been public knowledge since the congressional Pike Report was leaked in 1976, citing a figure of over \$65 million to approved political parties and affiliates from 1948 through the early 1970s. In 1976, the Aldo Moro government fell in Italy after revelations that the CIA had spent \$6 million to support anti-communist candidates. At the time, the European communist parties were moving towards independence of action with pluralistic and democratic tendencies (Eurocommunism), a development that in fact pleased neither Washington nor Moscow. For such reasons, both superpowers opposed the legalization of the Communist Party of Spain and the rising influence of the Communist Party in Italy, and both preferred center-right governments in France. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger described the "major problem" in the Western alliance as "the domestic evolution in many European countries," which might make Western communist parties more attractive to the public, nurturing moves towards independence and threatening the NATO alliance."

US interventions in the political affairs of other nations have always been morally and politically justified as part of the faith in the doctrine of spreading American-style democracy, but the actual reason was of course the spread of capitalism and the dominance of business rule. Was faith in the spread of democracy ever tenable?

No belief concerning US foreign policy is more deeply entrenched than the one regarding the spread of American-style democracy. The thesis is commonly not even expressed, merely presupposed as the basis for reasonable discourse on the US role in the world.

The faith in this doctrine may seem surprising. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which the conventional doctrine is tenable. If by “American-style democracy,” we mean a political system with regular elections but no serious challenge to business rule, then US policymakers doubtless yearn to see it established throughout the world. The doctrine is therefore not undermined by the fact that it is consistently violated under a different interpretation of the concept of democracy: as a system in which citizens may play some meaningful part in the management of public affairs.

So, what lessons can be drawn from all this about the concept of democracy as understood by US policy planners in their effort to create a new world order?

One problem that arose as areas were liberated from fascism [after World War II] was that traditional elites had been discredited, while prestige and influence had been gained by the resistance movement, based largely on groups responsive to the working class and poor, and often committed to some version of radical democracy. The basic quandary was articulated by Churchill’s trusted adviser, South African Prime Minister Jan Christiaan Smuts, in 1943, with regard to southern Europe: “With politics let loose among those peoples,” he said, “we might have a wave of disorder and wholesale Communism.” Here the term “disorder” is understood as threat to the interests of the privileged, and “Communism,” in accordance with usual convention, refers to failure to interpret “democracy” as elite dominance, whatever the other commitments of the “Communists” may be. With politics let loose, we face a “crisis of democracy,” as privileged sectors have always understood.

In brief, at that moment in history, the United States faced the classic dilemma of Third World intervention in large parts of the industrial world as well. The US position was “politically weak” though militarily and economically strong. Tactical choices are determined by an assessment of strengths and weaknesses. The preference has, quite naturally, been for the arena of force and for measures of economic warfare and strangulation, where the US has ruled supreme.

Wasn’t the Marshall Plan a tool for consolidating capitalism and spreading business rule throughout Europe after World War II?

Very much so. For example, the extension of Marshall Plan aid in countries like France and Italy was strictly contingent on exclusion of communists — including

major elements of the anti-fascist resistance and labor — from the government; “democracy,” in the usual sense. US aid was critically important in early years for suffering people in Europe and was therefore a powerful lever of control, a matter of much significance for US business interests and longer term planning. The fear in Washington was that the communist left would emerge victorious in Italy and France without massive financial assistance.

On the eve of the announcement of the Marshall Plan, Ambassador to France Jefferson Caffery warned Secretary of State Marshall of grim consequences if the communists won the elections in France: “Soviet penetration of Western Europe, Africa, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East would be greatly facilitated” (May 12, 1947). The dominoes were ready to fall. During May, the US pressured political leaders in France and Italy to form coalition governments excluding the communists. It was made clear and explicit that aid was contingent on preventing an open political competition, in which left and labor might dominate. Through 1948, Secretary of State Marshall and others publicly emphasized that if communists were voted into power, US aid would be terminated; no small threat, given the state of Europe at the time.

In France, the postwar destitution was exploited to undermine the French labor movement, along with direct violence. Desperately needed food supplies were withheld to coerce obedience, and gangsters were organized to provide goon squads and strike breakers, a matter that is described with some pride in semi-official US labor histories, which praise the AFL [American Federation of Labor] for its achievements in helping to save Europe by splitting and weakening the labor movement (thus frustrating alleged Soviet designs) and safeguarding the flow of arms to Indochina for the French war of re-conquest, another prime goal of the US labor bureaucracy. The CIA reconstituted the mafia for these purposes, in one of its early operations. The quid pro quo was restoration of the heroin trade. The US government connection to the drug boom continued for many decades.

US policies toward Italy basically picked up where they had been broken off by World War II. The United States had supported Mussolini’s Fascism from the 1922 takeover through the 1930s. Mussolini’s wartime alliance with Hitler terminated these friendly relations, but they were reconstituted as US forces liberated southern Italy in 1943, establishing the rule of Field Marshall [Pietro] Badoglio and the royal family that had collaborated with the Fascist government.

As Allied forces drove towards the north, they dispersed the anti-fascist resistance along with local governing bodies it had formed in its attempt to establish a new democratic state in the zones it had liberated from Germany. Eventually, a center-right government was established with neo-fascist participation and the left soon excluded.

Here too, the plan was for the working classes and the poor to bear the burden of reconstruction, with lowered wages and extensive firing. Aid was contingent on removing communists and left socialists from office, because they defended workers' interests and thus posed a barrier to the intended style of recovery, in the view of the State Department. The Communist Party was collaborationist; its position "fundamentally meant the subordination of all reforms to the liberation of Italy and effectively discouraged any attempt in northern areas to introduce irreversible political changes as well as changes in the ownership of the industrial companies ... disavowing and discouraging those workers' groups that wanted to expropriate some factories," as Gianfranco Pasquino put it. But the Party did try to defend jobs, wages and living standards for the poor and thus "constituted a political and psychological barrier to a potential European recovery program," historian John Harper comments, reviewing the insistence of Kennan and others that communists be excluded from government though agreeing that it would be "desirable" to include representatives of what Harper calls "the democratic working class." The recovery, it was understood, was to be at the expense of the working class and the poor.

Because of its responsiveness to the needs of these social sectors, the Communist Party was labelled "extremist" and "undemocratic" by US propaganda, which also skillfully manipulated the alleged Soviet threat. Under US pressure, the Christian Democrats abandoned wartime promises about workplace democracy and the police, sometimes under the control of ex-fascists, were encouraged to suppress labor activities. The Vatican announced that anyone who voted for the communists in the 1948 election would be denied sacraments, and backed the conservative Christian Democrats under the slogan: "O con Cristo o contro Cristo" ("Either with Christ or against Christ"). A year later, Pope Pius excommunicated all Italian communists.

A combination of violence, manipulation of aid and other threats, and a huge propaganda campaign sufficed to determine the outcome of the critical 1948 election, essentially bought by US intervention and pressures.

The CIA operations to control the Italian elections, authorized by the National Security Council in December 1947, were the first major clandestine operation of the newly formed agency. CIA operations to subvert Italian democracy continued into the 1970s at a substantial scale.

In Italy, as well as elsewhere, US labor leaders, primarily from the AFL, played an active role in splitting and weakening the labor movement, and inducing workers to accept austerity measures while employers reaped rich profits. In France, the AFL had broken dock strikes by importing Italian scab labor paid by US businesses. The State Department called on the Federation's leadership to exercise their talents in union-busting in Italy as well, and they were happy to oblige. The business sector, formerly discredited by its association with Italian fascism, undertook a vigorous class war with renewed confidence. The end result was the subordination of the working class and the poor to the traditional rulers.

Later commentators tend to see the US subversion of democracy in France and Italy as a defense of democracy. In a highly-regarded study of the CIA and American democracy, Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones describes "the CIA's Italian venture," along with its similar efforts in France, as "a democracy-propping operation," though he concedes that "the selection of Italy for special attention ... was by no means a matter of democratic principle alone;" our passion for democracy was reinforced by the strategic importance of the country. But it was a commitment to "democratic principle" that inspired the US government to impose the social and political regimes of its choice, using the enormous power at its command and exploiting the privation and distress of the victims of the war, who must be taught not to raise their heads if we are to have true democracy.

A more nuanced position is taken by James Miller in his monograph on US policies towards Italy. Summarizing the record, he concludes that "in retrospect, American involvement in the stabilization of Italy was a significant, if troubling, achievement. American power assured Italians the right to choose their future form of government and also was employed to ensure that they chose democracy. In defense of that democracy against real but probably overestimated foreign and domestic threats, the United States used undemocratic tactics that tended to undermine the legitimacy of the Italian state."

The "foreign threats," as he had already discussed, were hardly real; the Soviet Union watched from a distance as the US subverted the 1948 election and

restored the traditional conservative order, keeping to its wartime agreement with Churchill that left Italy in the Western zone. The “domestic threat” was the threat of democracy.

The idea that US intervention provided Italians with freedom of choice while ensuring that they chose “democracy” (in our special sense of the term) is reminiscent of the attitude of the extreme doves towards Latin America: that its people should choose freely and independently — as long as doing so did not impact US interests adversely.

The democratic ideal, at home and abroad, is simple and straightforward: You are free to do what you want, as long as it is what we want you to do.

*Note: Some of the material for this interview was adapted from excerpts from *Deterring Democracy* (Verso).*

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