

Hidden Power

Noam Chomsky On Resurrecting The Revolutionary Spirit Of America

JOHN MALKIN

Seventy-seven-year-old linguist and political writer Noam Chomsky has been a vocal opponent of injustice since the Vietnam War era, but his opposition to the abuse of power goes back even farther, to a schoolyard encounter in the first grade: Seeing a boy being taunted because of his weight, young Chomsky started to intervene. Then he got scared and ran away. The shame and regret he felt following the incident stayed with him and developed into a lifelong commitment to champion the underdog.

Born in 1928 in Philadelphia, Chomsky was raised by Jewish parents who had come to the United States to escape anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe. By the age of twelve, he was taking the train to New York City, where he spent time in anarchist bookstores and at his uncle's 72nd Avenue newsstand, eavesdropping on — and eventually participating in — lively political discussions about socialism and class conflict.

After receiving his PhD in linguistics in 1955 at the University of Pennsylvania, Chomsky joined the faculty at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. During the Vietnam War, he participated in protests against U.S. military intervention in Southeast Asia and traveled to North Vietnam to lecture at Hanoi Polytechnic University during a pause in the bombing. In 1969 he published *American Power and the New Mandarins* (Pantheon), the first of fifty books he has written about U.S. foreign policy, propaganda, and social change.

Chomsky, who is still a professor at MIT, has also written extensively about linguistics. His theories about language are as revolutionary as his political writings, and in both he emphasizes universal human traits: the universality of the way humans structure language, on the one hand, and the universality of the human struggle for freedom and independence, on the other. These traits, he says, arise from humanity's "natural instincts."

Chomsky's political writings often describe how governments and corporations use propaganda to stamp out our natural instinct toward freedom and to breed hopelessness and apathy in its place. In his book *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance* (Metropolitan Books), Chomsky writes that "destroying hope is a critically important project" of the U.S. government. Despite this, he says, people maintain a

profound ability to follow their instincts and organize for justice. He points to the great changes that have been made in the U.S. thanks to popular social movements: freedom of the press, improved working conditions, civil rights, women's rights, and increased awareness of the slavery and genocide in American history. He also observes that the massive global opposition to the current U.S. war in Iraq came before the fighting even began, whereas protests against the Vietnam War took years to develop — which suggests a deepening antiwar sentiment.

Chomsky's most recent publication, *Government in the Future*, is due out this month from Seven Stories Press. He believes that government authorities support democratic processes only to the extent that the outcome will support their strategic and economic interests. Elections, he says, have become "minor events" in the political landscape, and the myth that the issues are too complex for the public to understand keeps most people from participating. Still, he is determined to tap into dormant feelings of dissatisfaction with the system. He envisions a world in which distant, controlling governments and private, corporate tyrannies are replaced by organizations that promote true democracy. This interview took place last November 19 at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, in Cambridge.

Malkin: Many people in this country became politically active, some of them for the first time, during this year's presidential campaign. A lot of them are now expressing despair and disappointment about the election results. What are your thoughts about the recent election?

Chomsky: Well, such despair is common, but it is the result of a misunderstanding. For one thing, elections tell us virtually nothing about the country. George W. Bush got about 31 percent of the electorate. John Kerry got about 29 percent. That leaves 40 percent of Americans who didn't vote. The voting patterns were almost the same as in 2000: same "red" states, same "blue" states. There was only a slight shift that tipped the election in Bush's favor. Apparently the wealthier part of the population — which tends to vote more in line with its class interests — came out in somewhat greater numbers this time. If the voting patterns had shifted slightly in the oppo-



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site direction and Kerry were in the White House, it would also tell us nothing about the country.

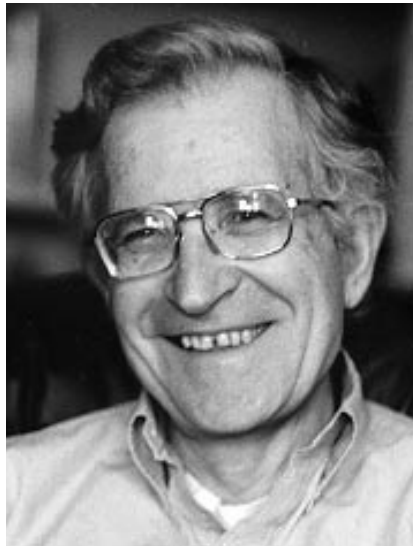
Right before the election there were extensive studies released about voters' attitudes and intent. It turns out that only about 10 percent of them were voting for what the studies' designers called "agenda, policies, programs, and ideas." The rest were voting for imagery.

U.S. elections are run by marketing professionals, the same people who sell toothpaste and cars. They don't believe in actual free markets or the nonsense taught in school about informed consumer choice. If they did, GM ads would say, "Here are the models we are putting out next year. Here are their characteristics." But they don't do that, because their model is the same as the next company's model. So what they do is show you an actress or a football player or a car going up a sheer cliff. They try to create an image that will trick you into buying their product.

These marketers also construct imagery to try to influence elections. They train Bush to project a certain image: An average guy just like you. A guy you'd like to meet in a bar. Someone who has your interests at heart, who'll protect you from danger. Kerry is trained to project a different image: someone who cares about the economy and about people's health, a war hero, and so on. Most people vote for an image, but the image typically has almost no resemblance to reality. People tend to vote for the candidate they believe shares their values. They are almost always wrong. Working-class Bush voters believed that Bush supported their interests, when the Republican Party platform was mostly about redirecting wealth to the top.

If you ask people why they don't vote based on issues, they'll say, "I don't know where the candidates stand on the issues." Which is the truth. The election is designed to keep you from understanding the candidates' positions on the issues. To figure out, say, what their healthcare proposals are would require a major research project. You aren't supposed to know. The advertising industry wants you to focus on what they call "qualities." And when you do discover the candidates' positions on the issues, you understand why.

Right before the election, two of the best public-opinion organizations in the world came out with major studies of popular attitudes and beliefs. The results are so far to the left of either political party that the press can't even report it. Huge majorities think that their tax dollars ought to go first for healthcare, education, and Social Security — not the military. An overwhelming majority oppose the use of military force unless we are under attack or under imminent threat of attack. A majority of Americans are in favor of signing the Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change and subjecting the U.S. to the International Criminal Court. The large majority think that the UN, not the United States, ought to take the lead on international



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crises. In fact, the majority even support giving up the U.S.'s veto power in the UN Security Council, so that the U.S. will have to go along with the opinions of the majority. I could go on, but these positions are so far off the left end of the political spectrum that you can understand why the advertising industry has to keep issues out of the election and focus on imagery.

The way to overcome this situation is to create real political parties. To have real political parties, the people must participate and make decisions, not just come together once every four years to pull a lever. That is not politics. It is the opposite of politics. If you have mass popular organizations that are functioning all the time — at local, regional, and international levels — then you have at least the basis for a democracy. Such organizations existed here in the past.

The unions were one example. And they exist right now in other countries. Take Brazil, the second-largest country in the hemisphere. They actually have a real democratic system. Voters aren't forced to choose between two rich businessmen who went to the same elite university and are members of the same secret society and are funded by the same corporations. Brazilians can vote for somebody like themselves, some impressive figure who maybe doesn't have a higher education — a peasant or a steelworker perhaps. I mean, that is inconceivable in the United States.

The reason they can do it in Brazil is that they have mass popular organizations. The Brazilian Landless Workers Movement is probably the most important popular organization in the world, and it's functioning all the time, not just in an election year. Then there's the Brazilian Worker's Party, which has all kinds of serious flaws, but nevertheless is a mass popular organization working at every level. There are professional associations in Brazil that are politically active. There are areas in which the budget is popularly decided: in Pôrto Alegre, for example. That is the basis of a democratic culture. If you don't have that, you can still have formal elections, but they're not meaningful.

And meaningless formal elections are indeed what the elite want us to have in this country. It goes back to the Constitutional Convention of 1787, where James Madison laid it out: the power has to be in the hands of the wealth of the nation, he said, people who understand the needs of property owners and recognize that the first priority of government is to protect the wealthy minority from the unwashed majority. To do this, the elite must fragment the majority in some fashion. We have had two-hundred-plus years of struggle about this because the people don't accept it, and they have gained many rights as a result of that struggle. In fact, we have a legacy of freedom that is in many ways unique. But it wasn't granted from above. It was won from below. And the battle continues.

The wealthy and privileged are always fighting a bitter, un-

The history books say, “This great man gave us these rights.” But if you look at what actually happened, the rights were won from below, and the “great man” was dragged kicking and screaming into signing something.

remitting class war. They never stop for a minute. If one tactic doesn't work, they shift to another. And if the general population lets itself become pessimistic and gives up — which is what the elite want — then the upper class will be even more free to do whatever is in its own best interest.

Malkin: It seems that, to the rest of the world, the propaganda that manipulates U.S. public opinion has been transparent for some time. Do you think the deceit is becoming more clear to people within the United States? Given the revelation that Iraq did not have weapons of mass destruction, the hiring of Halliburton to clean up after the war, the Abu Ghraib torture scandal, and this week's reports of a U.S. soldier executing an unarmed Iraqi, do you think people in the United States are waking up to the deception?

Chomsky: I don't want to be impolite, but the list you have just given is itself a type of sophisticated propaganda. Take the marine who killed an unarmed man in a Fallujah mosque. Compared with everything else that's going on in Fallujah, is that an atrocity? It isn't even a minor footnote. The atrocity is what you read on the front page of the *New York Times*, where you'll see a picture of Iraqi patients and doctors lying on the floor, manacled, and U.S. soldiers standing guard over them. The front-page story tells us proudly that American soldiers broke into Fallujah General Hospital, forced patients out of their beds, and made them lie on the floor in handcuffs. That is a war crime. The Geneva Conventions, which are the foundation of modern humanitarian laws, say that hospitals must be protected at all times, by all sides, in a war.

But of course the *Times* doesn't describe that hospital invasion as a war crime. The *Times* says it was an achievement, because Fallujah General Hospital was a propaganda center for the insurgents. Why? Because it was producing inflated casualty reports. How do we know that the reports were inflated? Because our leader told us so, and if our leader says something, it is automatically true for the front page of the greatest newspaper in the world.

But suppose they were reporting inflated casualty figures. Why is that propaganda for the insurgents? It means the U.S. is winning, right? But it also breaks the first rule of wartime propaganda, which is never to let the public see what is happening to the other side. We don't embed reporters with the Iraqis. We embed them with U.S. forces, just as the Russians

did with their reporters in Afghanistan, so that they'll report the war from our side.

The story about the marine who shot a wounded, unarmed soldier is just a distraction. The reason they're going after him is because he is vulnerable and expendable. Whoever he is, he is not somebody like us: nice, educated people wearing ties and sitting in air-conditioned offices. He is probably some kid from a disadvantaged background who has people shooting at him from all sides. So he lost control, and we can criticize him for that, because he is not like us. But how about criticizing the higher-ups who sent him to Iraq? They are the criminals.

After World War II, at the Nuremberg war-crimes tribunal, they didn't go after the soldiers. They went after the German foreign minister. He was hanged. But after the My Lai massacre in Vietnam, the soldiers became the scapegoats. Semi-educated, half-crazed GIs who didn't know who was going to shoot at them next carried out a massacre. That much is true. But My Lai was a tiny footnote to a major mass-murder operation called “Operation Wheeler/Wallowa,” which was a search-and-destroy mission organized by nice people like us: educated Harvard graduates in air-conditioned offices. The real criminals are immune. Instead they go after some minor person about whom we can say, “He was a bad apple, not like us.”

In fact, the whole invasion of Fallujah was very much like what happened in Srebrenica, Bosnia, which the U.S. has called a horrendous war crime. In 1995, Srebrenica was a UN-protected “safe area,” and Bosnian Muslims used it as a base from which to attack Bosnian Serb villages. Finally the Serb forces retaliated. All of the women and children and the elderly were driven out of Srebrenica. The men were forced to stay, and the Serbs killed them.

What did we do in Fallujah? Women and children were driven out, mostly by bombing. Men were forced back in to be killed. Srebrenica is described as genocide. What about Fallujah? It's not described as genocide in the U.S. press, though in other countries it is. I was just reading an Italian newspaper report about this. Nobel Peace Prize winners Lech Walesa of Poland, Adolfo Esquivel of Argentina, Rigoberta Menchú of Guatemala, Bishop Belo of East Timor, and many others have publicly said that the invasion of Fallujah was genocide. If so, then our president is a war criminal and is subject to the death penalty under U.S. law. The War Crimes Act of 1996, passed by a Republican Congress, states that grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions are war crimes punishable by death.

(end of excerpt)