

Noam Chomsky: Trump Is Quite Capable Of An “October Surprise”



Noam Chomsky ~ Photo:
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We take as axiomatic that the United States is a democracy, yet there can be no denying the fact that the country has been rapidly sliding into authoritarianism since Trump came to office, partly thanks to an antiquated mechanism known as the Electoral College. Trump’s removal of independent government watchdogs, his constant attacks on media, his divisive rhetoric, the way he has handled the coronavirus pandemic, his decision to send federal agents to crush protests, and his suggestion about postponing the November general election are but a small sample of Trump’s autocratic leadership, yet they speak volumes about the dark cloud over the U.S. In fact, it is quite conceivable that the worst is yet to come, says leading public intellectual Noam Chomsky. In this exclusive interview for *Truthout*, Chomsky says an “October surprise” from Trump or his cronies cannot be ruled out.

C.J. Polychroniou: Since coming to power, Trump has taken various steps to rule like an autocrat. His latest tactic is to send federal agents into cities to crush protests. Can you talk about the political aims behind Trump’s abuse of his law enforcement powers, and whether these actions have a precedent in modern U.S. history?

Noam Chomsky: The renowned economist James Buchanan, one of the leading figures of U.S.-style “libertarianism,” observed in his major work *The Limits of Liberty* that the ideal society should accord with fundamental human nature, which makes good sense. Then comes the next question: What is fundamental human nature? He had a very simple answer: “In a strictly personalized sense, any person’s ideal situation is one that allows him full freedom of action and inhibits the behavior of others so as to force adherence to his own desires. That is to say, each person seeks mastery over a world of slaves.”

It is not easy to find real human beings who suffer from this pathology, but Trump seems to be a good candidate.... When inspectors general begin to fulfill their duty of inquiring into the swamp of corruption he’s created, he fired them. The U.S. attorney for the Southern District of New York was summarily dismissed when he made the same error, replaced by a flack for private equity.

Next in turn is the military: “The White House is intensifying an effort to hire Pentagon personnel with an undisputed allegiance to President Trump ... [current and former officials said](#).” When the Senate did not quickly confirm his choice, retired Gen. Anthony Tata, to fill “the Pentagon’s top policy job,” [Trump simply appointed him without the required Senate approval](#). This has been standard procedure under Trump. Why bother with the legal formality of Senate confirmation?

Practices are much the same when the population dares to raise its head. They are then threatened with “ominous weapons” and “vicious dogs,” the latter a reference to the attack on civil rights protesters that aroused horror and contempt when they were used in the deep South 60 years ago. Overruling state and local officials [Trump] sent paramilitaries to assault protesters in Portland, Oregon, including the elite Border Patrol Tactical Unit (BORTAC), trained to use violence with little oversight against miserable refugees dying in the harsh Arizona desert not far from where I live.

Confronting Portland’s “Wall of Moms” with brute force does not go over too well with the general public, even arousing protests that it can’t happen here: We’re not Italy under Mussolini!

BORTAC was therefore withdrawn from Portland and returned to its mission of demonstrating that it *can* and *doeshappen* here, even if we choose not to look. A

few days after leaving Portland, heavily armed BORTAC units raided a humanitarian aid station for fleeing refugees in the Arizona desert, "[detaining over thirty people](#) who were receiving medical care, food, water, and shelter from the 100+ degree heat. In a massive show of force, Border Patrol, along with BORTAC, descended on the camp with an armored vehicle, three ATVS, two helicopters, and dozens of marked and unmarked vehicles," a No More Deaths [news update reports](#).

There's plenty more.

One reaction is that, "The Western-led world order is in crisis. If the U.S. reelects Donald Trump, this will be terminal."

A few years ago, you might hear these sentiments from someone on a street corner holding a sign reading "The end is nigh." Today, you [read them](#) in the world's leading business journal, the London *Financial Times*, expressed by the sober and highly respected economic-political analyst Martin Wolf.

Much of the world has had more than enough of the Western-led world order in the past centuries, but would hardly favor what is likely to come if Trump were to administer a terminal blow.

Are there precedents in American history? One has to search pretty hard to find any. One possible candidate is Trump's hero Andrew Jackson, who is alleged to have declared that Supreme Court Chief Justice "John Marshall has made his decision now let him enforce it" when Jackson defied the Court's orders to stop his campaign of brutal Indian removal.

We should also not overlook the fact that popular support for autocracy runs disturbingly high. Few signs are clearer than attitudes toward the media. Almost one-fourth of Republicans agree that "[President Trump should close down mainstream news outlets, like CNN, The Washington Post and The New York Times](#)." Twice that number of Republicans, almost half, agree that "the president should have the authority to close news outlets engaged in bad behavior" and that "the news media is the enemy of the American people," engaged in bad behavior. Democrats are not that extreme, but the numbers are not overly reassuring.

What about his suggestion that the November general election be delayed, from which he refuses to back down? Given that he is not constitutionally empowered to enforce such an extraordinary proposal, how can he be stopped from doing so?

He could be stopped by mass popular protests, perhaps a general strike, inducing the real masters to intervene to preserve the society they largely own. If it comes to a true show of force, Trump can be stopped by the military — if they decide to uphold the Constitution. These strange days it must surely have occurred to many that Trump's attempted purge of the military command might be planning for such a contingency — something else that would have been unthinkable a few years ago.

It might be worthwhile to pay attention to some analogies in today's decaying global social order. Recently, Trump's mimic in Brazil, President Jair Bolsonaro, sought to fire investigators looking into his family's sordid activities. He was blocked by the Supreme Court.

The world's oldest parliamentary democracy is also tottering, [under the regime of Prime Minister Boris Johnson](#), who stands out in Europe for Trump-like failure to handle the pandemic. When Johnson wanted to ram through his version of Brexit, he simply suspended Parliament, an unprecedented act that was bitterly condemned by British legal authorities, and quashed by the Supreme Court.

The U.S. trails behind.

Trump's attacks on the U.S. Postal Service are increasing in the year of the mail-in ballot. In fact, his new postmaster general, Louis DeJoy, has already taken steps to slow down the delivery of mail, and there is even talk of post offices shutting down across the country in an apparent effort to disenfranchise voters. What does Donald Trump's success in undermining democratic governance reveal about the state of the U.S. political system and U.S. democracy in the 21st century?

Several factors converge in the actions of Trump's choice to undermine the postal service. One is the narrow concern with the elections. Republicans know that they have a problem. They're a party of a shrinking minority. They cannot approach voters with their actual policies of unstinting service to extreme wealth and corporate power, and therefore have to mobilize voters on so-called "cultural issues," not a very secure stand. To hold onto office, they have to resort to such devices as massive purging of voters to ensure that the "wrong people" don't contaminate the elections, a remarkable story exposed by investigative journalist Greg Palast. Slowing mail service might open the door to challenges to the

election if they can't steal it by other means.

But there are deeper reasons that we've discussed before. The modern Republican party has a visceral hatred of the [U.S.] Postal Service, for good reasons. It is a highly efficient government institution, a fact that can give voters the subversive idea that government might be of, by and for the people. It offers no opportunities for private profit and performs major services to the population, and could do a great deal more if it were freed of congressional malevolence. These are lessons that have to be kept from the eyes of the dangerous masses. Even worse, the worshipers of the so-called founding fathers might not be able to continue to suppress the fact that they conceived of the postal service as a subsidy to a free, independent press; anathema.

The implications for what remains of democratic governance after 40 years of the neoliberal assault, enhanced by Trump's wrecking ball, need hardly be elaborated.

Trump has tried to use the coronavirus pandemic in a way that serves his reelection purposes, rather than the interest of the American public. With coronavirus cases hitting new records almost daily, isn't it possible that he may use COVID as a means to bolster his suggestion for postponing the November election?

He is desperate enough to try almost anything. And he'll have plenty of support. Business leaders may cringe at Trump's antics. That's especially true for those who like to present themselves as humane and cultivated managers of "soulful corporations" in '50s rhetoric, regularly recycled when needed to overcome "reputational risks." But as long as Trump recognizes where real power lies and follows the rules, they prefer him to uncertain alternatives that might be subject to pressures from people who care about the common good.

As Joe Biden bends to activist pressures and rises in the polls, the true Masters of the Universe are becoming increasingly alarmed. Front-page headlines tell us that "[Investors Start to Ask: What if Biden Becomes President?](#)" The stories report that investors are concerned that the gravy train may be slowed down if their champion is kicked out.

Fossil fuel industries are particularly worried. A headline in the Texas press reads "[Oil donors flock to Trump as Biden hardens climate stance.](#)" It reports that they

“are writing checks to President Donald Trump with greater zeal than they did four years ago, as Biden campaigns on a climate plan that seeks to eliminate carbon emissions by mid-century,” possibly earlier, along with his \$2 trillion program to address some of the many problems that have to be dealt with — not enough, but a substantial step forward.

Many polls indicate that Trump is trailing Biden by double digits. What could possibly happen between now and November that could turn the race around?

It’s anything but a sure thing. Election tampering is a huge industry. Massive campaign funding in the last days can have a major effect, as seems to have happened in 2016. The leading specialist on campaign funding, Tom Ferguson, found that a “[dual wave of money](#)” for both president and Senate had a substantial and probably decisive impact in the final days of the ‘16 campaign. We’ve already discussed the possibility that Republican interference with mail balloting might muddy the waters. Apart from all of these devices to undermine the limited integrity of elections, Trump is quite capable of an “October surprise.” It’s not hard to conjure up a variety of options. This is no time for letting one’s guard down, beguiled by dubious hopes.

This interview has been lightly edited for clarity.

C.J. Polychroniou is a political economist/political scientist who has taught and worked in universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. His main research interests are in European economic integration, globalization, the political economy of the United States and the deconstruction of neoliberalism’s politico-economic project. He is a regular contributor to *Truthout* as well as a member of *Truthout*’s Public Intellectual Project. He has published several books and his articles have appeared in a variety of journals, magazines, newspapers and popular news websites. Many of his publications have been translated into several foreign languages, including Croatian, French, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and Turkish. He is the author of [Optimism Over Despair: Noam Chomsky On Capitalism, Empire, and Social Change](#), an anthology of interviews with Chomsky originally published at *Truthout* and collected by Haymarket Books.