

International Socialist Review Issue 25, September–October 2002

U.S. intervention from Afghanistan to Iraq

David Barsamian interviews Noam Chomsky

David Barsamian: You're a critic of the U.S. attack on Afghanistan. I'd like you to consider the following comments, all of which were made in late August. CNN's Christiane Amanpour said, "There is no doubt that U.S. intervention in Afghanistan has had a net positive effect for the Afghan people." Then Ahmed Rashid, the Pakistani journalist and author of Taliban, told me in an interview, that there's been "an enormous improvement in the status of women in Afghanistan with the advent of the new government. Several million children are back in school and 50,000 women teachers are back on the job." Finally, in another interview, Pervez Hoodboy, who teaches in Islamabad, Pakistan, told me that the ouster of the Taliban "was a good thing for Pakistan" because that country was in danger of being Talibanized, that is, taken over by Islamic fundamentalists. Would you concede that the war produced benefits for the average Afghan?

Noam Chomsky: I don't know if the word "concede" is correct, and I'm not sure about the "average Afghan." There certainly were improvements that resulted from the overthrow of the Taliban. That's why everyone was in favor of the overthrow of the Taliban, except the U.S. government. Let's keep in mind that the overthrow of the Taliban regime was not a war aim. The war aim announced on October 12, five days after the bombing began, was that the Taliban leadership should hand over to the United States people who the U.S. suspected of participating in terrorist actions—the U.S. refused to provide evidence—and warned the Afghan people that unless this was done, they would be bombed. Over two weeks later, when the war was pretty much coming to an end, the war aim of overthrowing the Taliban regime was added. In fact, the British commander announced that the Afghan people would continue to be bombed until they changed their regime. So, if regime change wasn't a war aim, we can't even really raise that question. However, it's a good thing that the U.S. finally came around to joining others in opposing the Taliban regime toward the end of the war.

Then the question arises of how you should do it. Well, Afghans had opinions about this. Toward the end of October, there was a major meeting in Peshawar, Pakistan, of a thousand tribal and political leaders, some from inside Pakistan, some exiles, and some from elsewhere. These were all people strongly supported by the U.S. There were some reports about this meeting in the press. They said it was a very impressive meeting of usually contentious tribal leaders who were dedicated to overthrowing the hated Taliban. They disagreed on a lot of things. One thing they agreed on: they pleaded with the U.S. to stop the bombing because it was harming and destroying the country and was undermining their efforts to overthrow the Taliban regime from within. They called on the international media to plead with the U.S. to stop harming their efforts to overthrow the Taliban by bombing.

Just the week before that meeting, one of the most well known and highly regarded Afghan leaders, Abdul Haq—who is also highly regarded by the U.S. and the current Afghan government of Hamid Karzai—entered Afghanistan from Pakistan, apparently without U.S. support. He was captured and killed. Haq was regarded as one of the great martyrs of the war against the Taliban. Just before he entered Afghanistan, Haq had an extensive interview with Anatol Lieven of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. In the interview, he again condemns the U.S. bombing, pleads for the U.S. to stop it, says that by bombing it is undermining the efforts he and others are carrying out to overthrow the Taliban regime, which he regarded as fragile and hated. He then said the only reason the U.S. was bombing is because it wants to "show its muscle." It doesn't care anything about the Afghans. The leading women's group in Afghanistan, RAWA (the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan), which got some belated recognition after many years, also came out with similar statements, calling for the overthrow of the Taliban and urging that this could be done from within, without devastating attacks on the country, which were driving millions of people to the edge of starvation.

The concept of overthrowing the Taliban regime was certainly there. The U.S. joined in about three weeks after the bombing began, rejecting the call of Afghans to help them overthrow the government by funding and offering political support for their actions from within, and insisting on showing its muscle without caring for the Afghans. Certainly, overthrowing the Taliban was a very reasonable approach and we should have listened to the substantial and credible part of Afghan opinion that was talking about how to go about doing this.

Now, let's talk about the consequences. Let's suppose that it's true that the consequences for Afghans were beneficial. Do we celebrate Pearl Harbor Day every year? It's well understood that the Japanese attack on the colonial outposts of the United States, England, and Holland was in some respects highly beneficial to the people of Asia. It was a major factor in driving the British out of India, which saved maybe tens of millions of lives. It drove the Dutch out of Indonesia. That's why there was applause for the Japanese invasion. In fact, major nationalists, like Sukarno in Indonesia, joined the Japanese and even fought with them because they wanted to

get the hated white man out of Asia. If there had been no resistance to the Japanese attack, they might not have turned to the horrifying atrocities that did ultimately turn many Asians against them. So would we be celebrating Pearl Harbor? I don't think so. I certainly wouldn't.

Let's talk about the role of the media in manufacturing consent for war. Hermann Goering at Nuremberg had this to say: "[T]he people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked and then denounce the peacemakers for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same in any country." Does it work that way in the United States?

SURE, LOOK around us, though it's not to the extent you describe. Let's take a case from the past, so we can look at it a little more dispassionately. In the mid-1980s, during the first "war on terror," called by the Reagan administration in much the same terms as today—with the same rhetoric, the same people in charge even—even the administration moderates, like George Shultz, the counterpart of Colin Powell, condemned the "cancer" right here in our own land mass—meaning Nicaragua—which is following the plans of *Mein Kampf* and is planning to conquer the hemisphere. President Reagan declared a "national emergency" in 1985, which was renewed annually, because of the dangers to the security of the U.S. from the government of Nicaragua. When the U.S. bombed Libya in 1986, Reagan justified the attack on the grounds that the "mad dog" Qaddafi was bringing his war home to the United States as part of the campaign to expel America from the world. Qaddafi was doing this by sending arms to the Sandinistas, who were rampaging around the hemisphere. There was a huge effort made to arouse the American population to fear the Nicaraguan army, which was only a two-day march from Texas.

This rhetoric had some effect, but it certainly didn't have the effect Goering described. Opposition to U.S. attacks on Nicaragua remained fairly high, despite the hysteria and despite the fact that there was virtual 100 percent media support for the attack. It's a fact worth remembering. At the peak period of the hysteria about defending ourselves against Nicaragua, the opinion pieces—editorials and op-eds in the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*, for example—were close to 100 percent in favor of overthrowing the Nicaraguan government. They were split on how to do it. So the hawks said the U.S. should use more violence. The doves, like Tom Wicker of the *Times* and the editors of the *Washington Post*, said that the U.S. terrorist attack wasn't working too well and therefore we should find other means to fit Nicaragua back into "a Central American mode" and impose "regional standards" on Nicaragua. The "Central American mode" was the mode of El Salvador and Guatemala. The regional standards in those countries were U.S.-backed state-terrorist forces that had just killed tens of thousands of people, engaged in torture and huge atrocities, and destroyed the countries. That's the "Central American mode" to which we had to restore Nicaragua, but by other means. That was the doves. The hawks were for wiping them out.

Despite the virtual 100 percent media support and the hysteria coming out of the government propaganda agencies, the public did not fully go along. There was a very large committed mass solidarity movement, rooted right in the mainstream of the United States. I think Goering underestimates the resiliency of democracies.

Let me ask about another Nazi figure, Goebbels, the minister of propaganda. He said the purpose of Nazi propaganda is "to present an ostensible diversity behind which lies an actual uniformity."

He's speaking of an organized coordinated propaganda agency. In the West it doesn't work like that.

How does it work here?

Here the press is essentially free to do what it wants. There are efforts on the part of the government to influence the press outcome, but they're free to disregard it. Nevertheless, the outcomes are not unlike what Goebbels describes. Without central authority and without any serious compulsion to follow the party line, the end result comes out pretty much the way he described it—that is, an appearance of diversity, but with "actual uniformity." The example I just mentioned, Nicaragua, is a fine illustration of what was called a hawk-dove controversy, which was mainly: How do we achieve the shared objective of overthrowing the "cancer right here in our landmass" and "restoring it to the regional standards" of the U.S. murderous terrorist states? On that, there was consensus. There was very little disagreement within the mainstream. You have to go to the edges to find any difference, and in the major media there is essentially no variation. It is an appearance of diversity with uniformity of goal. It's pretty much the same now.

The main question today is how and when to attack Iraq. In the mainstream media, you find an occasional voice saying there might be some problem about committing the crime for which people were hanged at Nuremberg, by attacking another country with who knows what effect without even a pretext. You have to go out as far as House Majority Leader Dick Armey to say we shouldn't be the kind of country that carries out premeditated attacks against others in violation of international law and treaties. Almost no one else says that.

Let's continue on this issue of propaganda. Eduardo Galeano, the great Uruguayan journalist and novelist, wrote in the June Progressive magazine, "Propaganda, the Pentagon confesses, is part of the war budget. The White

House has brought [in]...advertising expert Charlotte Beers.... [H]er mission is to advance the terrorist crusade against terrorism on the world market. "We're selling a product," explains Colin Powell."

Governments are going to do anything they can to try to whip up support for the policies they pursue. Governments are power systems. They follow the interests of the concentration of domestic power to which they're committed. That's not a surprise. What Galeano describes is particularly crass, but it doesn't change anything. It just brings out publicly what we expect the government to be doing. It's illegal. The government's not supposed to be propagandizing the population, but it's minor in the scheme of things.

A much more important issue is how the free institutions, which are not bound to follow government orders, behave. This is not Nazi Germany or Stalinist Russia. There's no penalty for being independent and honest. The question is how they respond. On their own, do they voluntarily adopt the same stance? To the extent that they do, that is much more serious than the fact that a government is openly trying to propagandize the population. If the government has a propaganda ministry, it's a bad thing. A free society shouldn't tolerate that, but it's minor compared to the voluntary subordination, not just of the media, but of the articulate intellectual community generally.

Let's go back to the past. In the First World War, the British and the Americans had very effective state propaganda agencies. The Germans didn't. Nevertheless, the German intellectuals overwhelmingly supported the war. As the war began in 1914, a group of very distinguished German intellectuals from across the political spectrum issued an appeal to the intellectuals of the world to join in support of Germany and its noble efforts to defend civilization against barbarism. That was basically a free choice, and that's much more severe than the government agencies trying to get people to do things, as they did in the U.S. and Britain, with a good deal of effect. Most of the subordination to the propaganda was completely voluntary in the U.S. and Britain.

If you look through history, that's pretty much the way it works. There are totalitarian states where if you don't follow the official line, you're going to be punished severely. Take U.S. dependencies in Central America, some of the worst. In El Salvador, intellectuals who continued to call for peace negotiations and democracy weren't treated nicely. The conservative archbishop, Oscar Romero, who had become "a voice for the voiceless," was assassinated to begin the decade of the 1980s. This decade ended with the murder of six leading intellectuals at the Jesuit University in San Salvador. Their brains were blown out by U.S.-armed and trained members of an elite battalion, which by then had killed tens of thousands of people. Well, that's what it takes to try and be free and honest in a client state of the U.S. If you did a poll of educated Americans and asked them to name the leading Latin American intellectuals whose brains were blown out by our elite forces, essentially no one will have heard of them or remember the incident. If it had been six intellectuals in Czechoslovakia or Poland at the same time, you'd know their names.

THAT ILLUSTRATES the "worthy and unworthy victims' thesis" you and Edward S. Herman develop in your book Manufacturing Consent. There was an interesting comment made recently by CBS news anchor, Dan Rather. He didn't say it on his nightly news show but to the BBC. He said American reporting on the war on terrorism is far less critical than most other places in the world. He was disturbed by the lack of questioning among journalists and then he said reporters were intimidated, and he included himself in this, about reporting the facts, for fear of being labeled unpatriotic.

If Dan Rather is so cowardly about being labeled unpatriotic, he shouldn't be a newsman. Is that as bad as having your brains blown out? It's not nice to be subjected to vilification and defamation and lies, but anyone in the business has to take this as a fact of life. Are you intimidated by it?

No.

If you want to be intimidated by it, you can say, "I'm a coward." If people are intimidated, they shouldn't be in the business.

Let me blend Shakespeare with Rudyard Kipling, the poet laureate of the British Empire, "Take up the white man's burden, (unleash) the dogs of war (to fight) the savage wars of peace." What is driving the dogs of war in the Bush administration's Iraq policy?

THIS IS something we can only speculate about. We don't have the internal documentary evidence yet. Let's just label this as speculation. The claim is that Saddam Hussein is such a threat to the security of the U.S. and other countries that we can't let him survive. We have to destroy him by a preemptive strike. This raises obvious questions: When did he become such a threat? Notice this comes after September 11. There wasn't a call to invade Iraq two years ago. Something must have happened that made him a terrible threat. Is he more dangerous than two years ago? No. He's less dangerous than two years ago.

Even with all the effort, nothing has been found to link Hussein to September 11. This is not surprising because Saddam Hussein and bin Laden have been enemies for years. There is no reason to believe that has changed. However, if there are any links, they're going to be much harder to maintain after September 11 than before, for the simple reason of mass surveillance. That's only the beginning. In 1990, Saddam Hussein was a far greater threat than today. Remember all his major crimes were behind him. The gassing of the Kurds, the Iran-Iraq war, torture, and other crimes. He was a first-class world gangster and far more powerful than he is now. Furthermore, he was developing weapons of mass destruction at a time when his reach was far greater than it is now. Since that time, Iraq was bombed and devastated and it has been subjected to more than a decade of severe sanctions. These have reduced its capacity to carry out aggression. It's subject to overflights. Regular bombing controls a good part of the country.

What was he doing when he was really dangerous? Bob Dole, the former presidential candidate, now calls for Congressional support for an attack. What was Dole doing when he was really dangerous? He visited Saddam Hussein. In the spring of 1990, he led a delegation sent by George Bush I to convey greetings to him and inform him that the person who had criticized him over the Voice of America was being removed because he was stepping out of line. Senator Alan Simpson told Saddam his problem wasn't with the U.S. government but with the U.S. media, who are haughty and pampered and go off on their own. Even Congressional criticism should be disregarded. The White House was strongly with him.

This wasn't just talk. Right through his worst atrocities, the U.S. and Britain were providing Iraq with lavish aid. Iraq was a major trading partner. They were providing him with the means to develop weapons of mass destruction, including chemical and nuclear weapons, and missile systems. There was no secret about who he was. There was a time when Saddam Hussein was dangerous, had committed major crimes, and was capable of committing much worse ones, and those who are now saying he is too dangerous to exist were supporting him and helping him become more of a danger.

All of this was happening right before his act of disobedience in 1990, after which he shifted overnight from great friend and ally to the reincarnation of Attila the Hun. It's hard to believe that the war is taking place because of the threat that he poses. That's not to deny that he does pose a threat. The Iraqi people would be better off without him, but that was much more true 12 years ago than it is today. The crimes that are correctly charged to him—like using chemical weapons against his own people—can't be the reason for war now, because when he was doing it, the U.S. was supporting him, knowingly. So what are the reasons for war now?

Here we have to speculate. There are two plausible answers. First, the U.S. is trying to show its muscle, and it doesn't care much what happens to the people of the region. It's called establishing credibility. We have to show we're going to run the world, and if anyone gets out of line, we'll smash them. We have the power to do it, and we'll do it.

Second, there are also domestic reasons. It's not much of a secret that the Bush administration is carrying out a substantial assault against the general population here, particularly future generations. The huge tax cuts for the rich, which mainly come on line after the next election, could be a very serious blow to the American people. The huge deficit is replaying pretty much what happened in the 1980s. The goal is to make it impossible to provide services for the general population like medical care, Social Security, infrastructure development, or protection of the environment. This ensures that the government will direct its massive resources to the narrow power centers that the Bush administration serves even more intensively than the norm. That's happening all across the board, and the last thing they want people to do is pay attention to it. How do you do that? Here a variant of what Goering said is more accurate. The way to keep people from paying attention is to frighten them. If people are in fear, huddling under the protection of the savior, maybe they won't pay too much attention to what's being done to them. That means constant war.

The president has made it clear. His speechwriters have made it very clear. A couple weeks ago, he said that the war is on terror, but we're fighting endless wars. We can't say how many countries we're going to have to attack in this war on terror because there are potential threats everywhere. That's true. There are serious potential threats right here in the U.S., for example. Take the anthrax attack. In November and December, that was considered a much more serious threat than September 11. The first major book after September 11—*The Age of Terror*, written mostly by a group of well-known university professors—points out that the anthrax attacks were more serious than September 11. The anthrax attack was later localized to a federal lab in the U.S., and the commentary declined. So, by their reasoning, we should bomb the U.S. If you want to rid the world of potential threats, you'll have to destroy the world. If you want to be serious about reducing potential threats, not just working for power interests, what you'll do is look into the causes and reasons for terrorism, and try and deal with those. The correct response to a terrorist attack is not to lash out and murder people, but try to learn what lies behind it, and deal with the causes.

Gore Vidal used the analogy of bombing Palermo to kill the Mafia.

Or if the British had bombed Boston at the time of major IRA attacks on London. That's where the financing was coming from. But the British finally figured out they had to deal with the grievances. It doesn't justify terrorism, but there are usually reasons for it. Unless you deal with them, you aren't going to get anywhere. The head of the Israeli secret service recently said that if you declare a war on Palestinian terror, you're declaring a war that will go on forever. It's a war without end. If you want to deal with Palestinian terror, you have to deal with the legitimate grievances of the Palestinians, namely the fact we are denying them self-determination. Twenty years earlier, during an earlier period of Israeli atrocities in the territories, at a time when Israel still retained immunity from retaliation from within the territories, the former head of military intelligence made essentially the same comment. He said, "We'll never kill the mosquitoes. We have to drain the swamp." The swamp is the failure to deal with the legitimate aspirations of a people under military occupation.

In your description of the various reasons that lay behind driving the dogs of war in Iraq, you did not include oil. The Times of London ran the following headline in mid-July: "West Sees Glittering Prizes Ahead in Giant Oilfields." As the article put it, "The removal of President Saddam Hussein would open Iraq's rich new oilfields to Western bidders and bring the prospect of lessening dependence on Saudi oil. No other country offers such untapped oilfields whose exploitation could lessen tensions over the Western presence in Saudi Arabia." In fact, Iraq has the second largest oil fields, exceeded only by Saudi Arabia. One industry expert told the Times, "There is nothing like it anywhere else in the world. It's the big prize."

That's all correct, and I've written about this topic in the past. The reason I didn't mention it is because we were talking about the specific reasons at this moment. Those reasons are background ones, which persist. It's always been obvious that, one way or another, the U.S. would try to do something to ensure that this enormous prize would be back under U.S. control. This is as true today as it has always been.

The torrent of war talk, not just around Iraq, but as you said, other countries, seems to serve as a weapon of mass distraction, diverting people's attention from the corporate crime wave, from the Enron scandal and Bush's connection with Ken Lay, Bush's financial dealings while he was a director of Harken Energy, from Cheney's involvement with Halliburton, which now has a contract with the Bush administration to do work at Guantanamo Bay, or from the fact that Iraqi oil is still being imported by Halliburton into the United States.

Yes, they would like to distract attention away from that, but my feeling remains that they would primarily like to distract people's attention from the assault they are carrying against the general population. They're undermining the basis for a decently functioning society for most of the population, except for the very rich. That's not a small thing.

George Orwell's most famous novel, 1984, introduced such expressions as the "memory hole" and "Big Brother." Orwell wrote, "The Ministry of Truth was an enormous pyramidal structure of glittering white concrete and on its white face in elegant lettering the three slogans of the party War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, Ignorance is Strength." Do you see any parallels today with secret tribunals, secret evidence, permanent war, and government surveillance with the kind of picture Orwell was describing?

Orwell was describing and satirizing an extreme totalitarian state. Yes, you find bits and pieces in the freer societies and he intended that. The book was meant as a kind of allegory that was broader than the Soviet Union. One of the immediate effects of September 11 in most countries was to provide the government with the pretext to clamp down on its own population. Governments never like free societies. They try to impose discipline in various ways, and here they did it in rather extreme fashion. Still, I don't think those are the major issues. I would turn to a less known article of Orwell's, the unpublished preface to *Animal Farm*. It addressed what he called "literary censorship" in England. He asked, how is it that in free England the outcomes in the media are not all that different to what I'm satirizing in this account of a totalitarian monster? He mentioned two reasons. One reason the outcomes are similar is that the press is owned by wealthy men who have every reason not to want certain ideas to be expressed, so you get self-censorship. The second reason is just a good education. If you're properly educated at the elite schools, you internalize the understanding that there are certain things it wouldn't do to say. That's the effect of a "proper education." This doesn't mean just schools, but the whole system. The higher the education you receive, the more internalized the values are, and this leads to voluntary censorship.

What was the reaction in the media to the attitudes of leading Afghan dissidents backed by the U.S. to the bombing? These dissidents opposed the bombing, but how much of this made the press? Very little. After September 11, there was tremendous sympathy for the victims, but there was a question of how to react. Gallup carried out an international poll in late September 2001, asking how the U.S. should react. The main question was: If the identity of the perpetrators is known and the places they came from, should the U.S. resort to force or to judicial proceedings? Almost the whole world opposed bombing overwhelmingly. In Europe, it was three or four to one. In Latin America, the region with the most experience of U.S. intervention, support for bombing was tiny. In Panama, where support for bombing was highest, 16 percent, 80 percent called for judicial proceedings. There were only two exceptions of the countries polled: India and Israel. Here there was a small majority in favor of bombing, but that's because Afghanistan has become the surrogate for their own problems—Kashmir and Palestine. How much of this appeared in the U.S. press? Every editor knew this. A media study found one report of 150 words in an Omaha journal, which misstated the results. The government didn't tell them not to publish it.

Every editor knows this is the kind of poll it wouldn't do to print at a time when there are headlines saying "the world is with us." It's easy to give examples over and over. That's much more serious than a ministry of truth.