



GREGORY THORP

LANGUAGE OF MASS DECEPTION

NOAM CHOMSKY ON HOW THE GOVERNMENT
CONTROLS PUBLIC OPINION

DAVID BARSAMIAN

NOAM CHOMSKY seems to lead a double life. As a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he practically invented the field of modern linguistics, but outside the academy he's drawn more attention as a trenchant critic of U.S. foreign policy and the media.

At seventy-four, Chomsky is "one of the radical heroes of our age," according to the *Guardian*. His activism spans five decades, and the *Village Voice* compares him to "a medic attempting to cure a national epidemic of selective amnesia." The mainstream U.S. media studiously ignore him, but he is frequently quoted in the international press, making him better-known abroad than he is at home.

Though not a particularly arresting or charismatic orator, Chomsky invariably attracts overflow audiences from New York City to New Delhi. His speaking engagements are booked years in advance. At the January 2003 World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, some twenty thousand activists, workers, and trade unionists packed a stadium to hear him. Six months later, I saw him lead seminars for small groups of students at the Z Media Institute in Woods Hole, Massachusetts. The number of attendees did not affect his delivery: he is always patient and composed, with a dry sense of humor that often goes unnoticed amid the torrent of facts.

My relationship with Chomsky began more than twenty years ago when, after reading one of his books, I wrote him a letter. I was surprised to get a reply. Letter followed letter, and a friendship developed. Since 1984 I have been interviewing Chomsky as part of my *Alternative Radio* program. A series of books we have done together have sold many thousands of copies, despite having almost no promotion. Our latest is *Propaganda and the Public Mind* (South End Press).

Chomsky has written scores of books himself, and, according to the Arts and Humanities Citation Index, he is among the ten most cited authors, living or dead, right behind Plato and Freud. His most recent titles are *Middle East Illusions* (Rowman & Littlefield) and *Power and Terror* (Seven Stories Press). His book 9-11 (Seven Stories Press) spent seven weeks on the *New York Times* extended bestseller list. The hardcover *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Domination* is due out in November 2004 from Metropolitan Books.

People often ask me, "What's Chomsky like?" I've always found the Philadelphia native to be straightforward, soft-spoken, and unpretentious. There is no power trip or air of superiority. His approach is best summed up by something he once said to me: "I'm really not interested in persuading people. What I like to do is help people persuade themselves."

I caught up with Chomsky last April 5, in Boulder, Colorado, where he was helping celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of KGNU community radio. We conducted the following interview a few hours before his sold-out talk that evening. Ever generous



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with his time, he was bound for LA the next morning to do another benefit. As we spoke, the U.S. invasion of Iraq was underway, and coalition forces were pushing toward Baghdad. I attempted to bring together Chomsky the linguistics professor and Chomsky the media critic by asking him about language used by the government, and subsequently adopted by the media, to influence public opinion during the war.

Barsamian: What sort of propaganda is at work today with Operation Iraqi Freedom?

Chomsky: In this morning's *New York Times* there's an interesting article about Karl Rove, the president's manager — his "minder" is what they would call it in Iraq — the one who teaches him what to say and do in order to look good and get reelected. Rove is not directly involved in planning

the war — but then, neither is Bush. That's in the hands of other people. Rove says his goal is to present the president as a powerful wartime leader so that the Republicans can push through their domestic agenda, which means tax cuts for the rich and other programs designed to benefit an extremely small, highly privileged sector of the population. (Rove says it's to benefit the economy.)

More significant than that — and this part is not outlined in the article — is the attempt to destroy social support systems like schools and Social Security and anything based on the concept that people must have some concern for one another. That idea has to be driven out of people's minds: that you should have sympathy and solidarity; that you should care whether the disabled widow across town is able to eat. The problem with things like schools or Social Security is that they are based on natural human concern for others. Driving such thoughts from people's minds is a large part of the Republican domestic agenda. The best strategy for this is to produce citizens who are focused solely on maximizing their own consumption and have no concern for anyone else.

Since people aren't going to accept total self-interest at face value, however, the way to achieve it — and this is stated explicitly in the *Times* article — is to make people afraid. If people are frightened, if they think that their security is threatened, they will suppress their own concerns and interests and gravitate toward strong leaders. They will trust the Republicans to protect them from outside enemies. Meanwhile the Republicans will drive through their domestic agenda, maybe even institutionalize it, so that it will be very hard to take apart. And they will do this by presenting the president as a powerful wartime leader overcoming an awesome foe. In reality, of course, Iraq is chosen precisely because it is *not* awesome and can be easily crushed.

This strategy is laid out pretty overtly in today's *Times* — not in precisely the same words I just used, but the message

is very clear. And it's aimed at the next presidential election. That's a large part of this war.

Barsamian: Clearly, on the subject of the Iraq war, there is a huge gap between U.S. public opinion and opinion in the rest of the world. Do you attribute that to propaganda?

Chomsky: No question about it. The public-relations campaign against Iraq took off last September. This is so obvious it's even been discussed in mainstream publications. For example, Martin Sieff, the chief political analyst for United Press International, wrote a long article describing how it was done.

In September 2002, which happened to be the opening of the midterm Congressional election, the wartime drumbeat began. And it had a couple of constant themes. One is that Iraq is an imminent threat to the security of the United States: we have to stop them now, or they're going to destroy us tomorrow. The second is that Iraq was behind September 11. Nobody said this straight out, but it was clearly insinuated. The third lie is that Iraq is going to arm terrorists who are planning new atrocities, so, again, we've got to stop them *now*.

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The polls reflected the propaganda very directly. Immediately after September 11, 2001, only 3 percent of the population thought that Iraq had been involved. Since September 11, 2002, that number has grown to roughly 60 percent. More than half the U.S. population believes that Iraq was responsible for September 11, that Iraqis were on the planes, and that Iraq is planning new attacks. No one else in the world believes any of this.

When Congress authorized the president to use force in October, it said that Iraq was a threat to the security of the United States. Yet no other country regards Iraq as a threat.

Even Kuwait and Iran, both of which have been invaded by Iraq, don't regard Iraq as a threat to their security. As a result of the UN sanctions, which have killed hundreds of thousands of Iraqis — probably two-thirds of the population is on the edge of starvation — Iraq has the weakest economy and the weakest military force in the region. Its military expenditures are about one-third those of Kuwait, which has one-tenth of Iraq's population. And, of course, the real superpower in the region is that offshore U.S. military base known as Israel, which has hundreds of nuclear weapons and massive armed forces. After the U.S. takes over, it's very likely that Iraq will increase its military spending and maybe even develop weapons of mass destruction just to counterbalance other states of the region, particularly Iran. This administration will support the buildup, just as the Reagan administration and the first Bush administration supported Saddam Hussein's military programs, including weapons of mass destruction, right up to the day of his invasion of Kuwait.

But the other countries in the Middle East weren't afraid of Iraq. They hated Saddam Hussein, but they weren't afraid of him. For the past five years, in fact, they've been trying hard, over strong U.S. objections, to reintegrate Iraq back into their own system. Only in the United States is there fear of Iraq. And you can trace the growth of this fear to propaganda.

Barsamian: It's interesting that the United States is so susceptible to fear.

Chomsky: Whatever the reasons are for it, the United States happens to be a very frightened country, comparatively speaking. Fears of almost everything — crime, aliens, you name it — are off the chart.

And the people in Washington know this very well. They are, for the most part, the same people who ran the country during the Reagan administration and the first Bush administration. And they're reusing the script: pursuing regressive domestic programs and staying in power by pushing the panic button every year. If you do this in the United States, it's not hard to succeed.

Barsamian: What is it about our culture that makes Americans susceptible to propaganda?

Chomsky: I didn't say we're more susceptible to propaganda; we're more susceptible to fear. We're a frightened country. Frankly, I don't understand the reasons for this.

Barsamian: So if the fear is there, then propaganda becomes easier to implement.

Chomsky: Certain kinds of propaganda become much easier to implement. When my kids were in school forty years ago, they were taught to hide under their desks to protect themselves from atomic bombs. At that time, President Kennedy was trying to organize the hemisphere to support his terrorist attacks against Cuba. The U.S. is very influential in this hemisphere, and most countries just went along, but Mexico refused. The Mexican ambassador said, "If I try to tell people in Mexico that Cuba is a threat to our security, 40 million Mexicans will die laughing."

People in the United States didn't die laughing. They were — and are — afraid of everything. Take crime. Our crime rate

isn't that much higher than any other industrial society. Yet fear of crime is much greater here than in other countries. Even nonsensical fears, like alien abduction, are higher. If you go to Europe and ask people, "Are there aliens among us?" they'll laugh. Here, probably half the population will say yes.

Barsamian: Don't you think the media contribute to that with TV crime shows and movies?

Chomsky: Probably, but there is also a background fear that the media exploit, and it goes pretty far back. It probably has to do with conquest of the continent, where the colonists had to exterminate the native population; and with slavery, where Americans had to control an oppressed people that threatened, if only by their existence, to turn on their masters. And it may just be a result of the enormous security we enjoy. The United States controls the hemisphere. It controls both oceans. It cannot be seriously threatened. The last time the U.S. was threatened was during the War of 1812. Since then, it has just conquered others. And somehow this incredible security engenders a fear that somebody is going to come after us.

Barsamian: On Thursday, March 6, President Bush gave a prime-time press conference, his first in a year and a half. It was actually a scripted press conference. He knew in advance whom he was going to call on. A study of the transcript reveals Bush repeating certain words and phrases: "Iraq"; "Saddam Hussein"; "increasing threat" or "deep threat"; "weapons of mass destruction"; "9/11"; "terrorism." On the following Monday, there was a sharp spike in public-opinion polls: a majority of Americans now believed that Iraq was connected to 9/11.

Chomsky: You're right about the spike in the polls, but the change began back in September, when the poll results first indicated widespread belief in Iraqi participation in 9/11. That belief has to be continually reinforced, however, or it will drop off. These claims are so outlandish that it's hard to make people believe them unless you keep driving your point home.

You're right, too, that these press conferences are carefully programmed events, like television ads. The public-relations industry has plenty of experience in this. President Reagan was carefully programmed. Everyone knew that if he got off his notecards, he was going to say something insane. He was a media creation.

This administration has a collection of highly crafted media figures. George W. Bush is crafted to be a simple, honest, religious, straight-talking man who's got gut instincts and a deep sense of morality. Colin Powell is made out to be the moderate multilateralist, committed to diplomacy, so that when he stands up and says, "We have to go to war," people will think it must be true. There is not a particle of evidence for Powell's vaunted reputation, by the way. His record is horrendous.

But fear is the primary propaganda tool. Take a look at the 1988 presidential campaign. How did George H.W. Bush get elected? The Willie Horton ad campaign. Willie Horton was a convicted murderer serving time in a Massachusetts state prison when Democratic presidential candidate Michael Dukakis was governor. While out on a furlough, Horton, an



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African American, raped a white woman. The message of the Bush campaign ads was clear: If Dukakis is elected, an African American criminal is going to come and rape your daughter. They didn't say it in those words, but it was insinuated. And it shifted public attitudes about Dukakis.

Actually, one of the most spectacular cases of propaganda occurred in September 1989. Throughout the 1980s, the drug war had been in the news, but in September 1989, the first President Bush intensified his Hispanic-narco-traffickers-are-going-to-destroy-us rhetoric. Before that, drug trafficking hadn't ranked high among people's concerns. By the end of the month, it was the public's top concern. Media coverage of the drug threat was greater than the coverage of all international affairs put together. That campaign was a buildup to the invasion of Panama, which occurred in December of that year.

Barsamian: How long has this sort of propaganda been in use?

Chomsky: The practice of using language and information to shape attitudes and opinions and promote conformity and subordination is as old as history, but it didn't become an organized industry until the last century. And, contrary to what one might expect, this industry was created in the more democratic societies.

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