

Collateral Language

An Interview With Noam Chomsky

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Noam Chomsky is Institute Professor in the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy at MIT. He is the author of scores of books-his latest are *Power and Terror* and *Middle East Illusions*. His book *9-11* was an international bestseller.

BARSAMIAN: In recent years, the Pentagon, and then the media, have adopted this term "collateral damage" to describe the death of civilians. Talk about the role of language in shaping and forming people's understanding of events.

CHOMSKY: Well, it's as old as history. It has nothing much to do with language. Language is the way we interact and communicate, so, naturally, the means of communication and the conceptual background that's behind it, which is more important, are used to try to shape attitudes and opinions and induce conformity and subordination. Not surprisingly, it was created in the more democratic societies.

The first coordinated propaganda ministry, called the Ministry of Information, was in Britain during World War I. It had the task, as they put it, of controlling the mind of the world. What they were particularly concerned with was the mind of America and, more specifically, the mind of American intellectuals. They thought if they could convince American intellectuals of the nobility of the British war effort, then American intellectuals could succeed in driving the basically pacifist population of the United States, which didn't want to have anything to do with European wars, rightly, into a fit of fanaticism and hysteria, which would get them to join the war. Britain needed U.S. backing, so Britain had its Ministry of Information aimed primarily at American opinion and opinion leaders. The Wilson administration reacted by setting up the first state propaganda agency here, called the Committee on Public Information.

It succeeded brilliantly, mainly with liberal American intellectuals, people of the John Dewey circle, who actually took pride in the fact that for the first time in history, according to their picture, a wartime fanaticism was created, and not by military leaders and politicians but by the more responsible, serious members of the community, namely, thoughtful intellectuals. And they did organize a campaign of propaganda, which within a few months did succeed in turning a relatively pacifist population into raving anti-German fanatics who wanted to destroy everything German. It reached the point where the Boston Symphony Orchestra couldn't play Bach. The country was driven into hysteria.

The members of Wilson's propaganda agency included people like Edward Bernays, who became the guru of the public relations industry, and Walter Lippmann, the leading public intellectual of the 20th century, the most respected media figure. They very explicitly drew from that experience. If you look at their writings in the 1920s, they said, We have learned from this that you can control the public mind, you can control attitudes and opinions. That's where Lippmann said, "We can manufacture consent by the means of propaganda." Bernays said, "The more intelligent members of the community can drive the population into whatever they want" by what he called "engineering of consent." It's the "essence of democracy," he said.

It also led to the rise of the public relations industry. It's interesting to look at the thinking in the 1920s, when it got started. This was the period of Taylorism in industry, when workers were being trained to become robots, every motion controlled. It created highly efficient industry, with human beings turned into automata. The Bolsheviks were very impressed with it, too. They tried to duplicate it. In fact, they tried throughout the world. But the thought-control experts realized that you could not only have what was called on-job control but also off-job control. It's their phrase. Control them off job by inducing a philosophy of

futility, focusing people on the superficial things of life, like fashionable consumption, and basically get them out of our hair. Let the people who are supposed to run the show do it without any interference from the mass of the population, who have no business in the public arena. From that come enormous industries, ranging from advertising to universities, all committed very consciously to the conception that you must control attitudes and opinions because the people are just too dangerous.

It's particularly striking that it developed in the more democratic societies. They tried to duplicate it in Germany and Bolshevik Russia and South Africa and elsewhere. But it was always quite explicitly a mostly American model. There is a good reason for that. If you can control people by force, it's not so important to control what they think and feel. But if you lose the capacity to control people by force, it becomes more necessary to control attitudes and opinions.

That brings us right up to the present. By now the public is no longer willing to accept state propaganda agencies, so the Reagan Office of Public Diplomacy was declared illegal and had to go in roundabout ways. What took over instead was private tyrannies, basically, corporate systems, which play the role of controlling opinion and attitudes, not taking orders from the government, but closely linked to it, of course. That's our contemporary system. Extremely self-conscious. You don't have to speculate much about what they're doing because they're kind enough to tell you in industry publications and also in the academic literature.

So you go to, say, the 1930s, perhaps the founder of a good bit of modern political science. A liberal Wilsonian, Harold Lasswell, in 1933 wrote an article called "Propaganda" in the Encyclopedia of Social Sciences, a major publication, in which the message was, "We should not [all of these are quotes, incidentally] succumb to democratic dogmatism about men being the best judges of their own interests." They're not, we are. And since people are too stupid and ignorant to understand their best interests, for their own benefit—because we're great humanitarians—we must marginalize and control them. The best means is propaganda. There is nothing negative about propaganda, he said. It's as neutral as a pump handle. You can use it for good or for evil. And since we're noble, wonderful people, we'll use it for good, to ensure that the stupid, ignorant masses remain marginalized and separated from any decision-making capacity.

The Leninist doctrines are approximately the same. There are very close similarities. The Nazis also picked it up. If you read Mein Kampf, Hitler was very impressed with Anglo-American propaganda. He argued, not without reason, that that's what won World War I and vowed that next time around the Germans would be ready, too, and developed their own propaganda systems modeled on the democracies. The Russians tried it, but it was too crude to be effective. South Africa used it; others, right up to the present. But the real forefront is the United States, because it's the most free and democratic society, and it's just much more important to control attitudes and opinions.

You can read it in the New York Times. They ran an interesting article about Carl Rove, the president's manager—basically his minder, the one who teaches him what to say and do. It describes what Carl Rove is doing now. He was not directly involved in the war planning, but neither was Bush. This was in the hands of other people. But his goal, he says, is to present the president as a powerful wartime leader, aimed at the next presidential election, so that the Republicans can push through their domestic agenda, which is what he concentrates on, which means tax cuts—they say for the economy, but they mean for the rich—tax cuts and other programs which he doesn't bother enumerating, but which are designed to benefit an extremely small sector of the ultra-wealthy and privileged and will have the effect of harming the mass of the population. But more significant than that—it's not outlined in the article—is to try to destroy the institutional basis for social support systems, try to eliminate things like schools and Social Security and anything that is based on the conception that people have to have some concern for one another. That's a horrible idea, which has to be driven out of people's minds. The idea that you should have sympathy and solidarity, you should care whether the disabled widow across town is able to eat, that has to be driven out of people's minds.

Clearly, there is a huge gap on the Iraq war between U.S. public opinion and the rest of the world. Do you attribute that to propaganda?

There is just no question about it. The campaign about Iraq took off last September. This is so obvious it's even discussed in mainstream publications, like the chief political analyst for UPI, Martin Sieff, has a long article describing how it was done. In September, which happened to be the opening of the midterm congressional campaign, that's when the drumbeat of wartime propaganda began. It had a couple of constant themes. One big lie was that Iraq was an imminent threat to the security of the United States. We have got to stop them now or they're going to destroy us tomorrow. The second big lie was that Iraq was behind September 11. Nobody says it straight out; it's kind of insinuated.

Take a look at the polls. They reflected the propaganda very directly. The propaganda is distributed by the media. They don't make it up, they just distribute it. You can attribute it to high government officials or whatever you like. But the campaign was reflected very quickly in the polls. By September and since then, roughly 60 percent, oscillating around that, of the population believes that Iraq is a threat to our security. Congress, if you look at the declaration of October, when they authorized the president to use force, said Iraq is a threat to the security of the United States. By now about half the population, maybe more by now, believes that Iraq was responsible for September 11, that Iraqis were on the planes, that they are planning new ones.

There is no one else in the world that believes any of this; there is no country where Iraq is regarded as a threat to their security. Kuwait and Iran, which were both invaded by Iraq, don't regard Iraq as a threat to their security. Iraq is the weakest country in the region, and as a result of the sanctions, which have killed hundreds of thousands of people-about probably two-thirds of the population is on the edge of starvation-the country has the weakest economy and the weakest military force in the region. Its economy and its military-force expenditures are about a third those of Kuwait, which has 10 percent of its population, and well below others. Of course, everybody in the region knows that there is a superpower there, offshore U.S. military base, Israel, which has hundreds of nuclear weapons and massive armed forces and totally dominates anything.

But only in the United States is there fear or any of these beliefs. You can trace the growth of the beliefs to the propaganda. It's interesting that the United States is so susceptible to this. There is a background, a cultural background, which is interesting. But whatever the reasons are for it, the United States happens to be a very frightened country by comparative standards. Levels of fear here of almost everything, crime, aliens, you pick it, are just off the spectrum. You can argue, you can inquire into the reasons, but the background is there.

What is it that makes it susceptible to propaganda?

That's a good question I don't say it's more susceptible to propaganda; it's more susceptible to fear. It's a frightened country. The reasons for this-I don't, frankly, understand them, but they're there, and they go way back in American history. It probably has to do with conquest of the continent, where you had to exterminate the native population; slavery, where you had to control a population that was regarded as dangerous, because you never knew when they were going to turn on you. It may just be a reflection of the enormous security. The security of the United States is beyond anyone else. The United States controls the hemisphere, it controls both oceans, it controls the opposite sides of both oceans, never been threatened. The last time the U.S. was threatened was the War of 1812. Since then it just conquers others. And somehow this engenders a sense that somebody is going to come after us. So the country ends up being very frightened.

There is a reason why Carl Rove is the most important person in the administration. He is the public relations expert in charge of crafting the images. So you can drive through the domestic agendas, carry out the international policies by frightening people and creating the impression that a powerful leader is going to save you from imminent destruction. The Times virtually says it because it's very hard to keep hidden. It is second nature.

One of the new lexical constructions that I'd like you to comment on is "embedded journalists."

That's an interesting one. It is interesting that journalists are willing to accept it. No honest journalist would be willing to describe himself or herself as "embedded." To say "I'm an embedded journalist" is to say "I'm a government propagandist." But it's accepted. And it helps implant the conception that anything we do is right and just; so therefore, if you're embedded in an American unit, you're objective. Actually, the same thing showed up, in some ways even more dramatically, in the Peter Arnett case. Peter Arnett is an experienced, respected journalist with a lot of achievements to his credit. He's hated here precisely for that reason. The same reason Robert Fisk is hated.

Fisk being British, Arnett is originally from New Zealand.

Fisk is by far the most experienced and respected Middle East journalist. He's been there forever, he's done excellent work, he knows the region, he's a terrific reporter. He's despised here. You barely ever see a word of his. If he's mentioned, he's denounced somehow. The reason is he's just too independent. He won't be an embedded journalist. Peter Arnett is condemned because he gave an interview on Iraqi television. Is anybody condemned for giving an interview on U.S. television? No, that's wonderful.

The attack on Afghanistan in October 2001 generated a couple of these interesting terms, and you've commented on them. One was the Operation Enduring Freedom and the other is "unlawful combatant." Truly an innovation in international jurisprudence.

It's an innovation since the post-war period. After World War II there was a relatively new framework of international law established, including the Geneva Conventions. And they do not permit any such concept as enemy combatant in the way it's used here. You can have prisoners of war, but there is no new category. Actually, it's an old category, pre-World War II, when you were allowed to do just about anything. But under the Geneva conventions, which were established to criminalize formally the crimes of the Nazis, this was changed. So prisoners of war are supposed to have special status. The Bush administration, with the cooperation of the media and the courts, is going back to the pre-World War II period, when there was no serious framework of international law dealing with crimes against humanity and crimes of war and is declaring not only to carry out aggressive war, but also to classify people it bombs and captures as some new category who are entitled to no rights.

They have gone well beyond that. The Administration has now claimed the right to take people here, including American citizens, to place them in confinement indefinitely without access to families and lawyers, and to keep them there with no charges until the president decides that the war against terror, or whatever he wants to call it, is over. That's unheard of. And it's been to some extent accepted by the courts. And they're, in fact, going beyond the new, what's sometimes called PATRIOT 2 Act, which is so far not ratified. It's inside the Justice Department, but it was leaked. By now there are a couple of articles by law professors and others about it in the press. It's astonishing. They're claiming the right to remove citizenship, the fundamental right, if the Attorney General infers—they don't have to have any evidence—just infers that the person is involved somehow in actions that might be harmful to the United States. You have to go back to totalitarian states to find anything like this. An enemy combatant is one. The treatment of people—what's going on in Guantanamo is a gross violation of the most elementary principles of international humanitarian law since World War II, that is, since these crimes were formally criminalized in reaction to the Nazis.

What do you make of British Prime Minister Tony Blair being quoted on "Nightline" on March 31 saying, "This is not an invasion."

Tony Blair is a good propaganda agent for the United States: He's articulate, sentences fall together, apparently people like the way he looks. He's following a position that Britain has taken, self-consciously, since the end of World War II. During World War II, Britain recognized—we have plenty of internal documents about it—what was obvious; Britain had been the world-dominant power and it was not going to be after World War II—the U.S. was going to be. Britain had to make a choice: Is it going to be just another country, or is it going to be what they called a junior partner of the United States? It accepted the role of junior partner. And that's what it's been since then. Britain has been kicked in the face over and over again in the most disgraceful way and they sit there quietly and take it and say, "Okay, we will be the junior

partner. We will bring to what's called the coalition our experience of centuries of brutalizing and murdering foreign people. We're good at that." That's the British role. It's disgraceful.

Often at the talks you give, there is a question that's always asked, and that is, "What should I do?" This is what you hear in American audiences.

You're right, it's American audiences. You never hear it in the Third World.

Why not?

Because when you go to Turkey or Colombia or Brazil or somewhere else, they don't ask you, "What should I do?" They tell you what they're doing. It's only in highly privileged cultures that people ask, "What should I do?" We have every option open to us. None of the problems that are faced by intellectuals in Turkey or campesinos in Brazil or anything like that. We can do anything. But what people here are trained to believe is, we have to have something we can do that will be easy, that will work very fast, and then we can go back to our ordinary lives. And it doesn't work that way. You want to do something, you're going to have to be dedicated, committed, at it day after day. You know exactly what it is: it's educational programs, it's organizing, it's activism. That's the way things change. You want something that's going to be a magic key that will enable you to go back to watching television tomorrow? It's not there.

You were an active and early dissident in the 1960s opposing U.S. intervention in Indochina. You have now this perspective of what was going on then and what is going on now. Describe how dissent has evolved in the United States.

Actually, there is another article in the New York Times that describes how the professors are antiwar activists, but the students aren't. Not like it used to be, when the students were antiwar activists. What the reporter is talking about is that around 1970-and it's true-by 1970 students were active antiwar protesters. But that's after eight years of a U.S. war against South Vietnam, which by then had extended to all of Indochina, which had practically wiped the place out. In the early years of the war-it was announced in 1962-U.S. planes are bombing South Vietnam, napalm was authorized, chemical warfare to destroy food crops, and programs to drive millions of people into "strategic hamlets," which are essentially concentration camps. All public. No protest. Impossible to get anybody to talk about it. For years, even in a place like Boston, a liberal city, you couldn't have public meetings against the war because they would be broken up by students, with the support of the media. You would have to have hundreds of state police around to allow the speakers like me to escape unscathed. The protests came after years and years of war. By then, hundreds of thousands of people had been killed, much of Vietnam had been destroyed. Then you started getting protests.

But all of that is wiped out of history, because it tells too much of the truth. It involved years and years of hard work of plenty of people, mostly young, which finally ended up getting a protest movement. Now it's far beyond that. But the New York Times reporter can't understand that. I'm sure the reporter is being very honest. The reporter is saying exactly what I think she was taught-that there was a huge antiwar movement because the actual history has to be wiped out of people's consciousness. You can't learn that dedicated, committed effort can bring about significant changes of consciousness and understanding. That's a very dangerous thought to allow people to have.

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