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Noam Chomsky: “What Next? The Elections, the Economy, and the World”

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AMY GOODMAN: President-elect Obama and vice president-elect Joe Biden are holding a news conference in Chicago to formally announce their team of economic advisers and their plans to rebuild the faltering economy. But as Obama assembles his cabinet and prepares to take over the reins from President Bush, more questions are being raised about the kind of change he will bring to Washington and the world.

Progressives who supported Obama’s candidacy and celebrated his historic victory are dismayed by his consideration of Clinton-era figures as his key advisors, many of whom championed financial deregulation and are hawkish on foreign policy.

World-renowned public intellectual Noam Chomsky discussed the meaning of Obama’s victory and the possibilities ahead for real democratic change at a recent address in Boston. Chomsky has been a professor of linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for over a half-century and is the author of dozens of influential books on US foreign policy, the role of intellectuals, and the function of mass media. In his first public appearance since the election Professor Chomsky spoke last week to a packed audience in Boston at an event organized by “Encuentro 5.” His talk was titled “What Next? The Elections, the Economy, and the World.”

NOAM CHOMSKY: Well, let’s begin with the elections. The word that the rolls off of everyone’s tongue is historic. Historic election. And I agree with it. It was a historic election. To have a black family in the white house is a momentous achievement. In fact, it’s historic in a broader sense. The two Democratic candidates were an African-American and a woman. Both remarkable achievements. We go back say 40 years, it would have been unthinkable. So something’s happened to the country in 40 years. And what’s happened to the country- which is we’re not supposed to mention- is that there was extensive and very constructive activism in the 1960s, which had an aftermath. So the feminist movement, mostly developed in the 70s—the solidarity movements of the 80’s and on till today. And the activism did civilize the country. The country’s a lot more civilized than it was 40 years ago and the historic achievements illustrate it. That’s also a lesson for what’s next.

What’s next will depend on whether the same thing happens. Changes and progress very rarely are gifts from above. They come out of struggles from below. And the answer to what’s next depends on people like you. Nobody else can answer it. It’s not predictable. In some ways, the election—the election was surprising in some respects.

Going back to my bad prediction, If the financial crisis hadn’t taken place at the moment that it did, if it had been delayed a couple of months, I suspect that prediction would have been correct. But not speculating, one thing surprising about the election was that it wasn’t a landslide.

bq. By the usual criteria, you would expect the opposition party to win in a landslide under conditions like the ones that exist today. The incumbent president for eight years was so unpopular that his own party couldn’t mention his

name and had to pretend to be opposing his policies. He presided over the worst record for ordinary people in post-war history, in terms of job growth, real wealth and so on. Just about everything the administration was touched just turned into a disaster. [The] country has reached the lowest level of standing in the world that it's ever had. The economy was tanking. Several recessions are going on. Not just the ones on the front pages, the financial recession. There's also a recession in the real economy. The productive economy, under circumstances and people know it. So 80% of the population say that the country's going in the wrong direction. About 80% say the government doesn't work to the benefit of the people, it works for the few and the special interests. A startling 94% complain that the government doesn't pay any attention to the public will, and on like that. Under conditions like that, you would expect a landslide to a opposition almost whoever they are. And there wasn't one.

So one might ask why wasn't there a landslide? That goes off in an interesting direction. And other respects the outcome was pretty familiar. So once again, the election was essentially bought. 9 out of 10 of the victors outspent their opponents. Obama of course outspent McCain. If you look at the—and we don't have final records yet from the final results, but they're probably going to be pretty much like the preliminaries a couple of months ago. Which showed that both Obama and McCain were getting the bulk of their financing from the financial institutions and for Obama, law firms which means essentially lobbyists. That was about over a third a few months ago. But the final results will probably be the same. And there is a—the distribution of funding has over time been a pretty good predictor of what policies will be like for those of you who are interested, there's very good scholarly work on this by Tom Ferguson in UMass Boston, what he calls the investment theory of politics. Which argues essentially that elections are moments when groups of investors coalesce and invest to control the state and has quite the substantial predictive success. Gives some suggestion as to what's likely to happen. So that part's familiar. The—what the future is as I say, depends on people like you.

The response for the election was interesting and instructive. It kept pretty much to the soaring rhetoric, to borrow the cliché, that was the major theme of the election. The election was described as an extraordinary display of democracy, a miracle that could only happen in America and on and on. Much more extreme than Europe even than here. There's some accuracy in that if we keep to the West. So if we keep to the West, yes, it's probably true. That couldn't have happened anywhere else. Europe was much more racist than the United States and you wouldn't expect anything like that to happen.

On the other hand, if you look at the world, it's not that remarkable. So let's take the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere. Haiti and Bolivia. In Haiti, there was an election in 1990 which really was an extraordinary display of democracy much more so than this.

In Haiti, there were grassroots movements, popular movements that developed in the slums and the hills, which nobody was paying any attention to. And they managed, even without any resources, to sweep into power their own candidate. A populist priest, Jean-Bertrand Aristide. That's a victory for democracy when popular movements can organize and set programs and pick their candidate and put them into office, which is not what happened here, of course.

I mean, Obama did organize a large number of people and many enthusiastic people in what's called in the press, Obama's Army. But the army is supposed to take instructions, not to implement, introduce, develop programs and call on its own candidate to implement them. That's critical. If the army keeps to that condition, nothing much will change. If it on the other hand goes away activists did in the sixties, a lot can change. That's one of the choices that has to be made. That's Haiti. Of course that didn't last very long. A couple of months later, there was military coup, a period of terror, we won't go through the whole record. Up the present, the traditional torturers of Haiti, France, and the United States have made sure that there won't be a victory for democracy there. It's a miserable story. Contrary to many illusions.

Take the second poorest country, Bolivia. They had an election in 2005 that's almost unimaginable in the West. Certainly here, anywhere. The person elected into office was indigenous. That's the most oppressed population in the hemisphere, those who survived. He's is a poor peasant. How did he get in? Well, he got in because there were again, a mass popular movement, which elected their own representative. And they are the source of the programs, which are serious ones. There's real issues, And people know them. Control over resources, cultural rights, social justice and so on.

Furthermore, the election was just an event that was particular stage in a long continuing struggle, a lot before and a lot after. There was day when people pushed the levers but that's just an event in ongoing popular struggles, very serious ones. A couple of years ago, there was a major struggle over privatization of water. An effort which it would in effect deprive a good part of the population of water to drink. And it was a bitter struggle. A lot of people were killed, but they won it. Through international solidarity, in fact, which helped. And it continues. Now that's a real election. Again, the plans, the programs are being developed, acted on constantly by mass popular movements, which then select their own representatives from their own ranks to carry out their programs. And that's quite different from what happened here.

Actually what happened here is understood by elite elements. The public relations industry which runs elections here-quadrennial extravaganzas essentially- makes sure to keep issues in the margins and focus on personalities and character and so on—and-so forth. They do that for good reasons. They know- they look at public opinion studies and they know perfectly well that on a host of major issues both parties are well to the right of the population. That's one good reason to keep issues off the table. And they recognize the success.

So, every year, the advertising industry gives a prize to, you know, to the best marketing campaign of the year. This year, Obama won the prize. Beat out Apple company. The best marketing campaign of 2008. Which is correct, it is essentially what happened. Now that's quite different from what happens in a functioning democracy like say Bolivia or Haiti, except for the fact that it was crushed. And in the South, it's not all that uncommon. Notice that each of these cases, there's a much more extraordinary display of democracy in action than what we've seen—important as it was—here. And so the rhetoric, especially in Europe is correct if we maintain our own narrow racist perspective and say yeah, what happened was in the South didn't happen or doesn't matter. The only matters is what we do and by our standards, it was extraordinary miracle, but not by the standards of functioning democracy. In fact, there's a distinction in democratic theory, which does separate say the United States from Bolivia or Haiti.

Question is what is a democracy supposed to be? That's exactly a debate that goes back to the constitutional convention. But in recent years in the 20th century, it's been pretty well articulated by important figures. So at the liberal end the progressive end, the leading public intellectual of the 20th century was Walter Lippman. A Wilson, Roosevelt, Kennedy progressive. And a lot of his work was on a democratic theory and he was pretty frank about it. If you took a position not all that different from James Madison's. He said that in a democracy, the population has a function. Its function is to be spectators, not participants. He didn't call it the population. He called it the ignorant and meddling outsiders. The ignorant and meddling outsiders have a function and namely to watch what's going on. And to push a lever every once in a while and then go home. But, the participants are us, us privileged, smart guys. Well that's one conception of democracy. And you know essentially we've seen an episode of it. The population very often doesn't accept this. As I mentioned, just very recent polls, people overwhelmingly oppose it. But they're atomized, separated. Many of them feel hopeless, unorganized, and don't feel they can do anything about it. So they dislike it. But that's where it ends.

In a functioning democracy like say Bolivia or the United States in earlier stages, they did something about it. That's why we have the New Deal measures, the Great Society measures. In fact just about any step, you know, women's rights, end of slavery, go back as far as you like, it doesn't happen as a gift. And it's not going to happen in the future. The commentators are pretty well aware of this. They don't put it the way I'm going to, but if you read the press, it does come out. So take our local newspaper at the liberal end of the spectrum, “Boston Globe,” you probably saw

right after the election, a front page story, the lead front page story was on how Obama developed this wonderful grassroots army but he doesn't have any debts. Which supposed to be a good thing. So he's free to do what he likes. Because he has no debts, the normal democratic constituency, labor, women, minorities and so on, they didn't bring him into office. So he owes them nothing

AMY GOODMAN: M.I.T. professor, author, political dissident, Noam Chomsky. We'll come back to this interview in a minute. You can get a copy of our show at democracynow.org. Stay with us.

[break]

AMY GOODMAN: I'm Amy Goodman. As we return now to professor Noam Chomsky's address in Boston. The election, the economy, and the world.

NOAM CHOMSKY: What he had was an army that he organized of people who got out the vote for Obama. For what the press calls, Brand Obama. They essentially agree with the advertisers, it's brand Obama. That his army was mobilized to bring him to office. They regard that as a good thing, accepting the Lippman conception of democracy, the ignorant and meddlesome outsiders are supposed to do what they're told and then go home. The Wall Street Journal, at the opposite end of the spectrum, also had an article about the same thing at roughly the same time. Talked about the tremendous grassroots army that has been developed, which is now waiting for instructions. What should they do next to press forward Obama's agenda? Whatever that is. But whatever it is, the army's supposed to be out there taking instructions, and press work. Los Angeles Times had similar articles, and there are others. What they don't seem to realize is what they're describing, the ideal of what they're describing, is dictatorship, not democracy. Democracy, at least not in the Lippman sense, it proved- I pick him out because he's so famous, but it's a standard position. But in the sense of say, much of the south, where mass popular movements developed programs; organize to take part in elections but that's one part of an ongoing process. And brings somebody from their own ranks to implement the programs that they develop, and if the person doesn't they're out. Ok, that's another kind of democracy. So it's up to us to choose which kind of democracy we want. And again, that will determine what comes next.

Well, what can we anticipate if the popular army, the grassroots army, decides to accept the function of spectators of action rather than participants? There's two kinds of evidence. There's rhetoric and there's action. The rhetoric, you know, is very uplifting: change, hope, and so on. Change was kind of reflective any party manager this year who read the polls, including the ones I cited, would instantly conclude that our theme in the election has to be change. Because people hate what's going on for good reasons. So the theme is change. In fact, both parties put both of them, the theme was change. So the theme is change. In fact both parties, both of them the theme was change. You know, break from the past, none of old politics, new things are going to happen. The Obama campaign did better so they won the marketing award, not the McCain campaign.

And notice incidentally on the side that the institutions that run the elections, public relations industry, advertisers, they have a role—their major role is commercial advertising. I mean, selling a candidate is kind of a side rule. In commercial advertising as everybody knows, everybody who has ever looked at a television program, the advertising is not intended to provide information about the product, all right? I don't have to go on about that. It's obvious. The point of the advertising is to delude people with the imagery and, you know, tales of a football player, sexy actress, who you know, drives to the moon in a car or something like that. But, that's certainly not to inform people. In fact, it's to keep people uninformed.

The goal of advertising is to create uninformed consumers who will make irrational choices. Those of you who suffered through an economics course know that markets are supposed to be based on informed consumers making rational choices. But industry spends hundreds of millions of dollars a year to undermine markets and to ensure, you know, to get uninformed consumers making irrational choices.

And when they turn to selling a candidate they do the same thing. They want uninformed consumers, you know, uninformed voters to make irrational choices based on the success of illusion, slander, and effective body language or whatever else is supposed to be significant. So you undermine democracy pretty much the same way you undermine markets. Well, that's the nature of an election when it's run by the business world, and you'd expect it to be like that. There should be no surprise there. And it should also turn out the elected candidate didn't have any debts. So you can follow Brand Obama can be whatever they decide it to be, not what the population decides that it should be, as in the south, let's say. I'm going to say on the side, this may be an actual instance of a familiar and unusually vacuous slogan about the clash of civilization. Maybe there really is one, but not the kind that's usually touted.

So let's go back to the evidence that we have, rhetoric and actions. Rhetoric we know, but what are the actions? So far the major actions are selections, in fact the only action, of personnel to implement Brand Obama. The first choice was the Vice President, Joe Biden, one of the strongest supporters of the war in Iraq in the Senate, a long time Washington insider rarely deviates from the party vote. In cases where he does deviate they're not very uplifting. He did break from the party and voting for a Senate resolution that prevented people from getting rid of their debts by, individuals, that is, from getting rid of their debts by going into bankruptcy. It's a blow against poor people who've caught in this immense debt that's a large part of the basis for the economy these days. But usually, he's a, kind of, straight party-liner with the democrats on the sort of ultra naturalist side. The choice of Biden was a, must have been a conscious attempt to show contempt for the base of people who were voting for Obama, or organizing for him as an anti-war candidate.

Well, the first post-election appointment was for Chief of Staff, which is a crucial appointment; determines a large part of the president's agenda. That was Rahm Emanuel, one of the strongest supporters of the war in Iraq in the House. In fact, he was the only member of the Illinois delegation who voted for Bush's effective declaration of war. And, again, a longtime Washington insider. Also, one of the leading recipients in congress of funding from the financial institutions hedge funds and so on. He himself was an investment banker. That's his background. So, that's the Chief of Staff.

The next group of appointments were the main problem, the primary issue that the governments' going to have to face is what to do about the financial crisis. Obama's choices to more or less run this were Robert Rubin and Larry Summers from the Clinton's Secretaries of Treasury under Clinton. They are among the people who are substantially responsible for the crisis. One leading economist, one of the few economists who has been right all along in predicting what's happening, Dean Baker, pointed out that selecting them is like selecting Osama Bin Laden to run the war on terror.

[laughter]

Yeah, I'll finish. This saves me the problem of what's coming next, so I'll finish with the elections. Let me make one final comment on this. There was meeting on November 7, I think of a group of couple, of a dozen advisers to deal with the financial crisis. Their careers were, records were reviewed in the business press, and Bloomberg News had an article reviewing their records and concluded that these people, most of these people shouldn't be giving advice about the economy. They should be given subpoenas.

[applause]

Because most of them were involved in one or other form of financial fraud, that includes Rahm Emanuel, for example. What reason is there to think that the people who brought this crisis about are some how going to fix it? Well, that's a good indication of what's likely to come next, at least if we look at actions. We couldn't, but it won't. You can bring this up. Ask what we expect to see in particular cases. And there's evidence about that from statements

from Obama's website. I'll mention just one thing about Obama's website, which gives an indication of what's happening. One of the major problems coming is Afghanistan and Pakistan. That's pretty serious. Take a look at Obama's website under issues, foreign policy issues. The names don't even appear. I mean, we're supposed to be ignorant and meddling outsiders. We're not supposed to know what Brand Obama is. So you can't find out that way. The statements that you hear are pretty hawkish. And it doesn't change much as you go through the list. I'll wrap up here. So it's up to you to continue.

UNKNOWN: There you go.

[applause]

AMY GOODMAN: Noam Chomsky, MIT. Professor, world-renowned linguist, author of more than 100 books, his first major address since the elections. He gave it last week in Boston.