

# Saving the Future

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## Abstract

In this piece, Noam Chomsky shares his insights on a number of topics, including the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, racism and public policy, the state of American democracy, Social Security, the student debt crisis, attacks on public education, American poverty and economic inequality, and neoliberalism.

Keywords: American Democracy, Climate Change, COVID-19, Economic Inequality, Neoliberalism, Noam Chomsky, Poverty, Public Education, Racism, Student Debt

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## Introduction

The United States is in the midst of multiple crises, including the ongoing and mismanaged COVID-19 pandemic, the related economic downturn, an insufficient federal commitment to confronting climate change, a national reckoning over systemic racism, and the growing erosion/destabilization of democratic norms and institutions. In this piece, Noam Chomsky offers his thoughts on some of these topics, as well as a number of others.

Noam Chomsky is one of the most-cited scholars in modern times and is widely regarded as one of the most influential public intellectuals in the world. He is credited with more than 100 books which cover his expertise in linguistics as well as his highly-valued reflections on social and political issues. His books include *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal* (2020), *Requiem for the American Dream* (2017), *Failed States* (2006), *Hegemony or Survival* (2003), *Profit over People* (1999), and *Manufacturing Consent* (1988), among many others.

This piece is an edited collection of excerpts from multiple conversations and discussions over the past few years between Noam Chomsky and Lawrence Eppard, both one-on-one as well as with Eppard's students at Shippensburg University. Please note that

these conversations all took place before the killing of George Floyd and the national conversation on race that followed, which is why such an important discussion is absent from this piece.

## The United States Government's Response to COVID-19

Lawrence Eppard (LE): What is your reaction to the U.S. government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Noam Chomsky (NC): Countries responded differently with different results. Some countries responded very quickly, such as Taiwan, South Korea, and Singapore. New Zealand went into lockdown and seemed to virtually eliminate it. Europe waited too long, although some countries, like Germany, did better than others.

Down at the bottom of the barrel of course is the U.S., which is so dysfunctional it cannot even provide reliable data. Doctors and nurses are showing extraordinary and inspiring courage. But the Trump administration's reaction was beyond scandalous, it is just beyond description. The U.S. intelligence community knew right away and was bombarding the administration back in January. Trump wasn't paying attention and had no reaction. He made it much worse

than it had to be. It didn't happen this way in functioning countries.

Through Trump's entire term, he has been defunding the health-related components of the government. In October he killed a project which was identifying viruses in many countries, including China. In February, when the pandemic was already raging, he submitted his budget proposals for the next year. It looked like it came from a sociopath to try to kill as many people as possible from the pandemic and the environmental crisis. He continued defunding health-related components of the government all while the pandemic was raging. Meanwhile the Pentagon and his wall, of course, got more funding. The fossil fuel industry got an extra subsidy to try to destroy the environment that sustains human life.

Meanwhile Trump was making all sorts of statements, which were echoed and amplified each step of the way by Fox News. One day it is the common cold, the next day it is an epidemic but he has it in hand, then its go back to work, then its closures. Only when it was impossible to deny did he say it was a serious crisis, which he claims he was of course the first leader in the world to identify as a pandemic. And he of course claimed he did amazing things to keep it under control. Fox News would amplify and laud everything he said, and he would repeat messages he saw on their channel. Quite a dialogue.

If we want to prevent a likely future and perhaps even worse pandemic, we should also examine roots that go back further: failures of government, market failures deeply rooted in our particularly savage form of capitalism, and a for-profit privatized healthcare system. Pandemics were of course predicted, but nobody picked up the ball. Vaccines were not carried through. Government could have taken the lead, but it was dysfunctional. Drug companies could also have taken the lead. But there were not profits to be made, so ordinary capitalist logic dictated that drug companies weren't going to do it. There was no spare capacity in the healthcare system, it was not a part of the business model.

Our healthcare system is a scandal. Twice the per-capita costs of other similar countries without better outcomes. The *Lancet* estimates that the annual cost to Americans of the for-profit privatized system, in a normal non-pandemic situation, is a half-trillion dollars per year and tens of thousands of extra deaths a year. When things go wrong it is an even worse catastrophe.

Of course when a crisis comes, corporations throw away their copies of Ayn Rand and come running to the nanny state to feed them. What were they doing the last few years with all those profits? Improving services? Saving for a rainy day perhaps?

No. They were engaged in stock buybacks in order to funnel more money to shareholders and management.

## The State of American Democracy

LE: Many observers are worried about the current state of democratic norms and institutions in the U.S., and where this all might be headed. From your perspective, what is the state of American democracy?

NC: It's a mixed story. There is no correlation between the attitudes of the majority of the population and the policies pursued by their elected representatives, not until you get to the top one percent or top fraction of one percent. And Americans are aware that they are not being represented. People recognize it, and they're angry. There is a remarkably close correlation, both for the executive and for Congress, between campaign funding and electability. That's what the working-class press used to call a bought priesthood. You can call it democratic, but the facts show something quite different.

On the other hand there are positive elements. When it comes to protecting fundamental freedoms, for instance, the U.S. ranks fairly high. When it comes to freedom of speech, you could argue it is fairly unique in the world.

LE: You often mention that the preferences of most American citizens are not what drive policy outcomes. We may like to think of politics as reflecting the will of the people, but clearly elites disproportionately get their way when their preferences differ from those of the general population. How do our leaders get away with this?

NC: The facts are pretty striking. There have been very good studies by mainstream political scientists concerning the relation between people's attitudes and the policies pursued by their own representatives. There is a very sharp disconnect for the vast majority of the population. There is essentially no correlation between people's attitudes and the policies pursued by their representatives. They are disenfranchised. It isn't until you get to the very top of the income scale that there is a correlation.

They get away with it because there is no competition. Unlike in Europe, in the political system in the U.S. there are only two official parties. It is virtually impossible for anybody else to enter the political system. It is conceivable, but the barriers are very high. Neither party represents working people's interests, which is one reason why abstention is so high. Among the poor in particular, abstention is enormous. Nobody represents them. It is a very

regressive system. It would not even be regarded as acceptable by European standards.

### **Racism and Public Policy**

LE: You argue that Americans are pretty social democratic in the policies they support. But it is also true that if politicians can successfully frame policies in ways that tap into racial prejudice, sexism, notions of deservingness, etc., they can weaken support for policies that Americans might otherwise favor. Can you expand on this phenomenon?

NC: It is a complex mixture of propaganda and various conflicting elements of the dominant culture. Americans have many social democratic tendencies, but it is true that things like racism and sexism complicate them.

The same people who say they want the government off their back also want to see more spending on things like education, healthcare, assistance to mothers and their children, and so forth. In the same polls where they criticize the government, they also reveal these social democratic inclinations, even if they don't identify them as such.

Welfare is an interesting example. Many Americans are opposed to what is called welfare, despite favoring much of what it does. They are opposed to welfare because it has been demonized, because it has been associated with African Americans and single mothers. Especially by Ronald Reagan with his tales about welfare queens in their limousines robbing the country blind. And we all know the racial prejudice and sexism that such statements evoke.

### **Education Crises**

LE: What do you make of the sustained attack on public education in the U.S. today?

NC: One of the ways to eliminate democratic and significant public institutions like schools is to defund them. When you defund them they stop working properly, people don't like the outcomes and they look for something else. That is a major thrust of the programs of privatization, which benefit the rich and powerful and harm the rest.

The charter school movement is part of that. You can easily understand why a poor mother somewhere would choose to take her kid out of the defunded, dysfunctional public school and put them in a charter school, which don't forget receives public funds of course. These schools are able to select students and leave out the students who will require special care. You can understand why the business world is very

much in favor of charter schools: they don't like public institutions. They are very anti-democratic, they want things run by business, not by the public. Mass public education was a major factor in democratizing the society. But that is not what the business classes favor. It's not for them. They want things run by the corporate sector, by the business world. Therefore they are surely going to continue to press for the growth of charter schools, the defunding of public schools, the undermining of teachers' unions and teacher security, and so on. It is what John Kenneth Galbraith back in the 1950s called "private affluence, public squalor." The charter school movement is that.

LE: The U.S. has a very high-quality system of higher education by international standards. But the cost and student debt burden are very worrisome, and I think in many ways incongruent with the statements our leaders make about how much they value education. Can you comment on the student debt crisis?

NC: It is a very high quality educational system, and not just the universities. Mass public education was a great achievement of American democracy. The U.S. pioneered mass public education. They didn't have that in Europe. In fact, as late as WWII, Europe really didn't have mass public universities the way the U.S. did. Government policies in the U.S. developed a very high quality educational system from kindergarten up through university.

Now let's take a look at debt. When did that start? I went to college in 1945. I attended an Ivy League college, the University of Pennsylvania. It was one hundred dollars a year, and it was very easy to get a scholarship, which I got. Of course one hundred dollars then is maybe one thousand dollars today, but it was nothing like student debt. Furthermore, government policies in the 1950s and 1960s provided free tuition and support for huge numbers of people who would never have otherwise gone to college. That was the G.I. Bill, which was very good for them and very good for the country. That continued right through the 1950s and 1960s. Tuitions began to rise pretty much in the 1970s and they've become astronomical. At the same time, funding of universities began to decline. If you go back to the 1950s and 1960s, state universities, like the one where I am now at the University of Arizona, were funded by the states. Funding for universities has very sharply declined. Right now, for example, the university where I am barely gets any funding from the state, and that's true all over the country. So you have two phenomena: sharply rising tuitions and sharply declining funding.

In the period of roughly the late 1970s up through the present, that is a new period in modern economic history. That's the period when the market-oriented

neoliberal programs were instituted, the Reaganite programs carried forward by Clinton and his successors. This has led to consequences like stagnating or declining wages, sharp concentration of income, and other phenomena like a decline in funding of the universities.

This is imposing a kind of business model on universities, like hiring cheap labor. Instead of employing tenured faculty to teach, which is expensive, you hire graduate students or adjuncts, who have no rights, no benefits, and very low pay. They're not going to stick around and become tenured and need support. Universities are being reconfigured to produce a marketable product. Departments are expected to demonstrate that they can survive on the market. This is utterly undermining the concept of universities as it developed through hundreds of years of history.

This is all part of the set of neoliberal, business-oriented programs that have been instituted since the Reagan/Thatcher years in the early 1980s. Is there an economic reason for high tuitions? It is very hard to argue that. For one thing, if you go back to the 1950s and 1960s, education was virtually free. And it was a much poorer country then, the country is much richer now. If you could support higher education then without tuition, why can't you do it now?

In Mexico, a fairly poor country, there is a very high quality system of higher education. Very low salaries, it's a poor country, but the quality of the higher education system is high. It's free.

Take a country that ranks at the top internationally for educational achievement, Finland, a wealthy country. Education is free.

Go to Germany, a very successful capitalist country. Education is free. France = free.

Why is it uniquely the case that in the richest country in the world, with unparalleled advantages, education has to have extremely high tuition? And not historically, but recently in the neoliberal period? I think there are reasons.

If you go back and look at what was happening in the 1970s, there was a major elite backlash across the spectrum, liberal to conservative, against the activism of the 1960s. If you take a look at the publications at the time at the right-wing it was very harsh, like the Powell memorandum. At the more liberal wing it was more muted, but the content was pretty much the same. A striking example was *The Crisis of Democracy*. What was the crisis of democracy? Too many people were becoming involved in the democratic system, people who were supposed to be passive, apathetic spectators, not participants. In the 1960s people were becoming active and demanding their rights—students, women, minorities, working people—and they weren't supposed to do that. They didn't "belong"

in the political arena. And that causes a crisis of democracy, and they must be returned to their place of passivity and obedience.

One of the main concerns was students who had been at the forefront of much of the activism of the 1960s, activism which very much civilized the country when you look at its record. So they had to do something about students. On the liberal end of the spectrum, they criticized, and I am quoting, what they called "the institutions responsible for the indoctrination of the young." So schools, universities, churches, they were not indoctrinating the young properly. They wanted better indoctrination of the young. Shortly after this you start getting changes in academic structures of the kind that I mentioned which lead to "better" indoctrination of the young. You come out of school with one hundred thousand dollars of debt—you might want to become a public interest lawyer, but that's not gonna work. You have to go to a corporate law firm. This is across the board, it narrows people's options and restricts their freedom. It helps impose the doctrines of the dominant elements in the society. All of these things form a kind of package, with the rise in tuition as one of the features. I don't think one can make a serious economic argument for it.

LE: How do we fix it?

NC: Free tuition, like they have in Mexico, Germany, France, and Finland. What the U.S. pretty much had before the neoliberal period. It seems to work, so what's the problem? It would raise taxes, so the question would be if that is what society wants. Is it a public benefit? It is good for them, and it is good for the rest of us. If society wants that then we need to pay for it.

## Social Security is NOT Broken

LE: After the most recent tax cut, some elected representatives immediately claimed that they would need to cut things like Social Security in order to make up for the increased deficit. The usual claims about Social Security being broken have been trotted out. Is Social Security broken?

NC: Only according to the gangsters in power. The ones who crafted the tax cut for the rich—such as Paul Ryan and Mitch McConnell—were very frank about it. After they gave the wealthy and the corporate sector an enormous gift, they instantly said they would need to cut away things that were important to people to deal with the big deficit they created.

Now of course we don't have to let Social Security decline. Little tweaks in the system can make it work for as far ahead as you can predict. The tax that pays for Social Security is highly regressive. By today's standards the cap is pretty low. Raise the cap a little. Or fund it through the federal budget.

If you look at American social welfare measures—not only Social Security but unemployment insurance, childcare, the whole raft of them—compared to other OECD countries, the U.S. ranks at the bottom with poorer countries that cannot do any better. That's not a law of nature, it has to do with the priorities of those who run the country. If we let them do it, that's what is going to happen.

### **American Exceptionalism: Poverty and Economic Inequality**

LE: From your point of view, why does the U.S. perform so poorly among wealthy countries on measures like poverty, economic inequality, social mobility, etc.?

NC: OECD statistics show the U.S. near the bottom on social justice measures such as infant mortality, poverty, and economic inequality, among others. Why? The U.S. is a very different society than those others. To an unusual extent, the U.S. is a business-run society.

It is kind of striking that the U.S. is one of the rare advanced societies which doesn't have guaranteed universal healthcare in some form. Instead we have a highly complex, expensive, inefficient, and largely privatized system which has twice the per capita costs of comparable societies. It's been instilled in Americans that taxes are a horror, but when you pay twice as much to a private corporation, that's great. With universal healthcare, taxes will of course go up—but everything else will go down much further, the expenses out of your pocket would be less.

And the same is true of the U.S. in many other respects. This is one of the few countries where you can't take a high-speed train, for example. If you look at the International Labour Organization's (ILO) principles, the most prized principle is the freedom of workers to associate in a union to protect themselves and advance their interests. The U.S. has never supported this principle. All of these phenomena kind of fall together.

The U.S. also has a pretty regressive political system. We saw that in the last election, where the winner in the popular vote lost the White House. The U.S. electoral system, by European standards, would not be acceptable. There are many other factors, but

the U.S. is just very different than other advanced developed societies.

### **Neoliberal Trends**

LE: Given that you have written extensively about neoliberalism throughout your career, can you talk a bit about recent neoliberal trends, from your perspective?

NC: The neoliberal programs have by and large been pretty harmful all over the world. In Latin America, for example, they led to several lost decades when growth declined very sharply, poverty increased, and so on.

Neoliberal programs are helping to undermine democracy. There's been a decline in centrist political institutions. Out of this come many phenomena, some of them pretty frightening, like the rise of the far right, ultra-nationalist and sometimes neo-fascist parties in Europe. It is a very frightening phenomenon.

A positive phenomenon is something like the Bernie Sanders mobilization, which was pretty extraordinary. Typically in the U.S. it is possible to predict the outcome of elections very closely simply by looking at campaign spending, spending which comes overwhelmingly from the very wealthy and the corporate sector. Sanders had none of that. He did it with virtually no business support, no corporate support, and no support from the wealthy. That is a very striking example of how the public wants to break free from the neoliberal stranglehold.

Another manifestation of that is a large part of the Trump vote, people who are saying, "We don't want this system anymore, we want it changed because it is harmful to us." And it is. Real male wages are about what they were in the 1960s. Much of the population, the working class, the lower middle class, this population has been essentially cast aside. Nobody represents them, the policies are harmful to them and have taken away their meaningful jobs, taken away work, security, dignity, hopes for the future, and so on. They're resentful and want to change it.

### **Saving the Future**

LE: You have increasingly focused on climate change in recent years. At this point, how hopeful are you that humanity will avoid climate catastrophe?

NC: We have to transition to different forms of energy, and quickly. The scientific evidence by now is almost beyond dispute. Overwhelming consensus among scientists.

Unfortunately, leading the dissent is the most powerful country in world history, the United States. Just about every other country is doing something significant to reduce emissions—not enough, but something fairly significant. The Trump administration is now opening up new areas for fossil fuel exploitation. We are hailing ourselves for producing more fossil fuels. We are heading to catastrophe. If there ever is a future generation, they will look back at this period with amazement, as if we were insane. In the richest and most powerful country in the world, leadership is saying, “Let’s race to catastrophe.” And in fact they are conscious of it.

An internal memo leaked from economists at JP Morgan Chase this year. They said that the survival of humanity is at risk if we stay on our present course, and they were critical of the bank’s lending policies for contributing to the problem. President Trump appealed to the government of Ireland to build a wall—he loves walls—to protect his fancy golf course from rising sea levels.

So clearly, politicians and corporate decision-makers know what is happening. When it threatens their pocketbooks, they are concerned about climate change. But if it just destroys the possibilities for organized human life, well then who cares.

One of the most amazing documents I have ever seen came out of the Trump administration a year or two ago, I believe out of the Department of

Transportation. It was a detailed environmental assessment that concluded that, by the end of the century, temperatures would rise about 7 degrees Fahrenheit. That is a level that is considered catastrophic by scientists. They concluded that we should not impose further restrictions on auto emissions, a substantial contributor to climate change. Why? Because, according to their logic, we are going over the cliff anyway. It will be so bad, we will barely be able to survive anyhow. Why not have fun?

If there is a document like that in the entirety of human history, I can’t think of it. A document which says, “Our policies are driving us to disaster, so let’s just enjoy ourselves and enrich ourselves and race to disaster even faster.” See if you can find a document like that in human history. The closest analogue is perhaps the Nazi declaration at Wannsee in 1942.

The generation of young people coming of age today will have to make a decision that no previous generation has been required to make: will organized human life on Earth continue? It’s scandalous but true that it is young people who are at the forefront of trying to overcome this very serious crisis. They can say to the older generation, “You’re betraying us.” But the older generation doesn’t answer.

We know how to do it, we can move toward sustainable energy. But states and localities cannot do it by themselves.