

Z

Chomsky: Avoiding Catastrophe

September
2021



Photo by Valerio Pucci/Shutterstock

SEPTEMBER 2021 TABLE OF CONTENTS

COMMENTARY/1

Ending America's Empire of War Corruption & Poverty/1

Medea Benjamin & Nicolas J.S. Davis on the Afghanistan crisis

A World For Future Generations/6

Wim Laven on acting to avoid climate change

A Gift for the Future/12

Rivera Sun on acting now

BLM Member's Freedom Summer School/14

Sonali Kolhatkar on a model for progressive change that places children at the forefront

Anti-Abortion Police/20

Marjorie Cohn looks at Texas abortion law

FEATURES/28

Avoiding Catastrophe/28

C.J. Polychroniou interviews Noam Chomsky

The Great Game of Smashing Countries/44

John Pilger on Afghanistan

COVID Recession Year One/49

Jack Rasmus on who gained and who lost

Afghan Crisis Must End America's Empire of War, Corruption and Poverty

By Medea Benjamin
and Nicolas J. S. Davies

Americans have been shocked by videos of thousands of Afghans risking their lives to flee the Taliban's return to power in their country—and then by an Islamic State suicide bombing and ensuing massacre by U.S. forces that together killed at least 170 people, including 13 U.S. troops.

Even as UN agencies warn of an impending humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, the U.S. Treasury has frozen nearly all of the Afghan Central Bank's \$9.4 billion in foreign currency reserves, depriving the new government of funds that it will desperately need in the coming months

to feed its people and provide basic services.

Under pressure from the Biden administration, the International Monetary Fund decided not to release \$450 million in funds that were scheduled to be sent to Afghanistan to help the country cope with the coronavirus pandemic.

The U.S. and other Western countries have also halted humanitarian aid to Afghanistan. After chairing a G7 summit on Afghanistan on August 24, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson said that withholding aid and recognition gave them “very considerable leverage—economic, diplomatic and political” over the Taliban.

Western politicians couch this leverage in terms of human rights, but they are clearly trying to ensure that their Afghan allies retain some power in the new government, and that Western influence and interests in Afghanistan do not end with the Taliban's return. This leverage is being exercised in dollars, pounds, and euros, but it will be paid for in Afghan lives.

To read or listen to Western analysts, one would think that the United States and its allies' 20-year war was a benign and beneficial effort to modernize the country, liberate Afghan women and provide healthcare, education

and good jobs, and that this has all now been swept away by capitulation to the Taliban.

The reality is quite different, and not so hard to understand. The United States spent \$2.26 trillion on its war in Afghanistan. Spending that kind of money in any country should have lifted most people out of poverty. But the vast bulk of those funds, about \$1.5 trillion, went to absurd, stratospheric military spending to maintain the U.S. military occupation, drop over 80,000 bombs and missiles on Afghans, pay private contractors, and transport troops, weapons and military equipment back and forth around the world for 20 years.

Since the United States fought this war with borrowed money, it has also cost half a trillion dollars in interest payments alone, which will continue far into the future. Medical and disability costs for U.S. soldiers wounded in Afghanistan already amount to over \$175 billion, and they will likewise keep mounting as the soldiers age. Medical and disability costs for the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan could eventually top a trillion dollars.

So what about “rebuilding Afghanistan”? Congress appropriated \$144 billion for reconstruction in Afghanistan since 2001, but \$88 billion of that was spent to recruit, arm,

train and pay the Afghan “security forces” that have now disintegrated, with soldiers returning to their villages or joining the Taliban. Another \$15.5 billion spent between 2008 and 2017 was documented as “waste, fraud and abuse” by the U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction.

The crumbs left over, less than 2% of total U.S. spending on Afghanistan, amount to about \$40 billion, which should have provided some benefit to the Afghan people in economic development, healthcare, education, infrastructure and humanitarian aid.

But, as in Iraq, the government the U.S. installed in Afghanistan was notoriously corrupt, and its corruption only became more entrenched and systemic over time. Transparency International (TI) has consistently ranked U.S.-occupied Afghanistan as among the most corrupt countries in the world.

Western readers may think that this corruption is a long-standing problem in Afghanistan, as opposed to a particular feature of the U.S. occupation, but this is not the case. TI notes that, “it is widely recognized that the scale of corruption in the post-2001 period has increased over previous levels.” A 2009 report by the Organization for

Economic Cooperation and Development warned that “corruption has soared to levels not seen in previous administrations.”

Those administrations would include the Taliban government that U.S. invasion forces removed from power in 2001, and the Soviet-allied socialist governments that were overthrown by the U.S.-deployed precursors of Al Qaeda and the Taliban in the 1980s, destroying the substantial progress they had made in education, healthcare and women’s rights.

A 2010 report by former Reagan Pentagon official Anthony H. Cordesman, entitled “How America Corrupted Afghanistan,” chastised the U.S. government for throwing gobs of money into that country with virtually no accountability.

The *New York Times* reported in 2013 that every month for a decade, the CIA had been dropping off suitcases, backpacks and even plastic shopping bags stuffed with U.S. dollars for the Afghan president to bribe warlords and politicians.

Corruption also undermined the very areas that Western politicians now hold up as the successes of the occupation, like education and healthcare. The education system has been riddled

with schools, teachers, and students that exist only on paper. Afghan pharmacies are stocked with fake, expired or low quality medicines, many smuggled in from neighboring Pakistan. At the personal level, corruption was fueled by civil servants like teachers earning only one-tenth the salaries of better-connected Afghans working for foreign NGOs and contractors.

Rooting out corruption and improving Afghan lives has always been secondary to the primary U.S. goal of fighting the Taliban and maintaining or extending its puppet government’s control. As TI reported, “The U.S. has intentionally paid different armed groups and Afghan civil servants to ensure cooperation and/or information, and cooperated with governors regardless of how corrupt they were... Corruption has undermined the U.S. mission in Afghanistan by fuelling grievances against the Afghan government and channelling material support to the insurgency.”

The endless violence of the U.S. occupation and the corruption of the U.S.-backed government boosted popular support for the Taliban, especially in rural areas where three quarters of Afghans live. The intractable poverty of occupied Afghanistan also contributed to the Taliban

victory, as people naturally questioned how their occupation by wealthy countries like the United States and its Western allies could leave them in such abject poverty.

Well before the current crisis, the number of Afghans reporting that they were struggling to live on their current income increased from 60% in 2008 to 90% by 2018. A 2018 Gallup poll found the lowest levels of self-reported “well-being” that Gallup has ever recorded anywhere in the world. Afghans not only reported record levels of misery but also unprecedented hopelessness about their future.

Despite some gains in education for girls, only a third of Afghan girls attended primary school in 2019 and only 37% of adolescent Afghan girls were literate. One reason that so few children go to school in Afghanistan is that more than 2 million children between the ages of 6 and 14 have to work to support their poverty-stricken families.

Yet instead of atoning for our role in keeping most Afghans mired in poverty, Western leaders are now cutting off desperately needed economic and humanitarian aid that was funding three quarters of Afghanistan’s public sector and made up 40% of its total GDP.

In effect, the United States

and its allies are responding to losing the war by threatening the Taliban and the people of Afghanistan with a second, economic war. If the new Afghan government does not give in to their “leverage” and meet their demands, our leaders will starve their people and then blame the Taliban for the ensuing famine and humanitarian crisis, just as they demonize and blame other victims of U.S. economic warfare, from Cuba to Iran.

After pouring trillions of dollars into endless war in Afghanistan, America’s main duty now is to help the 40 million Afghans who have not fled their country, as they try to recover from the terrible wounds and trauma of the war America inflicted on them, as well as a massive drought that devastated 40% of their crops this year and a crippling third wave of Covid-19.

The U.S. should release the \$9.4 billion in Afghan funds held in U.S. banks. It should shift the \$6 billion allocated for the now defunct Afghan armed forces to humanitarian aid, instead of diverting it to other forms of wasteful military spending. It should encourage European allies and the IMF not to withhold funds. Instead, they should fully fund the UN 2021 appeal for \$1.3 billion in emergency aid, which as of late

August was less than 40% funded.

Once upon a time, the United States helped its British and Soviet allies to defeat Germany and Japan, and then helped to rebuild them as healthy, peaceful and prosperous countries. For all America’s serious faults—its racism, its crimes against humanity in Hiroshima and Nagasaki and its neocolonial relations with poorer countries—America held up a promise of prosperity that people in many countries around the world were ready to follow.

If all the United States has to offer other countries today is the war, corruption and poverty it brought to Afghanistan, then the world is wise to be moving on and looking at new models to follow: new experiments in popular and social democracy; renewed emphasis on national sovereignty and international law; alternatives to the use of military force to resolve international problems; and more equitable ways of organizing internationally to tackle global crises like the Covid pandemic and the climate disaster.

The United States can either stumble on in its fruitless attempt to control the world through militarism and coercion, or it can use this opportunity to rethink its place in

the world. Americans should be ready to turn the page on our fading role as global hegemon and see how we can make a meaningful, cooperative contribution to a future that we will never again be able to dominate, but which we must help to build. **Z**

Medea Benjamin is cofounder of CODEPINK for Peace, and author of several books, including *Inside Iran: The Real History and Politics of the Islamic Republic of Iran*.

Nicolas J. S. Davies is an independent journalist, a researcher with CODEPINK and the author of *Blood On Our Hands: the American Invasion and Destruction of Iraq*.

A World for Future Generations

By Wim Laven

Reflect for a moment that Mt. Shasta, off the I-5 in Northern California, was described by John Muir in 1877 as: “Go where you will within a radius of from fifty to a hundred miles, there stands the colossal cone of Shasta,

clad in perpetual snow, the one grand landmark that never sets.”

Mt. Shasta currently has no snow cap; the glaciers are gone.

One of many signs the world is changing, while we watch and fail to act. The signs are everywhere—big and small—if we just pay attention.

When I was a child I marveled at these magical creatures that flew around my yard. I was drawn to their mesmerizing green glow. I chased after them with wonder. I captured them in jars and watched them. I believed that if I ate one I would start to glow. My friends agreed, but all I observed was a bitter taste.

My family moved several times in my childhood. I was blessed by new experiences and contexts, I engaged in new debates. When I lived in Alabama we had tornado drills at school. In California we had earthquake drills. For tornados you crawl under your desk and put your hands over your eyes to protect against flying glass. For earthquakes you crawl under your desk and put your hands behind your head to protect against falling objects. In California I called them lightning bugs. In California they were called fireflies. There were other debates too, pill

bug vs. roly poly, and so on.

Social anthropology suggests that human experiences have impacts on how people see and experience the world. Theory suggests that people in places that experience more lightning—like the south—see the magical flashing this way whereas people who experience more wildfires—like the west—see the glow as a fire. In my lifetime there have been dramatic increases in wildfires and thunderstorms. The world is changing and we are losing so much in the process. Whether you call them fireflies or lightning bugs their population is shrinking. Like with so many species, habitat loss, pesticides, and other environmental factors threaten their survival.

I have been lucky to travel the world, so I have experienced a great variety of bioluminescent wonders. On a lucky night you can catch phosphorescent plankton lighting up the ocean, running your fingers through the water you can witness miniature fireworks erupting from the turbulence. I have also met many people who’ve missed out on these wonders. There are people who’ve never seen glowing water, bugs, or even a shooting star.

I worry that while I can teach the clear steps for increasing species survival I

cannot make my students or anyone else value things that are not consistent with their values or beliefs. Protection, conservation, and restoration of high-quality habitats is critical for species in population decline, but what about humans? Since we are not in actual population decline, is there any motivation to protect our own ecological niche, our own future?

The problem is not with the science for survival, it is with values pushing us to extinction. The threat is real; the sixth mass extinction of wildlife on Earth is accelerating. I want future generations to run around in the grass chasing after lightning bugs like I had been lucky enough to do, but this future is not guaranteed.

Protecting the wonders of world for future generations will require sacrifice. CO2 is a global pollutant, what happens in China influences the U.S., and what we do impacts everyone else. We need to move away from corporate greed and individual selfishness to common good and public utility. We need to understand that our choices have consequences on future generations and stop making the decision that we will ignore the suffering of strangers.

As we are too-slowly grasping in the pandemic, the fate

of strangers can quickly become our fate. Caring for strangers, we are seeing, is in our enlightened self-interest.

Saving the planet will also require addressing the immoral anti-science-skepticism that provides cover to gross pollution. Policy makers seize on the opportunities benefit, but the net results are clear and the poorest individuals and countries suffer the most. Modern lifestyles and conveniences play into this as well. It is difficult to make sacrifices when others are not doing their part, but it is also a dramatic problem of scale. If I give up flying for the rest of my life it will hardly make a dent compared to the 20 companies that have contributed to 35 percent of all energy-related carbon dioxide and methane worldwide.

Still, if millions gave up flying, that would indeed make a dent. If not me, who?

Some politicians today tell us that there is no problem or that fears are inflated. If we do not find our collective resolve and direct our people-power toward a common good in protecting the planet, then I cannot imagine the lies they will tell.

How many years will it be before they tell society that there was no such thing as a lightning bug, that it was never safe to swim in the ocean, or that blue skies were a met-

aphor? Policies that deny climate change do nothing more than leave us with a bitter taste, they do not light up our paths. **Z**

Wim Laven, Ph.D., syndicated by PeaceVoice, teaches courses in political science and conflict resolution.

A Gift for the Future

By Rivera Sun

Today, a child was born, tiny hands curling and unfurling with the startled shock of cool air on wet skin, oxygen flooding into newly-opened lungs as she cries upon entering this strange new world.

This child will likely live to see 2100. The date hangs, inconceivable, futuristic, but now within the span of a single lifetime. The child will be older by then, close to 80. She will have lived through every dire climate prediction modeled by modernity's soothsayers, the scientists. She will have seen the full

weight of our failures in the times she was too young to remember, these next few years when an immediate transition away from fossil fuels is an imperative for the survival of humanity.

I hope she remembers the story about to unfold, a story that began decades ago and is rapidly approaching the climax of its epic, the story in which billions of human beings rise up for their shared love of this Earth. Like thwarting monsters of old, we will wrestle fossil fuels back into the ground, dethrone the titans of industry, and stop the headlong plunge into the hell realms of the Sixth Mass Extinction. These times are the star-stuff of legends, if we survive long enough.

If we don't turn this story around, the tiny newborn arriving today will grow up in the greatest tragedy ever to hit our species, the catastrophic collapse of all we know and love. As an 80-year-old grandmother, she will see the dawn of a new, bleak century, awash in the wreckage of nuclear waste, plastic pollution, ruined cities, dust bowls of barren farmlands. Hers will not be the *Silent Spring* of which Rachel Carson warned. It will be the Silent Century.

She will be tough, this old woman in 2100. She will have survived decades of horrors: heat waves roasting the

corn on the stalk and melting the onions in the fields, superstorms that slam the coastlines and flatten cities, torrential flooding that sweeps whole towns away, vanishing ice caps, rising seas that swallow Florida in a gulp, early frosts that lead to crop failures and empty grocery store shelves, desperate wars fought for water amidst unrelenting droughts.

It reads like a Biblical curse. We are the ones hurling it in her fragile, newborn face. We are the wicked fairy godmothers hovering over her cradle, poised to ruin her life. But we don't have to be.

In these next few years as she learns to crawl, speak, count, walk, we still have time to change the story of her life. As an 80-year-old in 2100, she may be able to tell a vastly different tale than the apocalyptic tragedy that awaits. But, before she even learns to read, we must take immediate action. We must declare a climate emergency, demand a swift transition away from fossil fuels, defund polluting industries, invent in and deploy clean renewable energies, overhaul destructive agricultural practices, and more.

If we do all this with vision and conviction, as a grandmother in the new century, she will speak of our courage and sacrifice. She will tell her grandchildren how

everything changed as she grew up. She will speak of her career in restoring ecosystems alongside so many of her generation. She will have seen upheavals, yes, and the lingering instability of our damage to the Earth, but she will be able to speak with hope and pride.

The newborn in her parents' arms today will live to see the birds return in vast flocks. She will see the whales rebound in great proliferating pods that sing across the slowly-cooling seas. The aerial photo maps of her world will change color as she supports global reforestation projects to reverse desertification. She will taste the harvest from her local farms and know the journey her water took to reach her. She will have a hope that seems impossible to us today. She will have hope because of us.

And that is what we can do with our lives, right here and right now, to bless this child and all the others entering the world today, tomorrow, and the next day. We can take action for climate justice and give the young ones a gift unparalleled by any fairy godmother.

We can lift the curse that sits upon them. We can give them cause for hope, instead.

Joy for this child or misery for this child. To choose joy is to commit to action. **Z**

Rivera Sun, syndicated by PeaceVoice, has written numerous books, including *The Dandelion Insurrection*. She is the editor of *Nonviolence News* and a nationwide trainer in strategy for nonviolent campaigns.

How a Black Lives Matter Leader Started a “Freedom School” Summer Program

By Sonali Kolhatkar

Middle- and upper-income parents know that summers are an opportunity to give one’s children the sort of well-rounded education that can enhance future college applications. Summer camp rosters fill up months in advance, and price tags for enrichment programs

can run upwards of \$500 a week. This is especially true in high-priced Southern California, where I live and where Jasmine Abdullah Richards started the Black Lives Matter Pasadena Freedom School, a free, three-days-a-week summer camp for children who live in her neighborhood.

“Freedom School is for the ’hood. It’s for low-income families,” she explained as we sat together on the Metro train heading from the Los Angeles-area suburb of Pasadena to the California African American Museum near downtown LA. We shouted to be heard by one another through our COVID-19 face masks and over the din of more than a dozen Black and Brown children aged 9 through 15 who were wearing their new Freedom School T-shirts and chatting animatedly with one another. Many had never before been on a train or left the borders of Pasadena. Interrupting our conversation, Richards warned the raucous and excited children to keep it down, yelling, “Hey, hey, hey, we gotta lower it down just a little bit.”

Richards has led the Pasadena chapter of Black Lives Matter (BLM) since 2014, when I first met her alongside Patrisse Cullors, co-founder of BLM, for an in-person interview about the Ferguson

uprising in Missouri. Both Cullors and Richards had just returned from Ferguson, where the latest chapter in the movement for racial justice was blazing into existence. Richards called that trip an “eye-opening experience,” and said that “Black Lives Matter changed my life.” A year later, she was confronting Pasadena police over their fatal shooting of a young Black man in her neighborhood named Kendrec McDade and protesting alongside McDade’s mother, Anya Slaughter. She has since been on a mission to ensure no more mothers lose their children to police violence, and Freedom School is one effort to that end.

Seventeen-year-old Emoni Waiters and 20-year-old Amari Stewart are both graduates of the first session of Freedom School that Richards organized in 2018. Both young women are now working as camp counselors with Richards to guide a new generation of neighborhood kids and expose them to sights and sounds they might not otherwise have access to. Waiters confessed that before she attended the school, “I would just sit at the park and hang out. I would get into bad stuff.” But then, “when Jasmine started the Freedom School, it was a way for me to get away and do nothing

but positive things.” Stewart had a similar experience. “It changed me a lot,” she said. “Jasmine taught us how to speak to others so you can make a good first impression.”

Indeed, Auntie Jasmine, as the children call her, dished out sage advice to her camp attendees during the museum field trip every chance she got. While waiting for the train to arrive, she asked the kids, “So, how many of you know about gangs?” The mask she wore muffled her voice, and one little boy who mistook what she said responded excitedly, “oh, I got all games on my phone!” “G-A-N-G-S,” Jasmine spelled out patiently, unmasking her face for a moment. An older Latino boy answered, “I don’t know anything about gangs.” “Yes, you do, Gustavo,” she countered, looking him straight in the eye. “Let me tell you about my experience in gangs,” she said and went on to share her own story.

Richards’ family moved to Pasadena when she was seven, and she grew up north of the 210 freeway, where most of the city’s low-income Black and Brown residents live and where Pasadena police officers routinely patrol. “My neighborhood was a ‘zero-tolerance zone,’ so even if we wanted to hang out in front of my apartment, we were

considered a gang member,” she told me. When she was 14, Richards’s older brother, who eschewed gangs, was murdered in a drive-by shooting. The trauma of losing her brother left her reeling, and she spiraled into drug and alcohol abuse.

Getting involved in BLM changed everything, and today Richards is clean and sober and in a healthy relationship with herself and her partner. Freedom School “gives me purpose, it gives me life,” she said. “I get them at a young, impressionable age when they can either go left or right, and if I have anything to do with it, I want them to go the right way.” She sees her work with the school as central to her BLM-related activism, saying, “there is no revolution without the kids.”

The obstacles arrayed against low-income Black and Brown children are immense. Many of the kids enrolled in Freedom School have had routine and terrifying encounters with the police in their neighborhood. Seventeen-year-old Runnit, a Freedom School attendee, is one of them. He said that Freedom School teaches kids, “that we’re not supposed to be afraid when the police show up.” He’s grateful for the opportunities that the program has given him and his young cousin Jaden, who

accompanied him on the museum trip. “She’s [Richards has] been doing good stuff for our kids and taking them to places where kids can really be kids. We meet up at the park. We ride the bus safely as a group—we all got shirts on to show that we’re in a group.”

Learning how to interact with the police is part of Freedom School’s curriculum. “Don’t run, even if the police talk to you,” said Richards to the kids during another one of her impromptu lectures on the train. “If you steal something, you stop with the thing you stole [indicates throwing it to the ground] and say, ‘here, I don’t even want it, take this shit back.’ Don’t ever run. Don’t run, or they will shoot you.” It was a version of “the talk” that generations of Black parents have had to give their children to best ensure their odds of survival, and an informal version of the “know your rights” trainings that Richards includes as part of the camp curriculum.

But Richards wants more than survival for her neighborhood children. “I want to get them to start lovin’ on themselves and [teach them] how to iron out their own problems because all they see is gang-banging and stuff.” On the choice of the California African American Museum, she said, “Representation

matters. I want them to see stories of people like them.”

Richards sees Freedom School as following in the tradition of the Black Panther Party’s Breakfast Program. While she started the program in order to fill a void in Pasadena—city-run summer programs this year are not free of charge—the camp seems to have grown into a far more stimulating experience for the children than anything the city might be offering.

Eleven-year-old Jaden was buzzing with so much excitement about the prospect of visiting the museum that he could hardly stand still. “I came here today because my mom wanted me to know about my culture and my history, about what we did in the past,” he said. Illustrating just how much impact Freedom School has already had on him, he expostulated, “all the white people, they raised us as slaves and let us pick cotton and they whipped us, and it was bad and hurtful. That’s why we’re here today to learn about everything that we have in our history.”

Organizing programs like Freedom School costs money, and Richards, ever the innovator, has made something out of nothing, tapping into her own social network and her national reputation to raise thousands of dollars for the program. She earned

that profile the hard way. In 2016 she made headlines for becoming the first African American ever to be convicted on a charge of “felony lynching” in connection with intervening in a police arrest in her neighborhood. Richards said she had been on the police’s radar for months, facing constant harassment from officers.

Today she has turned the national reputation that the police inadvertently bestowed upon her into what she calls “social capital.” Proud of what she has accomplished, she delighted in the fact that “tons of people are giving money, all my followers on Facebook, Instagram, just random people,” as she asks them to “help me help my ’hood.” Using the donations, she has purchased branded T-shirts for the camp enrollees to wear on field trips, train and museum tickets, and bathing suits for swim days. She is also paying the two Freedom School graduates, Waiters and Stewart, to be camp counselors.

Richards has bigger plans for her neighborhood kids beyond Freedom School. When Victor Gordo ran for Pasadena mayor last year, she met with him demanding that he act like a civil servant. “I told him, ‘if we vote for you, bro, I need you to do something for our community.’ So that’s

what he vowed to do.” Gordo won the mayor’s race and has agreed to work with Richards on a city-level apprenticeship program for graduating teens, such as Waiters, who will be attending a welding program at Pasadena City College in the fall. Not one to rest on her laurels, Richards said, “I told him, ‘I’m not gonna stop the pressure on you. If you don’t do these things, then you gotta go too.’”

In using all the tools at her disposal, including her political sensibility, life experiences, fundraising prowess, adeptness at holding politicians accountable, and the trust that her neighbors have placed in her, Richards offers a model for progressive change that places children at the forefront. **Z**

This article was produced by Economy for All, a project of the Independent Media Institute.

Sonali Kolhatkar is the founder, host and executive producer of “Rising Up With Sonali,” a television and radio show that airs on Free Speech TV and Pacifica stations. She is a writing fellow for the Economy for All project at the Independent Media Institute.

SCOTUS Ruling Allows Texas to Deputize Citizens as Anti-Abortion Police

By Marjorie Cohn

Donald Trump's installation of three radical right-wing "justices" on the Supreme Court is paying off for the forces trying to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. On September 1, in a 5-4 vote, the high court allowed the most restrictive anti-abortion law in the country to go into effect, in *Whole Woman's Health v. Jackson*. SB 8, known as the "Texas Heartbeat Act," bans all abortions after physicians detect, or should have detected, a fetal heartbeat. That generally occurs at six weeks of pregnancy, when most women don't even know they're pregnant.

The split vote on the Court signals the likelihood that the "justices"—who were so quick to allow Texas's Machiavellian law to take effect—will seize the opportunity next term to overturn *Roe v. Wade* when it considers the constitutionality of a Mississippi law banning abortion after 15 weeks. That would

open the floodgates to similar legislation in other states preventing women from having abortions.

About 85 percent to 90 percent of Texas women who have abortions are at least six weeks into their pregnancy, which means the law will prohibit nearly all abortions in the state. There is no exception for rape or incest. Women in Texas will now have to travel to another state to secure an abortion or resort to life-threatening back alley coat-hanger abortions.

The drafters of SB 8 established a novel scheme to prevent lawsuits against state officials by privatizing enforcement and deputizing private persons to sue people who provide abortions. The bill gives any non-governmental person the right to sue abortion providers and those who "aid and abet" them, financially or otherwise. The defendants could include anyone—doctors, nurses, friends, spouses, parents, domestic violence counselors, clergy members or Uber drivers. Defendants must pay plaintiffs who win their lawsuits a \$10,000 bounty plus attorneys' fees. In other words, Texas is bribing its residents to sue people who help women get abortions.

President Joe Biden said the Court's action in *Woman's Whole Health* "unleash-

es unconstitutional chaos and empowers self-anointed enforcers to have devastating impacts." He added, "Complete strangers will now be empowered to inject themselves in the most private and personal health decisions faced by women." Biden is launching a "whole-of-government" response, directing the White House Counsel, Gender Policy Council, Health and Human Services and Justice Department to determine what "legal tools we have to insulate women and providers from the impact of Texas' bizarre scheme of outsourced enforcement to private parties."

Abortion providers in Texas challenged SB 8 in federal court. A U.S. district court judge scheduled a hearing about whether to block the Texas law. But the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals canceled the hearing. The plaintiffs asked the Supreme Court to stop SB 8 from taking effect, or in the alternative, to permit the district court proceedings to continue.

In an unsigned one-paragraph order, Clarence Thomas, Samuel Alito, Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh and Amy Coney Barrett left the Texas law in place with no analysis of the constitutional issues at stake. They wrote, "[I]t is unclear whether the named defendants in this

lawsuit can or will seek to enforce the Texas law against the applicants in a manner that might permit our intervention.” The majority said they were not drawing “any conclusion about the constitutionality of Texas’s law,” and their order “in no way limits other procedurally proper challenges to the Texas law, including in Texas state courts.” Meanwhile, the law will prevent most women from seeking abortions in Texas.

John Roberts, Elena Kagan, Sonia Sotomayor and Stephen Breyer dissented and filed four separate opinions. Roberts wrote, “We are at this point asked to resolve these novel questions—at least preliminarily—in the first instance, in the course of two days, without the benefit of consideration by the District Court or Court of Appeals.” The Court was asked to do this, he added, “without ordinary merits briefing and without oral argument.” So, why rush to allow implementation of a law that may well be unconstitutional? Roberts emphasized that “the Court’s order is emphatic in making clear that it cannot be understood as sustaining the constitutionality of the law at issue.”

Breyer stated, “[A] woman has a federal constitutional right to obtain an abortion

during that first stage,” citing *Roe v. Wade* and *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*. And, he wrote, “a State cannot delegate ... a veto power [over the right to obtain an abortion] which the state itself is absolutely and totally prohibited from exercising during the first trimester of pregnancy.”

Sotomayor declared, “The Court’s order is stunning. Presented with an application to enjoin a flagrantly unconstitutional law engineered to prohibit women from exercising their constitutional rights and evade judicial scrutiny, a majority of Justices have opted to bury their heads in the sand.” She wrote, “In effect, the Texas Legislature has deputized the State’s citizens as bounty hunters, offering them cash prizes for civilly prosecuting their neighbors’ medical procedures.”

Kagan objected to a lack of full briefing and argument before “this Court greenlights the operation of Texas’s patently unconstitutional law banning most abortions.”

The Women’s Health Protection Act of 2021 (WHPA), which would codify *Roe v. Wade*, is pending in the Senate and the House. On June 8, the WHPA was introduced with 176 original co-sponsors in the House and 48 supporters in the Senate, a record-high amount of support for a bill at introduction. Speaker of

the House Nancy Pelosi has pledged to bring the bill to the House floor when Congress returns from summer recess.

The WHPA protects the right to access abortion without medically unnecessary restrictions and bans on abortion. It creates a statutory right for health care providers to provide abortion care, and a corollary right for patients to receive care, without medically unnecessary restrictions that single out abortion and impede access to it.

A Hart Research poll found 61 percent of voters nationally supported the WHPA when it was introduced. “This poll sends a clear message to Congress: the majority of voters want abortion protected under federal law,” Nancy Northup, President and CEO of the Center for Reproductive Rights, said. “We cannot wait any longer. If *Roe* falls, many states will immediately take action to make abortion a crime.” **Z**

The Publication of Origin for this article is Truthout.

Marjorie Cohn is professor emerita at Thomas Jefferson School of Law, former president of the National Lawyers Guild, and a member of the bureau of the International Association of Democratic Lawyers and the advisory board of Veterans for Peace. Her books include *Drones and Targeted Killing: Legal, Moral, and Geopolitical Issues*.

Biden's "Radical" Proposals Are Minimum Measures to Avoid Catastrophe

Noam Chomsky interviewed by C.J. Polychroniou

C.J. Polychroniou: It's been said by far too many, including myself, that we live in dark times. And for good reasons. We live in an era where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, authoritarianism is a global political phenomenon, and life on Earth is entering a state of collapse. From that perspective, human civilization is on an inexorable course of decline and nothing but a radical overhaul of the way humans conduct themselves will save us from a return to barbarism. Yet, there are at the same time signs of progress on numerous fronts, which are hard to overlook. Societies are becoming increasingly multicultural and also more aware of and sensitive to patterns of racism and discrimination. In the light of all this, do we see the glass half empty or half full? Moreover, is it possible to evaluate the qualities of decline and progress scientifically, or do we have to rely purely on normative evaluations and value judgments?

Noam Chomsky: There are attempts to measure the contents of the glass. The best-known is the Doomsday Clock of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, with the hands placed a certain distance from midnight: the end.

Each year that Trump was in office, the minute hand was moved closer to midnight, soon reaching the closest it had ever been, then going beyond. The analysts finally abandoned minutes and turned to seconds: 100 seconds to midnight, where the Clock now stands. That seems to me a fair assessment.

The analysts identify three major crises: nuclear war, environmental destruction and the deterioration of rational discourse. As we've often discussed, Trump has made a signal contribution to each, and the party he now owns is carrying his legacy forward. They are also currently hard at work to regain power by overcoming the dread danger of a government of the people, with plenty of far right big money at hand. If the project succeeds, emptying of the glass will be accelerated.

There has indeed been progress on many fronts. It is startling to look back and see what was regarded as proper behavior and acceptable attitudes not many years ago, even written into law. While substantial, the progress has not, however, been sufficient to contain and reverse the continuing assault on the social order, the natural world and the climate of rational discourse.

Without disparaging the great activist

achievements, it's hard sometimes to suppress memory of an ironic slogan of the 1960s: They may win the battles, but we have all the best songs.

The glass that is before our eyes is not an encouraging sight, to put it mildly. Take the state of the three major crises identified in the setting of the Clock.

The major nuclear powers are obligated by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty "to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control."

They are pursuing the opposite course.

In its latest annual survey, the prime monitor of global armament, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, reports that "The growth in total spending in 2020 was largely influenced by expenditure patterns in the United States and China. The USA increased its military spending for the third straight year to reach \$778 billion in 2020," as compared with China's increase to \$252 billion. In fourth place, below India, is the second U.S. adversary, Russia: \$61.7 billion.

The figures are instructive, but misleading. The U.S. is alone in facing no credible security threats. The threats that are invoked in the calls for even more military spending are at the borders of adversaries, which are ringed with U.S. nuclear-armed missiles in some of the 800 U.S. military bases around the world (China has one, Djibouti).

Further threats, in this case quite real, are the development of new and more dangerous weapons systems. They could be banned by treaties, which were effective, until they were mostly dismantled by Bush II and Trump.

The current mythology concocted to justify escalation of this suicidal enterprise is carefully dismantled by nuclear physicist Law-

rence Krauss, who for many years had the responsibility to present publicly the setting of the Clock. He also reminds us that "the US and Russia have both come within seconds of launching nuclear weapons due to software or human errors that erroneously indicated an incoming nuclear missile strike" and now have "more than 5,000 nuclear weapons each, with more than 1,000 of these on high alert, launch-on-warning status" just waiting for another accident or human decision. That might be by someone well down the chain of command, as we learned from Daniel Ellsberg in his essential book, *The Doomsday Machine*.

The bloated military budget could be sharply cut without harm to authentic security—in fact enhancing genuine security if undertaken as a project of international cooperation, which is not an idle dream as history reveals. That would free up badly needed funds for urgent necessities. But it is not to be. The military budget remains untouchable, the example of the cherished ideal of bipartisanship. For some, it is not enough. Three influential Republican senators have just introduced an amendment to the Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill (BIP) now being debated, calling for another \$50 billion for the "undernourished" Pentagon.

One consequence is a substantial contribution to environmental destruction: recent studies show that "the US military is one of the largest polluters in history, consuming more liquid fuels and emitting more climate-changing gases than most medium-sized countries."

That brings us to the one comparable threat to survival of organized human life: environmental destruction. In this case, unlike the nuclear menace, there is at least discussion and sometimes even corrective action, though nowhere near what is urgently needed. For years, scientists have been warning of a "climate emergency." Thousands more are joining the call as the world is swept with disas-

ters intensified by heating the atmosphere. A few weeks ago, we reviewed recent discoveries that show, once again, that the dire predictions of earlier studies were too conservative. Inexorably, the grim tale continues to unfold.

To mention a few more recent examples, new research has found that thawing of permafrost in rapidly heating Siberia may be releasing the “methane time bomb” that scientists have long feared—a rapid release of massive quantities of methane, which is not as long-lasting as carbon dioxide (CO₂) but far more destructive. The main surprise is that the release is from hard rock, not wetlands, as previously anticipated. The lead researcher cautions that data are still uncertain; interpreting it correctly, he says, “may make the difference between catastrophe and apocalypse” as the climate crisis worsens.

Those are in fact the likely alternatives on our current course.

An accompanying report calls for a “global state of emergency” as temperatures continue to climb in Siberia and other Arctic regions. “Scientists have been shocked that the warm weather conducive to permafrost thawing is occurring roughly 70 years ahead of model projections,” the study warns. “The story is simple,” the report concludes. “Climate change is happening faster than anticipated. One consequence the loss of ice in the polar regions—is also a driver for more rapid global heating and disastrously rapid global sea level rise.”

Turning elsewhere, new studies find alarming signs of collapse in major ocean currents that regulate global climates, possibly with an impact on the Gulf Stream, all with incalculable but likely far-reaching effects.

If we return to the topic in a few weeks, there will be more unpleasant news. Meanwhile, political leaders dither, or even act to amplify the threats.

That is the state of threats to survival—

threats that could be overcome in a world of rational deliberation and judgment; we know the means.

That brings us to the third factor in the advance of the Doomsday Clock to midnight: the decline of rationality.

Illustrations are so numerous that any small sample will be hopelessly misleading. The most extreme form of irrationality is flat denial of what you don’t like. In the case of nuclear weapons and climate, the word “denial” translates as Doom, and not in the distant future.

Lesser examples illustrate the depths to which the malady has penetrated.

One example has to do with nuclear weapons in the Middle East, an obsession of the political class and the media for years. Anyone in the vicinity of the real world knows that Israel has a substantial arsenal of nuclear weapons and that there is universal agreement among intelligence agencies that Iran has none.

Trump didn’t get his “beautiful wall,” but in protection of beliefs from reality, it may not be needed. Polls reveal that “more Americans think Iran possesses nuclear weapons than think Israel does...60.5%, including 70.6% of Republicans and 52.6% of Democrats, say Iran possesses nuclear weapons—compared to 51.7% who say Israel does, including 51.7% of Republicans and 51.9% of Democrats.”

We have frequently discussed the obvious solution to the concern that Iran might develop nuclear weapons: a nuclear weapons-free zone (NWFZ) in the Middle East. In that case, there would be no constant tensions, no threat of major war, no murderous sanctions that the world must honor or be thrown out of the U.S.-run global financial system. In short, an ideal solution.

A few weeks ago, it seemed that there was finally a convert: the editorial board of *The New York Times*, who concluded that, “Ideal-

ly, the result [of current negotiations] would be a nuclear-weapons-free zone in the Middle East.”

The editors acknowledge that there are some problems, not least “Israel’s unacknowledged and nonnegotiable possession of nuclear weapons”—also unacknowledged by the U.S. to avoid the embarrassment of opening the question of the status of U.S. military aid to Israel under American law. Unmentioned is that Washington has unilaterally blocked moves toward the “ideal” solution for these reasons (notably Obama). And that the U.S. has some means to pressure Israel when it cares to, wielded by all pre-Obama presidents.

The editorial also states that there is an African NWFZ, failing to mention that it cannot go into effect because of the U.S. military base in Diego Garcia, part of Mauritius in Africa according to the World Court, the United Nations and the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea. But not according to the U.S. and its British client, which claims the island in order to provide Washington with the base.

Meanwhile the U.S.-UK righteously proclaim their leadership of the “rules-based international order” challenged by forces of evil.

Defiance of law is no minor matter in this case, not only for the expelled inhabitants and Mauritius, but also for the targets of U.S. bombing in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Nevertheless, at least the “ideal” solution is on the table, though it will plainly be a long struggle to free the public mind from the impressive grip of propaganda.

In a different domain, the gap between prevailing invented reality and old-fashioned reality is illustrated by the fealty of the Republican voting base to, for many of them, their bitter enemy.

Under Trump, the one legislative achievement of the self-declared party of the working man was the tax scam to enrich the very

rich and harm the rest that we’ve already discussed. The practice now extends to the BIP. It has to be funded somehow. “Congressional Republicans objected to tax hikes on the rich or corporations, while also eventually ruling out other measures proposed by the White House, such as stepped-up IRS enforcement on tax cheats. The White House, meanwhile, ruled out higher taxes on Americans earning under \$400,000, including a proposed gas tax.”

An instructive impasse.

Another illustration of deep loyalty, well reported, is the “stolen election” charade, still upheld by nearly two-thirds of Republicans.

A more subtle though highly consequential case is vaccine rejection, persisting in the face of overwhelming evidence of the efficacy of the vaccines and the grave danger of refusal. The danger, of course, is not limited to the refuser. On a sufficient scale, refusal will prevent herd immunity so that the plague will persist, and worse, will expedite mutations that may reach beyond control. Inquiry has identified many factors in refusal. A careful statistical study by Anthony DiMaggio reveals that the culprit, for once, is not Fox News, which has had no statistically significant effect on refusal. Rather, the most salient sector is Republicans confined to social media bubbles, already primed for distrust of science by decades of right-wing propaganda.

Refusal is no small matter. Nearly 60 percent of Republicans say they are unwilling to get vaccinated. Meanwhile, Republican leaders continue to oppose vaccine requirements, arguing that it’s up to the individual—whatever the lethal effect on others. The most outspoken is the new heroine of the party, Marjorie Taylor Greene, whose fans cheered when she heralded the low vaccination rate in Alabama, which tossed 65,000 unused doses—badly needed elsewhere—in the midst of another sharp spike in cases.

This is the barest sample. The task of restoring a measure of rationality is daunting, and a responsibility that cannot be shirked.

Should we accept social change as inevitable or is it completely a consequence of collective action? Moreover, given that social change occurs rather slowly in the course of history, in what context is radicalism of better use than pragmatism for achieving progressive social change?

There are some tendencies in history, rooted in the nature of institutions, but it does not follow a predetermined course. Human agency is essential for achieving progressive social change. Almost invariably, it crucially involves collective action. The great historian and activist Howard Zinn dedicated his life's work to "the countless small actions of unknown people" that lie at the roots of "those great moments" that enter the historical record, small actions almost always undertaken in concert. Labor historian Eric Loomis adds the crucial qualification that the labor actions that have commonly been in the forefront of the struggle for a better world have achieved success when a sympathetic administration contained state-business violence.

The usual path to success is a combination of radical goals and pragmatic choice of tactics, but there cannot be a general formula for the proper course.

Looking at the state of the contemporary United States, one is struck by the nearly simultaneous explosion of two highly contradictory phenomena—white supremacist ideology and a new civil rights or social justice movement known as Black Lives Matter, respectively. How do you assess the historical significance of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, and do you see it as a pragmatic or a radical response to the plague of systemic racism?

Black Lives Matter has proven to be a highly significant social movement. The "simultaneous explosion" is real, and not too surprising. BLM is an activist manifestation of a long overdue reckoning with a shameful past and its bitter surviving legacy. Many want that history erased, and its legacy ignored. One salient reason, it seems, is fear of the "Great Replacement."

It's easy to scoff at Great Replacement absurdities, and to condemn the demagogues and cynics who exploit them for their ugly purposes. But it's not hard to see why they appeal to parts of the population—mostly rural, white, Christian, less educated, relatively affluent, often tending toward white supremacist commitments and Christian nationalism. The absurdities resonate because they rest on a core of fact: Those who have survived under the jackboot for centuries are demanding basic rights and are receiving more general support. BLM and its broad outreach have significantly advanced this cause. The "traditional way of life" that rests on denying these rights is facing threats, including demographic realities.

It's not necessary here to trace how these conflicts have poisoned American society from its origins. They remain virulent, unpredictable, affecting many aspects of life and the social order.

A noticeable change is also being observed among a growing segment of American citizens, from both political parties, with regard to attitudes toward Israel and the Palestinians. How significant is this shift in public opinion, and how do we explain it?

Highly significant, and unmistakable. The poll I cited earlier on the astonishing perception of Middle East nuclear weapons found that the latest Israeli assault on Gaza "appears

to have led to the largest increase to date in the number of Democrats, especially young Democrats, who want the U.S. to lean toward the Palestinians.”

Each of the murderous Israeli assaults on Gaza has had that effect. The regular crimes of settlers and the army in the West Bank mostly pass under the radar. But the longtime tendency is very clear. In earlier years, even at moments where there was some recognition of the brutality of Israeli crimes, in the eyes of liberal America, Israel remained “a society in which moral sensitivity is a principle of political life” and which “through its tumultuous history” has been animated by “high moral purpose” (*New York Times*, *Time*, fall 1982, at the peak of condemnation of Israeli crimes after the Sabra-Shatila massacres).

That has changed. Now support for Israel has shifted to Evangelical Christians, right-wing nationalists and military-security sectors. The shift largely traces the drift to the ultranationalist right within Israel, along with the increasing difficulty of covering up its brutal actions and increased sensibility on a broad scale in the U.S.

The shift among the population has so far had little impact on policy, in fact runs counter to it. Obama was more supportive of Israel than his predecessors, even if not sufficiently so for the ascendant far right in Israel. Trump pulled out all the stops. Biden, so far, has scarcely modified his extremist stance. If the growing opposition to Israeli crimes crystallizes into an effective solidarity movement, it could bring about significant changes in U.S. policy. That could not fail to have major effects in Israel, which has been dependent on U.S. protection since the 1970s, when the Labor governments made the fateful decision to reject live diplomatic options, choosing instead expansion and construction of Greater Israel in violation of UN Security Council orders and international law.

Environmental activism is growing on a global scale and in various ways. Green political parties are flourishing in Europe, grassroots organizations such as the Sunrise Movement and Extinction Rebellion have emerged as crucial agents in the battle against the climate crisis, and even women in Latin America and the Caribbean have become active in defending the environment and fighting global warming. How do you assess the impacts of environmental movements so far to influence environmental policies and practices of governments and corporations?

There has been a notable impact, but it is nowhere near enough even to keep pace with the race to catastrophe, let alone to act decisively to avert it. There is much more to do, and not much time to do it. We cannot emphasize too strongly the immensity of the stakes.

The so-called radical wing of the Democratic Party, which is most vocally represented by Sen. Bernie Sanders and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, is coming under rather enigmatic criticism, at least as far as I am concerned, by various left-minded groups and individuals for allegedly not doing enough to push forward a radical agenda of social change, which includes, among other things, Medicare for All. How justified is this criticism considering that the so-called radical wing of the Democratic Party consists of just a handful of individuals, which means that they obviously lack the power to be movers and shakers in Washington, D.C.?

Much of the criticism seems to me misguided in two respects: First, it focuses on alleged failures to achieve what is beyond reach under existing circumstances; and second, and more significant, it largely ignores very serious failures to achieve what is well within reach, and

crucial for survival.

In the first category, it makes very good sense to strongly advocate for Medicare for All and other measures that would bring the U.S. into the “civilized” world, and enable it to realize its potential to become a leading force for progress, as it was in many ways in the New Deal years.

It is a stunning fact that despite its unique advantages, the United States ranks last among the rich societies in health care. The most recent international study of 11 high-income countries finds that, “The United States ranks last overall, despite spending far more of its gross domestic product on health care. The U.S. ranks last on access to care, administrative efficiency, equity, and health care outcomes, but second on measures of care process.” This scandal is mirrored in other measures of social justice. And efforts to overcome it are imperative.

Choice of measures to do so has to begin with assessment of social and political reality. The reality is that the levers of power are in the hands of concentrated wealth, the corporate world and their political representatives. The labor movement has been severely weakened by the neoliberal assault, and other popular movements are in no position to challenge concentrated political-economic power even when their goals are backed by a majority of the population. The Republican half of the Senate is opposed, rock solid, to change that impinges on the welfare of their actual constituency of private wealth and corporate power (posturing aside). Simply look at their conditions on funding the BIP. And enough (so-called moderate) Democrats go along with them to block progressive legislation.

Vigorous advocacy should continue, accompanying the educational and organizational work that is needed to overcome dominant reactionary forces. It is idle, however, to direct criticism to a scattered few for failing to

do what cannot be done until this foundational work is accomplished. To do that work is the proper task for the critics.

The second category of criticisms, which is largely lacking, should be directed at failures to undertake actions that are within reach and are of immense significance. I have already mentioned one: sharply cutting the Pentagon budget. A related concern is provocative foreign policy stances, dangerous and readily avoided in favor of diplomacy.

Keeping just to the domestic scene, there is a great deal that merits serious critical attention. The major Biden initiative is the BIP. As the business press reports, referring to climate policy, “most of Biden’s plans for radical change can’t be found anywhere” in the bill. The “radical” proposals that can’t be found are in fact moderate measures that are essential for escape from catastrophe.

The few progressives in Congress, backed by Sunrise Movement, have said they will not vote for the BIP unless Congress moves on a subsequent legislation that includes the full range of necessary proposals. The fate of the contemplated larger bill is very much in doubt.

While this failure is receiving at least some attention, there is more that is passing in silence and is truly ominous. AP reports that, “Approvals for companies to drill for oil and gas on U.S. public lands are on pace this year to reach their highest level since George W. Bush was president, underscoring President Joe Biden’s reluctance to more forcefully curb petroleum production in the face of industry and Republican resistance.” The reference is to reserves already under lease but not authorized.

While there are legal issues about blocking prior leases, there seems to be plenty of room for executive action. Much had been hoped for from Interior Secretary Deb Haaland, who while in Congress had adamantly opposed

drilling on federal lands and opposed fracking, and had co-sponsored the original Green New Deal. But the signs so far are hardly encouraging—and one can't reiterate often enough that there is not much time.

In this domain, critical commentary is well warranted. And even more so, direct engagement and action. **Z**

C.J. Polychroniou is a political scientist/political economist, author, and journalist who has taught and worked in numerous universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. Currently, his main research interests are in U.S. politics and the political economy of the United States, European economic integration, globalization, climate change and environmental economics, 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. His latest books are *Optimism Over Despair: Noam Chomsky On Capitalism, Empire, and Social Change* (2017); *Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal: The Political Economy of Saving the Planet* (with Noam Chomsky and Robert Pollin as primary authors, 2020); *The Precipice: Neoliberalism, the Pandemic, and the Urgent Need for Radical Change* (an anthology of interviews with Noam Chomsky, 2021); and *Economics and the Left: Interviews with Progressive Economists* (2021).

The Great Game of Smashing Countries

By John Pilger

As a tsunami of crocodile tears engulfs Western politicians, history is suppressed. More than a generation ago, Afghanistan won its freedom, which the United States, Britain and their “allies” destroyed.

In 1978, a liberation movement led by the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) overthrew the dictatorship of Mohammad Dawd, the cousin of King Zahir Shar. It was an immensely popular revolution that took the British and Americans by surprise.

Foreign journalists in Kabul, reported the *New York Times*, were surprised to find that “nearly every Afghan they interviewed said [they were] delighted with the coup.” The *Wall Street Journal* reported that “150,000 persons ... marched to honour the new flag ... the participants appeared genuinely enthusiastic.”

The *Washington Post* reported that “Afghan loyalty to the government can scarcely be questioned.” Secular, modernist and, to a considerable degree, socialist, the government declared a program of visionary reforms that included equal rights for women and minorities. Political prisoners were freed and police

files publicly burned.

Under the monarchy, life expectancy was thirty-five; one in three children died in infancy. Ninety percent of the population was illiterate. The new government introduced free medical care. A mass literacy campaign was launched.

For women, the gains had no precedent; by the late 1980s, half the university students were women, and women made up 40 percent of Afghanistan’s doctors, 70 percent of its teachers and 30 percent of its civil servants.

So radical were the changes that they remain vivid in the memories of those who benefited. Saira Noorani, a female surgeon who fled Afghanistan in 2001, recalled: “Every girl could go to high school and university. We could go where we wanted and wear what we liked ... We used to go to cafes and the cinema to see the latest Indian films on a Friday ... it all started to go wrong when the mujahedin started winning ... these were the people the West supported.”

For the United States, the problem with the PDPA government was that it was supported by the Soviet Union. Yet it was never the

“puppet” derided in the West, neither was the coup against the monarchy “Soviet backed,” as the American and British press claimed at the time.

President Jimmy Carter’s Secretary of State, Cyrus Vance, later wrote in his memoirs: “We had no evidence of any Soviet complicity in the coup.”

In the same administration was Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter’s National Security Adviser, a Polish émigré and fanatical anti-communist and moral extremist whose enduring influence on American presidents expired only with his death in 2017.

On July 3, 1979, unknown to the American people and Congress, Carter authorized a \$500 million “covert action” program to overthrow Afghanistan’s first secular, progressive government. This was code-named by the CIA Operation Cyclone.

The \$500 million bought, bribed and armed a group of tribal and religious zealots known as the mujahedin. In his semi-official history, *Washington Post* reporter Bob Woodward wrote that the CIA spent \$70 million on bribes alone. He describes a meeting between a CIA agent known as “Gary” and a warlord called Amniat-Melli: “Gary placed a bundle of cash on the table: \$500,000 in one-foot stacks of \$100 bills. He believed it would be more impressive than the usual \$200,000, the best way to say we’re here, we’re serious, here’s money, we know you need it ... Gary would soon ask CIA headquarters for and receive \$10 million in cash.”

Recruited from all over the Muslim world, America’s secret army was trained in camps in Pakistan run by Pakistani intelligence, the CIA and Britain’s MI6. Others were recruited at an Islamic College in Brooklyn, New York—within sight of the doomed Twin Towers. One of the recruits was a Saudi engineer called Osama bin Laden.

The aim was to spread Islamic fundamental-

ism in Central Asia and destabilize and eventually destroy the Soviet Union.

In August, 1979, the U.S. Embassy in Kabul reported that “the United States’ larger interests ... would be served by the demise of the PDPA government, despite whatever setbacks this might mean for future social and economic reforms in Afghanistan.”

Read again the words above I have italicized. It is not often that such cynical intent is spelled out as clearly. The U.S. was saying that a genuinely progressive Afghan government and the rights of Afghan women could go to hell.

Six months later, the Soviets made their fatal move into Afghanistan in response to the American-created jihadist threat on their doorstep. Armed with CIA-supplied Stinger missiles and celebrated as “freedom fighters” by Margaret Thatcher, the mujahedin eventually drove the Red Army out of Afghanistan.

Calling themselves the Northern Alliance, the mujahedin were dominated by warlords who controlled the heroin trade and terrorized rural women. The Taliban were an ultra-puritanical faction, whose mullahs wore black and punished banditry, rape and murder but banished women from public life.

In the 1980s, I made contact with the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, known as RAWA, which had tried to alert the world to the suffering of Afghan women. During the Taliban time they concealed cameras beneath their burqas to film evidence of atrocities, and did the same to expose the brutality of the Western-backed mujahedin. “Marina” of RAWA told me, “We took the videotape to all the main media groups, but they didn’t want to know”

In 1996, the enlightened PDPA government was overrun. The Prime Minister, Mohammad Najibullah, had gone to the United Nations to appeal to for help. On his return, he was hanged from a street light.

"I confess that [countries] are pieces on a chessboard," said Lord Curzon in 1898, "upon which is being played out a great game for the domination of the world."

The Viceroy of India was referring in particular to Afghanistan. A century later, Prime Minister Tony Blair used slightly different words.

"This is a moment to seize," he said following 9/11. "The Kaleidoscope has been shaken. The pieces are in flux. Soon they will settle again. Before they do, let us re-order this world around us."

On Afghanistan, he added this: "We will not walk away [but ensure] some way out of the poverty that is your miserable existence."

Blair echoed his mentor, President George W. Bush, who spoke to the victims of his bombs from the Oval Office: "The oppressed people of Afghanistan will know the generosity of America. As we strike military targets, we will also drop food, medicine and supplies to the starving and suffering..."

Almost every word was false. Their declarations of concern were cruel illusions for an imperial savagery "we" in the West rarely recognize as such.

In 2001, Afghanistan was stricken and depended on emergency relief convoys from Pakistan. As the journalist Jonathan Steele reported, the invasion indirectly caused the deaths of some 20,000 people as supplies to drought victims stopped and people fled their homes.

Eighteen months later, I found unexploded American cluster bombs in the rubble of Kabul which were often mistaken for yellow relief packages dropped from the air. They blew the limbs off foraging, hungry children.

In the village of Bibi Maru, I watched a woman called Orifa kneel at the graves of her husband, Gul Ahmed, a carpet weaver, and seven other members of her family, including six children, and two children who were

killed next door.

An American F-16 aircraft had come out of a clear blue sky and dropped a Mk82 500-pound bomb on Orifa's mud, stone and straw house. Orifa was away at the time. When she returned, she gathered the body parts.

Months later, a group of Americans came from Kabul and gave her an envelope with 15 notes: a total of \$15. "Two dollars for each of my family killed," she said.

The invasion of Afghanistan was a fraud. In the wake of 9/11, the Taliban sought to distance themselves from Osama bin Laden. They were, in many respects, an American client with which the administration of Bill Clinton had done a series of secret deals to allow the building of a \$3 billion natural gas pipeline by a U.S. oil company consortium.

In high secrecy, Taliban leaders had been invited to the U.S. and entertained by the CEO of the Unocal company in his Texas mansion and by the CIA at its headquarters in Virginia. One of the deal-makers was Dick Cheney, later George W. Bush's Vice-President.

In 2010, I was in Washington and arranged to interview the mastermind of Afghanistan's modern era of suffering, Zbigniew Brzezinski. I quoted to him his autobiography in which he admitted that his grand scheme for drawing the Soviets into Afghanistan had created "a few stirred up Muslims."

"Do you have any regrets?" I asked.

"Regrets! Regrets! What regrets?"

When we watch the scenes of panic at Kabul airport, and listen to journalists and generals in distant TV studios bewailing the withdrawal of "our protection," isn't it time to heed the truth of the past so that all this suffering never happens again? **Z**

John Pilger's 2003 film, *Breaking the Silence*, is available to view at <http://johnpilger.com/videos/breaking-the-silence-truth-and-lies-in-the-war-on-terror>

Covid Recession Year One: Who Gained? Who Lost?

By Jack Rasmus

We hear a lot lately about U.S. billionaires increasing their wealth by more than \$1 trillion over the past year, as Covid precipitated the most severe recession since the 1930s over the past year—from the spring quarter of 2020 through the spring quarter of 2021.

Over the same period, however, U.S. stock markets have surged to record levels. In early August, they attained record-breaking levels nearly every consecutive day.

Much of that record surge in stock and other financial markets has been due to the Federal Reserve, over the past year, pumping almost \$4 trillion in virtually free money into the banks and big corporations, even though they were flush with excess cash.

The Fed in effect “pre-bailed out” the banks—even when they weren’t in trouble.

Moreover, the Fed has indicated its intent to continue to pump free money into banks and even non-banks at the rate of \$120 billion per month, through 2022 at a minimum. That’s more than \$2 trillion after the past year’s nearly \$4 trillion—even though no banks are in trouble.

But bankers and billionaires were not the only beneficiaries of government bailout policies over the past year. So were the vast majority of the largest U.S. corporations. Starting in January and February 2020, me-

dium and large non-bank corporations began to raise trillions of dollars in cash by selling their corporate bonds at dirt cheap rates made possible by the Fed driving interest rates to near zero. Added to this cash hoard created by low Fed rates and record corporate bond rates, the same medium-large U.S. corporations drew down hundreds of billions more from their credit lines with banks, then got \$650 billion in new tax breaks from Congress in March 2020. They also got to cut their operating costs (especially wages and facilities costs) dramatically due to the shutdowns. The combined result was record income gains for big U.S. corporations—not just for U.S. billionaires. How big?

Reports released in recent days reveal 89% of the Fortune 500 companies increased their revenue this latest quarter (April-June 2021) by no less than 24.7% over the same quarter in 2020 when the Covid-induced recession began.

That 24.7% revenue explosion compares to an average quarterly revenue gain of 4.5% over the past 5 (non-recession) years; and 3.4% average over the preceding 10 years after the last official recession ended in 2009.

So Corporate America did fantastically well as a result of the recession.

In contrast to the record gains of billionaires, stock shareholders, and big corpora-

tions in general, over the same year, more than 35 million American workers lost their jobs at one time or another, with at least 17 million still jobless: 12 million are still collecting unemployment benefits; 3 million dropped out of the labor force; and 1.5 million are still improperly classified as “furloughed but working” by the U.S. Labor Department (which it admits was incorrect but still refuses to correct).

That 17 million is twice the “official” number of 8.7 million jobless being pushed by the government and parroted by the mainstream media. Both numbers are from government sources, but politicians and media like to cherry pick the best number, even though it represents only part of the total picture.

Most of the U.S. workforce this past year also experienced big wage cuts, due in part to the massive unemployment (no job equals a total wage cut), or reduced hours of work (millions converted to part time from full time work), or just lower hourly pay over the same period. Wage collapse at the middle to lower end of the structure of wages in the U.S. left the highest paid, still working, receiving their higher salaries and pay. That raised the average pay in general while the vast majority saw their actual wages collapse. (Government and media also like to report this distorted figure of rising wages over the past year as well).

As the economy has begun to reopen again this summer 2021, some workers have returned to work, but now it appears that pace is slowing.

The June and July jobs reports by the Labor Department reflect a pick up of rehiring as many service industry workers have begun returning to work. But these aren’t “job gains” or new jobs in the economy. They are “job returns.” Moreover, signs are now emerging that the re-hiring is beginning to slow. Many industries and companies do not have plans to return all laid off this past year back to work.

They have already begun to implement artificial intelligence and other technologies that allow them to displace workers with machines and software.

Just as important, millions of workers who have returned have done so to jobs providing fewer hours of work per week and therefore less weekly earnings than before the recession. That’s likely a major reason why many laid off service workers are resisting returning to work. They’ll actually see less weekly pay due to the reduced work week. Others can’t return because affordable child care is not available. Others simply because they’ve come to realize their service occupations were dead-end, low paid, and unstable jobs. Future waves of Covid could once again throw them out on the street. Who can blame them for not returning.

Small businesses have also been on the negative receiving end of the recession. Most accounts show around a million small businesses have gone under despite the government’s fiscal bailout having provided about \$1 trillion in guaranteed loans and outright grants since March 2020. With nearly one million small business failures, one can only conclude from that much of the \$1 trillion in loans and grants bailout money did not get to those needing it most. Exposing how much of the bailout of small business was “gamed: and by whom is a work in progress but will certainly be revealed at some point.

Like workers and small businesses, the nearly 75 million renters (in 48 million rental units) have also been bearing the economic brunt of the pandemic. Many have been evicted this past year, despite the CDC-federal govt “moratorium” on rent payments. That moratorium—extended several times but now set to completely end by October 2021—has never been total. It has only covered rental units that have been supported some way by federal subsidies or rules. Millions have already fall-

en through the moratorium cracks. The floor will collapse for all come October. (Only six states have supplemental state rent moratoria in place—none in the south or midwest).

In recent weeks the fight over evicting renters has emerged in the media, along with reports that \$47 billion of the March 2020 Cares Act and \$52 billion earmarked for renter assistance has yet to get into the economy. The media likes to portray this as due to government bureaucratic bungling. But it ignores the fact that resistance by landlords to process the rent assistance is likely the real cause of the failure to disburse funds. Some landlords don't like the fact that the government assistance funds over cover 80% of the back rent. Others don't want to give up the right to collect all back payments in the future; others want to sell or convert the rental units others want to retain the right to evict even though receiving the assistance payments and others want to continue to evict if even one late payment occurs. The public does not know—and the mainstream media refuses to explain—that rental assistance payments must be filed both by the renter and the landlord. And millions of landlords have refused to file. Thus, the real cause of the \$47 billion not being paid.

Then there's the much-publicized child care assistance payments that began this past July, as part of the Biden American Rescue Plan (aka March 2021 \$1.8 trillion Covid Relief Act). While a positive program to make up for the discontinuation of supplemental unemployment benefits and rent assistance, what most Americans don't realize is that it only will run through December 2021—then it expires as well. Furthermore, it is not actual new real money payments to households, but a pulling forward into July-December 2021 child care payments that would have been received anyway from the IRS next April 2022, when filing with the IRS for the 2021 period

child care tax credit.

With recent developments—like the cutting off of unemployment benefits, the expiring of rent assistance, the gaming of small business bailouts, and the soon to expire child care benefits and end of student loan forbearance—one can conclude that a period of “creeping incremental austerity” for the many has already begun—exempting of course bankers, businesses and investors for whom it appears the free money will continue to flow. Fortune 500 companies, banks, and U.S. billionaires who have reaped massive income gains over the past year, appear exempted from any future austerity. **Z**

Follow Dr. Rasmus on his blog, jackrasmus.com, on Twitter at @drjackrasmus, or listen to his Alternative Visions radio show on the Progressive Radio Network every Friday at 2:00 PM Eastern time.