

The Loneliness Of Noam Chomsky

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Sitting in my home in New Delhi, watching an American TV news channel promote itself ("We report. You decide."), I imagine Noam Chomsky's amused, chipped-tooth smile.

Everybody knows that authoritarian regimes, regardless of their ideology, use the mass media for propaganda. But what about democratically elected regimes in the "free world"?

Today, thanks to Noam Chomsky and his fellow media analysts, it is almost axiomatic for thousands, possibly millions, of us that public opinion in "free market" democracies is manufactured just like any other mass market product — soap, switches, or sliced bread. We know that while, legally and constitutionally, speech may be free, the space in which that freedom can be exercised has been snatched from us and auctioned to the highest bidders. Neoliberal capitalism isn't just about the accumulation of capital (for some). It's also about the accumulation of power (for some), the accumulation of freedom (for some). Conversely, for the rest of the world, the people who are excluded from neoliberalism's governing body, it's about the erosion of capital, the erosion of power, the erosion of freedom. In the "free" market, free speech has become a commodity like everything else — justice, human rights, drinking water, clean air. It's available only to those who can afford it. And naturally, those who can afford it use free speech to manufacture the kind of product, confect the kind of public opinion, that best suits their purpose. (News they can use.) Exactly how they do this has been the subject of much of Noam Chomsky's political writing.

Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, for instance, has a controlling interest in major Italian newspapers, magazines, television channels, and publishing houses. "[T]he prime minister in effect controls about 90 per cent of Italian TV viewership," reports the Financial Times. What price free speech? Free speech for whom? Admittedly, Berlusconi is an extreme example. In other democracies — the United States in particular — media barons, powerful corporate lobbies, and government officials are imbricated in a more elaborate, but less obvious, manner. (George Bush Jr.'s connections to the oil lobby, to the arms industry, and to Enron, and Enron's infiltration of U.S. government institutions and the mass media — all this is public knowledge now.)

After the September 11, 2001, terrorist strikes in New York and Washington, the mainstream media's blatant performance as the U.S. government's mouthpiece, its display of vengeful patriotism, its willingness to publish Pentagon press handouts as news, and its explicit censorship of dissenting opinion became the butt of some pretty black humour in the rest of the world.

Then the New York Stock Exchange crashed, bankrupt airline companies appealed to the government for financial bailouts, and there was talk of circumventing patent laws in order to manufacture generic drugs to fight the anthrax scare (much more important, and urgent of course, than the production of generics to fight AIDS in Africa). Suddenly, it began to seem as though the twin myths of Free Speech and the Free Market might come crashing down alongside the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center.

But of course that never happened. The myths live on.

There is however, a brighter side to the amount of energy and money that the establishment pours into the business of "managing" public opinion. It suggests a very real fear of public opinion. It suggests a persistent and valid worry that if people were to discover (and fully comprehend) the real nature of the things that are done in their name, they might act upon that knowledge. Powerful people know that ordinary people are not always reflexively ruthless and selfish. (When ordinary people weigh costs and benefits, something like an uneasy conscience could easily tip the scales.) For this reason, they must be guarded against reality, reared in a controlled climate, in an altered reality, like broiler chickens or pigs in a pen.

Those of us who have managed to escape this fate and are scratching about in the backyard, no longer believe everything we read in the papers and watch on TV. We put our ears to the ground and look for other ways of making sense of the world. We search for the untold story, the mentioned-in-passing military coup, the unreported genocide, the civil war in an African country written up in a one-column-inch story next to a full-page advertisement for lace underwear.

We don't always remember, and many don't even know, that this way of thinking, this easy acuity, this instinctive mistrust of the mass media, would at best be a political hunch and at worst a loose accusation, if it were not for the relentless and unswerving media analysis of one of the world's greatest minds. And this is only one of the ways in which Noam Chomsky has radically altered our understanding of the society in which we live. Or should I say, our understanding of the elaborate rules of the lunatic asylum in which we are all voluntary inmates?

Speaking about the September 11 attacks in New York and Washington, President George W. Bush called the enemies of the United States "enemies of freedom". "Americans are asking why do they hate us?" he said. "They hate our freedoms, our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other."

If people in the United States want a real answer to that question (as opposed to the ones in the Idiot's Guide to Anti-Americanism, that is: "Because they're jealous of us," "Because they hate freedom," "Because they're losers," "Because we're good and they're evil"), I'd say, read Chomsky. Read Chomsky on U.S. military interventions in Indochina, Latin America, Iraq, Bosnia, the former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, and the Middle East. If ordinary people in the United States read Chomsky, perhaps their questions would be framed a little differently. Perhaps it would be: "Why don't they hate us more than they do?" or "Isn't it surprising that September 11 didn't happen earlier?"

Unfortunately, in these nationalistic times, words like "us" and "them" are used loosely. The line between citizens and the state is being deliberately and successfully blurred, not just by governments, but also by terrorists. The underlying logic of terrorist attacks, as well as "retaliatory" wars against governments that "support terrorism", is the same: both punish citizens for the actions of their governments.

(A brief digression: I realise that for Noam Chomsky, a U.S. citizen, to criticise his own government is better manners than for someone like myself, an Indian citizen, to criticise the U.S. government. I'm no patriot, and am fully aware that venality, brutality, and hypocrisy are imprinted on the leaden soul of every state. But when a country ceases to be merely a country and becomes an empire, then the scale of operations changes dramatically. So may I clarify that I speak as a subject of the U.S. empire? I speak as a slave who presumes to criticise her king.)

If I were asked to choose one of Noam Chomsky's major contributions to the world, it would be the fact that he has unmasked the ugly, manipulative, ruthless universe that exists behind that beautiful, sunny word "freedom". He has done this rationally and empirically. The mass of evidence he has marshalled to construct his case is formidable. Terrifying, actually. The starting premise of Chomsky's method is not ideological, but it is intensely political. He embarks on his

course of inquiry with an anarchist's instinctive mistrust of power. He takes us on a tour through the bog of the U.S. establishment, and leads us through the dizzying maze of corridors that connects the government, big business, and the business of managing public opinion.

Chomsky shows us how phrases like "free speech", the "free market", and the "free world" have little, if anything, to do with freedom. He shows us that, among the myriad freedoms claimed by the U.S. government are the freedom to murder, annihilate, and dominate other people. The freedom to finance and sponsor despots and dictators across the world. The freedom to train, arm, and shelter terrorists. The freedom to topple democratically elected governments. The freedom to amass and use weapons of mass destruction — chemical, biological, and nuclear. The freedom to go to war against any country whose government it disagrees with. And, most terrible of all, the freedom to commit these crimes against humanity in the name of "justice", in the name of "righteousness", in the name of "freedom".

Attorney General John Ashcroft has declared that U.S. freedoms are "not the grant of any government or document, but... our endowment from God". So, basically, we're confronted with a country armed with a mandate from heaven. Perhaps this explains why the U.S. government refuses to judge itself by the same moral standards by which it judges others. (Any attempt to do this is shouted down as "moral equivalence".) Its technique is to position itself as the well-intentioned giant whose good deeds are confounded in strange countries by their scheming natives, whose markets it's trying to free, whose societies it's trying to modernise, whose women it's trying to liberate, whose souls it's trying to save.

Perhaps this belief in its own divinity also explains why the U.S. government has conferred upon itself the right and freedom to murder and exterminate people "for their own good".

When he announced the U.S. air strikes against Afghanistan, President Bush Jr. said, "We're a peaceful nation." He went on to say, "This is the calling of the United States of America, the most free nation in the world, a nation built on fundamental values, that rejects hate, rejects violence, rejects murderers, rejects evil. And we will not tire."

The U.S. empire rests on a grisly foundation: the massacre of millions of indigenous people, the stealing of their lands, and following this, the kidnapping and enslavement of millions of black people from Africa to work that land. Thousands died on the seas while they were being shipped like caged cattle between continents. "Stolen from Africa, brought to America" — Bob Marley's "Buffalo Soldier" contains a whole universe of unspeakable sadness. It tells of the loss of dignity, the loss of wilderness, the loss of freedom, the shattered pride of a people. Genocide and slavery provide the social and economic underpinning of the nation whose fundamental values reject hate, murderers, and evil.

Here is Chomsky, writing in the essay "The Manufacture of Consent," on the founding of the United States of America:

During the Thanksgiving holiday a few weeks ago, I took a walk with some friends and family in a national park. We came across a gravestone, which had on it the following inscription: "Here lies an Indian woman, a Wampanoag, whose family and tribe gave of themselves and their land that this great nation might be born and grow."

Of course, it is not quite accurate to say that the indigenous population gave of themselves and their land for that noble purpose. Rather, they were slaughtered, decimated, and dispersed in the course of one of the greatest exercises in genocide in human history... which we celebrate each October when we honour Columbus — a notable mass murderer himself — on Columbus Day.

Hundreds of American citizens, well-meaning and decent people, troop by that gravestone regularly and read it, apparently without reaction; except, perhaps, a feeling of satisfaction that at last we are giving some due recognition to the sacrifices of the native peoples.... They might react differently if they were to visit Auschwitz or Dachau and find a gravestone reading: "Here lies a woman, a Jew, whose family and people gave of themselves and their possessions that this great nation might grow and prosper."

How has the United States survived its terrible past and emerged smelling so sweet? Not by owning up to it, not by making reparations, not by apologising to black Americans or native Americans, and certainly not by changing its ways (it exports its cruelties now). Like most other countries, the United States has rewritten its history. But what sets the United States apart from other countries, and puts it way ahead in the race, is that it has enlisted the services of the most powerful, most successful publicity firm in the world: Hollywood.

In the best-selling version of popular myth as history, U.S. "goodness" peaked during World War II (aka America's War Against Fascism). Lost in the din of trumpet sound and angel song is the fact that when fascism was in full stride in Europe, the U.S. government actually looked away. When Hitler was carrying out his genocidal pogrom against Jews, U.S. officials refused entry to Jewish refugees fleeing Germany. The United States entered the war only after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour. Drowned out by the noisy hosannas is its most barbaric act, in fact the single most savage act the world has ever witnessed: the dropping of the atomic bomb on civilian populations in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The war was nearly over. The hundreds of thousands of Japanese people who were killed, the countless others who were crippled by cancers for generations to come, were not a threat to world peace. They were civilians. Just as the victims of the World Trade Center and Pentagon bombings were civilians. Just as the hundreds of thousands of people who died in Iraq because of the U.S.-led sanctions were civilians. The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was a cold, calculated experiment carried out to demonstrate America's power. At the time, President Truman described it as "the greatest thing in history".

The Second World War, we're told, was a "war for peace". The atomic bomb was a "weapon of peace". We're invited to believe that nuclear deterrence prevented World War III. (That was before President George Bush Jr. came up with the "pre-emptive strike doctrine". Was there an outbreak of peace after the Second World War? Certainly there was (relative) peace in Europe and America — but does that count as world peace? Not unless savage, proxy wars fought in lands where the coloured races live (chinks, niggers, dinks, wogs, gooks) don't count as wars at all.

Since the Second World War, the United States has been at war with or has attacked, among other countries, Korea, Guatemala, Cuba, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, Grenada, Libya, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Panama, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan, Yugoslavia, and Afghanistan. This list should also include the U.S. government's covert operations in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, the coups it has engineered, and the dictators it has armed and supported. It should include Israel's U.S.-backed war on Lebanon, in which thousands were killed. It should include the key role America has played in the conflict in the Middle East, in which thousands have died fighting Israel's illegal occupation of Palestinian territory. It should include America's role in the civil war in Afghanistan in the 1980s, in which more than one million people were killed. It should include the embargos and sanctions that have led directly, and indirectly, to the death of hundreds of thousands of people, most visibly in Iraq.

Put it all together, and it sounds very much as though there has been a World War III, and that the U.S. government was (or is) one of its chief protagonists.

Most of the essays in Chomsky's *For Reasons of State* are about U.S. aggression in South Vietnam, North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. It was a war that lasted more than 12 years. Fifty-

eight thousand Americans and approximately two million Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians lost their lives. The U.S. deployed half a million ground troops, dropped more than six million tons of bombs. And yet, though you wouldn't believe it if you watched most Hollywood movies, America lost the war.

The war began in South Vietnam and then spread to North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. After putting in place a client regime in Saigon, the U.S. government invited itself in to fight a communist insurgency — Vietcong guerillas who had infiltrated rural regions of South Vietnam where villagers were sheltering them. This was exactly the model that Russia replicated when, in 1979, it invited itself into Afghanistan. Nobody in the "free world" is in any doubt about the fact that Russia invaded Afghanistan. After glasnost, even a Soviet foreign minister called the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan "illegal and immoral". But there has been no such introspection in the United States. In 1984, in a stunning revelation, Chomsky wrote:

For the past 22 years, I have been searching to find some reference in mainstream journalism or scholarship to an American invasion of South Vietnam in 1962 (or ever), or an American attack against South Vietnam, or American aggression in Indochina — without success. There is no such event in history. Rather, there is an American defence of South Vietnam against terrorists supported from the outside (namely from Vietnam).

There is no such event in history!

In 1962, the U.S. Air Force began to bomb rural South Vietnam, where 80 per cent of the population lived. The bombing lasted for more than a decade. Thousands of people were killed. The idea was to bomb on a scale colossal enough to induce panic migration from villages into cities, where people could be held in refugee camps. Samuel Huntington referred to this as a process of "urbanisation". (I learned about urbanisation when I was in architecture school in India. Somehow I don't remember aerial bombing being part of the syllabus.) Huntington — famous today for his essay "The Clash of Civilizations?" — was at the time Chairman of the Council on Vietnamese Studies of the Southeast Asia Development Advisory Group. Chomsky quotes him describing the Vietcong as "a powerful force which cannot be dislodged from its constituency so long as the constituency continues to exist". Huntington went on to advise "direct application of mechanical and conventional power" — in other words, to crush a people's war, eliminate the people. (Or, perhaps, to update the thesis — in order to prevent a clash of civilizations, annihilate a civilisation.)

Here's one observer from the time on the limitations of America's mechanical power: "The problem is that American machines are not equal to the task of killing communist soldiers except as part of a scorched-earth policy that destroys everything else as well." That problem has been solved now. Not with less destructive bombs, but with more imaginative language. There's a more elegant way of saying "that destroys everything else as well". The phrase is "collateral damage".

And here's a firsthand account of what America's "machines" (Huntington called them "modernising instruments" and staff officers in the Pentagon called them "bomb-o-grams") can do. This is T.D. Allman flying over the Plain of Jars in Laos.

Even if the war in Laos ended tomorrow, the restoration of its ecological balance might take several years. The reconstruction of the Plain's totally destroyed towns and villages might take just as long. Even if this was done, the Plain might long prove perilous to human habitation because of the hundreds of thousands of unexploded bombs, mines and booby traps.

A recent flight around the Plain of Jars revealed what less than three years of intensive American bombing can do to a rural area, even after its civilian population has been evacuated. In large

areas, the primary tropical colour — bright green — has been replaced by an abstract pattern of black, and bright metallic colours. Much of the remaining foliage is stunted, dulled by defoliants.

Today, black is the dominant colour of the northern and eastern reaches of the Plain. Napalm is dropped regularly to burn off the grass and undergrowth that covers the Plains and fills its many narrow ravines. The fires seem to burn constantly, creating rectangles of black. During the flight, plumes of smoke could be seen rising from freshly bombed areas.

The main routes, coming into the Plain from communist-held territory, are bombed mercilessly, apparently on a non-stop basis. There, and along the rim of the Plain, the dominant colour is yellow. All vegetation has been destroyed. The craters are countless.... [T]he area has been bombed so repeatedly that the land resembles the pocked, churned desert in storm-hit areas of the North African desert.

Further to the southeast, Xieng Khouangville — once the most populous town in communist Laos — lies empty, destroyed. To the north of the Plain, the little resort of Khang Khay also has been destroyed.

Around the landing field at the base of King Kong, the main colours are yellow (from upturned soil) and black (from napalm), relieved by patches of bright red and blue: parachutes used to drop supplies.

[T]he last local inhabitants were being carted into air transports. Abandoned vegetable gardens that would never be harvested grew near abandoned houses with plates still on the tables and calendars on the walls.

(Never counted in the "costs" of war are the dead birds, the charred animals, the murdered fish, incinerated insects, poisoned water sources, destroyed vegetation. Rarely mentioned is the arrogance of the human race towards other living things with which it shares this planet. All these are forgotten in the fight for markets and ideologies. This arrogance will probably be the ultimate undoing of the human species.)

The centrepiece of *For Reasons of State* is an essay called "The Mentality of the Backroom Boys", in which Chomsky offers an extraordinarily supple, exhaustive analysis of the Pentagon Papers, which he says "provide documentary evidence of a conspiracy to use force in international affairs in violation of law". Here, too, Chomsky makes note of the fact that while the bombing of North Vietnam is discussed at some length in the Pentagon Papers, the invasion of South Vietnam barely merits a mention.

The Pentagon Papers are mesmerising, not as documentation of the history of the U.S. war in Indochina, but as insight into the minds of the men who planned and executed it. It's fascinating to be privy to the ideas that were being tossed around, the suggestions that were made, the proposals that were put forward. In a section called "The Asian Mind — the American Mind", Chomsky examines the discussion of the mentality of the enemy that "stoically accept[s] the destruction of wealth and the loss of lives", whereas "We want life, happiness, wealth, power", and, for us, "death and suffering are irrational choices when alternatives exist". So, we learn that the Asian poor, presumably because they cannot comprehend the meaning of happiness, wealth, and power, invite America to carry this "strategic logic to its conclusion, which is genocide". But, then "we" balk because "genocide is a terrible burden to bear". (Eventually, of course, "we" went ahead and committed genocide any way, and then pretended that it never really happened.)

Of course, the Pentagon Papers contain some moderate proposals, as well.

Strikes at population targets (per se) are likely not only to create a counterproductive wave of revulsion abroad and at home, but greatly to increase the risk of enlarging the war with China and the Soviet Union. Destruction of locks and dams, however — if handled right — might... offer promise. It should be studied. Such destruction does not kill or drown people. By shallow-flooding the rice, it leads after time to widespread starvation (more than a million?) unless food is provided — which we could offer to do "at the conference table".

Layer by layer, Chomsky strips down the process of decision-making by U.S. government officials, to reveal at its core the pitiless heart of the American war machine, completely insulated from the realities of war, blinded by ideology, and willing to annihilate millions of human beings, civilians, soldiers, women, children, villages, whole cities, whole ecosystems — with scientifically honed methods of brutality.

Here's an American pilot talking about the joys of napalm:

We sure are pleased with those backroom boys at Dow. The original product wasn't so hot — if the gooks were quick they could scrape it off. So the boys started adding polystyrene — now it sticks like shit to a blanket. But then if the gooks jumped under water it stopped burning, so they started adding Willie Peter [white phosphorous] so's to make it burn better. It'll even burn under water now. And just one drop is enough, it'll keep on burning right down to the bone so they die anyway from phosphorous poisoning.

So the lucky gooks were annihilated for their own good. Better Dead than Red.

Thanks to the seductive charms of Hollywood and the irresistible appeal of America's mass media, all these years later, the world views the war as an American story. Indochina provided the lush, tropical backdrop against which the United States played out its fantasies of violence, tested its latest technology, furthered its ideology, examined its conscience, agonised over its moral dilemmas, and dealt with its guilt (or pretended to). The Vietnamese, the Cambodians, and Laotians were only script props. Nameless, faceless, slit-eyed humanoids. They were just the people who died. Gooks.

The only real lesson the U.S. government learned from its invasion of Indochina is how to go to war without committing American troops and risking American lives. So now we have wars waged with long-range cruise missiles, Black Hawks, "bunker busters". Wars in which the "Allies" lose more journalists than soldiers.

As a child growing up in the state of Kerala, in South India — where the first democratically elected Communist government in the world came to power in 1959, the year I was born — I worried terribly about being a gook. Kerala was only a few thousand miles west of Vietnam. We had jungles and rivers and rice-fields, and communists, too. I kept imagining my mother, my brother, and myself being blown out of the bushes by a grenade, or mowed down, like the gooks in the movies, by an American marine with muscled arms and chewing gum and a loud background score. In my dreams, I was the burning girl in the famous photograph taken on the road from Trang Bang.

As someone who grew up on the cusp of both American and Soviet propaganda (which more or less neutralised each other), when I first read Noam Chomsky, it occurred to me that his marshalling of evidence, the volume of it, the relentlessness of it, was a little — how shall I put it? — insane. Even a quarter of the evidence he had compiled would have been enough to convince me. I used to wonder why he needed to do so much work. But now I understand that the magnitude and intensity of Chomsky's work is a barometer of the magnitude, scope, and relentlessness of the propaganda machine that he's up against. He's like the wood-borer who lives inside the third rack of my bookshelf. Day and night, I hear his jaws crunching through the

wood, grinding it to a fine dust. It's as though he disagrees with the literature and wants to destroy the very structure on which it rests. I call him Chompsky.

Being an American working in America, writing to convince Americans of his point of view must really be like having to tunnel through hard wood. Chomsky is one of a small band of individuals fighting a whole industry. And that makes him not only brilliant, but heroic.

Some years ago, in a poignant interview with James Peck, Chomsky spoke about his memory of the day Hiroshima was bombed. He was 16 years old:

I remember that I literally couldn't talk to anybody. There was nobody. I just walked off by myself. I was at a summer camp at the time, and I walked off into the woods and stayed alone for a couple of hours when I heard about it. I could never talk to anyone about it and never understood anyone's reaction. I felt completely isolated.

That isolation produced one of the greatest, most radical public thinkers of our time. When the sun sets on the American empire, as it will, as it must, Noam Chomsky's work will survive.

It will point a cool, incriminating finger at a merciless, Machiavellian empire as cruel, self-righteous, and hypocritical as the ones it has replaced. (The only difference is that it is armed with technology that can visit the kind of devastation on the world that history has never known and the human race cannot begin to imagine.)

As a could've been gook, and who knows, perhaps a potential gook, hardly a day goes by when I don't find myself thinking — for one reason or another — "Chomsky Zindabad".

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