

Interview - Noam Chomsky

Written by E-International Relations

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Noam Chomsky was born on December 7, 1928, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He received his PhD in linguistics in 1955 from the University of Pennsylvania. From 1951 to 1955, Chomsky was a Junior Fellow of the Harvard University Society of Fellows. The major theoretical viewpoints of his doctoral dissertation appeared in the monograph *Syntactic Structure* in 1957. This formed part of a more extensive work, *The Logical Structure of Linguistic Theory*, circulated in mimeograph in 1955 and published in 1975. Chomsky joined the staff of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1955 and in 1961 was appointed full professor. In 1976 he was appointed Institute Professor in the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy.

Chomsky has lectured at many universities in the US and abroad, and is the recipient of numerous honorary degrees and awards. He has written and lectured widely on linguistics, philosophy, intellectual history, contemporary issues, international affairs, and U.S. foreign policy. Among his more recent books are, *New Horizons in the Study of Language and Mind*; *On Nature and Language*; *The Essential Chomsky*; *Hopes and Prospects*; *Gaza in Crisis*; *How the World Works*; *9-11: Was There an Alternative*; *Making the Future: Occupations, Interventions, Empire, and Resistance*; *The Science of Language*; *Peace with Justice: Noam Chomsky in Australia*; *Power Systems*; and *On Western Terrorism: From Hiroshima to Drone Warfare* (with Andre Vltchek).

In this interview, Professor Chomsky discusses the recent passing of Nelson Mandela, the P5+1 agreement with Iran, the Syrian crisis, his recent debate with Zizek, and more.

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How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Sure it has changed. I've learned a lot more about the past, and ongoing events regularly add new critical materials. I can't really identify single events or people. It's cumulative, a constant process of re-thinking in the light of new information and more consideration of what I hadn't properly understood.

The general reaction to Nelson Mandela's passing from both politicians and the media around the globe has been one of very positive reflection on his life. Yet some, including you, have pointed out that he was on a US terrorist watch list until 2008. What do you think this says about the attitudes that the US has towards those they perceive as terrorists?

The terrorist list is a scandal, which should not be tolerated. It is created by executive decision, with no recourse, and reflects the whim of the executive. Mandela is a particularly striking case. In 1988, the Reagan administration, about the last holdouts in support for the apartheid state, declared that Mandela's ANC was one of the "more notorious" terrorist groups in the world. That was at a time when Reagan was supporting vicious terrorist organizations in Africa, as well as backing South African aggression and terror, not to mention what was happening within the country. On his release from imprisonment, Mandela expressed his great thanks to Cuba for its remarkable role in protecting Angola from South African aggression, forcing South Africa out of illegally-occupied Namibia, and contributing significantly to the end of apartheid. It took special legislation in 2008 to remove Mandela from the terrorist list. That's

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not the only scandalous case. In 1982, when the Reaganites wanted to support the murderous Iraqi attack on Iran, Saddam was taken off the terrorist list, paving the way for Donald Rumsfeld's famous handshake with their friend Saddam and extensive support for him, which even continued after Iran capitulated. George H.W. Bush went so far as to invite Iraqi nuclear engineers to the US for advanced training in weapons production. There was a gap in the list when Saddam was removed. It was filled by Cuba, perhaps in recognition of the fact that, in the preceding years, Cuba had been the leading target of international terrorism, based in Miami, apart from the direct US role going back to JFK's very serious terrorist attacks.

It was recently the 50th anniversary of John F. Kennedy's assassination and he garnered much praise from political leaders and the media. How do you account for Kennedy's popularity today?

Kennedy was very popular at the time as well, particularly among intellectuals, dazzled by the glories of Camelot. The administration had a very effective PR system, and the assassination enhanced the imagery of a youthful, courageous fighter for justice and peace, struck down just as he was about to perform wondrous deeds. The actual record is quite different. It should also be remembered that virtual worship of leaders and creation of exalted imagery goes far back. The George Washington cult was an embarrassment, and the astonishing achievements of the Reagan legacy movement perhaps break all records.

In a recent interview, you described Kennedy's foreign policy as being worse than Obama's, though you have certainly been highly critical of Obama's foreign policy activities. As things stand, what do you feel will be Obama's legacy in regards to his foreign policy?

Former CIA director Michael Hayden recently commented that, apart from perhaps Israel and Afghanistan, no country in the world accepts Obama's legal justification for his drone assassination program – which we would regard as large-scale international terrorism if the agent were some official enemy. In an international poll released in December 2013 on the question "Which country is the biggest threat to world peace today?," the US won by a huge margin, with triple the votes for second-place Pakistan (inflated by the Indian votes). In some parts of the world, notably the Arab world, judgments are still harsher. Obama has not been guilty of the criminal aggression of his predecessor and has made some small moves towards diplomacy. As to what the legacy will be, that depends, as always, on the integrity of scholarship and commentary.

The ongoing civil war in Syria has already caused huge amounts of human suffering. What role do you feel the US should be playing in resolving this crisis?

I wish I knew. It is hard to think of constructive actions as Syria spirals downwards to murderous self-destruction. Far more should be done for humanitarian aid, and there should be efforts to support the slim hopes for the Brahimi negotiating mission. But I am unaware of any serious proposal as to how to help substantively to resolve the crisis. Serious proposal, that is. Not slogans.

In November 2013, the P5+1 and Iran finally reached an agreement on the nuclear issue. How remarkable do you see the political implications of the agreement?

It is commonly assumed that there are two options for achieving the sole policy objective that receives serious consideration, preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons or even nuclear capability: diplomatic or military, in both cases while severe sanctions (the most severe unilateral US sanctions) remain in place. Military attack is regularly threatened ("all options are open") in direct violation of the UN Charter, which bans the threat of force. Of the two, the diplomatic path is surely to be preferred, but so far it is quite tentative.

We should, however, also be asking about the framework that is taken for granted in US discussion, though not elsewhere. Thus the Non-aligned movement, most of the world, has continued to vigorously endorse Iran's right to enrich uranium and to call for a nuclear weapons-free zone in the Middle East. The US has effectively blocked this option, adopting Israel's stance, again in late 2012 when an international conference was to be held in Helsinki to carry the project forward. As for the sanctions, the US is constantly complaining that others, even Europeans, are

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trying to evade them, a sign of how unpopular they are; elsewhere even more so. Few are willing to adopt the US doctrine that Israel must have an overwhelming and untouchable – in fact un-discussable – nuclear weapons program. And as I mentioned, in the Arab world, it is Israel and the US that are perceived as the most serious threat they face; not Iran, which is disliked, but not regarded as much of a threat – by the populations, that is. US discourse claims the opposite, keeping to the dictators and ignoring the populations.

We should also ask why the US regards Iran as “the gravest threat to peace,” unlike the population of the world. The answers are, I think, revealing. The major concern appears to be that Iran might be a deterrent to the free use of force by the US and its Israeli ally. If so – and I think the evidence supports that – then significant questions arise about the entire framework of the discussion. In particular, we might ask why the US should not join the Arab states and many others who seek to move to establish a zone free of nuclear weapons – or, more generally, WMD – in the region.

In a previous interview on our site, Norman Finkelstein, when discussing the future of the Palestinians, was pessimistic about the Palestinian cause for a single state, but suggested that, if the Palestinians engaged in mass non-violent disobedience, there might be the possibility that they could end the occupation because international public opinion is hostile to Israel at the moment. To what extent do you share these sentiments, if at all?

Finkelstein is not speaking of a single state, but of a two-state settlement in accord with the overwhelming international consensus that the US and Israel have blocked for almost 40 years, since the first US veto of a Security Council resolution calling for this outcome (January 1976), advanced by the major Arab states. A “single state” is not a realistic option. It has no international support, and there is no reason why Israel and its US backer should accept it. The two real options are either a two-state settlement or continuation of the Israeli programs for takeover of what is of value to them in the West Bank, while separating it from Gaza and maintaining the harsh siege in Gaza, and keeping the illegally-annexed Golan Heights. All of this contingent on continuing US support, even with occasional clucking of tongues.

I think Finkelstein’s position, which is well argued, is correct. International opinion, outside the US, is increasingly hostile to the occupation, and opinion is shifting in that direction in the US as well. I’ve been arguing for 50 years that the best strategy for the Palestinians is non-violent civil disobedience. Israel, I think, understands that, too, and has been quite brutal in repressing it, while also expelling non-violent activists. What the prospects are is hard to guess. Probably limited, as long as the US continues to back Israeli expansionism in practice, in virtual international isolation, in a way rather reminiscent of apartheid South Africa.

When the reports broke of the NSA “warrantless wiretapping” scandal, were you surprised by the extent to which the US intelligence community had abused its surveillance power? What role do you feel ordinary citizens can play in preventing future abuses of power?

The fact that it was happening didn’t surprise me. The scale did. Citizens can act to impose legislation and safeguards to end such abuses.

In *Manufacturing Consent*, you developed the propaganda model with Edward S. Herrmann, which sought to explain how consent for economic, social, and political policies is “manufactured” in the public mind through media propaganda. Since the book was written, there have been many developments in digital technologies. How do you feel the advent of such technologies has affected the propaganda model, if at all?

We published an update in 2002, suggesting some modifications, but not fundamental ones. New technologies have multiple effects, some positive, some negative – matters worth pursuing but that would take us too far afield here. The basic framework seems to me to continue to be applicable, and I personally think that something similar applies as well to the more general intellectual culture, though with somewhat different operative factors.

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You recently had a heated debate with Slavoj Žižek about the role of theory. You made it clear in the discussions that you are not a fan of what you described as “intellectual posturing,” but how important or useful do you see theories, such as realism and liberalism, in understanding global politics?

On my part, there was no heated debate and, frankly, no interest. My contribution consisted of a brief response to a query about postmodernism in an interview, and then a refutation of a series of false claims in Žižek’s response. Theories are fine, in fact highly desirable, when they exist. Real theories, that is: non-trivial principles from which empirical consequences can be deduced and that contribute to explanations. There is no space to go into it here, but what Žižek calls “theory” does not, in my opinion, meet such conditions and – to the extent that they qualify as theories – realism, liberalism, idealism, constructivism, and other such proposals seem to me fairly thin and not very helpful beyond narrow bounds.

In your 1967 article on the responsibility of the intellectuals, you called for intellectuals to expose lies and tell the truth. To revisit this idea and argument today, to what extent are intellectuals meeting their responsibility and what advice might you have for young intellectuals?

The call seems to be as close to truism as imaginable. The history of intellectuals is not an uplifting one. Throughout history – long before the term “intellectual” came into use in its modern sense – the mainstream of intellectual life has been supportive of power, often in ugly ways. Societies typically have a fringe of dissidents, usually treated quite harshly, sometimes simply slaughtered; like the Jesuit intellectuals murdered by a US-trained terrorist battalion in El Salvador in December 1989, the culmination of a decade of savage US-backed terror in Central America and the final phase of shocking crimes throughout the continent, with US support or direct initiative. In Western societies, there is a wider range of options, of course, though not without severe abuses, as illustrated by the fate of the one person you mentioned, the fine scholar Norman Finkelstein.

Advice for the young? Nothing beyond the simple virtues: honesty, integrity, an open mind, willingness to subject received doctrine to challenge when necessary – and recognition that pursuing the simple virtues may not be welcomed by authority and power.

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*This interview was conducted by **Al McKay**. Al is an Editor-at-large of E-IR.*