

# Noam Chomsky: Trump Is Willing To Dismantle Democracy To Hold On To Power



Noam Chomsky

While it's still too early to predict the likely outcome of the November 2020 presidential election, Donald Trump continues to fall behind in national polls while pulling dirty electoral tricks in the hope of defeating Democratic challenger Joe Biden. Much of Trump's hope for victory rests with his "law and order" campaign, which promotes lies about mail-in-voting fraud in order to preemptively discredit the election results if they are in Biden's favor. In this exclusive interview for Truthout, Noam Chomsky discusses the national and international significance of Trump's refusal to commit to a "peaceful transition to power" and his reliance on conspiracy theories.

*C.J. Polychroniou: Noam, with slightly more than two weeks away from the most important national elections in recent U.S. history, Trump's campaign continues to harp on the message of "law and order" — a political tactic that authoritarian leaders have always relied on in order to control people and to strengthen their grip on a country — but refuses to accept a "peaceful transition to power" if he loses to Biden. Your thoughts on these matters?*

*Noam Chomsky: The "law and order" appeal is normal, virtually reflexive. Trump's threat to refuse to accept the result of the election is not. It is something new in stable parliamentary democracies.*

The fact that this contingency is even being discussed reveals how effective the

Trump wrecking ball has been in undermining formal democracy. We may recall that Richard Nixon, not exactly revered for his integrity, had some reason to suppose that victory in the 1960 election had been stolen from him by Democratic Party machinations. He did not challenge the results, placing the welfare of the country above personal ambition. Al Gore did the same in 2020. The idea of Trump placing anything above his personal ambition — even caring about the welfare of the country — is too ludicrous to discuss.

James Madison once said that liberty is not protected by “parchment barriers” — words on paper. Rather, constitutional orders presuppose good faith and some commitment, however limited, to the common good. When that is gone, we’ve moved to a different sociopolitical world.

Trump’s threats are taken quite seriously, not only in extensive commentary in mainstream media and journals, but even within the military — which might be compelled to intervene, as in the tinpot dictatorships that are Trump’s model. A striking example is [an open letter to the country’s highest ranking military officer](#), Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Mark Milley, from two highly regarded retired military commanders, Lt. Colonels John Nagl and Paul Yingling. They warn Milley: “The president of the United States is actively subverting our electoral system, threatening to remain in office in defiance of our Constitution. In a few months’ time, you may have to choose between defying a lawless president or betraying your Constitutional oath” to defend the Constitution against all enemies, “foreign and domestic.”

The enemy today is domestic: a “lawless president,” Nagl and Yingling continue, who “is assembling a private army capable of thwarting not only the will of the electorate but also the capacities of ordinary law enforcement. When these forces collide on January 20, 2021, the U.S. military will be the only institution capable of upholding our Constitutional order.”

With Senate Republicans “reduced to supplicant status,” having abandoned any lingering shreds of integrity, General Milley should be prepared to send a brigade of the 82nd Airborne to disperse Trump’s “little green men,” Nagl and Yingling advise. “Should you remain silent, you will be complicit in a coup d’état.”

Hard to believe, but the very fact that such thoughts are voiced by sober and respected voices, and echoed throughout the mainstream, is reason enough to be

deeply concerned about the prospects for U.S. society. I rarely quote *New York Times* senior correspondent Thomas Friedman, but when he asks whether this might be our last democratic election, he is not joining us “wild men in the wings” — to quote McGeorge Bundy’s term for those who don’t automatically conform to approved doctrine.

Meanwhile, we should not overlook how leading elements of Trump’s “private army” are showing their mettle in their usual terrain of deployment: the cruel Arizona desert to which the U.S., since Clinton, has driven miserable people fleeing from our destruction of their countries so that we may evade our responsibility — both legal and moral — to offer them an opportunity for asylum.

When Trump decided to terrorize Portland, Oregon, he didn’t send the military, probably expecting that it would refuse to follow his orders, as had just happened in Washington, D.C. He sent paramilitaries, the most fierce of them the tactical unit BORTAC of the Border Patrol, which is given virtually free rein with the “damned of the earth” as its targets.

Immediately on returning from carrying out Trump’s orders in Portland, BORTAC returned to its regular pastimes, smashing up a flimsy medical aid center in the desert where volunteers seek to provide some medical aid, even water, to desperate people who managed somehow to survive.

Not content with this achievement, BORTAC soon returned to the task. Perhaps those who may be facing Trump’s private army might want to learn more about them. Here’s an excerpt from [an authoritative report from the scene](#) offered by the humanitarian organization [No More Deaths](#):

*After sunset yesterday, October 5th, U.S. Border Patrol entered No More Deaths’ humanitarian aid station, Byrd Camp, with a federal warrant, for a second nighttime raid in two months. Volunteers were held for 3 hours while 12 people who were receiving medical care, food, water, and shelter from the 100+ degree heat were apprehended.*

*In a massive show of armed force, Border Patrol, along with the Border Patrol Tactical Unit (BORTAC), descended on the camp with an armored tank, ATVs, a helicopter, and many marked and unmarked vehicles. Agents, armed with assault rifles, chased and terrorized those who were receiving care, all while the*

*helicopter hovered low above them kicking up dust and debris, making it nearly impossible to see. Border Patrol smashed windows, broke doors, and destroyed essential camp infrastructure as well as supplies. This was after heavily surveilling the camp and patrolling its perimeter, creating an antagonistic and distressing environment for those receiving care, since late Saturday night on the 3rd.*

*Since the previous raid on July 31st, Border Patrol has [refused on multiple occasions to meet with volunteers](#) to discuss previous shared agreements that upheld the right to provide humanitarian aid. The Tucson sector chief sent No More Deaths representatives a formal letter asserting this refusal.*

Those are the professional elements of Trump's private army, buttressed by the armed militias that are upholding the doctrines of white supremacy that the FBI and Department of Homeland Security regard as [the major domestic threat in the U.S.](#), sharply increasing during the Trump years from 20 percent of terrorism-related crimes in 2016 to close to 100 percent by 2019.

Those are the forces that may be upholding "law and order" if in fact the top military command decides to be "complicit in a coup d'état." It seems unimaginable, but, regrettably, not inconceivable.

Meanwhile Trump and his Republican cohorts are working overtime to implement their strategy of undermining the election or discrediting it if it comes out the wrong way, setting the stage for a possible coup.

In preparation, an "[Army for Trump](#)" is being mobilized to descend on polls to intimidate the wrong voters. What was once the Justice Department is [easing election fraud inquiry constraints](#) in case that path becomes necessary.

In general, no stone is left unturned in Trump's campaign to dismantle democratic forms and hold on to power.

Perhaps there is some slight comfort in the fact that we are not alone. Other major democracies are also decaying, also falling into the hands of leaders with traits of fascism, if not the ideologies (many, including leading scholars of fascism, regard this characterization of Trump as much too charitable).

The world's largest democracy, India, is now run by a Trump-style wrecker, Narendra Modi, who is destroying Indian secular democracy and turning India

into a cruel ethnocracy, while also crushing Kashmir.

The world's oldest democracy, Britain, has not approached Trump's demolition job, but Prime Minister Boris Johnson is trying to join the club. His dismissal of Parliament so that he could ram through his version of Brexit, quickly overturned by the Supreme Court, caused outrage in British legal circles, with charges that he was undermining the presumption of good faith on which the British constitutional order has rested for centuries. He has since moved on to violating international law — admittedly, but only “a little bit” — by reversing a crucial provision of the agreement he had just reached with the EU, which is now suing Britain for this breach.

We may add the second largest democracy in the western hemisphere, run by a Trump clone who tries in every way to imitate his model, for example, by trying to fire investigators for daring to look the corruption and alleged criminality that surrounds him and his family. [Jair] Bolsonaro was blocked by the Supreme Court. The U.S. has gone farther down the road toward autocracy. When inspectors general tasked with overseeing executive malfeasance followed the same course, the would-be dictator in the White House simply fired them. He did so without a peep from the Republican Senate that had instituted this effort to protect the public, by now “reduced to supplicant status.”

Perhaps it is mere coincidence, but there is a remarkable correlation between the dedication of leaders to demolish the democratic order and their expediting the slaughter of their own populations by COVID-19. The current ranking of cases and deaths, reported by the authoritative *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), are, from the top:

United States: 7,551,428 cases, 211,844 deaths

India: 6,835,655 cases, 105,526 deaths

Brazil: 5,000,694 cases, 148,228 deaths

They are followed far behind by a stellar democracy, Russia: 1,253,603 cases, 21,939 deaths. Others are left in their wake.

This is of course not the full picture. It's important to factor in death rates and other variables. But the general picture, and the correlation, are hard to overlook.

What is happening in the U.S., India and Brazil also cannot fail to evoke memories

of the early 1930s — for me, bitter personal memories. One common feature is the fanatic adoration of the Maximal Leader by his loyal followers. There is one curious difference. Mussolini and Hitler were providing their worshippers with something: social reforms, a place in the sun. Trump is stabbing them in the back with virtually every legislative and executive action, and seriously harming the U.S. in the international arena. The same is true of his companions in arm in India and Brazil.

Trump's commitment to cause maximal suffering to the American population is stunning to behold. It goes well beyond his truly colossal crimes: racing towards the abyss of environmental catastrophe and sharply increasing the threat of nuclear war. In far lesser ways, once again no stone is left unturned in ways to cause severe harm to the public.

Let's just keep to the pandemic, the least of the grave crises humanity faces. There is an international consortium, Covax, working to facilitate the search for vaccines by cooperative efforts and to give at least some consideration to the distributional problems, ensuring that potential vaccines and other treatments will be available to those who need them rather than monopolized by the rich.

Trump's contribution? The usual one: [to withdraw from the effort by over 170 countries](#).

The wrecker-in-chief always has a pretext: In this case, the World Health Organization (WHO) is involved, and the WHO serves Trump as a scapegoat as he flails around to deflect attention from his slaughter of tens of thousands of Americans.

Aside from the characteristic cruelty in pursuit of self-interest, withdrawal means that Americans will be deprived if vaccines are developed elsewhere — perhaps in China, which according to some reports may be in the lead.

As in 2003, after the SARS epidemic, scientists are now warning that another coronavirus pandemic is likely, probably more severe than this one. We've discussed before how Trump dismantled the protections that were in place against the current pandemic, leaving the U.S. singularly unprepared. He is now resolutely pursuing the same course, not just by withdrawing from Covax.

The countries of the world are now participating in a UN Biodiversity Summit "to try and slow humanity's rapid destruction of nature." The UN official leading the convention, Elizabeth Maruma Mrema, emphasizes that averting another pandemic is one crucial target. If we want to avoid another COVID, [she warns](#),

“we have to take action.... We either conserve and protect that nature, biodiversity, or it will make us suffer as we do now.”

Trump is again helping out in the usual way: by refusing to take part.

The media are also helping in this case. The cited two minutes on *NPR* may have exhausted the coverage, a cursory search suggests.

Meanwhile “humanity’s destruction of nature” proceeds apace. [A major study of the destruction of biodiversity](#) by the Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew found that “Two-fifths of the world’s plants are at risk of extinction.... We are `ignoring the potential treasure chest of wild species’ that offers potential fuels, foods and medicines to humanity, says conservation scientist Colin Clubbe.”

This study received 3 minutes on *BBC*. We have to keep to priorities, after all.

Trump’s approach to international conventions and initiatives is simple: If I didn’t create it, demolish it, claiming it’s the worst deal in history. If I created it, it’s “the deal of the century,” the greatest achievement in memory. And with his media echo chamber, and congressional supplicants, he can get away with it. Pity the country, and the world.

True, Trump’s methods are achieving something. Waving the big stick does sometimes bring results. When the U.S. approached the UN Security Council to demand that it renew harsh sanctions against Iran, it refused with almost total unanimity, including even Britain. No matter. Secretary of State Pompeo, in good Mussolini-Hitler fashion, returned to the Security Council to inform them that the UN sanctions are renewed.

“The United States took this decisive action,” [Pompeo instructed his Security Council servants](#), “because, in addition to Iran’s failure to perform its JCPOA commitments, the Security Council failed to extend the UN arms embargo on Iran.” Such disobedience of course cannot be tolerated by the Dear Leader of the world.

More broadly, the Trump administration is steadily firming up the reactionary international headed by Washington, the one geo-strategic initiative that can be detected in the administrative chaos. Prime members are Trump’s companions Modi and Bolsonaro. In the Middle East, they are joined by Egypt’s General al-Sisi, Trump’s “[favorite dictator](#),” who has driven Egypt to new depths of despair. And of course the Gulf dictatorships, headed by the estimable Mohammed bin

Salman, responsible for Khashoggi's brutal murder as one of his lesser crimes. Another welcome member is Israel, now scarcely concealing its drift to the far right. The recent formalization of tacit relations between Israel and the Gulf dictatorships finds its natural place in this system. There are also members beyond, like Viktor Orbán's Hungarian illiberal democracy, and waiting in the wings, such attractive figures as Italy's Mario Salvini, celebrating the drowning of thousands of the damned in the Mediterranean, not without Italy's contributions to Europe's genocidal record.

On the bright side, Trump's reactionary international is now countered by the new Progressive International, which grew from the Sanders movement in the U.S. and a European counterpart, DiEM25, a transnational movement seeking to preserve and strengthen what is of value in the European Union while overcoming its severe flaws. It has also drawn in a wide range of representatives from the Global South. Its first international conference just took place in Iceland, where the prime minister is a member. Though it of course lacks the resources of violence and wealth of the reactionary international, it has promise to become a people's representative in the global class war that is underway to determine the contours of the post-pandemic world.

*CJP: Typical of authoritarian leaders, Trump relies heavily on the use and promotion of conspiracy theories, apparently fully aware of the fact that conspiracy theories intensify political polarization. Why do conspiracy theories thrive in politics, and what do they mean for political reality at the end of the second decade of the 21st century in the United States?*

*NC: One reason why conspiracy theories flourish is that people want explanations, sometimes out of intellectual curiosity, sometimes for more personal and often wrenching reasons. That's particularly true when things fall apart. That's happened in many ways.*

*Consider the neoliberal disaster of the past 40 years. Its essence was announced with much clarity by Thatcher and Reagan, and their economic guru Milton Friedman, right at the start: There is no society; individuals have to face the ravages of the market alone, with no defense, surely not labor unions, which have to be destroyed. Governments are the problem, flawed by the fact that they are partially responsive to the public. Decisions therefore have to be transferred to private hands, in effect, the corporate sector. Corporations must be dedicated*

*solely to self-enrichment — not a principle of economics, but an ethical judgment.*

There are further nuances, but this is the essence. Putting these principles together, it is not hard to draw some conclusions about likely consequences.

The Rand Corporation has just released [a study on the scale of the \(hardly unexpected\) effects](#). They estimate the sum “transferred” from the middle and working classes to the very rich since Reagan-Thatcher-Friedman to be \$47 trillion. “Robbery” might be a more accurate term.

Rand takes the very rich to be the top 10 percent. That’s misleading. It is overwhelmingly a tiny fraction of these. The top 0.1 percent have seen their share of the nation’s wealth double since Reagan, to 20 percent.

This is only part of the grim story, amplified by Clinton’s radically anti-labor globalization program, post-Thatcher austerity, Obama’s bailout of the perpetrators of the housing crash and rejection of legislation to help the victims as well, and much else.

It should not come as a great surprise that the epidemic of “deaths of despair” that has plagued the U.S., primarily among white men of working age, is [now beginning to haunt Britain](#). Nor that much of the world is consumed by rage, resentment, contempt for institutions. This offers fertile territory to demagogues and con men — sometimes, like Trump, highly skilled — who can parade as the saviors of the public while slavishly serving their oppressors. With ample help from the information system, they can divert attention away from the sources of popular discontent to the standard scapegoats, exploiting deep-seated prejudices and fears. No need to review how it is done.

In such a climate, conspiracy theories can flourish.

There are other factors to consider. The real world is complex. Pick any event you like and even the most solid accounts will have plenty of loose ends, odd coincidences, unexplained features. That’s why scientists do experiments, abstracting radically from the observed phenomena. Again, that encourages conspiracy theories.

Furthermore, some of the theories might have some validity. Adam Smith was consciously exaggerating when he declared that “People of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public, or in some contrivance to raise prices.” But he

wasn't concocting a fantasy. It happens all the time. Some of these escapades are well documented. In many other cases there are grounds for suspicion.

To take just one current example, the staid and respectable German national broadcaster *Deutsche Welle* recently interviewed the prominent U.S. political scientist Norman Ornstein of the American Enterprise Institute on [some curious doings](#) involving Trump, Deutsche Bank and the U.S. Supreme Court.

To quote the opening words:

*The explosive New York Times report on the tax situation of U.S. President Trump is raising some uncomfortable questions for Germany's largest lender, Deutsche Bank, namely: why did Deutsche Bank loan Mr. Trump 2 Billion dollars at the same time other banks, including all U.S. banks, were not willing to do so? And while Deutsche Bank may be handling the loans, we cannot say tonight who or what is behind that money. In other words, we don't know who owns the debt of U.S. President Donald Trump. And adding to the puzzle is the role played by the son of a former Supreme Court Justice. Justin Kennedy, son of former Justice Anthony Kennedy, was a division head and contact for Trump at Deutsche Bank. Kennedy was close to the then future president while continuing to lend him money.*

Another part of the puzzle, as Ornstein elaborates, is the premature retirement of Justice Kennedy, the swing vote on the Court, permitting Trump to nominate the young far right Brett Kavanaugh, Justin Kennedy's protégé, to replace him.

"The optics look terrible," Ornstein concludes, calling for investigation by the State of New York, not the Federal Prosecutors, who are now in the pockets of Trump's legal representatives, formerly known as the Justice Department.

It's not a conspiracy theory, but can easily be recrafted as one.

In brief, in a fetid swamp, conspiracy theories flourish, and some might turn out to have considerable bearing on the world that has been created by systems of state and private power.

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