

Thomas Sowell interview on August 6, 2010
This is an unedited transcript of the interview

Peter: Welcome to Uncommon Knowledge, I'm Peter Robinson. Be sure to follow us on Twitter if you would at www.Twitter.com/UNCKnowledge. www.twitter.com/UNCKnowledge, to ask questions, suggest guests. A fellow with the Hoover Institution, Dr. Thomas Sowell has taught economics, intellectual history and social policy at such institutions as Cornell, Amherst, and UCLA. The author of more than a dozen books, Dr. Sowell has just published a collection of essays, *Dismantling America*. Tom welcome.

Tom: Good to be here.

Peter: Segment 1. *Decline and Fall* from *Dismantling America*, "the collapse of the civilization is not just the replacement of rulers or institutions with new rulers and new institutions; it is the destruction of a whole way of life and the painful and sometimes pathetic attempts of rebuilding, amid the ruins. Is that where America is headed? I believe it is." Now, whatever troubles we have, it's still the richest most powerful nation in the world. We're still fundamentally at peace, some soldiers in Iraq, some soldiers in Afghanistan, some in Germany, some in South Korea, but relatively small wars, by historical standards in Afghanistan and Iraq. How can you say such a thing?

Tom: Well you know that description also fit the United States on December 6, 1941.

Peter: Okay, so...go ahead.

Tom: It's like what I used when I was asked the question whether Social Security was fiscally sound. And I say Social Security has never missed a payment. It has never been a day late or a dollar short and I said that's always true right up to the moment of collapse.

Peter: Alright, again from *Dismantling America*. While the Obama Administration is the root cause of the ominous dangers that face this country at home and abroad, it is the embodiment, the personification, and the culmination of dangerous trends that began decades ago. How does the President of the United States embody dangerous trends? How do you see this man?

Tom: Oh my gosh, I see him as someone who all his life has been associated with and a part of a group of people who fundamentally don't believe in the principles of this country. Not, only well the most obvious example is Jeremiah, right...people like Bill Ayers, who he has tried to disavow, but people who fundamentally think that we're on the wrong track...we have the wrong principles and we need to be changed, whether we want to be or not.

Peter: Tom, you mentioned Jeremiah Wright, the pastor at the church in Chicago, you mentioned Bill Ayers, who was a former member of...

Tom: The Weather Underground terrorist group.

Peter: The Weather Underground. What about his formation, his intellectual formation at Columbia, Harvard Law School...

Tom: He, himself says that he always sought out the most radical people. He worked as a community organizer. I don't think most people stop and think, but what does a community organizer do...he doesn't organize a community?

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Peter: It's not bake sales.

Tom: Huh?

Peter: It's not bake sales that he is organizing.

Tom: No, he's not telling the people in the community how to shop better and stuff like; he is mobilizing all the resentments, organizing them in order to put them into a battle to get what they want from other people.

Peter: Now, you talk about Barack Obama as embodying dangerous trends, "that began decades ago."

Tom: Oh yes.

Peter: When...this is during your lifetime, during your adult lifetime?

Tom: Yes and perhaps even a little earlier. But I think what you see in the...most clearly I think in the academic world, are people who don't think that this country is a great country. One example...a colleague of mine who teaches at Harvard...after 911 put out an American flag on his car. And his colleagues said what is that for? When I visited Berkeley in the aftermath of 911, there were flags everywhere...I did not see one flag on the Berkeley Campus...on any of those expensive houses. You know, as I was coming back from Berkeley, the first American Flag I saw was in a low income black neighborhood in Oakland. These are people who consider themselves citizens of the world and the rest of us are so lucky to have them here to change America so that people like us don't have a voice. And of course the whole way that Obama has operated, with these enormous bills that no one had ever had time to read...they were rushed through. Well they are putting people in power who don't have to go through the confirmation process, so that we don't find out what they are like except via – well if there is an expose on Fox News or some place. I mean the whole thing has been to circumvent the American public in order to put in things that they clearly don't want, as shown by the polls, as shown by the recent repudiation in Missouri.

Peter: That's a question...Barack Obama won by about seven percentage points. That's the biggest...for a democratic presidential candidate. Bill Clinton won by eight, FDR won by big, but he is in the top three democratic finishers in the last seven decades, Barack Obama is. So, here's the question. You've described him, you have described the academic elite's...to what extent...the American people voted for him...to what extent do you see a corrosion in values among the American people themselves on the one hand. On the other hand, to what extent is there just a kind of creeping take over by an elite that fails to share and is opposed to the values that most Americans share?

Tom: It's both things and I think part of the reason that so many people voted for him was that what they got through the media was so filtered that you know...they pooh-poohed this man for having been the member of a church run by a ranting racist...because they wanted to believe that he was going to be a unifier. Community organizers don't unify, they divide, they polarize, and that's how they get what they want. I never thought of Acorn as a unifying force in American life. And this man is not, but of course if they don't know than of course, they may vote for him.

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Peter: So, it's the press? It's Barack Obama and the Administration; it's the élite's at academic institutions...

Tom: But it's not just a thing that happened now. Long before Barack Obama's name became known, there was this attitude essentially repudiating the principals of the country. I just thought about Woodrow Wilson, who was the first President of the United States to openly say that the Constitution needed to be superseded. Now, he didn't mean there needed to be amendments to the Constitution, which anybody can _____ [00:07:19] for, the Courts should do this. In order words, circumvent the public...the voting public and put in the things that the Judges think ought to be put, irrespective of what the constitution said.

Peter: We will return to Judges in a moment. Segment II – *Dismantling America*, two quotations, the first comes from your book, *Dismantling America*. This segment is on marriage. “Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes,” you write, “said that the life of the law has not been logic, but experience. Vast numbers of laws have accumulated and evolved over the centuries, based on experience with male, female unions. There is no reason why all those laws should be transferred willy nilly to a different kind of union, one with neither the inherent tendency to produce children or the inherent asymmetries of relationships between people of different sexes.” That's quotation one. Here's quotation two. U.S. District Judge Fawn Walker, ruling in *Perry vs Schwartzanegger* on August 4, 2010. “Gender no longer forms an essential part of marriage.” I dropped that in your lap to see what you do with it, Dr. Sowell.

Tom: Well you know, the most important decision is always who makes the decision? And so the question is not; what is the role of gender for this Judge to decide, but since we are presumably still for the moment, at least a self-governing nation, it is for the voting public to decide. So, the fact that he feels that way, that's wonderful let him vote that way in the privacy of the voting booth, but let him not say that this is now the law of the land, just because he happens to think that way.

Peter: Tom, let me give you just another couple of quotations from Judge Vaughn Walker's ruling the other day. Judge Walker, the traditional understanding of marriage represents, “nothing more than an artifact of a foregone notion that men and women fulfill different roles in civic life.” That's an artifact.

Tom: Well one might say that Judge Walker is an artifact of what goes on in academia in the law schools. But again, the question is whose decision is that? Is that a Judge is there to decide what the rest of us and what we believe is just not worth thinking about? Or he is the man to carry out the law that has been passed by our duly elected representatives?

Peter: Tom you know that during this trial he had a long fact finding phase, in which one sociologist after another came in to testify about the roles of genders, the state of marriage in the twenty-first century and so forth. You just brush all that aside?

Tom: No, none of that is a substitute for “We the People,” which is what the Constitution is about. I could give you an impressive list of people who have said absurd things. In fact, if you were to make a list of the absurd things said by brilliant people, it would be longer than the encyclopedia Britannica.

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Peter: Alright, one more from Judge Walker here. "The evidence shows conclusively that moral and religious views form the only basis for the belief that same sex couples are different from opposite sex couples."

Tom: Well it may be conclusive, but again the question is whose decision is it? Obviously, it is not conclusive to other people or else the proposition that he was ruling on would never have passed.

Peter: And passed with the votes of seven million Californians.

Tom: Yeah, by the way.

Peter: Let me ask you and just to step back from that a little bit and ask you this question; how did we go in the space of a couple of decades...maybe three, but I think probably closer to two...from an America in which the notion of same sex marriage was literally unthinkable. That is to say, it was in nobody's head. So outlandish that it never occurred to anyone to a sitting Judge, Federal Judge named to the Federal bench by the way by George H.W. Bush...

Tom: Heaven help us.

Peter: Coming out with an opinion like this. What happened to the legal regimen to the social morays, what...

Tom: This is why I say that Obama is really the culmination of trend. He didn't do this by himself. That there was a notion out there, several notions really about the country...about what was right and who should make what decisions...those notions were out there before he ever became a public figure. But now...and I think what you saw was an erosion of the confidence in the country in the country's culture, its principles and so forth, and all of this happened. And what is happening now is what was just an erosion sort of - almost uncoordinated and so on...to a deliberate attempt on his part to change the country in fundamental ways.

Peter: Now, you talked about Woodrow Wilson, with a certain kind of wrath setting in with Woodrow Wilson progressed as sort of the leadism ...I, Woodrow Wilson know far better than the nonentity James Madison...but in more recent times...times that you and I can remember, we had Ronald Reagan and the sense that somehow the country was coming back. How do you go from Ronald Reagan to Barack Obama...how do you go from a reassertion of what seems to be fundamental faith in the country to a Judge Vaughn Walker. What happened in the space of just two to three decades?

Tom: Well I think it started immediately with Reagan's successor, George H.W. Bush. No doubt a decent man, an honorable man, but one disdained what he called this vision thing. In other words, an over washing sense of principles that you should be fighting for. To me, I think one of the moments that sort of gave a clue was when during one of the presidential debates when Bush is looking at his wife...I can't imagine Ronald Reagan or any democrat for that matter, looking at his wife during a - Bush was - I think the first moment that you saw a glimpse of this was when Bush first took office - he was forty-one and started talking about a kinder and gentler America. It's kinder and gentler to tax payers...in order to make it easier on people who have not lived up to their responsibilities. You see that right now with the extremes of this Administration, where people who

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never took out a seven hundred thousand dollar loan in their lives, now have to subsidize people who did take out a seven hundred thousand dollar mortgage loan and couldn't afford it.

Peter: So, it is the case that either you have a Ronald Reagan in place, fighting for American principles and Ronald Reagan's don't come along that often, or even a republican and temperamentally conservative President, such as George H.W. Bush, will come under such cultural and political pressures that the drift to the left...that will continue.

Tom: Oh yes. Yes, what you have generally had in recent times is that people moving to left rapidly under the democrats and slowly under republicans.

Peter: Alright. Segment III – *Dismantling the Culture*. From your book Tom, *Dismantling America*, “The great escape of our times is escape from personal responsibility.” What do you mean?

Tom: Oh, I think that idea that personal responsibility is more or less off the table. It is passe in many places. Again, going back to say the housing situation...that people took out mortgages that they couldn't afford. People who didn't take out mortgages they couldn't afford are now expected to pay...to bail them out. It's insane.

Peter: But they were duped by dishonest mortgage brokers.

Tom: [Laughter] Oh there was enough dishonesty to go around...we don't need to single out mortgage brokers. Ah...no that's the narrative. The fact of the matter is that speculators took advantage...these things are put...these laws and policies are put into place saying this is going to help the poor and the down trodden. But what the question is – who actually benefits from this? Speculators benefitted from this more than any poor or any down trodden. A speculator could come in; claim any income he wanted to claim in order to buy three or four houses. Nobody would verify the income...he would get teaser rates like 2%/year and he didn't worry about them going up later because he was going to sell the house beforehand. So, a lot of that was in there. The other thing is that – it's a very complicated financial situation, but the cold fact is that if the mortgages were continued to be paid, we wouldn't have had the mortgage crisis. So, the fundamental reason of the crisis is that the mortgages weren't paid and the fundamental reason that they weren't paid is that they were made under conditions that made it unlikely that they would ever be repaid. You knew that going in.

Peter: Right, right. Uhm...losing sense of personal responsibility you write in *Dismantling America*, places, “a whole society in jeopardy.” How is that the case? How do you draw a line from the mortgage crisis to the dismantling of the entire country?

Tom: Well I think if you don't have a sense of personal responsibility and what you have is the government taking money from people who are personally responsible and giving it to people who are irresponsible, or in many other cases corrupt...that's not a viable situation for the long term. You are going to have ever more people being ever more irresponsible. As is happening now in the wake of the mortgage crisis, they have raised the limit that the Federal Housing Administrative will insure from about three hundred and sixty thousand to seven hundred and twenty some thousand. So they have doubled the policy that got us into the problem in the first place.

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Peter: Tom, on personal responsibility, you and I have talked about this before, you spent part of your boyhood in Harlem, is that correct?

Tom: Yes, most of it.

Peter: Alright. Tell me a little bit about the Harlem that you knew as a boy. Was it safe at night?

Tom: Yes, when I would wake up in the middle of the night, ah I would get up, get dressed, and go out to a corner newsstand when it was a little old man, who was white...selling the newspapers in Harlem at midnight. Now, today he and I would both be taken in for mental observations.

[Laughter]

Peter: How were the schools in the Harlem of your boyhood?

Tom: Oh they were among the best in the country.

Peter: Public schools?

Tom: I only went to public schools. I have data on the actual test scores of kids in Harlem...they were almost identical to the kids in the lower east side, who were almost all white. Ah, nobody was concerned about getting school lunches and stuff like that. They didn't ask me whether my home was broken or not. They just told me what I was supposed to do and they made damn sure I did it.

Peter: Do your homework, get your assignments in.

Tom: That's it.

Peter: Tom, what happened between the Harlem of your boyhood, which would be what...late forties to the mid-fifties or something?

Tom: Oh, forties...my school I attended in Harlem was 1939.

Peter: Oh really. So, you grew up – you were there during the second World War?

Tom: Oh yes.

Peter: Okay, so take me from the Harlem of your boyhood and this theme of personal responsibility to the Harlem of the seventies and eighties.

Tom: Oh, there you got the teachers who became social workers. Social theorists and began – became propaganda for all kinds of new fads. I guess the test was whether they made the teachers feel that it was exciting and made the students feel good about themselves. Of course, they ended with no education that is worth talking about.

Peter: And what about the crime rates?

Tom: Oh, my goodness the crime rates were much lower.

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Peter: Much lower when you were a boy, but...so what do you attribute the rise in crime?

Tom: Oh, the rise and the idea that we have to look for the root cause of crime, rather than put the bad guys in jail.

Peter: Alright. So, the disillusion of this sense of personal responsibility that the teacher is to teach, the child is to do his homework, criminals are to be picked up and put in jail...now Harlem today is pretty safe. It has enjoyed the increase in safety or the drop in crime rates associated with the rest of New York that began under Rudy Giuliani...the Harlem economy is pretty robust and Harlem is now home to some two dozen charter school. So, what I am trying to do Tom, is cheer you up. I am trying.

Tom: I need it.

Peter: I am trying to point to evidence of the possibility of renewal, of rebirth, and that to suggest...

Tom: I never denied that there was a possibility for renewal and rebirth. I would say in fact, even in my book I say that the one good thing is that nothing is inevitable until it happens. But, I also point out that there were periods of improvement as the Roman Empire moved toward its last days.

Peter: Right. Segment IV, *Dismantling Self Government* - again Tom, from *Dismantling America* - "Nothing so epitomizes President Obama's contempt for American values and traditions, as ramming two Bills; the Stimulus Package and the Health Care Bill this would be through Congress in his first year - each Bill more than a thousand pages long...to fast to either be read, much less discussed." The Stimulus Package...the Healthcare Bill, I actually looked this up and it came to more than two thousand pages. On the other hand, the American people elected Barack Obama, they gave him big democratic majorities in both the House and the Senate, why shouldn't Barack Obama and his democratic allies enact whatever they want, as they want.

Tom: Well whatever they want is one thing, as they want it is something else. As they want means circumventing the whole political system of a country that is meant to safeguard a self-governing country. If you never learn what kind of laws are being passed, then you've lost a great deal of your ability to influence what happens to the people to rule. I mean the thing - this whole business with rushing these Bills through reminds - the only thing I could find in parallel in history is the Norman conquerors who would publish their laws in England in French for an English-speaking nation.

Peter: *Dismantling America* once again, what are beltway politicians buying with all the hundreds of billions of dollars they are spending. They are buying what politicians are most interested in - power. Explain that notion.

Tom: There are things that the government is authorized to do under the Constitution and other things that they are not authorized to do. But, simply spending a vast amount of money, you acquire the right to that. For example; you can fire the head of General Motor, simply because you've spent all that money buying or rescuing General Motors. There are all kinds of programs that the Federal Government imposes on the States, which they have no authority to do, but they impose them because they make the receipt of Federal money contingent on doing what they tell you in

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Washington. And so the powers that were set out in the Constitution that limited, become expanded by this process.

Peter: Now, I mentioned that we've had some questions for you that were submitted from people who follow the show on Twitter and Facebook. Here's one from a fellow called Albert Fuchs on Facebook and he points...I will paraphrase because it's a little long here..."Milt Friedman said a major reason for the growth of government is the special interests are concentrated, but the general interest is diffuse and Touqueville warned that American democracy would be in danger when the public learned it use the ballot box to vote itself money." And both of these get at what you were talking about just a moment ago. But both of these are structural points. It has been the case since the Constitution was enacted that special interests are concentrated and the general interest is diffuse or that politicians could in effect purchase votes.

Tom: Yes.

Peter: Why do we have the problem now? What has happened in recent...

Tom: Very good question. Because one of the constraints on the values of the public and when the values of the public are constantly eroded in the schools, in the press, and elsewhere, then these other tendencies can have a wider field of play.

Peter: So, what's a good index for the values of the public? Would you say – would you say for example that it might be Federal spending or Federal debt, where for two centuries you have a fairly flat slowly climbing line...goes up during the Civil War and comes back down and then beginning about in the seventies, it just takes off.

Tom: Yes.

Peter: So, it's not FDR, it's not the great deal, it's not the thirties, it's the seventies? When did things begin to go catastrophically wrong?

Tom: I would say it was the Great Depression. Most people are unaware that prior to the 1930's, the Federal Government never intervened in the economy to get us out of a recession. The economy recovered on its own and kept going. But, FDR really broke down a great deal of that sense that independence...I mean there was a time, I think when most Americans would have felt insulted to have it thought that they wanted somebody else to pay their medical bills. They don't feel so insulted anymore.

Peter: Uhm, hmm. Alright, this is what I am trying to get at...on the one hand you've got an elite that is effectively engaging in a slow motion hijacking of America. That is one way of putting it. But on the other hand you've got more and more Americans who either like the idea of being hijacked, are too worn out to fight it anymore...I am trying to get your sense of the extent to which the public itself is dispirited.

Tom: Oh yeah...the ideas of the sixties, the idea that if you had a grievance you didn't have to obey the law. You know?

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Peter: Historian Paul Rahe of Hillsdale College. He grants – we did a shoot with Paul Rahe and he grants a great deal of what you have been saying here, Tom. But, now listen to Paul Rahe...”the political moment in which we live is a moment of great, great hope.” How so...because by over reaching so dramatically, President Obama has roused the American people to reclaim their old liberties. The Obama Administration, Paul Rahe argues, “is a gift to the friends of liberty.”

Tom: [Chuckle] I hope he is right and that I am wrong.

Peter: And you don't...are you encouraged by the Tea Party, by the polls that show that...

Tom: Oh yes, oh yes. But there is such a thing as a point of no return and I think then the real question is whether he can take us there. And that's why I think the fall of ...the 2010 elections are in my judgment one of the most, if not the most important election we've ever held. Because if he doesn't get stopped in this fall's election, I don't how he will ever be stopped. For one thing, people talk about his falling in the polls. He is still in the forties. If he can somehow make millions of illegal immigrants legal and voters before 2012, he can get a second term. And I see that as a point of no return.

Peter: So, getting some substantial portion of the twelve million illegal immigrants in this country to vote...that would be a direction....step toward the point of no return. Domestically, what other...is Obamacare...Obamacare is reversible or at least its ill effects can be contained...it all comes down to November, 2010.

Tom: Oh this year. If it's not stopped now, it won't be stopped.

Peter: Alright, so November 2nd or 4th, I can't remember when is election day...you have one specific date in American history, which you can name right now that you consider absolutely crucial.

Tom: Oh, absolutely...it's almost like the great military battles...you know...Charles Marquel...

Peter: At 7:32...I actually looked that up just yesterday...

Tom: Or the siege of Vienna, 1532...you know had those things gone the other the way it would be a different world today.

Peter: Alright, so we are approaching a siege of Vienna. We're into Segment V, which I had in my notes titled *The Point of No Return*. You mentioned in *Dismantling America* such a point in foreign policy. Let me quote you, Tom. “Iran is advancing step-by-step toward nuclear weapons, while the Europeans wring their hands while the United Nations engages in leisurely discussion, when Osama Bin Laden has nuclear weapons...the choice will be between knuckling under and watching American cities blasted off the face of the earth. That is the point of no return and we are drifting toward it.” Nothing you've seen since you wrote that causes you to reconsider or mute your views?

Tom: No. I was appalled earlier this year when – I think it was Gates or someone else in the Pentagon – leaked the fact that there were no contingency military plans for stopping Iran from getting nuclear weapons. And now recently there has been some talk that there are now plans. Now, I have no idea whether that means that there really are plans or whether they see an election coming

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and they had better create the impression that they have more plans. They have covered themselves very well. They are boosting up international conferences over Iran – resolutions – these are what I call elaborate ways of doing nothing.

Peter: Well, let me quote you, Michael Barone the journalist, you know Barone...this was just from a couple of days ago. “*Time Magazine’s* Joe Klein and *The American Interests’* Walter Russell Meads, suggested to me that the Obama Administration is seriously considering a military strike against Iran, now comes further evidence in an opinion article in the *Washington Post* by Steven Simon and Ray Takeyh,” I am not sure I am pronouncing that correctly, “Simon worked in Bill Clinton’s National Security Council and Takeyh is described as a former advisor to the Obama Administration...their article takes seriously the possibility that the President will order such an attack.” And your answer to that is...that could be nothing but cheap leaking.

Tom: Yeah, I’ll believe it when I see it.

Peter: Alright.

Tom: In fact he doesn’t have to do that. All he has to do is not interfere if the Israelis want to do it. I saw some place where Saudi Arabia has indicated that the Israelis could fly over Saudi Arabia to get there. And it’s ironic that they would have to go around Iraq and fly over Saudi Arabia, because the American planes patrol over Iraq and presumably would shoot down the Israeli planes on their way to Iran.

Peter: Our colleague here at the Hoover Institution, Peter Berkowitz was in the Middle East not long ago and he asked a Saudi official what would happen in the even that the Israelis needed to fly over. And the official replied, “The following morning, we would lodge an official complaint.”

Tom: Yes, yes [Laughter].

Peter: “But that night our radar would cease to function.”

Tom: Oh yes. Oh yes.

Peter: So, let me ask you this...do you consider it then the duty of the President of the United States to prevent Iran from gaining...

Tom: Absolutely.

Peter: That’s clear to you?

Tom: I don’t know what earthly chance we have or the western world has – once Iran has those weapons. You know...it’s...

Peter: What about this notion of deterency...it worked during the Cold War.

Tom: Yeah, the Russians did not want us to blast Moscow off the map. The Iranians have said themselves – going back to the Ayatollah Khomeini that their top priority is not Iran, but Allah, so

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if they get into a war in which Iran is knocked out, but they then strike a blow for Allah...they are happy with that.

Peter: And failing any serious signs that the United States would attack, would you say that it's the duty of the Prime Minister of Israel and his cabinet to order an attack?

Tom: Oh, absolutely. But think of how pathetic this is that the fate of the United States of America would be in the hands of country smaller than Lake Michigan.

Peter: Uhm...I am trying to find a way to cheer you up, but the problem is you think things through before you write them. There is no way to get you to back down.

Tom: Do you realize that Japan was a very tough country, as you know...they surrender after just two nuclear bombs. Bombs that were much less effective than the ones they have today. I don't believe we are anywhere near as tough as Japan was. And I certainly don't believe that the President, the Vice President, or the Secretary of State – all of whom were ready to turn tail and run in Iraq, just three years ago and were denouncing Patraeus, who they now welcome as a hero and savior – that these people will stand up to the pressure of nuclear weapons.

Peter: The counter argument would be that we can contain Iran and your argument is...that Iran itself represents a deadly threat to us or that once Iran has nuclear weapons, we can be sure they will pass them off to terrorists.

Tom: Yes.

Peter: And we can't...

Tom: We can't be sure of anything in life, but its one hell of a gamble to take with the future of the whole nation. Remember Bin Laden said that he would attack those people who voted for Bush in the 2004 election.

Peter: Yes.

Tom: We ignored him. If he says that in 2012 or 2016 and he has the weapons to do it...that's the end of our deciding who is going to be there. If he says, you either put Lewis Farrahkan in the White House or we take Chicago and Los Angeles off the face of the earth, do you think that the people in Washington have the guts to say no?

Peter: Alright. One final comment from *Dismantling America*, – “to follow Rome, one of the greatest civilizations of all times, as it degenerated and fractured is especially painful in view of the parallels to what is happening in America in our own time.” What are the parallels that are most striking to you?

Tom: The internal loss of confidence. That we are not prepared to standup and defend ourselves – I mean there are all kinds of small signs and large signs. But we have to accommodate people who move here. You know the old saying was that when in Rome, do as the Romans do...the new one is when in Rome, tell the Romans what to do. And we are going along with it.

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Peter: Tom, let me close this out by getting your kind of a broad civilizational view here. Fourth century...Rome's final century is a great power and of course it lingers on in Constantinople for another thousand years, but the fourth century. We have St. Augustine watching from North Africa, as his beloved Rome, where he studied, he is a great product of classical civilization is sacked. And he responds by averting his gaze from this world and writing *The City of God*. He shifts his attentions to heaven. A few decades later we have St. Benedict of Nursia up in Northern Italy and he's the founder of great monasteries attempting to horde in a certain sense what learning he can and hoping that later there will be regrowth. And he adopts a motto which translates from the Latin..."To pruned it will grow again." So, is Tom Sowell an Augustine who is insisting on underlying principles and kind of eternal values, but actually foresees – believes that what he is observing is total collapse or is he a Benedict, hoping for, preparing for, doing what he can to initiate rebirth?

Tom: Well I am at an age where I couldn't play either of those roles.

[Laughter]

Peter: You look pretty saintly to me, Tom.

[Laughter]

Tom: You need new glasses. But, I think it was really...what I meant about the pathetic aspect of the aftermath of the collapse of Rome is these heroic efforts, which ultimately paid off – you know many centuries later, but there were centuries to live through.

Peter: Well the Dark Ages were dark.

Tom: Yes, imagine living in the midst of ruins that you don't have the knowledge to repair, much less to build.

Peter: Oh, that's what you mean in the passage where you talk about the pathetic attempt to live among the ruins.

Tom: Yes.

Peter: The sense that there was a civilization here...

Tom: And it was all around you. I think this is part of the reason that the Europe of that era was thought of as a backward looking civilization. They had good reason to look back, because the people before them had achieved far more than they were capable of achieving or even sustaining.

Peter: So, your fear is that two decades from now, Americans will be looking back at – even at the 1950's – a time of growth and American self-confidence and standing up to the Soviets and the Cold War – assuming a large role in the world – that will be gone and we will have the feeling that we're pygmies by comparison with...there is something of this in Tom Brokaw's books, *The Greatest Generation*. There's a kind of nostalgia – a feeling that those who came just before us were bigger people somehow.

Thomas Sowell interview on August 6, 2010
This is an unedited transcript of the interview

Tom: They were.

Peter: They were?

Tom: Yes.

Peter: Alright. Uhm...last question – if you could offer one sentence of council to the President of the United States, what would you say, Tom?

Tom: We're dying.

Peter: Now, I can't end the program on that...if you could offer one sentence of council to some twenty year old kid who is watching this Webcast...and by the way when we put up a notice that you were going to appear on Twitter or Facebook...you are a rock star to college kids. I want you to know that. So, there's hope. You are reaching people. So, one sentence of advice to some sophomore or junior who is watching this today and thinks to himself...gee Dr. Sowell just told me the America which I am going to grow up in is going to be a shrunken place.

Tom: No, ah...it's not over until it's over...as Yogi Berra said. I would say to this young person, if we through some miracle get through this, please take to heart the lesson of what happens. Will you vote on the basis of rhetoric and symbolism, instead of using your mind. It doesn't matter how smart you are, unless you stop and think.

Peter: Dr. Thomas Sowell, the author of *Dismantling America*, thank you for joining us.

Tom: Thank you.

Peter: I am Peter Robinson for Uncommon Knowledge.