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# **Chomsky on Trump's Disastrous COVID-19 Response, Sanders and What Gives Him Hope**

**BY**

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**H**ow did the United States — the richest country in the world — become the worldwide epicenter of the coronavirus outbreak, with one person dying of COVID-19 every 47 seconds? We spend the hour with Noam Chomsky, the world-renowned political dissident, linguist and author, discussing this unprecedented moment in history, and its political implications, as Senator Bernie Sanders announces he is suspending his campaign for the presidency. Chomsky also describes how frontline medical workers and progressive organizing are giving him hope.

## TRANSCRIPT

**AMY GOODMAN:** We're broadcasting from New York City, the epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic. The U.S. itself is now the worldwide epicenter, with one person dying of COVID-19 every 47 seconds. Nearly 16,700 coronavirus deaths have been recorded in the United States, with the number of confirmed cases approaching half a million — more than Italy, Spain and France combined. Of course, the true rate of infections is far, far higher due to a critical lack of testing. This comes as the Labor Department said

Thursday over 6.6 million Americans filed for unemployment benefits over the past week, as the pace and scale of U.S. job losses is set to rival the Great Depression.

Well, for more on the political implications of this unprecedented moment, we turn today to Noam Chomsky for the hour, the world-renowned political dissident, linguist and author, laureate professor in the Department of Linguistics at the University of Arizona, Tucson, professor emeritus at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he taught for more than 50 years. His recent books include *Global Discontents: Conversations on the Rising Threats to Democracy*, *Who Rules the World?* and *Requiem for the American Dream: The 10 Principles of Concentration of Wealth & Power*.

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Noam Chomsky joined us for a conversation Wednesday from his home in Tucson, Arizona, where he is sheltering in place with his wife Valeria. This was just before Senator Bernie Sanders announced he's suspending his campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination, making former Vice President Joe Biden the presumptive nominee to face Donald Trump in the November election. I began by asking Professor Chomsky about what's happening right now in the context of the 2020 elections, and what he sees happening in November.

**NOAM CHOMSKY:** If Trump is reelected, it's a indescribable disaster. It means that the policies of the past four years, which have been extremely destructive to the American population, to the world, will be continued and probably accelerated. What this is going to mean for health is bad enough. I just mentioned the *Lancet* figures. It will get worse. What this means for the environment or the threat of nuclear war, which no one is talking about but is extremely serious, is indescribable.

Suppose Biden is elected. I would anticipate it would be essentially a continuation of Obama – nothing very great, but at least not totally destructive, and opportunities for an organized public to change what is being done, to impose pressures.

It's common to say now that the Sanders campaign failed. I think that's a mistake. I think it was an extraordinary success, completely shifted the arena of debate and discussion. Issues that were unthinkable a couple years ago are now right in the middle of attention.

The worst crime he committed, in the eyes of the establishment, is not the policy he's proposing; it's the fact that he was able to inspire popular movements, which had already been developing – Occupy, Black Lives Matter, many others – and turn them into an activist movement, which doesn't just show up every couple years to push a leader and then go home, but applies constant pressure, constant activism and so on. That could affect a Biden administration. It could also – even if it's just a holding action, it means there's time to deal with the major crises.

Take Medicare for All or, the other major plank in Sanders's program, free college education. Across the whole mainstream spectrum, all the way to what's called the left in the mainstream, this is condemned as too radical for Americans. Just think what that means. That's an attack on American culture and society, which you would expect from some hostile enemy. What it's saying is it's too radical to say that we should rise to the level of comparable countries. They all have some form of national healthcare. Most of them have free higher education – the best-performing countries nationally, like Finland, free; Germany, free; right to our south, Mexico, a poor country, high-quality higher education, free. So, to say we should rise to the level of the rest of the world is considered too radical for Americans. It's an astonishing comment.

As I say, it's a critique of America that you'd expect from some super hostile enemy.

That's the left of the spectrum. Tells you that we have really deep problems. It's not just Trump. He's made it much worse, but the problems go much deeper, just like, say, the ventilator catastrophe, which I described, just based on good capitalist logic with the extra hammer blow of making the government ineffectual to deal with things. This is much deeper than Trump. And we have to face those facts. Some do. I'm sure you reported – I don't remember – you probably reported the setting of the Doomsday Clock in January. OK?

**AMY GOODMAN:** Yes.



**NOAM CHOMSKY:** Notice what happened. All through Trump's term, the minute hand of the Doomsday Clock, the best general assessment we have of the state of the world, moved closer to midnight – termination – reached the highest point ever. This January, it exceeded it. The analysts gave up minutes, moved to seconds: a hundred seconds to midnight, thanks to Donald Trump.

And the Republican Party, which is just monstrous, no longer qualifies as a political party. It simply sheepishly echoes everything the master says. Zero integrity. It's just amazing to watch. He's surrounded himself by a collection of sycophants who just repeat worshipfully everything he says. Real major attack on democracy, alongside the attack on the survival of humanity, to quote JPMorgan Chase again – the nuclear war, raising the threat of nuclear war, dismantling the arms control system, which has, to some extent, protected us from total disaster. It's astonishing to watch.

The same memo that I quoted about how the policies we're following are risking the survival of humanity ended by arguing that the banks should cut back its fossil fuel support, in part because of the reputational consequences. Their reputation is being harmed. What does that mean? That means that activists are putting pressure on them, and they have to maintain some kind of reputation. Now, that's a good lesson.

And it works. We've seen some very striking examples. Take, say, the Green New Deal. A couple of years ago, that was an object of ridicule, if it was mentioned at all. Some form of Green New Deal is essential for the survival of humanity. Now it's part of the general agenda. Why? Activist engagement. Especially Sunrise Movement, a group of young people, acted significantly, up to the point of sitting in congressional offices. They received support from Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and other young legislators who came into office as part of the Sanders-inspired popular wave – another great success. Ed Markey, senator from Massachusetts joined in. Now it's a part of the legislative agenda. The next step is to force it through in some viable form. And there are very good ideas as to how to do that. Well, that's the way things can change.

With a Biden presidency, there would be, if not a strongly sympathetic administration, at least one that can be reached, can be pressured. And that's very important. If you look over the very good labor historian – I'm sure you know Erik Loomis, who has studied the efforts by working people to institute changes in the society, sometimes for themselves, sometimes for the society generally. And he's pointed out – made an interesting point. These efforts succeeded when there was a tolerant or sympathetic administration, not when there wasn't. That's a big – one of many enormous differences between Trump, the sociopath, and Biden, who's kind of a pretty empty – you can push him one way or another. This is the most crucial election in human history, literally. Another four years of Trump, and we're in deep trouble.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Back with professor Noam Chomsky in 30 seconds.

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Amy Goodman is the host and executive producer of *Democracy Now!*, a national, daily, independent, award-winning news program airing on more than 1,100 public television and radio stations worldwide. *Time Magazine* named *Democracy Now!* its “Pick of the Podcasts,” along with NBC’s “Meet the Press.”