

Iraq is a trial run
Chomsky interviewed by Frontline
by Noam Chomsky and VK Ramachandran
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Noam Chomsky , University Professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, founder of the modern science of linguistics and political activist, is a powerhouse of anti-imperialist activism in the United States today. On March 21, a crowded and typical - and uniquely Chomskyan - day of political protest and scientific academic research, he spoke from his office for half an hour to V. K. Ramachandran on the current attack on Iraq.

V. K. Ramachandran :Does the present aggression on Iraq represent a continuation of United States' international policy in recent years or a qualitatively new stage in that policy?

Noam Chomsky : It represents a significantly new phase. It is not without precedent, but significantly new nevertheless.

This should be seen as a trial run. Iraq is seen as an extremely easy and totally defenceless target. It is assumed, probably correctly, that the society will collapse, that the soldiers will go in and that the U.S. will be in control, and will establish the regime of its choice and military bases. They will then go on to the harder cases that will follow. The next case could be the Andean region, it could be Iran, it could be others.

The trial run is to try and establish what the U.S. calls a "new norm" in international relations. The new norm is "preventive war" (notice that new norms are established only by the United States). So, for example, when India invaded East Pakistan to terminate horrendous massacres, it did not establish a new norm of humanitarian intervention, because India is the wrong country, and besides, the U.S. was strenuously opposed to that action.

This is not pre-emptive war; there is a crucial difference. Pre-emptive war has a meaning, it means that, for example, if planes are flying across the Atlantic to bomb the United States, the United States is permitted to shoot them down even before they bomb and may be permitted to attack the air bases from which they came. Pre-emptive war is a response to ongoing or imminent attack.

The doctrine of preventive war is totally different; it holds that the United States - alone, since nobody else has this right - has the right to attack any country that it claims to be a potential challenge to it. So if the United States claims, on whatever grounds, that someone may sometime threaten it, then it can attack them.

The doctrine of preventive war was announced explicitly in the National Strategy Report last September. It sent shudders around the world, including through the U.S. establishment, where, I might say, opposition to the war is unusually high. The National Strategy Report said, in effect, that the U.S. will rule the world by force, which is the dimension - the only dimension - in which it is supreme. Furthermore, it will do so for the indefinite future, because if any potential challenge arises to U.S. domination, the U.S. will destroy it before it becomes a challenge.

This is the first exercise of that doctrine. If it succeeds on these terms, as it presumably will, because the target is so defenceless, then international lawyers and Western intellectuals and others will begin to talk about a new norm

in international affairs. It is important to establish such a norm if you expect to rule the world by force for the foreseeable future.

This is not without precedent, but it is extremely unusual. I shall mention one precedent, just to show how narrow the spectrum is. In 1963, Dean Acheson, who was a much respected elder statesman and senior Adviser of the Kennedy Administration, gave an important talk to the American Society of International Law, in which he justified the U. S. attacks against Cuba. The attack by the Kennedy Administration on Cuba was large-scale international terrorism and economic warfare. The timing was interesting - it was right after the Missile Crisis, when the world was very close to a terminal nuclear war. In his speech, Acheson said that "no legal issue arises when the United States responds to challenges to its position, prestige or authority", or words approximating that.

That is also a statement of the Bush doctrine. Although Acheson was an important figure, what he said had not been official government policy in the post-War period. It now stands as official policy and this is the first illustration of it. It is intended to provide a precedent for the future.

Such "norms" are established only when a Western power does something, not when others do. That is part of the deep racism of Western culture, going back through centuries of imperialism and so deep that it is unconscious.

So I think this war is an important new step, and is intended to be.

Ramachandran :Is it also a new phase in that the U. S. has not been able to carry others with it?

Chomsky : That is not new. In the case of the Vietnam War, for example, the United States did not even try to get international support. Nevertheless, you are right in that this is unusual. This is a case in which the United States was compelled for political reasons to try to force the world to accept its position and was not able to, which is quite unusual. Usually, the world succumbs.

Ramachandran :So does it represent a "failure of diplomacy" or a redefinition of diplomacy itself?

Chomsky : I wouldn't call it diplomacy at all - it's a failure of coercion.

Compare it with the first Gulf War. In the first Gulf War, the U.S. coerced the Security Council into accepting its position, although much of the world opposed it. NATO went along, and the one country in the Security Council that did not - Yemen - was immediately and severely punished.

In any legal system that you take seriously, coerced judgments are considered invalid, but in the international affairs conducted by the powerful, coerced judgments are fine - they are called diplomacy.

What is interesting about this case is that the coercion did not work. There were countries - in fact, most of them - who stubbornly maintained the position of the vast majority of their populations.

The most dramatic case is Turkey. Turkey is a vulnerable country, vulnerable to U.S. punishment and inducements. Nevertheless, the new government, I think to everyone's surprise, did maintain the position of about 90 per cent of its population. Turkey is bitterly condemned for that here, just as France and Germany are bitterly condemned because they took the position of the

overwhelming majority of their populations. The countries that are praised are countries like Italy and Spain, whose leaders agreed to follow orders from Washington over the opposition of maybe 90 per cent of their populations.

That is another new step. I cannot think of another case where hatred and contempt for democracy have so openly been proclaimed, not just by the government, but also by liberal commentators and others. There is now a whole literature trying to explain why France, Germany, the so-called "old Europe", and Turkey and others are trying to undermine the United States. It is inconceivable to the pundits that they are doing so because they take democracy seriously and they think that when the overwhelming majority of a population has an opinion, a government ought to follow it.

That is real contempt for democracy, just as what has happened at the United Nations is total contempt for the international system. In fact there are now calls - from The Wall Street Journal, people in Government and others - to disband the United Nations.

Fear of the United States around the world is extraordinary. It is so extreme that it is even being discussed in the mainstream media. The cover story of the upcoming issue of Newsweek is about why the world is so afraid of the United States. The Post had a cover story about this a few weeks ago.

Of course this is considered to be the world's fault, that there is something wrong with the world with which we have to deal somehow, but also something that has to be recognised.

Ramachandran :The idea that Iraq represents any kind of clear and present danger is, of course, without any substance at all.

Chomsky : Nobody pays any attention to that accusation, except, interestingly, the population of the United States.

In the last few months, there has been a spectacular achievement of government-media propaganda, very visible in the polls. The international polls show that support for the war is higher in the United States than in other countries. That is, however, quite misleading, because if you look a little closer, you find that the United States is also different in another respect from the rest of the world. Since September 2002, the United States is the only country in the world where 60 per cent of the population believes that Iraq is an imminent threat - something that people do not believe even in Kuwait or Iran.

Furthermore, about 50 per cent of the population now believes that Iraq was responsible for the attack on the World Trade Centre. This has happened since September 2002. In fact, after the September 11 attack, the figure was about 3 per cent. Government-media propaganda has managed to raise that to about 50 per cent. Now if people genuinely believe that Iraq has carried out major terrorist attacks against the United States and is planning to do so again, well, in that case people will support the war.

This has happened, as I said, after September 2002. September 2002 is when the government-media campaign began and also when the mid-term election campaign began. The Bush Administration would have been smashed in the election if social and economic issues had been in the forefront, but it managed to suppress those issues in favour of security issues - and people huddle under the umbrella of power.

This is exactly the way the country was run in the 1980s. Remember that these are almost the same people as in the Reagan and the senior Bush Administrations. Right through the 1980s they carried out domestic policies that were harmful to the population and which, as we know from extensive polls, the people opposed. But they managed to maintain control by frightening the people. So the Nicaraguan Army was two days' march from Texas and about to conquer the United States, and the airbase in Granada was one from which the Russians would bomb us. It was one thing after another, every year, every one of them ludicrous. The Reagan Administration actually declared a national Emergency in 1985 because of the threat to the security of the United States posed by the Government of Nicaragua.

If somebody were watching this from Mars, they would not know whether to laugh or to cry.

They are doing exactly the same thing now, and will probably do something similar for the presidential campaign. There will have to be a new dragon to slay, because if the Administration lets domestic issues prevail, it is in deep trouble.

Ramachandran :You have written that this war of aggression has dangerous consequences with respect to international terrorism and the threat of nuclear war.

Chomsky : I cannot claim any originality for that opinion. I am just quoting the CIA and other intelligence agencies and virtually every specialist in international affairs and terrorism. Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy , the study by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the high-level Hart-Rudman Commission on terrorist threats to the United States all agree that it is likely to increase terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

The reason is simple: partly for revenge, but partly just for self-defence.

There is no other way to protect oneself from U.S. attack. In fact, the United States is making the point very clearly, and is teaching the world an extremely ugly lesson.

Compare North Korea and Iraq. Iraq is defenceless and weak; in fact, the weakest regime in the region. While there is a horrible monster running it, it does not pose a threat to anyone else. North Korea, on the other hand, does pose a threat. North Korea, however, is not attacked for a very simple reason: it has a deterrent. It has a massed artillery aimed at Seoul, and if the United States attacks it, it can wipe out a large part of South Korea.

So the United States is telling the countries of the world: if you are defenceless, we are going to attack you when we want, but if you have a deterrent, we will back off, because we only attack defenceless targets. In other words, it is telling countries that they had better develop a terrorist network and weapons of mass destruction or some other credible deterrent; if not, they are vulnerable to "preventive war".

For that reason alone, this war is likely to lead to the proliferation of both terrorism and weapons of mass destruction.

Ramachandran :How do you think the U.S. will manage the human - and humanitarian - consequences of the war?

Chomsky : No one knows, of course. That is why honest and decent people do not resort to violence - because one simply does not know.

The aid agencies and medical groups that work in Iraq have pointed out that the consequences can be very severe. Everyone hopes not, but it could affect up to millions of people. To undertake violence when there is even such a possibility is criminal.

There is already - that is, even before the war - a humanitarian catastrophe. By conservative estimates, ten years of sanctions have killed hundreds of thousands of people. If there were any honesty, the U.S. would pay reparations just for the sanctions.

The situation is similar to the bombing of Afghanistan, of which you and I spoke when the bombing there was in its early stages. It was obvious the United States was never going to investigate the consequences.

Ramachandran :Or invest the kind of money that was needed.

Chomsky : Oh no. First, the question is not asked, so no one has an idea of what the consequences of the bombing were for most of the country. Then almost nothing comes in. Finally, it is out of the news, and no one remembers it any more.

In Iraq, the United States will make a show of humanitarian reconstruction and will put in a regime that it will call democratic, which means that it follows Washington's orders. Then it will forget about what happens later, and will go on to the next one.

Ramachandran :How have the media lived up to their propaganda-model reputation this time?

Chomsky : Right now it is cheerleading for the home team. Look at CNN, which is disgusting - and it is the same everywhere. That is to be expected in wartime; the media are worshipful of power.

More interesting is what happened in the build-up to war. The fact that government-media propaganda was able to convince the people that Iraq is an imminent threat and that Iraq was responsible for September 11 is a spectacular achievement and, as I said, was accomplished in about four months. If you ask people in the media about this, they will say, "Well, we never said that," and it is true, they did not. There was never a statement that Iraq is going to invade the United States or that it carried out the World Trade Centre attack. It was just insinuated, hint after hint, until they finally got people to believe it.

Ramachandran :Look at the resistance, though. Despite the propaganda, despite the denigration of the United Nations, they haven't quite carried the day.

Chomsky : You never know. The United Nations is in a very hazardous position.

The United States might move to dismantle it. I don't really expect that, but at least to diminish it, because when it isn't following orders, of what use is it?

Ramachandran :Noam, you have seen movements of resistance to imperialism over a long period - Vietnam, Central America, Gulf War I. What are your impressions

of the character, sweep and depth of the present resistance to U.S. aggression? We take great heart in the extraordinary mobilisations all over the world.

Chomsky : Oh, that is correct; there is just nothing like it. Opposition throughout the world is enormous and unprecedented, and the same is true of the United States. Yesterday, for example, I was in demonstrations in downtown Boston, right around the Boston Common. It is not the first time I have been there. The first time I participated in a demonstration there at which I was to speak was in October 1965. That was four years after the United States had started bombing South Vietnam. Half of South Vietnam had been destroyed and the war had been extended to North Vietnam. We could not have a demonstration because it was physically attacked, mostly by students, with the support of the liberal press and radio, who denounced these people who were daring to protest against an American war.

On this occasion, however, there was a massive protest before the war was launched officially and once again on the day it was launched - with no counter-demonstrators. That is a radical difference. And if it were not for the fear factor that I mentioned, there would be much more opposition.

The government knows that it cannot carry out long-term aggression and destruction as in Vietnam because the population will not tolerate it.

There is only one way to fight a war now. First of all, pick a much weaker enemy, one that is defenceless. Then build it up in the propaganda system as either about to commit aggression or as an imminent threat. Next, you need a lightning victory. An important leaked document of the first Bush Administration in 1989 described how the U.S. would have to fight war. It said that the U.S. had to fight much weaker enemies, and that victory must be rapid and decisive, as public support will quickly erode. It is no longer like the 1960s, when a war could be fought for years with no opposition at all.

In many ways, the activism of the 1960s and subsequent years has simply made a lot of the world, including this country, much more civilised in many domains.