

interview

AN HOUR WITH NOAM CHOMSKY

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I am struck that, when I travel abroad, foreign academics and activists often ask me about my MIT colleague Noam Chomsky, whom they recognize as one of the pre-eminent intellectuals, and critics of social injustice, alive in the world today. On the other hand, when I mention him in my classes at MIT, over half the students have never heard of him, although he is unarguably the most distinguished faculty member at our university. Famed both as the originator of structural linguistics and as a formidably knowledgeable and intense critic of US military and economic intervention abroad, of the mainstream media and of Israeli repression of the Palestinians, he enjoys a strange mixture of local obscurity and global celebrity as a left-wing intellectual. In the Boston area he has a sort of cult following, like that enjoyed by certain rock bands, and his occasional talks on current politics draw standing-room-only crowds, largely dressed in black, which, ceding him oracular status, tend to hang on his every word. The flavour of such public events is nicely captured in *The Manufacture of Consent*, a recent documentary film about Chomsky.

Chomsky has laid out his political point of view in over thirty books¹ on the Vietnam War, the Middle East conflict, US intervention abroad, and the manufacture of consent by corporate media at home. His political theory is simple in its outline and massive in the quantity of evidence Chomsky has, over the years, adduced in its favour: those who control the capitalist world system protect their political and economic privileges, when they are

challenged, through raw violence and repression in the Third World and through media propaganda in the advanced industrial democracies, where it is, on the whole, not acceptable to repress dissent by sending out death squads and disappearing union leaders. Resistance to this system of domination comes from the poor in the Third World and, in the West, from workers, activists and students whose radicalism may, however, be constrained by the manufactured consensus of mainstream media-led political discourse. Although Chomsky is often characterized as an anarchist, his sensibility (in both his linguistic and political theory) is decidedly structuralist and his theory of hegemony has a distinctly Althusserian cast. What is important about his political writing is not so much any novel theoretical contribution to our understanding of, say, political subjectivity or state apparatuses, but his remarkable ability to locate evasions, inconsistencies and double standards in official political narratives and media discourses and to fashion forcefully insurgent counter-narratives (of the Vietnam War, the Middle East conflict, the War in Kosovo, etc.) from the shards of evidence his formidably encyclopaedic mind is constantly collecting and arranging, both from alternative media sources and from mainstream sources that he deconstructs in the act of reading.

I interviewed Noam Chomsky in his modest office in MIT's Linguistics Department in early November 2000, in the waning weeks of the Clinton Presidency.² Chomsky had recently published *The New Military Humanism: Lessons From Kosovo* (Common Courage Press, 1999) and *Rogue States: The Rule of Force in World Affairs* (South End Press, 2000) and, on the day we met, he seemed particularly preoccupied with understanding the historical trajectory of military intervention abroad by the US, the pre-eminent 'rogue state' today, from Vietnam to Kosovo. We discussed the motives for those interventions and the evolving political circumstances that both enable and undercut the exercise of US military power. To be honest, I have often seen Chomsky's political analyses as bleakly depressing, having found in them a narrative of the insightful few who see the world as it really is shaking their intellectual fists as giant media conglomerates and military apparatuses set about their work of repressing the masses; thus, while he was as disparaging of the conventional left as I expected, I was surprised to find him almost optimistic about the slackening grip of our corporate and military masters.

We began by discussing the Clinton Administration's military intervention in Kosovo. Although Chomsky finally leaves 'unanswered' the question of whether military intervention in Kosovo might have been justifiable, his commentary foregrounded the speciousness of many US arguments in favour of the war. Given the ugliness of the Serb regime on the other side of this conflict, and the fact that even many on the left were persuaded that the use of force was justified to defend the Kosovar Albanians against the regime of

Slobodan Milosevic, I began by asking Chomsky whether the humanitarian rationale for this military intervention could be easily dismissed.

NOAM CHOMSKY: Almost every case of military intervention or coercion that you can think of is justified in humanitarian terms, including Hitler, Mussolini and the Japanese fascists – and probably Attila the Hun, if we had the documents. So there's nothing new about that. That carries zero information in a technical sense because everyone does it all the time. So the fact that humanitarian goals are professed is just to say that military force was used. Then, if you want to be serious you say, well, was Hitler really trying to solve the ethnic problems in the Sudetanland so that everybody could live in peace? That's the question you ask. Not, did he profess that that's what he was doing?

HUGH GUSTERSON: I wonder if I could push you a little harder on what you think US strategic policy makers perceived US national interest to be. In Iraq, it's clear it's oil. In Vietnam, it's the domino theory.

NC: I don't think it's clear. I don't agree on Iraq. Yes, oil is in the background – in a sense with anything that happens in the Middle East, oil is hanging around in the background somewhere – but, assuming you can believe what the insiders are saying, like Michael Gordon³ and Bernard Trainor,⁴ what they were afraid of was that Saddam was going to withdraw.

HG: Withdraw from Kuwait.

NC: Right away. In fact Colin Powell said it almost like this. He said what will happen is Iraq will withdraw from Kuwait, leaving a puppet government in charge and all the Arab states will be happy. And you've got to stop that. Well suppose that had happened. It would have duplicated what the US had just done in Panama. It wouldn't have any effect on the oil system. It would just mean that he [Saddam Hussein] would get access to the Gulf, which Iraq had always wanted. Iraq would overcome what they always thought was a British Imperial interference, namely setting up a principality to block them off. And they'd get that little bit of extra oil, which didn't amount to that much because Iraq is second to Saudi Arabia anyway in resources.

Within about a week or two, Saddam was making offers of a negotiated settlement, which would involve withdrawal. And the US was blocking it, right? Because they were afraid of it. And this went on from August, the time of the invasion, until a week before the bombing. That was the latest offer, saying 'OK, we'll withdraw totally', but in the context of a general regional security settlement of general security issues, which is code for Israeli nuclear weapons, and of course the US not only rejected that but the press wouldn't even cover it. So I suspect something different was going on.

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HG: What is that something different?

NC: It's what they call credibility. Credibility means people have to understand that you don't disobey the master. Since we're the world's dominant power, it's extremely important that we run the world the way any Mafia boss runs his own territory. Let's take the Mafia analogy: Suppose you're in charge, and some storekeeper doesn't pay the protection money. You don't just go in and take the money. You make an example of him. You send people in to smash him to pieces so that everybody else understands that's not the right kind of behaviour. That's called credibility. In effect, the whole nuclear system is about this – about credibility. How do you make people properly afraid of us? Because nuclear weapons are always hanging in the background. Therefore, we have to have a posture that's 'irrational and vindictive'. People have to understand that some elements are 'out of control'⁵ and then they'll be afraid. And that makes perfect sense. Why do we need credibility? Well, there you get into other things. But the immediate policies are mostly just making sure that people don't do the wrong thing.

HG: Some people, Michael Klare⁶ for example, suggested the Gulf War came very soon after the end of the cold war not by coincidence, that the Pentagon was looking for a way to legitimate its military.

NC: We can debate that. I don't think the Pentagon was that interested in the war. Armies usually aren't interested in wars. They like preparation for war. But they have an understandable reluctance to fight a war. So I think if you look at, at least the history that I know, it's usually the civilian leadership who is pushing the military to do something. It was the case in the early days of the Vietnam War. . . .

HG: It was clearly the case in Kosovo as well.

NC: It was the case in Kosovo. It's almost always the case, and kind of understandable.

HG: Is it the case in Colombia now?

NC: Well, yes. General McCaffrey⁷ is a bit of an ideologue, but I think it's coming straight out of the civilian society. It has nothing to do with drugs in my opinion. And in the case of Kosovo, it was very explicit. There were three official reasons, constantly repeated. There's one reason [for the intervention] which we know is not true: to stop ethnic cleansing. Now that we have NATO and US documentation for the period up to the bombing, we know that that can't have been the reason because it wasn't going on. And they knew it. So,

that's talk. That's the usual zero-information, humanitarian story. But the other two reasons are sensible. The first one is, ensure the stability of South-eastern Europe and the second is, establish the credibility of NATO. OK, now all we have to do is translate. 'Credibility of NATO' does not mean credibility of Belgium. It means credibility of the United States. And, if it's a NATO operation, that sort of shifts the domain from diplomacy to force, and the US is so overwhelmingly dominant in force that it becomes a US operation. So, yes, establish the credibility of the United States is one reason. As for stability, what does stability mean? Stability means we run it. There are countries that are very stable. Cuba is stable, but that's not called stability. And my guess is, if we ever get the documents, we'll find that pretty much the same was true in Iraq. They needed to establish credibility, meaning everybody knows you don't cross the line. And 'we have to maintain stability' means we run it the way we want, not the way somebody else wants.

HG: And that's why the almost daily bombing of Iraq persists. Because Saddam Hussein has still refused to bow. . . .

NC: The same reason we're still torturing Cuba. They didn't obey orders. The same with the invasion of Panama. Did they invade Panama because Noriega was a gangster? No. I mean when he came to trial, after being kidnapped, almost all the charges against him were from the period when he was a CIA asset. And in fact his behaviour then was much worse than in the last years. But he stopped participating in that Contra war. He was too big for his britches and so on, so we cut him down.

HG: I have one question about Kosovo. And I ask this partly because you've done so much work theorizing the role of the media in establishing a consensus on US military policy. Some people within the establishment argue that the US was sucked into former Yugoslavia because of the power of media images showing suffering there, that actually the 'realists' within the Pentagon and the National Security Council would have liked to have kept out, but the media was out in front.

NC: The media is out in front because they understand what their duty is. So why weren't they roaming all over East Timor where there were worse atrocities going on? Worse. At that same time. Or in Colombia in the same period, early 1999, there was a massacre a day. How come they weren't all over Colombia? Why aren't they in south-eastern Turkey? It's inside NATO after all. Right inside NATO. Much worse ethnic cleansing and atrocities were going on. One journalist, Kevin McKiernan,⁸ did go and he did a documentary on it and articles. He said he just couldn't sell the story. Nobody wants to know about the suffering of Kurds with Clinton providing the arms and

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the training. That's not the story. The same with Kosovo. The story is we're building up to a war so we better show the suffering which is going to justify the war. The KLA understood this perfectly. Now that the leadership has spoken out as they have, not in the United States but on the BBC and so on, they say straight out: the idea was to carry out atrocities that kill civilians and police to ensure that there would be a disproportionate Serb response. So a disproportionate Serb response will come along and that will impress people in the West. And then it will be a way to bring NATO in. This is according to the British press; it's never been reported here. And in fact the group that did the big BBC retrospective documentary, they say they have CIA agents who have informed them that the CIA was involved in helping plan the KLA raids into Kosovo and Albania.

HG: Interesting.

NC: Which I don't know how to verify. It's just reports in the mainstream press, like the *Sunday Times* and so on. But, yes, the press goes to look for the right kind of atrocities. And they know what kind to look for. Let's take another case. The US bombed Sudan, destroyed half the pharmaceutical supplies of a poor African country. What happens when you bomb half the pharmaceutical supplies of a country? People die, probably tens of thousands of people. How many journalists have you seen go in to find out how many people are dying from Clinton's decision to destroy a pharmaceutical plant? None. That's not the story. Same with everything else. I actually know personal examples of journalists who are very highly placed who have been sent to places to find atrocities because something else was going to happen. Somalia was a case like that.

HG: You mean the CIA through some back channel?

NC: No. You just read the papers and you figure out what's going to happen. And there are cases which are so clear it really takes effort not to see them. Take the bombing of Libya in 1986. First of all, notice how it was timed. It was timed at exactly 7 p.m. Eastern Standard Time, precisely. That's a tricky logistic operation. The planes were not allowed to fly over Europe because the Europeans objected. So they went way out over the Atlantic from England or the United States, wherever they came from, a roundabout route, and hit Libya right at 7 p.m. precisely. Why 7 p.m.? Because that's when, in those days, the national news was broadcast over the three networks. Well all three networks were completely set up for it. I actually got a phone call from a friend of mine, a Middle East correspondent from ABC, from Libya, and he said, 'We're waiting. It's coming in 10 minutes.' How come? Do the news agencies have their bureaux in Tripoli? How come they were all there, ready

to film the wonderful sight of American bombs falling on this place exactly at the time when the national news begins, which guarantees that Washington gets a free hour of propaganda? First, a half-an-hour of all the nice sights, then you shift over to Washington and an official, a State Department official, briefs you. Was that an accident? Of course not.

HG: There's one thing about Kosovo I wanted to push on a little more. You're presenting Kosovo as in a sense a reiteration of the same old story of US intervention. There's one sense in which it's a little different, which is that normal coalitions on both sides get split. So, for example, on the hawk side you have someone like Henry Kissinger saying we have no vital interest in this place, we shouldn't be there. But I'm more interested in the other side. The old coalition that had contested the war in Vietnam is very badly split. I remember turning on the radio one day and hearing you on the Christopher Lydon show.⁹ And someone was calling in and saying, 'Noam I was with you back in the Vietnam War back in the '60s; you and I were shoulder to shoulder. But you're wrong on this one.' You have Susan Sontag picking out bridges saying that NATO should be bombing this bridge and not that bridge.

NC: First of all, the picture of the anti-Vietnam coalition had to have been false. The attitude of intellectuals, including liberal intellectuals, was quite supportive of the war. And, when opposition came, it came late and was very nuanced. There's a book by a Columbia University professor called Charles Kadushin that came out in 1974. It's called *The American Intellectual Elite*.¹⁰ I know a lot about it from the inside because I was one of the people who was interviewed by him. He picked 200 people who, he said, by some criterion were the American intellectual elite. And he interviewed them in depth. Very long, in-depth interviews. The interviews were, I think, April 1970. And the date is kind of important. Now this is an old memory so I may get some of the story wrong but this is the rough picture. That was the peak moment of opposition to the war. And that was right after Nixon's invasion of Cambodia. You had right-wing academics going down to Washington to complain. They wanted out. They didn't want it to expand. The campuses were closed, protests all over, just the peak of opposition. At that time come these in-depth interviews. They were about all sorts of topics but most of it was about Vietnam because it was so live at the time. Look down the list of people interviewed and most of them are people who you would consider left-liberal, like Susan Sontag and so on. Everybody was against the war. But of course so was Wall Street. By then the business community was pressing the government to get out because it was harming the economy and the Army wanted to get out; the Army was falling apart. Everybody was trying to get out, so of course all the intellectuals were opposing the war. But the interesting question was the reasons. There were three categories. Pragmatic opposition,

moral opposition and ideological opposition. I don't remember the figures but the plurality was pragmatic. Pragmatic means 'it's costing us too much'. The next category was moral. Moral meant 'it's getting too bloody. There's too much Napalm, I don't want to see it on television.' That's called moral opposition. Ideological opposition was, 'I think it's wrong in principle, I think aggression is wrong.' I think there were two people out of the 200 – it was maybe 1 per cent – in the ideological opposition category. In fact I believe I recognized every quoted comment as my own. I don't know who the other person was since all the quotes were anonymous.

But just notice those categories. He didn't ask, what do you think about the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia in '68? But, if he had, you know what the answers would have been. Everybody would have been opposed. Nobody would have been opposed on pragmatic grounds, because it worked like a charm. Nobody would be opposed on moral grounds because almost nobody got killed. So everybody would be opposed on ideological grounds. Would that have been called ideological? No. 'Ideological' is a negative word. So the whole framework was that there are a couple of extremists who think the United States could be wrong about something in principle. But there was almost no opposition of that sort. And in fact you see that right up till today. When McNamara's book¹¹ came out, I did an article reviewing some of the reactions to it, which were very intriguing.

HG: As much despised on the left as on the right?

NC: No. It was approved on the left, approved. Long-time activists, people like Robert McAfee Brown, a moral leader, said 'OK, we're finally vindicated'. The standard position on the left is 'OK, we're finally vindicated. He finally came out and said he was wrong. So he's shown that we were right.' That was the standard feeling of the left. I was one of the very few critics. Take a look. So either McNamara was criticized for being unpatriotic or he was criticized for having come out too late. Like, why didn't you say it at the time? Why would you say it now? But now you're showing we were right. But what did he say in the book? He apologized in the book. Who did he apologize to?

HG: Not the Vietnamese.

NC: No, nothing about them. He apologized to the American people because the war cost them too much. A lot of soldiers died. It disrupted American society. He'd like to make a sincere apology to the American people. He was praised on the left for at last at least being willing to apologize. I mean, this is like Hitler apologizing to the Germans after Stalingrad. My God, sorry I got us into a two-front war. And the book was a total apologetics for the war.

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- HG:** I remember one of his points was that there was a sense in which the Viet Cong were maniacs because any other people would have surrendered after suffering so many casualties.
- NC:** Well, it's even worse than that, and it's interesting that knowledgeable reviewers avoided this point. He said, 'Look we made them a decent offer. We offered them the model of Indonesia where there was a political settlement and they could have the same kind of political settlement.' And what was the settlement in Indonesia? The settlement in Indonesia was that the Army that we supported took power in a coup, wiped out the opposition – the CIA said it was one of the worst mass murders of the twentieth century, compared it to Hitler, Stalin and Mao – they wiped out the only mass political party and they killed hundreds of thousands of landless peasants. And that's the model that he's offering to the Viet Cong. 'Look, just negotiate, we're reasonable people. And then we'll massacre all of you.' That's the model that he was offering. And, the major criticism from the left was, 'Why did you wait so long? Why didn't you show that we were right all along?' Now, if what he's saying is what the left was advocating, they belong with the Nazis. What he's saying is, 'We should have gotten out earlier. It was too costly to us. I apologize to you.' That's the left? Well apparently it is. So, first of all, the whole story about the Vietnam anti-war movement has to be much more complex. There were principled antagonists. There were not many among intellectuals. Very few and mostly late. In fact, it's so few that, to this day, to this day, the concept that Kennedy attacked South Vietnam doesn't exist in the literature. Well of course he did. If you send the Air Force to bomb another country, that's an attack.
- HG:** So are you suggesting that the body of public opinion that's opposed to intervention is actually growing rather than splitting and diminishing?
- NC:** Vastly growing.
- HG:** Because the dominant media frame at the time was that the war in Kosovo had split an established movement.
- NC:** Because that's necessary in order to develop propaganda for the war. But we can check the facts.
- HG:** You didn't get into arguments with people you had perceived as comrades before?
- NC:** Yes, but I did in 1964 too.
- HG:** But I'm talking specifically about people who had been on your side before.

- NC:** Were they on my side in 1964 when we were wiping out South Vietnam? No. In fact, so much so that the fact that Kennedy was attacking South Vietnam still doesn't exist in people's consciousness. After all, the US was fundamentally at war with South Vietnam – it was the main target of attack all along – and wiped the place out. And that started in 1962. 1962 was when Kennedy launched the war against South Vietnam. And then it sort of picked up over the years and it escalated – like when they started bombing the North in February of 1965. At that point, February of '65, that's when you started getting opposition because they were starting to bomb North Vietnam, and then you'd get the Russians involved so it was dangerous. At that time they also escalated the bombing of South Vietnam at triple the scale of the North. Did you hear any protests about that? You go back to the late '60s and the big protest meetings. Are you protesting the bombing of South Vietnam? No. You're protesting the bombing of the North and the atrocities. Not everybody. The activists were talking about the atrocities in the South.
- HG:** Well I'm intrigued by your perception that a body of opinion against intervention is growing. And I'm wondering what your explanation for that would be. The centre of gravity of American political life has moved to the right since the '70s.
- NC:** Actually I don't agree with you. The centre of gravity of elite opinion has moved to the right. But public opinion remains roughly social democratic, the way it always is. I think there's reasonably good evidence for that. Now it's just that the public doesn't count. The Chicago Council on Foreign Relations does regular polling on people's attitudes on foreign affairs. They've been doing it for about thirty years. One of the questions that's asked – and it's seriously done – one of the questions always is, what do you think about the war in Vietnam? And there were a number of choices, so you don't usually get high numbers for things like that. One of the options is, 'fundamentally wrong and immoral, not a mistake'. That runs a steady 70 per cent, plus or minus a few points.¹²
- HG:** Interesting.
- NC:** Now you don't know exactly what that means, because they are so brain-washed themselves that they don't ask the obvious follow-up question: what made it immoral? Is it immoral because you're wiping out Indochina? Or is it immoral because you're killing American soldiers? And that's the next question. But they can't ask that question because it's just not in their consciousness. And in fact the way it's interpreted always is, 'The people don't want to accept the burdens of war leadership', or something like that. Maybe, but that's not the way it sounds to me.

HG: Well, actually that leads into the last question I wanted to ask around Kosovo. It seemed, given the way the war was executed on the US side, that there's an increasing nervousness in the US about incurring any casualties in an intervention at all. And within the Republican Party you have the rise of isolationism. So I'm wondering if it's becoming harder for the US to manage interventions abroad, and if you're optimistic in that regard.

NC: First of all, every army is like this: you don't want casualties. Let's take the Israeli army. Their military doctrine right now is – and they say it; it's not a secret – if the security forces come under any threat, you respond with massive force. [In the US] it's called the Powell Doctrine. If you're under any threat, respond with massive force. That's why the Somalia intervention ended up with maybe thousands of Somali civilians killed. Pakistan didn't respond with overwhelming force when twenty-eight Pakistani soldiers were killed. But, as soon as American soldiers came under threat, you just react with overwhelming force. And that's part of what it means to be *the* world power. So that's standard.

There's not a good study on the military. There's a good book by Robert Buzzanco,¹³ a diplomatic historian, a very highly regarded study of the military attitude in the late '50s and early '60s when the Vietnam War was really getting started. And mostly they were against it. Some strongly against it. Like the Marine Commandant, David Shoup. He was condemning the war publicly in terms that I couldn't use or I would have been shot. Saying things like, 'We better get our bloody dollar-soaked, blood-soaked hands out of the affairs of these poor people and let them live by themselves.'¹⁴ Since he was the Marine Commandant, he could get away with it. But the military were forced into an error; most of them knew it was an error. The error is to try to fight a colonial war with a civilian army. That is a mistake. It's the mistake that Israel made in the occupied territory. You don't send civilians to fight a colonial war. Because it's too vicious. You have to massacre civilians. Only trained professionals can do that kind of thing. Or mercenaries. And, in fact, if you look at the history of imperialism, it's mostly mercenaries. Take the British in India. You take people from one ethnic group and you get them to attack another ethnic group. That's why people use paramilitaries. Like with the Serbs who use paramilitaries to carry out atrocities. Because an army, if it's not a professional army, like the Guatemalan army, they're just not good at murdering people.

HG: Or you kill people from 30,000 feet.

NC: Or you do it from 30,000 feet. But you don't get your own soldiers involved. Now the US made a mistake. The civilians forced them into a bloody, brutal colonial war, which was mostly against the civilian population. And they used

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kids out of high school. They're not ready for this. That's why by the late '60s the army was falling apart. The generals and high officers were saying, we've got to get these troops out of here or we're not going to have an army any more.

HG: Some people in the Pentagon today worry that even with a professional army, the US public doesn't have much appetite and stamina for protracted casualties.

NC: Yes. And that's a very useful propaganda ploy. Because that makes it look as if somehow the public is the problem. It's just not true. Have you looked at Steven Kull's work?¹⁵

HG: Yes.

NC: OK, well you see the data. Even after Somalia, the public didn't change its mind on the intervention. Most of the time the public feeling is pretty steady. If we can do some good in the world, let's do it. They like to use that as an excuse. But that's an excuse for fighting standard colonial wars. You don't put your armed forces at risk. You do it some other way. Well the way you used to do it is having local agents do it. Now you do it by bombing from a distance.

HG: And you probably noticed that Edward Luttwak floated the idea that you could offer US citizenship to foreigners who would fight as mercenaries in US wars. He's very concerned about this.¹⁶

NC: But that's just tradition. That's just saying, 'Yes, let's be like the British.' You don't send civilians to carry out your dirty work. In South Africa under apartheid a lot of the worst atrocities were carried out by blacks. Black mercenaries basically. And if there had ever been an accounting for British rule in India, it would have been the same thing. And, in fact, the few cases I know of where they tried something else were failures. So Israel had to withdraw a good bit of its army from the West Bank in four or five places. Look at the Intifada ten years ago. The Israeli army was scattered all over the place and extremely brutal, and it just didn't work. You started getting protests from the parents that their kids had to break into houses and smash up kids in bed and so on. What they usually use now are border guards who are like paramilitaries. Not from the elite in other words. And that's very different. In fact the US now has sort of a mercenary army, because you can't get draftees to do these things. And so, yes, if you can give as an excuse that the population won't tolerate casualties, that's a nice excuse. But I don't have any reason to believe it. During the Second World War, for example, did the population

object to casualties? No. Because they were committed to the war. You didn't like it obviously. I can remember as a kid, we weren't happy about it, but there was complete dedication to it. And the genes haven't changed since then. Nor has the culture significantly.

There is one way in which the culture has changed, and that is that there is more opposition to intervention. So that Vietnam is an interesting example. It went on for about six years before there was any visible opposition. Notice how it worked. People don't tell the correct story because they don't understand what happened. I mean the facts are very plain. By 1961, '62, Kennedy started a war against South Vietnam. By then a third of the attacks were by US planes mostly with South Vietnamese markings. They authorized the use of napalm, they authorized crop destruction, to try to destroy the base for the guerillas. They started driving people into concentration camps. That's the strategic hamlets. Notice, that was criticized, because it wasn't working; read David Halberstam¹⁷ – he is considered among the great opponents of the war and a thorn in the side of the government – and he was saying 'It's not working'. Where were you in those years?

HG: Well, I was a child in England.

NC: OK, so you don't know. Well I was here. Boston, the most liberal city in the country. We could not have a public demonstration against the war without it being physically broken up, often by students, until late 1966. Literally. At that time there were a couple of hundred thousand American troops rampaging around South Vietnam. The war had been around for five years. And there were hundreds of thousands of people who had already been killed. And at that time if we tried to have a meeting on Boston Common it would be broken up violently.

HG: Not by the police . . .

NC: Not by the police; the police were protecting us. If it hadn't been for the hundreds of State Troopers, we probably would have been killed. They didn't protect us because they liked us, but because they didn't want to see people murdered on the Boston Common. In fact, even when we tried to do it in a church, the Arlington Street Church, it was attacked, in April of '66.

HG: I was here during the Gulf War . . .

NC: See, but notice the difference. The Gulf War was probably the first war in history where the protests, massive protests, took place before the war started. Not six years later. That reflects the change in the attitude of the population. But it's not an attitude about how many casualties are acceptable.

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HG: How has the population managed to break free from this iron-gloved media control that you have theorized so well?

NC: My feeling is the media control works mostly for educated people. And in fact I think it's mostly directed at them. So a lot of the doctrinal management is directed towards what they call the political class. The people who matter. The people who are somehow involved in decision-making. They have to have the right attitudes. As far as the general population is concerned, where the real mass media are directed, the main thing is just get them off our backs. Get them interested in something else. Professional sports. . . .

HG: *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?*

NC: Yes, *Who Wants To Be a Millionaire?*, who's going to win the World Series, sex, anything that doesn't matter. And if you look at the mass media, that's what they do. How many people read *The New York Times*? And *who* reads *The New York Times*? A lot of elites. And I suspect that they tend to be the most deeply indoctrinated sector of the population. Partly because the propaganda is directed at them, and partly because they themselves are engaged in it.

HG: But the main opposition to these interventions has come from the children of the educated elite, right? From the students.

NC: And again, that's interesting. Students are at a point in their lives, the only time in their lives, when they're basically free. They've gotten away from parental control; they're not yet facing the problem of putting food on the table. So they're free, they think and act and so on, and they do it. That's quite typical. And in fact this is happening right now. The anti-apartheid movement was a lot of elite students; the sweatshop movement was too.

HG: And now the anti-globalization movement and the movement against genetically modified food.

NC: Yes.

HG: Are you hopeful for those movements? Do you see them as representing something potentially powerful or not?

NC: Well, yes, but, as usual, I don't like the terminology. I don't think there's an anti-globalization movement. I don't know anyone who thinks it's a bad idea for us to be able to talk to Brazilians.

HG: It's all about the terms of globalization.

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- NC: Well, it's about the framework of globalization. There's a lot of opposition to this particular form of corporate globalization in which the interests of people are incidental. And that's been going on for a long time. In the Third World it's been active for years. Now it's spread to elite sectors of the wealthy countries.
- HG: And it's become globally networked.
- NC: It's very globally networked.
- HG: Which is an interesting development.
- NC: Very. And in fact it's a novel one.
- HG: Is that the Internet?
- NC: The Internet helps. In fact I can give you concrete examples of how it helps. Take, say, the Washington demonstrations and the Internet. The Washington demonstrations in April [2000] just by accident happened to coincide with huge public protests in Bolivia over privatization of the water system, which meant that user fees were going to be charged and poor people wouldn't get water. So the whole place was under martial law, people being killed and so on – nothing unusual. But it happened to be at the time of the Washington demonstrations. And using the Internet a number of Bolivian activists were able to link them up so that the protests in Washington and all over the world focused in part on this issue. As far away as New Zealand people were attacking Bechtel Corporation. It had an effect. It amplified, significantly amplified, the local protests. And in fact Bechtel pulled out.¹⁸ And that is part of the interaction. And it's complicated. For, let's say, the landless workers who moved into Brazil, which was one of the major popular movements of the world, maybe *the* major one, now when they get shot by the police and so on they can get international support. And there's much more about this movement: the kind of solidarity internally is unusual. In the past you didn't have steelworkers and environmentalists and gay activists shoulder to shoulder.
- HG: It's quite fascinating.
- NC: It's quite interesting. And important. The international institutions are worried about it. Read the press reports. Like in Prague the business press was giving a very straight story as they often do. So the *Wall Street Journal* was describing it straight out and saying, as long as there are voices in the street, the World Bank is going to have to allow the people with ties and jackets, from Oxfam and so on, to come in and talk to them, until the protests

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stop. *The New York Times* on the other hand, an ideological journal, was writing articles, Joseph Kahn's articles for example, and some of them were classic PR jobs. There was one which started by describing a poor woman, from the lowest caste in India, poor woman, grew up in a village, working on poverty; it turned out, down the column, she was a World Bank official. And so the picture they use is this: here's this poor woman working for the World Bank, and outside are these rich kids, who don't know anything about poverty, just having fun. And these rich kids outside don't understand that the World Bank is already doing the things that they're talking about. If they did, they would just be applauding the World Bank. That comes out of the PR agency, but the picture is not entirely false. World Bank rhetoric has indeed changed, and maybe even policy – but exactly as *The Wall Street Journal* said, in reaction to the protests. [*The New York Times* could have added] 'relax, the policies will change'. But you can't say that.

HG: Can I just ask you one more question? It's about the university. As I look around me at MIT and other major universities, we're awash in corporate money. More and more students are interested in business and engineering and practical things, not in humanities and social sciences. I've read your piece in *The Cold War and the University*.¹⁹ And I was very interested in how bleak it was to be in opposition intellectually in the 1950s and early 1960s.

NC: It was impossible. Same here at MIT. Nobody was interested in anything except work.

HG: As you look around you now, do universities look to you as if in the next two or three decades they will be fruitful places to do oppositional work? Or are you afraid of where American universities are going?

NC: Can you mention to me a prediction about human affairs that has been anywhere near accurate? Did anybody predict what was happening in the '60s? No. You just can't predict human affairs. There's too much human will involved.

HG: Do you feel the chill of the '50s returning? In a different way because orthodoxy is mediated through money and funding?

NC: It's nothing like the '50s. The whole mood of the country has shifted. Even the way we're dressed has shifted. If this had been thirty-five years ago, you and I would be wearing ties and jackets. And we would be relating to students and to one another the way that is symbolized by that. That's not just form. And attitudes have changed on all sorts of things. Feminist issues didn't exist, environmental issues didn't exist. The rights of Native Americans didn't exist.

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The opposition to repression didn't exist. The whole tenor of the culture has changed. It's become a much more civilized place. And that leads to all kinds of possibilities. There has been a major attempt to drive all that back. It started right after the early '70s with things like *The Crisis of Democracy*.²⁰ It's a very important book – not interesting, but important. It's the first major study by the Trilateral Commission and it was about what they called 'the crisis' in Japan, Europe and the United States. The Carter administration came out of it literally, including Carter himself. So, that's the tenor, not right-wing crazies. And they were concerned about what they called 'the crisis of democracy' in the '60s. And the crisis was that industrial countries were getting too democratic. People were becoming involved in the public arena – usually marginalized people – most of the population was getting organized and pressing their demands and this was putting, they said, too much pressure on the system. We've got to moderate the pressure so that democracy can survive, they argued. That's when all the right-wing think tanks came along. And the economists showed that Keynesianism is wrong and we have got to go back to neoclassical economics. And the international financial system was destroyed, which had a big effect on constraining welfare state policies. You have the whole right-wing shift among the elites. And a large part of it was an effort to beat back this democratizing wave. And it's nothing new. Exactly the same thing happened after the Second World War. Exactly the same thing happened after the First World War. And I suspect for the same reasons. Wars tend to get people thinking. And then you have to work really hard to drive them back into passivity. So the '20s were passive, the '50s were passive, the '70s had less success because the popular movements kept expanding and growing. But there was some effect. And we're right in the middle of it. It's kind of a normal cycle. Except that the cycle, I think, is moving upwards.

HG: Okay that's a nice optimistic note to finish on.

Postscript

Immediately after the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001, the following brief statement by Chomsky began circulating:

On the Bombings
Noam Chomsky

The terrorist attacks were major atrocities. In scale they may not reach the level of many others, for example Clinton's bombing of the Sudan with no credible pretext, destroying half its pharmaceutical supplies and killing unknown numbers of people

(no one knows, because the US blocked an inquiry at the UN and no one cares to pursue it). Not to speak of much worse cases, which easily come to mind. But that this was a horrendous crime is not in doubt. The primary victims, as usual, were working people: janitors, secretaries, firemen, etc. It is likely to prove to be a crushing blow to Palestinians and other poor and oppressed people. It is also likely to lead to harsh security controls, with many possible ramifications for undermining civil liberties and internal freedom.

The events reveal, dramatically, the foolishness of the project of 'missile defense'. As has been obvious all along, and pointed out repeatedly by strategic analysts, if anyone wants to cause immense damage in the US, including weapons of mass destruction, they are highly unlikely to launch a missile attack, thus guaranteeing their immediate destruction. There are innumerable easier ways that are basically unstoppable. But today's events will, very likely, be exploited to increase the pressure to develop these systems and put them into place. 'Defense' is a thin cover for plans for militarization of space, and with good PR, even the flimsiest arguments will carry some weight among a frightened public.

In short, the crime is a gift to the hard jingoist right, those who hope to use force to control their domains. That is even putting aside the likely US actions, and what they will trigger – possibly more attacks like this one, or worse. The prospects ahead are even more ominous than they appeared to be before the latest atrocities.

As to how to react, we have a choice. We can express justified horror; we can seek to understand what may have led to the crimes, which means making an effort to enter the minds of the likely perpetrators. If we choose the latter course, we can do no better, I think, than to listen to the words of Robert Fisk, whose direct knowledge and insight into affairs of the region is unmatched after many years of distinguished reporting. Describing 'The wickedness and awesome cruelty of a crushed and humiliated people,' he writes that 'this is not the war of democracy versus terror that the world will be asked to believe in the coming days. It is also about American missiles smashing into Palestinian homes and US helicopters firing missiles into a Lebanese ambulance in 1996 and American shells crashing into a village called Qana and about a Lebanese militia – paid and uniformed by America's Israeli ally – hacking and raping and murdering their way through refugee camps.' And much more. Again, we have a choice: we may try to understand, or refuse to do so, contributing to the likelihood that much worse lies ahead.

Notes

1 See <http://web.mit.edu/linguistics/www/chomsky.home.html> for a sense of the vast range and volume of Chomsky's writings.

2 For a more extensive book of interviews with Chomsky on a wide variety of topics, see Chomsky (1998).

3 A columnist for the *New York Times*.

4 A retired US general who provided considerable US

media commentary before and during the war between the US and Iraq.

5 The terms in quotes come from official planning documents of the Clinton Administration.

6 Klare (1995).

7 As Director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy, General Barry McCaffrey was 'drug czar' in the second Clinton Administration. He had also fought in the Vietnam War and was one of the leading generals in the Gulf

War against Iraq where he was implicated in the mass slaughter of Iraqi soldiers who were trying to surrender, according to Hersh (2000).

8 McKiernan (1999: 26–37).

9 WBUR's programme, *The Connection*, syndicated on National Public Radio. Christopher Lydon is no longer the host, though the programme continues.

10 Kadushin (1974).

11 McNamara (1999).

12 See Rielly (1999).

13 See Buzzanco (1996).

14 See Buzzanco (1996: 342–4).

15 See Kull (1995), Kull and Ramsay (1993) and Kull and Destler (1999).

16 Luttwak (1994: 23–8).

17 Halberstam (1972).

18 On this struggle, see Sheila Franklin's documentary film *The Water is Ours, Damn it!* (One World Productions, 2000).

19 Chomsky (1997: 171–94).

20 Crozier *et al.* (1975).

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