



Noam Chomsky's keynote speech at the "Two Minutes To Midnight" International Conference (May 12th 2018)

This transcript may not be 100% accurate due to audio quality or other factors.

Dan Ellsberg describes his remarkable new book which is essential reading as "a chronicle of human madness" and the record that's reviewed easily lives up to the title and raises serious questions about whether the human species is an evolutionary error.

An objective and informed observer might conclude that since World War II, the species has been dedicated to establishing the thesis that humans are simply a mistake. That actually should have occurred too, to everyone with eyes open on August 6 1945, a day that I remember all too vividly, both the horrifying news and the casual reaction to it. Actually, it resonated when I read recently a William Perry's comment that he is doubly terrified: both by the extreme and mounting dangers and by the lack of concern over the threat of terminal destruction.

Those awful events of August 6 taught us that human intelligence, in its glory, had devised means of destruction that would surely soon escalate to the point where a mass suicide would be imminent and that's indeed what has ensued. Those familiar with the record will be aware that it's a near miracle that we've survived this far and such miracles cannot be expected to persist. It's all too easy to list flash points around the world that might right now, tomorrow, explode to terminal conflagration. And it's useful to remember that when the Doomsday Clock was first set back in 1947, it was 7 minutes to midnight, which seems like Halcyon days today, from our perspective.

Well, in 1945 we did not yet know that the nuclear age, the onset of the nuclear age, coincided with the onset of a new geological epoch, the so-called Anthropocene, in which humans are laboring not only to destroy organized human life, but many other species, too, because of the accompanying Sixth Extinction - that proceeds along with the Anthropocene - proceeds on its lethal course.

Well, there have been debates about the onset of the Anthropocene but last year the World Geological Organization settled on the beginning of the postwar era, because of the sharp escalation in environmental destruction that is taking place since that time, and when the Doomsday Clock was moved to two minutes to midnight last January, the accompanying statement opened by - and I quote - warning of the failure “to respond effectively to the looming threats of nuclear war and climate change, making the world security situation more dangerous than it was a year ago and as dangerous as it has been since World War II,” which I think is an understatement.

Our prime concern here is on the first of these threats, the nuclear age, but it’s hard to avoid mention of the utterly astonishing fact that the most powerful state in human history, with unparalleled advantages, is not only refusing to join the rest of the world in making at least some effort to deal with the imminent and quite devastating threat of global warming, but worse yet, is devoting its energies to accelerating the race to destruction and all for the exalted purpose of stuffing a few more dollars into overstuffed pockets before we say goodbye to the hopes for survival.

And also, it’s hard to not mention the no less astonishing fact that so little notice is taken of this amazing spectacle, it’s hard to find, I can’t find a historical precedent for it and what it all tells us about our society and our culture, and again that’s doubly terrifying.

But let’s keep to the nuclear threat. There will be little disagreement here I’m sure on the compelling need to eliminate, to rid the earth of the scourge of nuclear weapons, and others today will surely discuss the many ways to approach this goal. But I’d therefore like to say a few words about a different topic, different though clearly related, one which I don’t think receives the attention that it deserves.

And we might approach the topic that I have in mind by formulating a simple question. It’s worth some reflection: What would happen if political leaders decided to obey the Supreme Law of the Land? Just our own laws. In particular, to obey the United Nations Charter, a treaty made by the United States, and in the words of the Constitution, article 6, thus part of the supreme Law of the Land. That supreme Law of the Land obligates us to resort to peaceful means in the event of international disputes and to refrain from the THREAT - I stress threat - or use of force in international affairs. That’s an obligation under the Constitution.

And you might ask yourself when that legal obligation was last observed by the President or any other high officials. And we might... you know the answer to that, and we might also reflect on what that means.

Well, adherence to the supreme Law of the Land in the past would have spared us many tragedies, as well as some very near super-tragedies. One crucial case instantly comes to mind, should not be forgotten, adherence to the supreme Law of the Land would have saved us from what Arthur Schlesinger rightly called “the most dangerous moment in history,” Schlesinger’s term for the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. The frightening story should be familiar, I won’t review it, except to mention that Washington’s, Kennedy’s terrorist war against Cuba, which of course was a serious violation of the U.S. Constitution, was a

significant factor in inducing Khrushchev to undertake the reckless act of placing missiles in Cuba, as scholarship now fully recognizes.

Dan Ellsberg, who followed the events closely from a privileged position within the government at that time; he now concludes that the terrorist war was probably *the* prime factor in Khrushchev's decision. The facts about that are not as well-known as they should be, but you should recall that Kennedy's official plan for the terrorist war was formulated in National Security Memorandum 181, September 1962 and I'll quote it, the plan was "to engineer an internal revolt [in October] that would be followed by U.S. military intervention." That was a month before the Missile Crisis and in fact terror was being escalated at that point in preparation, and was a very serious matter. The record reveals that quite clearly and more than enough was surely known to Cuba and Russia.

Well, in brief, respect for the U.S. Constitution would very likely have averted the most dangerous moment in history, and it was no small matter. Those of you familiar with it know that we escaped it by a near miracle and it's much too little understood.

Well, legality aside, there are perhaps some other reasons, other questions that might be raised about a murderous and destructive terrorist war. Or so one might assume, but mistakenly. There's a review of released government documents on the terrorist war by a Harvard Latin America scholar, Jorge Domínguez, and he writes that "only once in these nearly thousand pages of documentation did a U.S. official raise something that resembled a faint moral objection to U.S. government sponsored terrorism": a member of the National Security Council staff suggested that the terrorist raids are "haphazard and kill innocents, which might mean a bad press in friendly countries." That's it. So perhaps it's not a good idea. That's it in a thousand pages of documentation. The terrorist war, is a prime, if not *the* prime (example of that) fact that engendered the crisis, and incidentally for those of you who have read the ExComm transcripts, the detailed transcripts of deliberations about the crisis, it is literally not mentioned once, it just doesn't matter. It's our right. Our right to conduct terrorist wars which lead to virtual destruction and there's no need to even think about it, for the few people who even know about it.

Well, respect for elementary moral values as well as respect for law would have spared the world, very likely would have spared the world this close brush with terminal disaster, it's not the first time, it's not the last time, up till the moment.

And the same guiding principles, that is, simply observing the law, offer promising ways to deal with the crises that led to - I quote the Doomsday Clock announcement again - led to a "world security situation... as dangerous as it has been since World War II," that's the latest setting of the Doomsday Clock, as close as it's come to terminal disaster since 1953, when also two minutes to midnight, when the United States and later the Soviet Union exploded thermonuclear weapons. So, let's take a look at the examples that are mentioned, the cases that are mentioned in the current Doomsday Clock statement.

Well, the first one is North Korea. So, has there been a diplomatic path in the case of the North Korea situation?

There is one possibility, it's been advanced by China for some years, support of Russia, intermittent support from North Korea, and that's a double freeze: North Korea would freeze its development of nuclear weapons and missiles, the United States in response would cease its military actions, threatening military actions on the borders. That includes menacing flights by nuclear-capable bombers, the most advanced U.S. bombers, and that's not a laughing matter in a country that was flattened by US bombs, merciless U.S. bombing in easy memory, and in fact when there was nothing left to destroy because all the targets were done, the U.S. Air Force simply destroyed the dams, exultant comments about it in the official documents, the *Air Force Quarterly*; this was, if anybody cares, a crime for which Nazi war criminals were hanged at Nuremberg.

Well, a double freeze would have opened the way to further negotiations, that might have gone as far as what was achieved in 2005. And it's worth bearing in mind what that was because the press has been seriously distorting what happened in 2005, which was that under international pressure, President Bush agreed to enter into the six power negotiations and there was substantial success. I'll quote, North Korea agreed, and now I'm quoting the agreement, North Korea agreed to abandon "all nuclear weapons and existing weapons programs" and to allow international inspections. So, let me repeat that because there are constant lies about it every time you open the newspaper: North Korea agreed to abandon "all nuclear weapons and existing weapons programs" and allow international inspections. In return, the United States was to provide a light water reactor for medical use, issue a non-aggression pledge, and join in an agreement that the two sides - and I'm quoting - would "respect each other's sovereignty, exist peacefully together and take steps to normalize relations." That was 2005. So, what happened?

Instantly, within days, the Bush administration tore the agreement to shreds. It renewed the threat of force, it froze North Korean funds in foreign banks and it disbanded the consortium that was to provide North Korea with a light water reactor. Bruce Cumings, the leading Korea scholar you know, writes that "the sanctions were specifically designed to destroy the September pledges #and# to head off the accommodation between Washington and Pyongyang." That's 2005 and I won't review the press, common press coverage of this, but open the newspaper and you'll see it. So, it's exactly the opposite.

The path could've been pursued for several years, and now as we know there are even better options.

So, a couple of weeks ago, on April 27th, North and South Korea alone signed a historic document, the Panmunjom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity and Unification of the Korean Peninsula. And the words of the document are worth reading closely and carefully. In the Declaration - I'm quoting it now - the two Koreas "affirmed the principle of determining the destiny of the Korean nation on their own accord" - "on their own accord" - those are very important words. They went on to call for... to completely cease all hostile acts against each other in every domain,... [to]... actively cooperate to establish a permanent and solid peace regime on the Korean Peninsula... to carry out disarmament in a phased manner, #in order to achieve# the common goal of realizing, through complete denuclearization, a nuclear-free

Korean Peninsula... to strengthen the positive momentum towards continuous advancement of inter-Korean relations as well as the peace, prosperity and unification of the Korean Peninsula.” And they further “agreed to actively seek the support and cooperation of the international community [which means the United States] for the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.”

And furthermore, as Korea specialist Chung-in Moon reviews in a current issue of *Foreign Affairs*, the two Koreas did not just make high-level commitments - I’m quoting him - They also laid out specific timetables for implementing them and took concrete steps that will have immediate effects in facilitating cooperation and preventing conflict, which is as he points out “something new and significant.” There have been agreements before but never with this specificity.

And again, it’s important to read the words of the Declaration carefully. Their import is very clear. The United States should back off and allow the two Koreas to achieve peace, disarmament, unification, and complete denuclearization. We should accept the call for support and cooperation with this endeavor on the part of the Korean nation, its two parts, to determine their destiny “on their own accord.” Crucial words of the declaration.

So, to put it more simply, the Declaration is a polite letter, saying “Dear Mr. Trump, declare victory if you want to prance around in public, but please just go away and let us move towards peace, denuclearization and disarmament.”

And the plea could hardly be more clear. It’s very far from the interpretation here and that’s worth paying attention too as well, so the general reaction here was lucidly articulated by Mark Landler, foreign policy specialist in the *New York Times*, when he explained that the Declaration complicates Washington’s strategy - I’m quoting him - “Mr. Trump will find it hard to threaten military action against a country that is extending an olive branch.” And it’s true. It’s pretty hard to threaten military action, which incidentally is a criminal act, we remember the threat of force is a criminal act, and it’s hard to do that when the target is extending an olive branch, so we really have some problems.

So, clearly - it’s very clear that peaceful means are available to mitigate one of the most serious of the threats that’s bringing the world as close to terminal disaster as it’s been since World War II, since the onset of the nuclear age. And citizen efforts can be significant, maybe even decisive, in realizing the prospects for peace in Northeast Asia that now are indeed before us. And realizing efforts to ensure that Washington does not once again undermine the prospects for peace in Northeast Asia. And I stress once again, since it is not the first time.

It’s also worth noting that U.S. analysts have been very clear and quite frank about the real nature of the North Korea threat. So, here’s foreign affairs commentator Max Fisher in the *New York Times*, he writes that North Korea “has achieved what no country has since China developed its own program a half-century ago: a nuclear deterrent against the United States.” They’ve achieved that and Trump’s threats and sanctions, he says, have not succeeded “to reverse or stall these gains.” So, clearly we must do something to prevent anyone from

detering our resort to force and violence. That's a fundamental principle of US foreign policy.

Well, let's turn to Iran, which poses a similar problem, similar to North Korea. Among specialists, across the spectrum, the political spectrum, you find very few who would disagree with the conclusion of the respected and properly conservative International Institute of Strategic Studies, this is 2010, when there was still some thought that maybe Iran is developing nuclear weapons, and they concluded that "Iran's nuclear program and the willingness to keep open the possibility of developing nuclear weapons is a central part of its deterrent strategy." US intelligence concurs, they were reporting to Congress regularly that the Iranian "threat" is part of their deterrent strategy.

And again, it's intolerable to the two rogue states that rampage in the region, that anyone should have a deterrent.

There is much talk about Iran's possible violations of the JCPOA, the joint program, the Iran Deal, even though the International Atomic Energy Agency in concurrence of US intelligence has repeatedly given Iran a clean bill of health. There, however, is virtually no talk about the fact that the U.S. has been violating the agreement from the very beginning and is continuing to do so. So, the U.S., if you read the agreement... the U.S. has in fact been repeatedly seeking to block Iran's reintegration into the global economy, particularly the global financial systems controlled right here in New York, and to undermine - I'm quoting the agreement - to undermine "the normalization of trade and economic relations with Iran." All of that is in violation of the agreements, a strict violation, it's ignored, on the prevailing tacit assumption that "the indispensable nation" stands above the law.

Well, Trump's decision a couple of days ago to effectively withdraw from the agreement was not surprising, it was of course anticipated. And contrary to what is often said, Trump is actually highly predictable. He's constantly described as unpredictable, but that's simply untrue. In fact, you can predict with close precision exactly what he's going to do as simply by recognizing the guiding principle, which is quite simple, the guiding principle is: me, me, me (exclamation mark). And there's a corollary, namely: if anything was done by the black demon, maybe antichrist, who preceded, then you do the opposite. Just think through the policy decisions of the last couple of years and it predicts it with virtual precision and it just doesn't matter what the consequences are. It's kind of irrelevant, just like I'm destroying the climate is somebody else's business, and in this case the consequences might be, we don't know, to induce Iranian hardliners to return to nuclear programs which they had abandoned, that could provide an opening for John Bolton, Netanyahu, the rest of them, to realize their openly stated goals of direct aggression, with consequences that range from awful to horrendous.

Well, are there peaceful options? And in this case, the question simply doesn't even arise. The U.S. could rejoin the world, could permit the JCPOA to function effectively as it's been doing and perhaps the U.S. might even refrain from regular and constant violations of the agreement. All of that, it's possibility.

But actually, we can do a lot better than that. There is one point on which I agree with President Trump. He's constantly talking about ways to improve the agreement, and there are ways, very interesting ways. And the most obvious and constructive ones for some odd reason are never mentioned, so let me mention them. The agreement could be extended to moving towards establishing a Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone in the Middle East. The spread of such zones around the world is valuable in itself for mitigating the threats but it also has symbolic significance of no slight importance, simply as an expression of the global determination to rid the world of these monstrous devices. And in the troubled Middle East region, it would be of particular importance.

I'll just come back to that in a moment but as an aside, we might bear in mind that in other regions such positive steps to reduce the threat of nuclear weapons have been attempted, but they've impeded by the refusal of one country to permit the zones to go into effect. So, there's in Africa a Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone but it can't go into effect. It's held back by Washington's development of nuclear facilities in Diego Garcia, which is regularly used for bombing Central Asia. It was particularly true under Obama who rapidly extended it to include nuclear submarines and nuclear prepositioning. There is a Pacific Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone that could, but can't go into effect because of U.S. insistence that US military bases there accommodate nuclear weapons. So that's more work for us to do. Make it public, do something about it.

Well, coming back to the Middle East, serious steps towards a Nuclear Weapons-free Zone would undercut any imaginable threat that Iran is alleged to pose. And there's no need to obtain Iran's acquiescence. They've been vociferously calling for years, particularly as the spokesperson for the G-77, for the non-aligned countries, which are strongly calling for this for years. What about the Arab states? Absolutely no problem, they are the ones who initiated the proposal and it started with Egypt about twenty years ago, so they are strongly in favor. There is overwhelming international support. So, why doesn't it happen? Well, actually the matter does come up every five years in the NPT (Nuclear Proliferation Treaty) review sessions and there's one problem: the United States vetoes it. That's why it doesn't happen. Last one was Obama in 2015. And the reason is perfectly obvious to everyone, we don't even have to bother stating it: Israel's nuclear weapons systems must not be subject even to inspection, let alone steps towards dismantlement. There are various reasons given for this but they are below even discussion, not even worth mentioning. We understand the reasons and so matters stand. We cannot improve the JCPOA in the obvious manner.

It's important to add to this that the United States along with the United Kingdom have a special responsibility to work to establish a Middle East Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone. They are committed to this goal, these two countries specifically are committed to this goal, by an important Security Council Resolution 687, Article 14, if you want to look it up, it commits those who initiated and voted for the resolution, US and Britain, to move to establish a Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone and that commitment takes on even greater force because it's this resolution to which the US and Britain appealed when they were seeking desperately to find some shred of a legal pretext for invading Iraq. Well, it's another example that illustrates the value of observing the supreme Law of the Land and even of referring to it, you might find, see if you can find anyone even discussing these facts.

Well, I won't go on but case by case, serious investigation reveals the wisdom of the principles of the Charter, and I feel of the Founders who created the constitutional obligation to abide by valid treaties. It could be argued, and indeed often is argued that law, including international law, is a living instrument and its substance changes depending on prevailing practice, which would, of course, include the practice of the global hegemonic power, and we need not tarry on the conclusions that would follow from this line of reasoning. But concerned citizens should not tolerate these conclusions. And it's unnecessary to stress that a great deal is at stake in reversing them, reaching as far as safeguarding the future of humanity.

Thank you.

END