

Axis of Justice Radio Network  
Interview with Noam Chomsky

*[The following interview aired on KPFK radio January 13, 2006. The actual interview took place on December 19, 2005. Transcript made from original raw recording, minor edits have been made for clarity]*

Tom Morello: Professor Chomsky, welcome to the Axis of Justice Radio Network.

Noam Chomsky: Glad to be with you.

TM: Thank you very much. What is your assessment of the current situation in Iraq? What do you make of the Bush administration's assessment of the situation, and what are the most effective strategies employed by activists on issue?

NC: Well, the first strategy that has to be employed is to look at the situation realistically. That means violating a rigid principle of doctrine. It's driven into everyone's head that the dirty word "oil" has nothing to do with what's going on. We're supposed to believe that Bush and his friends would have passionately liberated Iraq if the main energy sources of the world were in central Africa, and Iraq was producing lettuce and pickles. Unless you believe that, you're a conspiracy theorist or some other bad thing.

As soon as we escape into elementary rationality, we know that the reason for the invasion of Iraq is that it has some of the largest energy resources in the world, and that it is right in the heart of the world's major energy-producing region. Control over Iraq would increase substantially Washington's already great control over this enormous lever of world control. That has been understood forever—for sixty years at least. That's at the core of it, but that tells us something about withdrawal. It means that the U.S. cannot withdraw unless it leaves in place a subordinate client state. Something like say, El Salvador and Nicaragua after massive terror which became client states; or Eastern European satellites; or for that matter the countries occupied by Nazi Germany. In all of these cases—just like the British empire or the French empire and so on—in all of these cases there was a kind of formal independence. The countries were run by domestic security forces; the horrendous national guards in Central America and the Caribbean for decades were familiar to us. Domestic security forces, domestic political forces. With the mail fist in the background just in case it is ever needed. That's the standard Imperial system, and that's what they're desperately trying to impose in Iraq.

If you listen to Bush (read newspapers, anything), you hear that the U.S. is seeking to permit to develop a free, sovereign, independent, democratic Iraq. It takes five seconds to see that that can't be true. I mean just consider what the policies would be, very likely, of an independent, sovereign, more-or-less democratic Iraq. It's not hard to work out. Iraq has a Shiite majority in the south where most of the oil is. If it's at all democratic, they'll be a dominant force; *the* dominant force. They have every reason to want to have closer relations with their big Shiite neighbor, Iran. They would much rather have friendly than hostile relations. Furthermore, they have close links to Iran already. The

majority of clerics who are extremely influential come from Iran, including Ayatollah Sistani, the most revered of them. The militia, the Badr Brigade that's pretty much running southern Iraq, was trained in Iran which has maintained linkages there; trade and other relations are increasing. So it is extremely likely that they will move in that direction. I mean, the last thing Washington wants is trying to isolate Iran. Furthermore, there is a Shiite population right across the border in Saudi Arabia. Now they have been brutally oppressed by the U.S.-backed fundamentalist dictatorship. But as autonomy begins to develop in Iraq, of course it spreads. In fact they're already increasing demands for some kind of autonomy, or at least minimal rights. Well that happens to be where most of Saudi Arabia's oil is. So you can see it developing on the horizon. If there is a sovereign, independent Iraq, what you can see developing is a loose Shiite alliance which will control most of the world's oil, will be independent of the United States, and will include Iran.

And you know, Iran is already toying with turning toward the East. There is an Asian energy security grid, independent of U.S. control (based primarily in China and Russia with India on the sideline and others coming in working to develop their own control over energy resources). Well, if Iran moves in that direction it becomes kind of a lynchpin. If Iraq, with its vastly greater resources moves in, it is even more so. And still more Saudi Arabia. And China knows it. Europe is easily intimidated by the United States, but China is not. That is the reason the United States planners are so worried about China. It's not that they are a military threat or anything like that, they just are not intimidated. So when the U.S. tries to block investment in Iran, the big European companies pull out, but China doesn't care. In fact, they are even making in-roads into Saudi Arabia.

So what you see developing for Washington would be the ultimate nightmare. How can they be willing to accept an independent, sovereign Iraq?

If these questions are not discussed at least, all the talk about withdrawal is off on Mars somewhere; it is not even in the real world. The tactic for activists is first of all to get into the real world and recognize what the issues are, and then recognize that they are going to have to act in a way which may very well lead Washington to have to abandon its lever of world control through control of the world energy supplies. Personally, I think that is a good thing, but I think it is a serious effort.

I mean, there are a lot of comparisons these days to Vietnam; none of them make any sense. In Vietnam, we were also trapped by rigid ideologies, but if you look back to the reality of Vietnam, the reason for the invasion of south Vietnam and the rest of Indochina was a concern that (and we know this from internal records) Vietnam might undergo some form of successful independent development. It's what planners call a virus that might affect others, maybe as far as Indonesia, maybe even leading Japan to accommodate to an independent nation system. Well, they were not going to tolerate that, and so they invaded Vietnam; South Vietnam first, and then the rest. And the basic objective was achieved: South Vietnam was destroyed. All of Indochina was pretty much destroyed. So, no danger of successful development. No virus. No, the U.S. could pull

out after destroying the place. In fact, that was kind of recognized by planners. McGeorge Bundy, the national security advisor for Kennedy and Johnson, said later that (reasonably) he thought the U.S. should probably have pulled out of Vietnam in 1965. The reason was in 1965 there was a murderous massacre and military coup in Indonesia which killed hundreds of people. It destroyed the political system, opened up the country to Western exploitation, and imposed a vicious dictator who was strongly supported by the U.S. right until the end. Paul Wolfowitz was his greatest friend; still is. So that ended the danger, so Vietnam was no longer a danger. We should have just pulled out.

As soon as you realize that, you see that there is no comparison to Iraq. Vietnam, you could destroy it and withdraw. You cannot destroy Iraq, and you cannot withdraw. It is just a totally different situation.

We are prevented from thinking about these things because of the iron grip of ideology, which doesn't prevent us to look at things that are just right on the surface. There's nothing profound about these insights, just think about the facts.

Serj Tankian: Obviously the media and its presentation of the Iraq situation have a lot to do with it. How is it that most journalists went along with all of the transparent lies that the White House used to justify the war?

NC: See, I think that is the least of it. Much more significant to me is what I've just been talking about. Let's say they go along with what people in power say. So if Powell says there are weapons of mass destruction, we tend to believe that. But much more significant is the complete exclusion of the fundamental issues involved in the war in the first place, and in any talk about disentangling. I mean that's missing, and it's not just missing from the media. It's also missing from journals of opinion, missing from most scholarship. It's kind of North Korea style. I mean these are crucial issues. They are evident. You don't have to search deeply for them. No complicated conspiracy, they are right on the surface. And it's understood in most places. It's certainly understood in Iraq judging by polls. Polls were taken in Iraq right after the President made his dramatic announcement about his messianic mission to bring democracy to Iraq, which set the tone for all discussion that follows here, approximately a hundred percent. Now right after that, polls were taken in Baghdad and people were asked why they thought the United States invaded, and about one percent agreed with about a hundred percent of Western opinion, "to bring democracy." Five percent said: "to help Iraqis." Almost everyone else said what is obvious: "to take control of Iraq's oil and to strengthen the U.S. position in the center of world energy production." But that's elementary sanity. Ten year olds should be able to figure that out. But here it's inexpressible, and if its inexpressible you can't even discuss rationally the withdrawal plans. Yeah, they would be happy to withdraw if they could leave something in place—say El Salvador, or Poland under the Russians, or Vichy France, or India to the Raj—sure, you have that and they will be happy to withdraw. I mean nobody wants to leave foreign troops anywhere else.

ST: For me there seems to be a parallel between the Saddam Hussein trials that are being held right now in Iraq, and the Turkish tribunal post-World War I trials that were held to

condemn the perpetrators of the Armenian genocide. If Saddam is not incriminated by a world court or the ICC, which obviously the U.S. does not recognize, it's possible that a new democratically elected government in Iraq may not recognize the decisions of the court on Saddam. What do you think about that?

NC: Well, it's a little academic because we're a long way from a democratically elected government in Iraq that can make its own decisions, for the reasons I mentioned. But if that ever happens, my guess is that they would accept the conclusion. There's no doubt that he was a brutal murderer.

ST: Right.

NC: But here again there's something very critical that we should think about. Sadaam is now being tried for crimes that he committed in 1982. That's the trial that is going on now. A lot of hoopla about it. Well, 1982 is a rather significant year in U.S.-Iraq relations. 1982 is the year of the Reagan administration (which means the people pretty much in office now) removed Sadaam from the list of states supporting terror so that they would be able to provide him with very substantial aid, including means to develop weapons of mass destruction—missiles, bio-toxins and so-on. The fact that that is not mentioned at the time of the trials—that really takes discipline. It tells you exactly who ought to be standing along side him out on the dock. Furthermore, this aid continued, including weapons of mass destruction, right through the atrocities against the Kurds (the Halabja massacre on, all the rest of it). In fact, it continued well after the war with Iran was over. That was a pretext for it, but it continued afterwards. And it was even explained, openly, at the time by George Bush number one, after the war with Iran, after the atrocities. We have to continue because we have a responsibility toward American exporters and because Sadaam Hussein will contribute to stability in the region, meaning obedience. In fact, the U.S. (this is Bush number one), went back to supporting Sadaam in 1991 when he was massacring Shiites. There was a Shiite rebellion that might well have overthrown him. Bush—U.S. military totally controlled the region—and it was after the war that they effectively authorized Sadaam to crush the rebellion. And now there is lots of lamenting and moaning about the horrible atrocities and mass graves and so on. Yeah, the people were lamenting, knew about them at the time and thought it was the right thing. The fact that these topics are being suppressed, again, is a major tribute—not just to the media but to the intellectual culture all together—its all on the surface.

TM: Professor Chomsky, can a word change people's thinking? Specifically referring to Lemkin's coining of the term "genocide." Details on how we use the term genocide when it fits our purpose and when it doesn't, etc. What do you make of that?

NC: Well, personally I tend to keep away from the word "genocide" for the kind of reasons you're mentioning. I think it's appropriate for the cases that Lemkin had in mind, and that people did have in mind at the genocide convention. So it's appropriate for the holocaust. It's appropriate for the Rwanda slaughters. But by now the term genocide is being used so loosely that any crime is being called genocide. It's just an insult to the victims of the real genocide. The term has been virtually deprived of its

meaning by its propagandistic usages. And as you say, it is always crimes of enemies, not ours.

TM: You have said in interviews that Americans walk up to you and ask, “What can we do about all these problems facing the world?” But then in other countries people walk up to you and tell you what they’re doing. Why do you think there is this big difference between activists in the United States and abroad?

NC: Well, first of all it’s not quite abroad. The difference is between the West and the rest of the world. I hear the same questions in Germany and England and so on. You don’t hear them in Latin America or Africa; Turkish activists and so on—they know what they’re doing. The correlations are pretty clear. We can look for an explanation. The correlation is essentially with privilege and opportunity. By and large, the people with more privilege and more opportunity feel more hopeless and helpless. Why is that the case? I can think of a lot of reasons, but it’s pretty striking. I mean, we in the United States but also in Europe have incomparable (by historical standards) privilege and opportunity. We can do anything we like, and we’re not going to get our heads blown off. We’re not going to be sent to a prison for torture. We’re not going to be bombed. There are lots of opportunities, but you have to take them. That means recognizing that it is going to be hard work. It’s not a matter of going to a demonstration and “nothing happened, so I quit.” You have to be at it day after day; that’s how popular organizations are formed. That’s how you get the basis for a democratic society, which we’ve pretty much lost. As they have in much of the third world.

I mean take the election in Bolivia the other day. You know, that was an election that was based in an extremely poor country—miserable people, a ton of oppression. But they actually had a democratic election that we can’t even dream of. Could we imagine electing somebody from the ranks of the population, not two spoiled frat boys who went to Yale who learned how to be members of the upper class? And how were they able to do it? Well, they have massive popular organizations. An election is not just something where you show up every four years and push a button. You actually plan, organize, work at the regional level, local level—all these sorts of things that lead to a democratic society. But that takes work, and you can’t do it by sporadic actions. Apparently there is something about having a lot of privilege and opportunity that makes people feel that they just can’t do it.

ST: Do you feel that it’s because we are more indoctrinated when we have those privileges and opportunities?

NC: It might be, but when you talk about indoctrination we have to recognize that it has to be accepted. Indoctrination goes two ways. I mean we know who is trying to do it, but at the other end there are the people who are accepting it. And we don’t have to accept it. I mean it’s not quantum physics. It’s pretty easy to see through it if we accept it as a kind of intellectual laziness. So it comes down to the same thing as not wanting to put the energy and effort to become really engaged in activism, and it’s tempting not to. Part of what comes along with freedom and opportunity is there are lots of ways to keep

you from spending your time and energy in difficult things. And it's difficult. It's not like, say, being in Colombia or Turkey or some such place. But there are costs. One cost is just constant vilification. So you're going to be subjected to floods of slanders and lies and vilification, and denunciations—at least if you are noticed. If you are not noticed, it won't happen. But if it's something that has become noticed, it will happen.

TM: (laughs) Serj and I are familiar with some of that.

NC: Right. That just comes with the turf, and it's not very pleasant. It's a pain in the neck. The other thing is there are also some objective barriers, like you might be denied employment, or marginalized somehow. And there are a lot of “unpleasantnesses” that can result, but compared with what other people face in the world, and don't hesitate. I mean we can't even talk about these things.

TM: Just to follow up though, you said that industries ranging from advertising to universities are all very committed to the belief that attitudes and opinions must be controlled, in part inducing a philosophy of futility. How does this philosophy of futility work, and what are some ways to combat it?

NC: Well if we talk about the philosophy of futility, it is actually quoted from the business literature from the 1920s when the public relations industry was just exploding and they were talking about the need to impose a philosophy of futility on people to keep them from using the opportunities that they have to participate in a democratic society.

And there are all kinds of ways of doing it. We are all trained to think that there is nothing we can do. You know, problems are all beyond us. We can't get together and do anything about them. We can't have political parties and organizations. Part of the philosophy of futility just comes from truly massive efforts to induce high level consumerism, to make people see their only value in life as the number of commodities they can obtain, or “how can I come to looking like that model on television?” or something like that. I mean we don't have to talk about it, but business spends hundreds of billions of dollars a year on this, and you can be caught up in it. It starts from infancy. I sometimes watch television with my grandchildren. No matter how young they are they are being inundated with it, so that's a major phenomenon.

There is a lot of training and indoctrination into thinking you should really only be interested in yourself. Like, if that disabled widow across town doesn't have enough food to eat, “its not *my* problem,” you know, “I didn't tell her to marry the wrong person. Why should I do anything about it?” Furthermore we have no community responsibility. So maybe individuals contribute to Katrina and get patted on the head, but we don't even think that these are the government policies in a democratic society. In a democratic society, the government would be an instrument of the population, and it would carry out policies for the community. It's drilled into our heads that the government is an enemy. When you pay taxes on April 15<sup>th</sup>, you are trained to believe that that alien force is taking away your hard-earned money. You are not supposed to think, “yeah we are getting together in a democratic community and cooperating to ensure that our plans and ideas

are going to be implemented.” That is not what you are supposed to think on April 15<sup>th</sup>. It’s just overwhelming: from higher education to popular media everywhere. And you can’t really say it’s conscious indoctrination, because by now it’s just sort of in the bones of people. They can’t think in other terms.

TM: If people are frightened that their security is threatened, they are more likely to suppress their own concerns and interests and gravitate towards strong leaders. You have said that the United States is especially susceptible to this kind of fear by comparative standards. Why do you think that is, and how is that fear engendered and manipulated?

NC: Well actually it’s an interesting fact. One thing I suggest to listeners or you is that there is a great book about it by Bruce Franklin, who is a literary historian and critic. It is called War Stories, I think, in which he traces back this enormous fear in the American population—way back to colonial days. He studies it in popular literature and so on, and I think it’s very striking. The U.S. is kind of off the spectrum in that it has been a frightened society from the very beginning, and that kind of fear is manipulated—consciously manipulated. The Reagan administration, any administration that is kicking the population in the face; like the Reagan administration or the current Bush administration, is going to be more likely to try to induce fear, to convince people to huddle under the umbrella of power, and they do it over and over.

I mean, take the Iraq war. There was a major government media campaign which took off in September of 2002 to try to drive the population into hysterical fear. “Sadaam is going to come and get us.” Sadaam was *hated* everywhere, but he wasn’t *feared* anywhere else. I mean even Kuwait and Iran didn’t fear him; they knew he couldn’t *do* anything. But here people were genuinely frightened, and still are. That happens over and over. It happened all through the 80s. It’s hard to imagine but Americans were actually trembling in fear over Grenada, the nutmeg capital of the world. The Nicaraguan army was two days away from Arlington, Texas: we have to go huddle in fear. I mean looking at this from the outside you wouldn’t know whether to laugh or cry, but it happened. And the same is true domestically. I mean, fear of crime in the United States, and fear of drugs is way out of proportion to the actual problems. You can see it by looking at comparable societies where they have the same problems, but not the fear.

ST: Let’s talk about labor unions for a second. Most labor unions are local or national, while their corporate opponents are frequently international. Are there any promising signs of unions from different nations linking up to better fight for their rights and needs?

NC: Well, unions are called internationals, and there is a good reason for that. Back from the earliest days of the labor movement in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the hope was to build international organizations of working people who would cooperate because they have the same goals and aims. The labor movement and the left have always been the strongest proponents of globalization, interaction, but among the people, not among sects of the private power. And yes, there are prospects of that. For example, there are now significant moves on the part of the U.S. and other labor movements to act together, for example, about sweatshops in Mexico. Or take Colombia. Colombia is a good case in

point because more union activists are killed in Colombia than in probably the rest of the world. And there are now initiatives from the United Steel Workers and others to try to protect Colombian trade unions. I know of personal cases, and it sometimes works. It's to the benefit of the Colombian activists, and also of the unions here. Working people here are suffering from the effort to create the lowest possible labor standards around the world. So it's to everyone's benefit and it's just the right thing to do, benefit or not. And yeah it's beginning to happen, it can happen more.

Incidentally with regard to Iraq it's critically important. There are democratizing elements, forces in Iraq, and the labor movement is prominent among them, but they are being crushed. A lot of them are being assassinated. The U.S. occupation has insisted on maintaining Sadaam Hussein's brutal anti-labor laws. American labor could give them a lot of support, and so could we all. Someone who has been doing the best work on this is David Bacon who has been writing about it.

TM: In a final word could you just tell us, what is it that gives you hope?

NC: Well what gives me hope is people like you and your listeners—in fact, the general population of the United States. I mean, public opinion in the United States is very well studied; we know a lot about it. It's pretty remarkable and it's almost never reported because it's just too dangerous. But there are major studies that reveal consistently that the two political parties are way to the right of the general population on just issue after issue. What is missing is that they all feel hopeless and atomized and separated, which means that in some ways this country ought to be an organizer's paradise.

TM: This has been Professor Noam Chomsky on the Axis of Justice Radio Network. Professor Chomsky, thank you so much for being on the show. We really appreciate your time.

NC: Thank you.

ST: Huge fans, thank you.