



Interview

Iraq: The Real Agenda. An Interview with Noam Chomsky

By

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(1) Why did the U.S. invade Iraq, in your view?

These are naturally speculations, and policy makers may have varying motives. But we can have a high degree of confidence about the answers given by Bush-Powell and the rest; these cannot possibly be taken seriously. They have gone out of their way to make sure we understand that, by a steady dose of self-contradiction ever since last September when the war drums began to beat. One day the "single question" is whether Iraq will disarm; in today's version (April 12): "We have high confidence that they have weapons of mass destruction -- that is what this war was about and is about." That was the pretext throughout the whole UN-disarmament farce, though it was never easy to take seriously; UNMOVIC was doing a good job in virtually disarming Iraq, and could have continued, if that were the goal. But there is no need to discuss it, because after stating solemnly that this is the "single question," they went on the next day to announce that it wasn't the goal at all: even if there isn't a pocket knife anywhere in Iraq, the US will invade anyway, because it is committed to "re-

gime change." The next day we hear that there's nothing to that either; thus at the Azores summit, where Bush-Blair issued their ultimatum to the UN, they made it clear that they would invade even if Saddam and his gang left the country. So "regime change" is not enough. The next day we hear that the goal is "democracy" in the world. Pretexts range over the lot, depending on audience and circumstances, which means that no sane person can take the charade seriously.

The one constant is that the US must end up in control of Iraq. Saddam Hussein was authorized to suppress, brutally, a 1991 uprising that might have overthrown him because "the best of all worlds" for Washington would be "an iron-fisted Iraqi junta without Saddam Hussein" (by then an embarrassment), which would rule the country with an "iron fist" as Saddam had done with US support and approval (NYT chief diplomatic correspondent Thomas Friedman). The uprising would have left the country in the hands of Iraqis who might not have subordinated themselves sufficiently to Washington. The murderous sanctions regime of the following years devastated the society, strengthened the tyrant, and compelled the population to rely

for survival on his (highly efficient) system for distributing basic goods. The sanctions thus undercut the possibility of the kind of popular revolt that had overthrown an impressive series of other monsters who had been strongly supported by the current incumbents in Washington up to the very end of their bloody rule: Marcos, Duvalier, Ceausescu, Mobutu, Suharto, and a long list of others, some of them easily as tyrannical and barbaric as Saddam. Had it not been for the sanctions, Saddam probably would have gone the same way, as has been pointed out for years by the Westerners who know Iraq best, Denis Halliday and Hans van Sponeck (though one has to go to Canada, England, or elsewhere to find their writings). But overthrow of the regime from within would not be acceptable either, because it would leave Iraqis in charge. The Azores summit merely reiterated that stand.

The question of who rules Iraq remains the prime issue of contention. The US-backed opposition demands that the UN play a vital role in post-war Iraq and rejects US control of reconstruction or government (Leith Kubba, one of the most respected secular voices in the West, connected with the National Endowment of Democracy). One of the leading Shi'ite opposition figures, Sayed Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim, who heads the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), just informed the press that "we understand this war to be about imposing US hegemony over Iraq," and perceive the US as "an occupying rather than a liberating force." He stressed that the UN must supervise elections, and called on "foreign troops to withdraw from Iraq" and leave Iraqis in charge.

US policy-makers have a radically different conception. They must impose a client regime in Iraq, following the practice elsewhere in the region, and most significantly, in the regions that have been under US domination for a century, Central America and the Caribbean. That too is well-understood. Brent Scowcroft, National Security Adviser to Bush I, just repeated

the obvious: "What's going to happen the first time we hold an election in Iraq and it turns out the radicals win? What do you do? We're surely not going to let them take over."

The same holds throughout the region. Recent studies reveal that from Morocco to Lebanon to the Gulf, about 95% of the population want a greater role in government for Islamic religious figures, and the same percentage believe that the sole US interest in the region is to control its oil and strengthen Israel. Antagonism to Washington has reached unprecedented heights, and the idea that Washington would institute a radical change in policy and tolerate truly democratic elections, respecting the outcome, seems rather fanciful, to say the least.

Turning to the question, one reason for the invasion, surely, is to gain control over the world's second largest oil reserves, which will place the US in an even more powerful position of global domination, maintaining "a stranglehold on the global economy," as Michael Klare describes the long-term objective, which he regards as the primary motive for war. However, this cannot explain the timing. Why now?

The drumbeat for war began in September 2002, and the government-media propaganda campaign achieved a spectacular success. Very quickly, the majority of the population came to believe that Iraq posed an imminent threat to US security, even that Iraq was involved in 9-11 (up from 3% after 9-11) and was planning new attacks. Not surprisingly, these beliefs correlated closely with support for the planned war. The beliefs are unique to the US. Even in Kuwait and Iran, which were invaded by Saddam Hussein, he was not feared, though he was despised. They know perfectly well that Iraq was the weakest state in the region, and for years they had joined others in trying to reintegrate Iraq into the regional system, over strong US objections. But a highly effective propaganda assault drove the American population far off the spectrum of world opinion, a remarkable achievement.

The September propaganda assault coin-

cided with two important events. One was the opening of the mid-term election campaign. Karl Rove, the administration's campaign manager, had already pointed out that Republicans have to "go to the country" on the issue of national security, because voters "trust the Republican Party to do a better job of...protecting America." One didn't have to be a political genius to realize that if social and economic issues dominated the election, the Bush administration did not have a chance. Accordingly, it was necessary to concoct a huge threat to our survival, which the powerful leader will manage to overcome, miraculously. For the elections, the strategy barely worked. Polls reveal that voters maintained their preferences, but suppressed concerns over jobs, pensions, benefits, etc., in favor of security. Something similar will be needed for the presidential campaign. All

of this is second nature for the current incumbents. They are mostly recycled from the more reactionary sectors of the Reagan-Bush administrations, and know that they were able to run the country for 12 years, carrying out domestic programs that the public largely opposed, by pushing the panic button regularly: Libya attempting to "expel us from the world" (Reagan), an air base in Grenada from which the Russians would bomb us, Nicaragua only "two-days driving time from Harlingen Texas," waving their copies of *Mein Kampf* as they planned to take over the hemisphere, black criminals about to rape your sister (Willie Horton, the 1988 presidential campaign), Hispanic narco-traffickers about to destroy us, and on and on.

To maintain political power is an extremely important matter if the narrow sectors of power represented by the Bush administration hope to carry out their reactionary domestic program over strong popular opposition, if possible even to institutionalize them, so it will be hard to reconstruct what is being dismantled.

Something else happened in September 2002: the administration released its National Security Strategy, sending many shudders

around the world, including the US foreign policy elite. The Strategy has many precedents, but does break new ground: for the first time in the post-war world, a powerful state announced, loud and clear, that it intends to rule the world by force, forever, crushing any potential challenge it might perceive. This is often called in the press a doctrine of "pre-emptive war." That is crucially wrong; it goes vastly beyond pre-emption. Sometimes it is called more accurately a doctrine of "preventive war." That too understates the doctrine. No military threat, however remote, need be "prevented"; challenges can be concocted at will, and may not involve any threat other than "defiance"; those who pay attention to history know that "successful defiance" has often been taken to be justification for resort to force in the past.

When a doctrine is announced, some action must be taken to demonstrate that it is seriously intended, so that it can become a new "norm in international relations," as commentators will soberly explain. What is needed is a war with an "exemplary quality," Harvard Middle East historian Roger Owen pointed out, discussing the reasons for the attack on Iraq. The exemplary action teaches a lesson that others must heed, or else.

Why Iraq? The experimental subject must have several important qualities. It must be defenseless, and it must be important; there's no point illustrating the doctrine by invading Burundi. Iraq qualified perfectly in both respects. The importance is obvious, and so is the required weakness. Iraq was not much of a military force to begin with, and had been largely disarmed through the 1990s while much of the society was driven to the edge of survival. Its military expenditures and economy were about one-third those of Kuwait, with 10% of its population, far below others in the region, and of course the regional superpower, Israel, by now virtually an offshore military base of the US. The invading force not only had utterly overwhelming military power, but also extensive information to guide its actions from satel-

lite observation and overflights for many years, and more recently U-2 flights on the pretext of disarmament, surely sending data directly back to Washington.

Iraq was therefore a perfect choice for an "exemplary action" to establish the new doctrine of global rule by force as a "norm of international relations." A high official involved in drafting the National Security Strategy informed the press that its publication "was the signal that Iraq would be the first test, but not the last." "Iraq became the petri dish in which this experiment in pre-emptive policy grew," the *New York Times* reported -- misstating the policy in the usual way, but otherwise accurate.

All of these factors gave good reasons for war. And they also help explain why the planned war was so overwhelmingly opposed by the public worldwide (including the US, particularly when we extract the factor of fear, unique to the US). And also strongly opposed by a substantial part of economic and foreign policy elites, a very unusual development. They rightly fear that the adventurist posture may prove very costly to their own interests, even to survival. It is well-understood that these policies are driving others to develop a deterrent, which could be weapons of mass destruction, or credible threats of serious terror, or even conventional weapons, as in the case of North Korea, with artillery massed to destroy Seoul. With any remnants of some functioning system of world order torn to shreds, the Bush administration is instructing the world that nothing matters but force -- and they hold the mailed fist, though others are not likely to tolerate that for long. Including, one hopes, the American people, who are in by far the best position to counter and reverse these extremely ominous trends.

(2) There is some cheering in the streets of Iraqi cities. Does this retrospectively undercut the logic of antiwar opposition?

I'm surprised that it was so limited and so

long delayed. Every sensible person should welcome the overthrow of the tyrant, and the ending of the devastating sanctions, most certainly Iraqis. But the antiwar opposition, at least the part of it I know anything about, was always in favor of these ends. That's why it opposed the sanctions that were destroying the country and undermining the possibility of an internal revolt that would send Saddam the way of the other brutal killers supported by the present incumbents in Washington. The antiwar movement insisted that Iraqis, not the US government, must run the country. And it still does -- or should; it can have a substantial impact in this regard. Opponents of the war were also rightly appalled by the utter lack of concern for the possible humanitarian consequences of the attack, and by the ominous strategy for which it was the "test case." The basic issues remain: (1) Who will run Iraq, Iraqis or a clique in Crawford Texas? (2) Will the American people permit the narrow reactionary sectors that barely hold on to political power to implement their domestic and international agendas?

(3) There have been no WMD found. Does this retrospectively undercut Bush's rationales for war?

Only if one takes the rationale seriously. The leadership still pretends to, as Fleischer's current remarks illustrate. If they can find something, which is not unlikely, that will be trumpeted as justification for the war. If they can't, the whole issue will be "disappeared" in the usual fashion.

(4) If WMD are now found, and verified, would that retrospectively undercut antiwar opposition?

That's a logical impossibility. Policies and opinions about them are determined by what is known or plausibly believed, not by what is discovered afterwards. That should be elementary.

(5) Will there be democracy in Iraq, as a result of this invasion?

Depends on what one means by "democracy." I presume the Bush PR team will want to put into place some kind of formal democracy, as long as it has no substance. But it's hard to imagine that they would allow a real voice to the Shi'ite majority, which is likely to join the rest of the region in trying to establish closer relations with Iran, the last thing the Bushites want. Or that they would allow a real voice to the next largest component of the population, the Kurds, who are likely to seek some kind of autonomy within a federal structure that would be anathema to Turkey, a major base for US power in the region. One should not be misled by the recent hysterical reaction to the crime of the Turkish government in adopting the position of 95% of its population, another indication of the passionate hatred of democracy in elite circles here, and another reason why no sensible person can take the rhetoric seriously. Same throughout the region. Functioning democracy would have outcomes that are inconsistent with the goal of US hegemony, just as in our own "backyard" over a century.

(6) What message has been received by governments around the world, with what likely broad implications?

The message is that the Bush administration intends its National Security Strategy to be taken seriously, as the "test case" illustrates. It intends to dominate the world by force, the one dimension in which it rules supreme, and to do so permanently. A more specific message, illustrated dramatically by the Iraq-North Korea case, is that if you want to fend off a US attack, you had better have a credible deterrent. It's widely assumed in elite circles that the likely consequence is proliferation of WMD and terror, in various forms, based on fear and loathing for the US administration, which was regarded as the greatest threat to world peace even before

the invasion. That's no small matter these days. Questions of peace shade quickly into questions of survival for the species, given the case of means of violence.

(7) What was the role of the American media establishment in paving the way for this war, and then rationalizing it, narrowing the terms of discussion, etc.?

The media uncritically relayed government propaganda about the threat to US security posed by Iraq, its involvement in 9-11 and other terror, etc. Some amplified the message on their own. Others simply relayed it. The effects in the polls were striking, as often before. Discussion was, as usual, restricted to "pragmatic grounds": will the US government get away with its plans at a cost acceptable at home. Once the war began it became a shameful exercise of cheering for the home team, appalling much of the world.

(8) What is next on the agenda, broadly, for Bush and Co., if they are able to pursue their preferred agendas?

They have publicly announced that the next targets could be Syria and Iran -- which would require a strong military base in Iraq, presumably; another reason why any meaningful democracy is unlikely. It has been reliably reported for some time that the US and its allies (Turkey, Israel, and some others) have been taking steps towards dismemberment of Iran. But there are other possible targets too. The Andean region qualifies. It has very substantial resources, including oil. It is in turmoil, with dangerous independent popular movements that are not under control. It is by now surrounded by US military bases with US forces already on the ground. And one can think of others.

(9) What obstacles now stand in the way of Bush and Co.'s doing as they prefer, and what obstacles might arise?

The prime obstacle is domestic. But that's up to us.

(10) What has been your impression of anti-war opposition and what ought to be its agenda now?

Antiwar opposition here has been completely without precedent in scale and commitment, something we've discussed before, and that is certainly obvious to anyone who has had any experience in these matters here for the past 40 years. Its agenda right now, I think, should be to work to ensure that Iraq is run by Iraqis, that the US provide massive reparations for what it has done to Iraq for 20 years (by supporting Saddam Hussein, by wars, by brutal sanctions which probably caused a great deal more damage and deaths than the wars); and if that is too much honesty to expect, then at last massive aid, to be used by Iraqis, as they decide, which will be something other than US taxpayer subsidies to Halliburton and Bechtel. Also high on the agenda should be putting a brake on the extremely dangerous policies announced in the Security Strategy, and carried out in the "petri dish." And related to that, there should be serious efforts to block the bonanza of arms sales that is happily anticipated as a consequence of the war, which will also contribute to making the world a more awful and dangerous place. But that's only the beginning. The antiwar movement is indissolubly linked to the global justice movements, which have much more far-reaching goals, properly.

(11) What do you think is the relationship between the invasion of Iraq and corporate globalization, and what should be the relation between the anti-corporate globalization movement, and the peace movement?

The invasion of Iraq was strongly opposed by the main centers of corporate globalization.

At the World Economic Forum in Davos in January, opposition was so strong that Powell was practically shouted down when he tried to present a case for the war -- announcing, pretty clearly, that the US would "lead" even if no one followed, except for the pathetic Blair. The global justice and peace movements are so closely linked in their objectives that there is nothing much to say. We should, however, recall that the planners do draw these links, as we should too, in our own different way. They predict that their version of "globalization" will proceed on course, leading to "chronic financial volatility" (meaning still slower growth, harming mostly the poor) "and a widening economic divide" (meaning less globalization in the technical sense of convergence). They predict further that "deepening economic stagnation, political instability, and cultural alienation will foster ethnic, ideological and religious extremism, along with violence," much of it directed against the US -- that is, more terror. Military planners make the same assumptions. That is a good part of the rationale for rapidly increasing military spending, including the plans for militarization of space that the entire world is trying to block, without much hope as long as the matter is kept from the sight of Americans, who have the prime responsibility to stop it. I presume that is why some of the major events of last October were not even reported, among them the US vote at the UN, alone (with Israel), against a resolution calling for reaffirmation of a 1925 Geneva convention banning biological weapons and another resolution strengthening the 1967 Outer Space Treaty to ban use of space for military purposes, including offensive weapons that may well do us all in.

The agenda, as always, begins with trying to find out what is happening in the world, and then doing something about it, as we can, better than anyone else. Few share our privilege, power, and freedom - hence responsibility. That should be another truism.