

Noam Chomsky

“States are simply not moral agents.”

Peter Werbe
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1994

Noam Chomsky is a major figure in 20th Century linguistics although best known for his social and political criticism. He has taught at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology since 1955.

The following interview was conducted Oct. 31, 1993 by a *Fifth Estate* staff member who hosts a radio interview show on a Detroit station.

Peter Werbe: The perspectives you put forth in your books and interviews are rarely ever presented in the mass media of this country. The group, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), has shown mainstream media reports almost all news and analysis from a right-wing point of view.

Noam Chomsky: That's true, but it's not a change from the past. And, it's entirely understandable. It's corporate media and they're not going to finance people who are trying to undermine their privilege and power.

Peter Werbe: It's interesting that the myth continues that the mass media is dominated by liberals. It's put forth by extreme right-wing radio and television personalities which is kind of funny since it is they who are currently dominating the media. How did the idea emerge in the popular mind that media is dominated by liberals?

Noam Chomsky: Actually, I wouldn't disagree with that. It's particularly true of the elite media, but one has to recognize that liberals are pretty far to the right. What are called liberals are people who don't take an extreme position in support of state and corporate power, but only a moderate position in support of it. And, from that point of view, it's probably correct. If you look at the New York Times and Washington Post, they are not rabid jingoists or chauvinists; they are moderate jingoists and chauvinists.

Peter Werbe: You'd be safe to say that the official ideology of corporate liberalism and conservatism aren't far apart.

Noam Chomsky: It's a very narrow spectrum and the elite media tends towards the less extreme end of that spectrum.

Peter Werbe: How does President Clinton figure in your estimation of this continuity, particularly between the Reagan-Bush years and the “change” the Clintons are allegedly bringing about?

Noam Chomsky: The continuity is quite substantial. Clinton comes from the most conservative wing of the Democratic Party; that's what are called the New Democrats. These are the Democrats who are giving up those mushy old liberal clichés about entitlements and redistribution and rights. They are committed primarily to what they call “enterprise economics,” meaning the use of state power to support investment, productivity and the like. They are, in effect, moderate Republicans. If you look at the 1992 presidential campaign, there were not many issues that separated the conservative Democrat Clinton and the moderate Republican Bush.

Peter Werbe: On some of the issues candidate Clinton was very critical of President Bush on, like Haiti, President Clinton is not much different at all.

Noam Chomsky: In fact, one of the first Clinton campaign promises he gave up on was Haiti. He had criticized Bush for the quite inhumane policy of forcibly returning people fleeing a horror chamber, and his first act was to harshen that policy. Clinton instituted a completely illegal blockade on Haiti which succeeded in turning back every fishing boat with starving, desperate people on it. Although, interestingly, it didn't succeed in stopping ships coming from Haiti carrying drugs to the U.S. that are the main narcotrafficking support of the Haitian military junta.

Peter Werbe: Let's address some other foreign policy issues. Somalia, in many ways, seemed like a poison pill Bush left for the incoming president to insure a continuity of foreign intervention. If Clinton had any ideas about ceasing overseas involvement, he was given Somalia right off the bat.

Noam Chomsky: That's quite true. Poison pill is exactly the right word. Bush very carefully timed the Somalia intervention. It was after the famine and the fighting had substantially declined. He was guaranteed some good photo opportunities for a couple of weeks, but anyone who has looked at the history of military intervention knows that it goes sour pretty fast. He dumped it in Clinton's lap who would have to face the consequences. As soon as the U.S. had massive military forces in Somalia, they began buttering up the warlords (including Aidid, who later became the arch-enemy for a while) which gave them new prestige and power. It was a policy just riding for disaster and the U.S. fell right into it.

Peter Werbe: There was a report in the Los Angeles Times of significant concessions for oil exploration in Somalia granted by the old government. Was this the reason for the intervention, those old-fashioned class and economic interests, or was it a politician operating off of crass opportunism?

Noam Chomsky: I read the same report about the oil and I'm sure the facts are correct, but I doubt very much that it was a factor in the intervention. In fact, the intervention in no way improved the opportunities for American oil companies; it probably harmed them. The best explanation was that it was taken in part simply out of political opportunism, a way of making Bush look good for a couple of weeks at the end of his administration. But I think a large part of it was what Chief of Staff, Colin Powell, blurted out at one point about good photo opportunities for the Pentagon.

The Pentagon budget was under attack at the time, since it's rather hard to defend now. For 50 years it had been claimed we needed a huge military system to defend ourselves from the Russian hordes. That's been pretty hard to sell since the Berlin wall fell. So other techniques have been used. And the Pentagon system still fulfills exactly its own functions which had very little to do with the Russians; but it was hard to sell to the public.

Peter Werbe: There was a humorous photo on the front page of the *New York Times* in December 1992 on the first day of the U.S. landing. It showed a full battle dressed Navy Seal charging ashore alongside a TV cameraman dressed in shorts and flip flops—somebody was dressed inappropriately.

Noam Chomsky: I think that symbolized what was really going on. There were emotional photos of starving children and American soldiers and officers handing out food to them. It's probable that all this had very little effect, or even a negative effect, on the health and the food supplies available to the Somalis. It looked good for a couple of weeks and probably gave a short-term shot in the arm to the Pentagon budget.

Peter Werbe: Didn't the intervention come at the time Bush had just pardoned Caspar Weinberger and others who were implicated in the Iran-Contra scandal?

Noam Chomsky: It was very close certainly, but we don't know the timing precisely. The official story is that Bush saw a television clip of starving Somalis right around Thanksgiving and said we have to do something about it. However, this is a highly unlikely story. I've been told by very reliable American TV foreign correspondents who were in Somalia several months earlier, that in early November they were already seeing high-ranking Marine officers in civilian dress walking around Baidoa and other cities looking for spots for bases and so on. It looks like it was planned at least a month before the official announcement.

Peter Werbe: Is there any manner in which you could see the U.S. legitimately intervening abroad?

Noam Chomsky: Military intervention by any power carries enormous dangers and risks. States simply are not moral agents. They don't do things out of humanitarian interests. If you look at history, you find it extremely hard to find an example of genuine humanitarian intervention. Things like that just don't happen. Sometimes there have been interventions which have humanitarian by-products, but never as an intention.

It's quite commonly the case that when a subject population that is suffering actually calls for military intervention, it turns out they are fighting against that army pretty soon. Take Northern Ireland. The initiative for intervention came from the Catholic community which was being treated pretty brutally. But within a short time they were at war with the British troops. If foreign troops landed in Detroit, with the most humanitarian intentions and tried to deal with the real problems of the city, I'm sure within a short time they would be at war with the population. It's in the nature of an occupying army

Peter Werbe: You've written much about the media's ability to define reality and hence what the empire desires for us to see as important.

Noam Chomsky: Take Bosnia and Angola which are fairly comparable. The situation in Angola is probably worse, but there is a tremendous amount of attention on Bosnia where there is a real horror story going on. There's virtually nothing reported about a similar situation in Angola; what's the difference?

What happens in the Balkans affects the interests of rich, powerful people in Europe and America, therefore they care about that. Besides it is easy to blame the atrocities in Bosnia on Serbian peasants and ex-communists. On the other hand, if you look at Angola where the situation is even worse than Bosnia, no matter how many massacres go on, it's not going to harm the interests of rich Europeans and rich Americans. Furthermore, in Angola (as in Afghanistan), the group and the individual primarily responsible for the atrocities is a former U.S. client who was hailed not many years ago during the Reagan/ Bush years as a great freedom fighter and the George Washington of Angola. So, that's not a good story to focus on.

Peter Werbe: I was fascinated by how many new books you have published recently. It's a tribute to the work you've done over the years, but does it also say something about what a dearth there is of other prominent social critics?

Noam Chomsky: There are two interesting tendencies going on that are counter to one another and it does put quite a heavy burden on a few of us. There has been a significant increase in the part of the population that's interested in hearing something different, who are looking for alternatives, who are unsatisfied with the range of ideas and information presented to them.

At the same time there has been a notable decline in what used to be called left intellectuals, (I don't like that word much, but that's what they were), who helped articulate, research, speak, write and so forth. The end result is a huge demand on a few people who are happy to devote a good part of their lives to this.

Noam Chomsky's most recent books include *What Uncle Sam Really Wants: The Prosperous Few, and The Restless Many*, from Odonean Press. From Common Courage Press: *Adventures In Media Land*; from South End Press: *Year 501 The Conquest Continues*, and also a film, *The Manufacture of Consent*.

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