



THE  
**ANTI CHOMSKY**  
READER

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# INTRODUCTION

*Peter Collier*

The dust jacket of *Hegemony or Survival*, Noam Chomsky's attack on U.S. foreign policy and the elites who supposedly control it, calls the author "the world's foremost intellectual activist." Normally such a statement could be dismissed as publisher's hyperbole, but this claim about Chomsky exists in an echo chamber of similar sentiments. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, Chomsky is "the most cited living author" and ranks just below Plato and Sigmund Freud among the most cited authors of all time. While acknowledging that he is reviled in some quarters for his ferocious anti-Americanism and cavalier relationship with the factual record, a recent *New Yorker* profile calls Chomsky "one of the greatest minds of the 20th century."

Even this rapturous praise does not quite capture the extent of the Chomsky phenomenon. At this point in his career, Chomsky is more a cult figure—"the L. Ron Hubbard of the New Left," one writer called him—than a writer or even a theorist. (Most of his "books" are pamphlets in disguise, collections of speeches, or interviews strung together, as in the case of the best-selling *9-11*, which was assembled by e-mail with the assistance of his protégés.) Rock groups such as Rage Against the Machine and Pearl Jam promote Chomsky at their concerts the way the Beatles once promoted the Guru Maharaji, solemnly reading excerpts from his work between sets and urging their followers to read him too.

*Manufacturing Consent*, a documentary adapted from a Chomsky book of the same title, has achieved the status of an underground classic in university film festivals. And at the climactic moment in the Academy Award–winning *Good Will Hunting*, the genius-janitor played by Matt Damon vanquishes the incorrect thinking of a group of sophomoric college students with a fiery speech quoting Chomsky on the illicit nature of American power.

The devotion of Chomsky’s followers is summarized by radio producer David Barsamian, who describes the master’s effulgence in openly religious terms: “He is for many of us our rabbi, our preacher, our Rinpoche, our sensei.”

But unlike other cult figures, Chomsky’s power is not commanded by the authority of charisma or the electricity of revelation. His speeches are flat and fatwa-like, hermetically sealed by syllogism and self-reference against the oxygen of disagreement. His power comes not from his person, but from the fact that he, more than any other contemporary public intellectual, gives an authentic voice to the hatred of America that has been an enduring fact of our national scene since the mid-1960s. It is a voice that also is easily distinguished from others with similar commitments. Chomsky is interested in a few “truths” that are always “beyond dispute.” His citations often loop back solipsistically to his own works. He argues with such imperious disregard for other explanations that he often seems to be talking to himself: “The so-called War on Terror is pure hypocrisy, virtually without exception. Can anybody understand that? No, they can’t understand it.”

The *Anti-Chomsky Reader* does not seek to deprogram members of the Chomsky cult. But it does offer a response and an antidote to the millions of words Noam Chomsky has emitted over the last thirty-five years, and tries to explain to those who do not yet accept him as their Rinpoche what he has stood for during that time. Some of the ideas on his intellectual curriculum vitae that are discussed in the following pages—his defense of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, for example, and his support of Holocaust revisionism—may surprise those who know Chomsky only generally as a bilious critic of U.S. foreign policy. Other

commitments of his—for instance, his claim that the United States as a world power is continuing the program of Nazi Germany, and his fierce hatred of Israel—will, unfortunately, be more familiar. But either way, as Chomskyism continues to grow at home and abroad, it is clearly time for a reckoning.



Any work about Chomsky must begin with linguistics, the field he remade so thoroughly by his scholarly work of the late 1950s that he was often compared to Einstein and other paradigm shifters. Those who admire this achievement but not his politics are at pains to explain what they take to be a disjunction between his work in linguistics and his sociopolitical ideas. They see the former as so brilliant and compelling as to be unarguable—in all, a massive scientific achievement—and the latter as so venomous and counterfactual as to be emotionally disturbing. In their contribution to this volume, Paul Postal and Robert Levine, linguists who have known and worked with Chomsky, take the view that the two aspects of his life's work in fact manifest the *same* key properties: “a deep disregard of, and contempt for, the truth; a monumental disdain for standards of inquiry; a relentless strain of self-promotion; notable descents into incoherence; and a penchant for verbally abusing those who disagree with him.”

Whatever flaws have appeared retroactively, Chomsky's work in linguistics allowed him to make a transition from the university to the public arena in the mid-1960s and be taken seriously as a critic of the war in Vietnam. In a series of influential articles that appeared in the *New York Review of Books* and other publications and in his *American Power and the New Mandarins*, he distinguished himself by the cold intellectual ferocity of his attacks on American policy. Although a generation older than most members of the New Left, he shared their eagerness to romanticize the Third World. Finding Hanoi to be a radical version of the Eternal City, Chomsky traveled there with other revolutionary tourists to make speeches of solidarity with the Communists (whose heroism he believed revealed “the capabilities of the human spirit and human will”) and to sing songs and declaim poems.

But Chomsky was unlike other antiwar intellectuals in that he never made a cerebral return to Vietnam to rethink the consequences of the Communist takeover there. As Stephen Morris shows in “Whitewashing Dictatorship in Communist Vietnam and Cambodia,” Hanoi has remained for him a place of the radical heart, where unblemished goodness continues to engage the absolute evil of American aggression in a freeze-frame death struggle. He continued to serve the Vietnamese revolution after Hanoi, under the guise of “reeducation,” sent hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese to Hanoi’s gulag, relocated up to two million to the New Economic Zones (a jungle version of its Soviet patron’s Siberia), and forced tens of thousands of “boat people” to take their chances on the open sea. Confronted with evidence of these homicidal policies, Chomsky, as Morris points out, rushed to defend Hanoi: “For him there were only two questions to be asked—whose interests were being served by all these ‘negative reports,’ and how could these reports be disproved?”

Morris shows that Chomsky took exactly the same stance when word of the Khmer Rouge’s killing fields arrived in the West. Unlike some of his comrades who had joined him in regarding Pol Pot as a revolutionary hero and who had second thoughts as the bodies accumulated, Chomsky held fast to the radical party line, initially trying to minimize the deaths in Cambodia (“a few thousand”) and comparing those killed to the collaborators who were executed by resistance movements in Europe at the end of World War II. Writing in *The Nation* in 1977, Chomsky practiced his own version of killing the messenger by savagely attacking the witnesses, some of them fellow leftists, who brought out news from Phnom Penh of the developing holocaust. In 1980, when it was no longer possible to deny that some 2 million of Cambodia’s 7.8 million people had indeed perished at the hands of the Khmer Rouge, Chomsky, still in denial about the Communist rulers, suggested that Cambodia’s problems might have been caused by a failed rice crop. As late as 1988, when the skulls were piled too high to be ignored any longer, he returned to the subject and insisted that while bad things may have happened in Cambodia, the United States was to blame.

While he was establishing himself as a permanent scourge

of American foreign policy, Chomsky occasionally called himself an “anarchist socialist” (which any linguist might be expected to identify as an oxymoron). But aside from genuflections in the direction of Mao’s totalitarian China (which he referred to as a “relatively just” and “livable” society) and Castro’s Cuban gulag (which he regards as more sinned against than sinning) and his more passionate engagements with Vietnam and Cambodia, he has not been much interested in the theory or practice of other countries, socialist or otherwise. His only real subject—David Horowitz is right to call it an “obsession”—is America and its “grand strategy of world domination.” In 1967, Chomsky wrote that America “needed a kind of denazification,” and the Third Reich has provided him with his central metaphor ever since.

Chomsky has denounced every president from Wilson and FDR to Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton as the front men in “four year dictatorships” by a ruling elite. In his view, the United States, led by a series of lesser Hitlers, picked up where the Nazis left off after they were defeated (primarily by the Soviets) in 1945. Thus, a case could be made for impeaching every president since World War II because “they’ve all been either outright war criminals or involved in serious war crimes.” In their efforts to prevent a Communist takeover in Latin America, JFK and LBJ in particular used “the methods of Heinrich Himmler’s execution squads.”

As Thomas Nichols shows in “Chomsky and the Cold War,” the long conflict with the Soviets and the fact that it was fought out primarily in the Third World allowed Chomsky to elaborate on his analogy with the Nazis and “to spin his master narrative on the evils of American power.” The Soviet dictatorship was not only “morally equivalent” to democratic America in Chomsky’s view, but actually better because it was less powerful. The chief sin of Stalinism in his eyes was not the murder of millions but giving socialism a bad name. Nichols opens a window onto Chomsky’s rage in 1990 when the Berlin Wall came down, Communism collapsed and the USSR disintegrated—all events that were previously undreamt of in his philosophy: “The world that emerged was the complete reverse of what Chomsky and his cult followers had hoped for and expected during a quarter-century



of insistence that the United States was morally indistinguishable from the USSR.”

Many of the other critics of the war in Vietnam whom Chomsky had stood with during the 1960s had moved on by the 1990s. He remained behind, a bitter-ender operating what sometimes seemed to be an intellectual version of a one-man government-in-exile from his office at MIT and frequently complaining of being ignored and marginalized. In *Manufacturing Consent*, he explained how such a thing could happen: the American media, reflecting the views of the corporate elites who control them, made sure that ideas such as his remained on the fringe. As Eli Lehrer shows in “A Kept Press and a Manipulated People,” Chomsky’s “propaganda model” of the media is a key to his worldview, explaining how the American people are so suffocated by false consciousness that they willingly accede to the horrors perpetrated in their name. Lehrer writes, “[Chomsky believes] they are either too stupid to understand how the media manipulates every aspect of their lives or complicit pawns who ‘goosestep’ to every whim of the dictatorial rich.”

Chomsky has rigorously argued against personal motive in discussing policy, preferring to see elected officials, for instance, as robotic actors in a Marxoid drama of sinister ruling classes and falsely conscious masses. For the most part, he has kept his own personality out of his work too, cultivating a guru-like persona that communicates as easily by tape recordings as by public appearances. The one exception involves the Jews and Israel. Here there is an unacknowledged and perhaps unassimilated personal content that is hard to ignore.

In “Chomsky’s War against Israel,” Paul Bogdanor discusses the “astonishing displays of polemical rage and vindictiveness” in Chomsky’s long hate affair with Israel, a country he regards as playing the role of Little Satan to the American Great Satan and functioning strategically as an “offshore military and technology base for the United States.” His animus toward Israel is so great—Chomsky sees it as a terror state “with points of similarity” to the Third Reich—that it seems to call for a psychological explanation, especially given the fact that his father, an immigrant from the Ukraine, was a Hebrew teacher; his mother wrote

children's stories about the heroism of Jews trying to form a new country in the face of Arab hatred; and Chomsky himself was once a member of a pro-Israel youth group.

Even more bizarre is Chomsky's involvement with neo-Nazis and Holocaust revisionism. This strange and disturbing saga began in 1980 with Chomsky's support of Robert Faurisson, a rancorous French anti-Semite who was fired by the University of Lyon for his hate-filled screeds. ("The alleged Hitlerite gas chambers and the alleged genocide of the Jews form one and the same historical lie.") Chomsky defended Faurisson as an "apolitical liberal" whose work was based on "extensive historical research" and said that he saw in it "no hint of anti-Semitic implications" at all. In his carefully documented "Chomsky and Holocaust Denial," Werner Cohn follows Chomsky into this murky world, locating him at the intersection where his loathing of Israel and his "paroxysm of self-hatred" meet Faurisson and the neo-Nazi groups that Chomsky allowed to print his books and to promote them alongside the works of Joseph Goebbels.



In the post-9/11 political ferment, Chomsky's reputation, which had suffered because of his support of Pol Pot and his dalliance with figures like Faurisson, is on the upswing again. His following has grown, particularly in Europe and Asia, where his views have helped inform an inchoate anti-Americanism, and on the university campus, where divesting from Israel (a cause he has led) and attacks against the War on Terror are *de rigueur*. The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, which had for the most part ignored the dozens of Chomsky books that had emerged like clones over the previous few years, both treated his recent *Hegemony or Survival* as a significant work, with Pulitzer Prize winner Samantha Power writing in the *Times* that Chomsky's work was "sobering and instructive."

On 9/12 and for several days afterward, Chomsky discussed the attack on America, without particular regret, as an understandable response to a longstanding grievance. His audience was far broader than the true believers who had followed him in

his *idées fixes* about East Timor. Those whom Chomsky now rallied were as high as he was on *schadenfreude* and as committed to the idea that America had it coming for a history of misdeeds stretching back at least to 1812, the last time foreigners attacked the homeland (but really to 1492, where the nightmare began, according to another Chomsky tract, *Year 501: The Conquest Continues*).

While bodies were still being pulled out of the rubble of the Twin Towers, Chomsky was charging that the U.S. military response against the terrorists would immediately lead to a “silent genocide” through the wintertime starvation of three or four million Afghans. But as David Horowitz and Ronald Radosh show, nothing remotely resembling Chomsky’s scenario actually happened. Relatively few civilian deaths occurred in the U.S. offensive against the Taliban, and of those, virtually none were the result of starvation. But Chomsky, obeying the first law of the Left—never look back—offered no explanations and certainly no apologies for being so wrong. After going to Pakistan to repeat his calumnies in the weeks after the attack on the Twin Towers, he continued to spread his Big Lie around the world by a slender collection entitled *9-11* that was translated into 23 languages and published in 26 countries. And when asked about his lie, Chomsky simply denied that he had ever made it.

The events of 9/11 seem to have drawn Chomsky back to the center of things from the margins where he has resided since Vietnam. His comments about the United States and what it faces in an age of terror have been marked by a sense of anticipation. In one of his condemnations of the war in Iraq, for instance (he opposed the effort to remove Saddam’s regime, one of those actually existing fascisms that get crowded out of his worldview by the imaginary fascism of America), Chomsky noted offhandedly that “sometimes violence does lead to good things. The Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor led to many very good things.” He had in mind the postwar defeat of imperialism in Asia, not the wartime triumph of democracy throughout the world. But it is the subtext of the comment that bears Chomsky’s indelible stamp. If the long-range consequences of the 1941 sneak attack against America involved some “very good things,”

the same might be hoped to result from the more recent attack. Al-Qaeda's strike, therefore, may be the opening salvo in a war in which the United States will not only be defeated internationally, but be under the gun at home. This has been Noam Chomsky's idea of a just and necessary war for the last forty years. Today, as throughout his long career, America's peril is Chomsky's hope.

## THREE

# CHOMSKY AND THE MEDIA: A KEPT PRESS AND A MANIPULATED PEOPLE

*Eli Lehrer*

While much of Noam Chomsky's writing on foreign policy issues—such as his 2001 pamphlet *9-11*—has enjoyed significant sales, it's fair to say that no part of his work outside of linguistics has been as influential as his media criticism. Indeed, among his books on topics other than linguistics, the media theory primer *Manufacturing Consent* (co-authored with Edward Herman) is by far the most frequently cited in the popular and academic press.\* Chomsky's ideas about media spring from and reinforce his ideas about global politics. They rest on three principal claims:

- ◆ First, all major media are controlled by a small group of corporations and extremely wealthy individuals that are “with rare exceptions...culturally and politically conservative.”<sup>1</sup>
- ◆ Second, beginning with World War I, the United States government has run a significant propaganda operation intended to hoodwink the American public and “mobilize support for the

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\*Chomsky's primary work on media was written with Edward Herman as the first listed author and, one assumes, the primary author. As nearly all of Chomsky's works on the media (including those published under his name alone) draw heavily on *Manufacturing Consent*, it's technically proper to refer to the theories he expresses as “Chomsky and Herman's theories.” For the sake of simplicity, however, I refer to them as Chomsky's theories when not discussing a work produced with a co-author.

[largely right-wing] special interests that dominate the state and political activity.”<sup>2</sup> The media, likewise, are entirely “undemocratic,” and speak only for the ruling classes.<sup>3</sup>

- ◆ Third, these propaganda operations, which continue to the present day, have been almost entirely successful: The decisions to publicize certain stories and downplay others are made in ways that “serve political ends” of America’s ruling class.<sup>4</sup>

Collectively, these premises make up what Chomsky calls a “propaganda model.” Blinded and bemused by the filters and screens created by powerful interests, the mainstream media report only facts and stories that serve the interests of the ruling elite. A free press, Chomsky claims, is an illusion cynically perpetuated by the media. The media keep their audience amused, but their chief function is to inculcate the values that compel obedience to the myths sustaining an aggressive and immoral capitalist system. Thus they disseminate propaganda rather than information per se. Chomsky dismisses the sometimes searing exposés of government and corporate misconduct that occasionally appear in the press as mere camouflage for the media’s larger purpose of supporting the basic power arrangements of America’s political and economic life.

This view of the media occupies a central place in Chomsky’s mental universe. He has expounded it in *Manufacturing Consent* and a variety of speeches and pamphlets, all of them illustrated with examples drawn from news coverage between the mid-1960s and mid-1980s. He returns almost obsessively to the subject in books such as *Necessary Illusions* (1989), *Propaganda and the Public Mind* (2001) and *Media Control* (2002).

Chomsky’s ideas about the media are probably the most quoted but least plausible of his “theories.” His analysis is very much that of an outsider who knows relatively little about the media and has scant interest in the subject except to the degree that “media subservience” serves to explain why there is no outcry against the evil he sees everywhere in the American enterprise. His theories are based on illogical, flawed or fallacious arguments. He makes factual errors with alarming frequency, writes in a way that tends to mislead his audience, and makes sweeping statements without any evidence to support them. Many of his ideas about the media and how they operate

in American society contradict each other sharply. As in his writings about world affairs, he makes highly selective use of evidence. His assertions about media control seem increasingly antique in the information age because they show ignorance of technological advances such as the Internet and changes in consumer taste, which Chomsky ignores, misunderstands or summarily dismisses.



Chomsky's notion of a "kept" media propagandizing in behalf of a power elite suffers from two major intellectual inconsistencies.

First, the "propaganda model" posits, on one hand, that a small clique of profit-oriented companies controls the media. But at the same time, it insists that they exercise this control to advance political rather than commercial ends. Aside from simply asserting that the media are all "corporate"—and assuming that this term alone conveys a sufficiently malign purpose—Chomsky does nothing to show how being owned by a corporation leads to a desire to advance particular political views. Corporations, after all, exist primarily to make profits. Among the national newspapers, the *New York Times* takes positions well to the left of center, *USA Today* and the *Washington Post* are slightly more moderate, and the *Wall Street Journal* is roughly as far to the right as the *New York Times* is to the left. If Chomsky's propaganda model held, one would expect the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* editorial pages to agree on most major topics; instead, they agree on virtually nothing.

Gannett, the single largest owner of newspapers in the United States, provides a good example of the one-dimensionality of Chomsky's critique. It's fair to say that at its core, this is a liberal company, requiring a vigorous affirmative action program in all of its newsrooms. Its flagship publication, *USA Today*, is a national paper with a left-of-center editorial page. But its two largest community newspapers, the *Detroit News* and the *Arizona Republic*, have conservative editorial pages.

Even the magnates who own large media empires have vastly divergent views: Ted Turner is a left-winger who gives lavishly to the United Nations and other "progressive" causes and

hates George Bush, while Rupert Murdoch gives his support mostly to the Liberal Party in Australia, Tories in the U.K. and Republicans in the United States, and is generally regarded as pro-Bush. While some media CEOs do see their companies as soapboxes for personal views, most do not. For instance, Time Warner CEO Richard Parsons is a Republican who worked in the Nixon White House, but his company's publications show little ideological consistency, with most of them falling slightly to the left of center.

The politics of a media outlet's ownership, moreover, do not necessarily correlate with the opinions expressed in that media outlet. To the extent that media owners impose their own politics, there's little consistency in the politics they impose. Nearly all of the major media companies that Chomsky attacks have several thousand shareholders of record; it seems difficult to believe that many owners would put politics ahead of profit and risk suffering a shareholder revolt. But that's exactly what Chomsky's model says they would do. Typically, he provides no evidence for this assertion.

The second major inconsistency in the "propaganda model" stems from Chomsky's assertion that the media fail to represent the people's interests and instead pander to their base desires (for sensationalism, celebrity, etc.). But if the media exist to propagandize in behalf of specific right-wing interests inimical to the common good, then how could they simultaneously pander to the people? If the media provide nothing but bread and circuses—nothing more than "an obsessive focus on the O. J. Simpson trial, the Lewinsky scandal, and the deaths of two of the West's super celebrities, Princess Diana and John F. Kennedy Jr.," in Chomsky's words—then how can they simultaneously move public opinion on major world events?<sup>5</sup> If the real news doesn't get covered, then how can people be manipulated by what isn't even written about or broadcast?



In nearly all of his work on media, Chomsky invokes the name of the prestigious political commentator of the last generation, Wal-



ter Lippmann, who coined the term “manufactured consent.” According to Chomsky, Lippmann believed that the media’s new techniques of propaganda could make the public believe that it wanted things it really didn’t want.<sup>6</sup> But the idea that the people simply couldn’t be trusted in a democracy and needed a highly specialized class of elite experts to guide (and hoodwink) them is a distorted version of what Lippmann actually thought. (Typically, although Lippmann is central to his own theories, Chomsky spends very little time analyzing his writing and *never* quotes him directly at any length.)

In fact, Lippmann believed modern society had become so complex that people could not keep track of all the complicated issues involved in governance: “Only in the very simplest cases does an issue present itself in the same form spontaneously and approximately at the same time to all the members of a public.”<sup>7</sup> What Lippmann argued is, in effect, a basic truth of representative government: people cannot make *every* decision about public policy for themselves. Individual nonexpert citizens should not, for example, supervise meat inspection or order troops into combat. Instead, they should try to learn about the issues from people who are expert in them and then rely on this set of experts to make informed choices about which experts should govern the nation.

The government of a democracy, Lippmann believed, “manufactures consent” only in that it tends to limit the choices available to the citizenry to those that actually make sense. Since direct democracy is impossible, it is necessary that there be experts and that the range of opinion considered be based on expertise in the issues under consideration. The resulting consent of the governed—after due deliberation among competing views—is “manufactured” only in the sense that the debate is limited to informed opinions and to technically expert representatives of those informed opinions.

All this is common sense about the way in which representative democracy differs from direct democracy—particularly in a modern, bureaucratized state. There’s nothing especially startling, let alone sinister, about this conclusion. But Chomsky has twisted Lippmann’s analysis so that it appears to support the

notion of a class conspiracy to brainwash the public into stupefied submission. In other words, Chomsky conscripts Lippmann into his own version of Marx's discredited idea of a "false consciousness," in which a capitalist ruling class cleverly induces people to act robotically against their own interests.

According to Chomsky, any hope of establishing an authentically American democracy ended in 1918 when Woodrow Wilson established the Creel Commission, a small federal board charged with studying public opinion about the war. (Walter Lippmann was one of its members.) The commission, Chomsky claims, turned a peace-loving public into "raving anti-German fanatics."<sup>8</sup> As a result of its success, the American ruling class was able to manipulate the public into supporting America's entry into World War I. Since then, the corporate militarists have continued to triumph by forcing people to believe what they really don't (or at least shouldn't, given their class allegiances).

Characteristically, Chomsky does not even bother to acknowledge, let alone analyze, the events to which most historians attribute American entry into World War I: the sinking of the cruise ship *Lusitania* by the Germans and, more importantly, the "Zimmerman memorandum," a secret note to the Mexican government in which Germany offered to help Mexico "reconquer the lost territory in New Mexico, Texas, and Arizona" in return for its "support of a German war effort against the United States."

Is it possible that the disclosure of this German offer and the killing of over a thousand American tourists might have done more to induce a change of mind than all the efforts of the Creel Commission? It would be hard to find an expert on the subject who regarded the Creel Commission as the precipitating factor—or even a major contributing factor—in American entry into World War I. B. H. Liddell Hart's *The Real War: 1914–1918*, for instance, considered the definitive one-volume work on the war, devotes only a few lines to the commission's work.<sup>9</sup>



The disregard for evidence in *Manufacturing Consent* is so

omnipresent and relentless that I decided to focus only on some of the claims that Chomsky and co-author Herman make in the introduction to the book, where they present their theory of a “propaganda model.”

The first assertion Chomsky and Herman make is that the United States government advertised claims about an alleged delivery of Soviet MiG fighter jets to Nicaragua to distract American public opinion from the elections that the Sandinistas were holding in 1984—elections which would disarm Washington’s claims that it was a dictatorship. Now, it does appear that the Nicaraguan regime never did get the planes. But two facts undermine the theory that this story was merely manipulative propaganda and not reasonable reporting. First, according to *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, King Publications’ widely read news update for defense contractors, MiGs had, indeed, been in Nicaragua prior to the allegations—and the U.S. government had spy photographs to prove it.<sup>10</sup> Second, Yuri Pavalov, head of the Soviet Union’s Latin American office at the time, admitted that the Nicaraguan government *wanted* to acquire the planes in order to destabilize the region. He told an interviewer from George Washington University’s National Security Archive:

As for MiGs they might be useful to intimidate Nicaraguan neighbors like the Hondurans, but again it wasn’t a thought in Moscow that it would help much the Sandinista cause to antagonize these neighbors.... Another fact of course was that the leaders in Moscow did not want to provoke the United States into giving more military aid to the contras and to the Honduran government, because to supply MiGs to the Sandinista government would have immediately led to US government reinforcing Honduran air forces.... And therefore these requests were politely denied every time the Sandinistas brought it up in Moscow.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, while the reports turned out to be wrong about the specifics, the fact was that the Sandinista government was intent on acquiring MiGs, which in the circumstances was eminently newsworthy. The MiG affair, therefore, was hardly a propaganda-motivated distraction from the elections as Chomsky and Herman contend. Rather, it was a major story that the American media were right to cover.

Chomsky and Herman go on to discuss and document the consolidation of media properties and decry this development as a threat to media diversity, arguing that media giants are “owned and controlled by quite wealthy people.” Their data are from 1986; less than half the companies they name exist in anything close to the same form today. By their own count, moreover, even in 1986 ownership was not primarily held by the wealthy people who were running the companies: in only 6 of the 24 companies listed did the people controlling the company own more than 50 percent of the stock. Therefore, the major beneficiaries of media profits at the time were the individuals who held the stock, not all of whom were “very wealthy.” Gannett, for example, has over half a million stockholders currently on record. The idea that only the rich benefit from media profitability is indefensible.

Chomsky and Herman also claim that the need for broadcast media entities to get licenses from the government has been “used as a club to discipline the media, and media policies that stray too often from an establishment orientation.” To document this assertion, they cite three sources, all of which deal only with the Nixon administration’s treatment of the media, primarily with regard to national television newscasts. If these sources are accurate, the most that can be said is that fifteen years before Chomsky and Herman wrote their book, the government occasionally used licensing powers to harass three major television networks. The two authors do not even *allege* any widespread pattern of using media regulations to cow the networks, and they say nothing about other media. They also say nothing about what happened in other administrations: did Ford, Carter or Reagan do anything to bludgeon the media? Reagan surely did not: in fact, by abolishing the Federal Communications Commission’s “fairness doctrine” requiring that broadcast media to give “equal time” to multiple sides in news coverage, he eliminated any federal power to regulate news content and thus substantially freed the press from governmental interference.

Midway through the Introduction to *Manufacturing Consent*, the authors get to the claim that the media as a whole are “culturally and politically conservative,” an assertion that is at the core of the book. According to them, this results from the

influence of advertisers. In all of Chomsky's work on media theory, this is the only place where he provides any evidence for this frequently repeated claim. The evidence amounts to quotations from two advertisers, both more than ten years old when he cited them. One is alleged to originate with Procter & Gamble (although Chomsky and Herman do not cite a source); it claims that the corporation wants its programming to present a generally positive view of business.<sup>12</sup> The second quotation, attributed to General Electric, says more or less the same thing. These statements provide no evidence that the companies are *conservative*, but simply that they want the programming that carries their ads to refrain from attacking business. And probably with good reason. It appears that entertainment programming in general (the subject at least one of the companies is concerned about) is *anti-business*. In a 1982 study, Robert and Linda Lichter, working with Stanley Rothman, found that businessmen are usually villains in entertainment programming: they are three times more likely than members of any other profession to be depicted as criminals, and nine times out of ten are presented as being motivated primarily by greed.<sup>13</sup> In any case, even if the quotations that Chomsky and Herman present gave solid evidence that business is conservative—and they don't do that—they offer no evidence that a conservative bias affects public-affairs programming.

Nor is there any evidence that the two corporations Chomsky and Herman cite—Procter & Gamble and GE—are conservative in a cultural sense. Today, the Human Rights Campaign's scorecard gives them highly positive ratings for prohibiting discrimination against gay employees, providing health benefits for their partners, and sponsoring gay employee groups.<sup>14</sup> A review of political action committee records shows that GE has typically given roughly equal amounts to Democrats and Republicans (with more Democrats getting large contributions), while Procter & Gamble has tended to favor Republicans.<sup>15</sup> Both companies, however, appear to give to politicians based on which party is dominant in regions where they have major facilities—GE gives heavily in mostly Democratic New England and New York, while Procter & Gamble gives most

heavily in Republican-leaning Ohio. In other words, the evidence seems to show that these companies are socially liberal and interested in supporting politicians who represent the areas where they operate. If GE and Procter & Gamble represent corporate America, there is little evidence that corporate America is conservative.

Finally, Chomsky and Herman assert that “business corporations and trade groups are also regular and credible purveyors of stories deemed newsworthy.” This claim can’t be refuted as such: reporters do get stories from business corporations and trade groups, but they also get stories from academia, nonprofits, elected officials, and individual citizens who call in with stories. Business reporters obviously do get most of their stories from businesses, but they often write stories that are highly critical of business. Would the tobacco industry, for example, have paid billions in settlements were it not for the continual drubbing from television shows like *60 Minutes* and from the editorial pages of every major newspaper in the country? CEOs of companies ranging from Kmart to Morrison Knudsen have lost their jobs on the basis of unflattering media reports. Indeed, this is the kind of story that makes reputations and wins awards; no reporter has ever won an award or gotten a promotion for a fawning profile of a local CEO. And nonbusiness reporters don’t rely on business for many stories: how often, if ever, has the CEO of General Motors been quoted giving his opinion on a war or an election? In fact, most companies and trade associations rarely if ever take positions on issues that do not directly concern their members or their product. The few that do (Unilever’s subsidiary Ben & Jerry’s, which is liberal; and Amway, which is conservative, are examples) often make their politics a clear part of their product pitch. If anything, of those companies with clear political views, rather more appear to lean left than right. For instance, Working Assets Long Distance, a substantial telephone service provider with a clearly left-wing social mission, has no counterpart on the Right.



Chomsky’s analysis employs an extremely limited subset of

sources, ignores changes in the media landscape (most glaringly, the Internet), and uses primarily non-American examples to make a case about American conditions. His database leaves out most national newspapers, nearly all magazines, all television and all wire services. With a few exceptions, he appears to use only newspaper sources available in the computerized Nexis database (and other databases) when analyzing the American media. Nexis does not contain the *Wall Street Journal*, and when Chomsky and Herman wrote *Manufacturing Consent* in the mid-1980s, it did not contain *USA Today* either. This is, to say the least, a significant omission, since the *Wall Street Journal* sells more copies than any other Monday-through-Friday paper, while *USA Today* sells the most copies overall.

The newspaper sources that Chomsky cites—primarily the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*—were until 1985 available only to people who lived in certain metropolitan areas. While he alludes to the growing power of cable television at several points in his media critiques, Chomsky cites CNN only to criticize it briefly, even though the network is the first to report most major stories.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, he ignores wire service accounts, which by his own description are the primary sources of foreign news for most Americans. Local television news, the main source of news for the majority of Americans, might as well not even exist.<sup>17</sup>

The Internet is the most important news source to become available after Chomsky wrote *Manufacturing Consent*, but he has ignored it almost entirely in his speaking and pamphleteering on the media since then. He cites few websites, even in writings as recent as 2002. His overall grasp of the Internet seems exceptionally poor, bordering on negligent for someone who has set himself up as a modern media theorist. In one instance, he appears to think that America Online is an Internet portal (it's a service provider); in another, he claims that Internet hardware has been "privatized" (in fact, much of the underlying infrastructure is still publicly owned or in the hands of public or heavily subsidized universities, and very little of what's currently in private hands was ever publicly owned); and he says that only "sizeable commercial entities" have run successful Internet

sites.<sup>18</sup> This last, of course, is absurd and leaves out—to take one glaring example—The Drudge Report, whose newsbreaks so affected the Clinton impeachment process.

Chomsky fails to mention weblogs, Internet radio, or dozens of other new manifestations of Internet media. He also writes almost nothing about radio news, despite the massive consolidation of radio station ownership under a few large media umbrellas, a trend that might actually support his thesis about conspiratorial control of the news outlets if he ever could really establish that ownership determines reportage. He also ignores talk radio, probably because the tone and content of most talk-radio shows appear to prove that conservative ideas have a popular following, a fact that undermines his overall thesis of an intrinsically leftist public lulled into compliant uniformity by a right-wing ruling class.

By his own admission, Chomsky is so ignorant about pop culture that he has rarely even known who was playing in the Super Bowl.<sup>19</sup> Without studying this aspect of his subject at all, however, he dismisses all entertainment and sports programming as well as much news coverage as mere “bread and circuses” intended to distract the bewildered herd from the true state of the world.<sup>20</sup> Ironically, if he bothered to look at pop culture he would find much support for left-wing politics: one of Chomsky’s biggest personal followings is the audience for the groups Pearl Jam and Rage Against the Machine, which have acknowledged his influence on their politics and even their music. Nearly all explicitly political television series—*The West Wing* is a prime example—have strongly left-liberal politics.

Chomsky would no doubt say with his usual hauteur that all these specifics are too mundane for him to take notice of and account for in his theory. But it’s always the small, inconvenient detail that trips up the grand plan.



On top of these deficiencies in *Manufacturing Consent*, *Media Control*, *Necessary Illusions* and other writings on media, Chomsky relies almost exclusively on foreign policy examples in



drawing conclusions about media reporting as such. Except for a three-page discussion about supposedly declining standards of living in the United States in *Manufacturing Consent*, Chomsky and Herman write about the media almost as if domestic politics did not exist. Between the fall of the Berlin Wall and 9/11, however, national polls indicate that few Americans put foreign policy among their top ten concerns. Despite having written more than 250,000 words on the media, Chomsky has yet to produce a single essay examining coverage of domestic affairs in any detail. If there is a massive media conspiracy to undermine the interests of the working class, wouldn't this be most clearly apparent in reportage of domestic events?<sup>21</sup> Instead, Chomsky focuses on events in Kosovo, (prewar) Iraq and Latin America. Chomsky and Herman engage in a lengthy discussion of the rise and fall of the working-class press in Britain, but make no attempt whatsoever to relate this discussion to the United States or examine why an explicitly working-class press never gained a mass following in America.<sup>22</sup>

Nearly all of Chomsky's work on the media begins with a restatement of his propaganda model. There is never an attempt to investigate the subject in the spirit of inquiry to see if the facts fit the model. It's always the other way around: the facts are shoe-horned into the theory. Chomsky's analysis of the murder of Polish priest Jerzy Popieluszko in Communist Poland in 1984, and how this relates to political killings in Central America in the same era, provides a good example of his methods. It happens also to be the first case examined in *Manufacturing Consent* and—as is usual for the monomaniacal Chomsky—is referred to again and again in his speeches and other works.

According to Herman and Chomsky, the case definitively demonstrates how the media distort reality:

Popieluszko, murdered in an enemy state, will be [seen in the media as] a worthy victim, whereas priests murdered in our client states in Latin America will be unworthy. The former may be expected to elicit a propaganda outburst by the mass media; the latter will not generate sustained coverage.<sup>23</sup>

The authors discuss the murder of Popieluszko, who had

supported the anti-Communist Solidarity trade union movement, and compare it with murders of pro-Communist clerics and their supporters in what they call the United States' "sphere of influence" in Latin America—El Salvador and Guatemala in particular. The two report, correctly, that Popieluszko's murder received more extensive and more sympathetic coverage than the murders of the pro-Communist Central American clerics and their supporters. According to them, this proves that "when differential treatment occurs on a large scale, the media, intellectuals, and public are able to remain unconscious of [the differential treatment itself] and maintain a high moral and self-righteous tone."<sup>24</sup> Rolling out their train of logical consequence, they assert that "This is evidence of an extremely effective propaganda system,"<sup>25</sup> and that, as a result of media inaction and government conspiracy, the death squads of Latin America had a "continued freedom to kill" granted to them by the United States.<sup>26</sup>

But does the fact that the murder of a Polish priest received this attention really indicate that American media follow the government's bellicose anti-Communism in a servile way? Might it not have something to do with another of those inconvenient facts that Chomsky routinely ignores—in this case, that about 10 million people of Polish ancestry (roughly 3.5 percent of the population) live in the United States?<sup>27</sup> In the entire world, no city except Warsaw has more Polish residents than Chicago. The United States, in fact, has almost as many Polish residents as there are Guatemalans in Guatemala (population 12 million) and more than there are Salvadorans in El Salvador (population 6.5 million).<sup>28</sup> Thus, other things being equal, events in Poland will have far more relevance from a media point of view than events in El Salvador and Guatemala.

But of course there was also an ideological dimension. The dominant historical fact of the mid-1980s was the Cold War endgame, many of whose pivotal events and confrontations occurred in Europe generally and Poland in particular. Occupied by the Red Army, Poland had been the locus of the Cold War's origins, the first country to be made a Soviet satellite state. It was the largest country in Central Europe and, of the Soviet satellites,

had the biggest economy. Three years before Popieluszko's murder, the Red Army had been compelled to intervene militarily in order to quell Solidarity's insurrectionary activities. Popieluszko and Solidarity were threatening the rule of the Communist government that the Soviets had imposed on Poland, which is why the priest was killed.

Popieluszko's murder was pivotal in turning the tide of Polish and world opinion against the Soviet occupation, and within five years of his death, the movement he had helped to lead played a key role in redrawing the map of the world. In short, his death was big news.<sup>29</sup> By contrast, the murders of left-wing activists in Latin America took place in a region where violence dominates the political landscape and where such atrocities are all too common. Tragic as they may have been, they were not comparably historic events, and only an ideologically driven press—one intensely devoted to left-wing propaganda (which is what Chomsky really desires)—would treat them as major news.

As a footnote, one might add that the political thrust of the popular culture, something lying beneath Chomsky's horizon although it reaches masses of Americans, did its best to propagandize the leftist side of all these events. The only widely released film of the early 1980s dealing directly with Communist ideology was Warren Beatty's *Reds*, which presented the Communists in a heroic light. (When it won the Academy Awards for Best Picture and Best Director in 1982, the Academy orchestra played "The Internationale," the anthem of the Communist world movement.) During the 1980s—the period of the civil wars in Central America—at least a dozen films and public television documentaries, including Oliver Stone's *Salvador* (1986), the pro-Sandinista/anti-American documentary *Dream of a Free Country* (1983) and the avidly pro-Communist drama *Last Plane Out* (1983), presented the conflict with Communism from Chomsky's viewpoint. There were no films presenting the other side.

In other words, the popular culture's "bread and circuses" for the masses actually promoted Chomsky's view of world affairs—replete with U.S. villainy, skullduggery and financing by the very oligarchs who he claims relentlessly pursue the interests of the capitalist ruling class.



In his media criticism, Noam Chomsky engages in illogical argument, selectively disregards evidence, and displays no skepticism of the “facts” he adduces to support his claims. The most salient aspect of his thought, however, is contempt for the views and opinions of the average person. Chomsky asserts that those who reject his teachings will

live under what amounts to a self-imposed totalitarianism, with the bewildered herd marginalized, directed elsewhere, terrified, screaming patriotic slogans, fearing for their lives, and admiring with awe the leader who saved them from destruction, while the educated masses goosestep on command and repeat the slogans they are supposed to repeat and the society deteriorates at home.<sup>30</sup>

In other words, he believes that nearly all Americans—including the working class whose patron he fancies himself to be—are either too stupid to understand how the media manipulate every aspect of their lives, or complicit pawns who “goosestep” to every whim of the despotic rich. Democracy, a free press and, indeed, freedom itself are little more than illusions foisted on a public that’s gullible or evil, or both. The people can simultaneously act against their own interests and be pandered to continually because they are, in Chomsky’s view, loathsome.

Chomsky’s consuming hatred for his entire subject—both the media and its alleged victims—precludes him from suggesting alternatives and reforms. Despite his claims to be an anarchist or an oxymoronic “libertarian socialist,” Chomsky repeatedly reveals himself to be much closer to a vulgar Marxist committed to the cliché that underwrote the now-vanished Communist totalitarianism: the ruling ideas are everywhere the ideas of the ruling class. Everything else is false consciousness. But unlike the orthodox Marxist, who must have unwavering faith in the capability of the masses to throw off their shackles, Chomsky has too much contempt for the American people to hold out even a vague hope for revolution.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988 [2001]), p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Noam Chomsky, *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies* (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 1989), p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>5</sup> Herman and Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*, p. xiv.

<sup>6</sup> Noam Chomsky, *Media Control*, 2nd ed. (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (1922; New York: The Free Press, 1997), p. 189.

<sup>8</sup> David Barsamian and Noam Chomsky, *Propaganda in the Public Mind* (Boston: South End Press, 2001), p. 151.

<sup>9</sup> B. H. Liddell Hart, *The Real War: 1914–1918* (New York: Little, Brown, 1963).

<sup>10</sup> Bill Sweetman, “Mystery Contact May Be Aurora,” *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, February 28, 1992, p. 333.

<sup>11</sup> “Interview with Yuri Pavlov,” The National Security Archive of George Washington University, Internet resource at [www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/coldwar/interviews/episode-18/pavlov1.html](http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/coldwar/interviews/episode-18/pavlov1.html) (accessed July 12, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> *Manufacturing Consent*, p. 340. The two cite a Procter & Gamble “instructions to its ad agency,” but neglect to mention that Procter & Gamble owns outright the programs *Guiding Light* and *As the World Turns*. This is almost certainly why the company refers to “the depiction of business on *our* programs” (emphasis mine) in the statement Chomsky and Herman cite. Despite a few efforts to launch other shows on a similar model, this arrangement of entertainment program ownership by consumer products companies is unique to soap operas as of summer 2003 and it’s thus not surpris-

ing that Procter & Gamble would exercise a significant degree of control over the content of these particular programs. In any case, how this would effect news coverage is never described.

- <sup>13</sup> Robert S. Lichter, Linda Lichter and Stanley Rothman, *Video Villains: The TV Businessman, 1955–1986* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Media and Public Affairs, 1986).
- <sup>14</sup> See Internet resource at <http://www.hrc.org/worknet/> (accessed July 13, 2003).
- <sup>15</sup> See Internet resource at <http://www.opensecrets.org/pacs/> (accessed August 10, 2003).
- <sup>16</sup> *Manufacturing Consent*, p. lii.
- <sup>17</sup> Gallup Organization, December 5–8, 2002, cited at <http://www.pollingreport.com/media.htm> (accessed August 10, 2003).
- <sup>18</sup> *Manufacturing Consent*, p. xvi.
- <sup>19</sup> Barsamian and Chomsky, *Propaganda in the Public Mind*, pp. 25–26.
- <sup>20</sup> See e.g. *Manufacturing Consent*, p. xiv.
- <sup>21</sup> See e.g. Chomsky, *Media Control*, pp. 22–29.
- <sup>22</sup> See e.g. *Manufacturing Consent*, p. 15.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- <sup>27</sup> Polish-American Congress, “Poles in the United States,” 2002, online at <http://www.polamcon.org/about%20us.htm>.
- <sup>28</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, *CIA World Factbook, 2003*, online at <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/> (accessed July 20, 2003). All population figures cited above come from this source.
- <sup>29</sup> Polish Communists, of course, killed many thousands of dissidents during their initial takeover. By the mid-1980s, admittedly, dissidents were only rarely killed outright.
- <sup>30</sup> Chomsky, *Media Control*, pp. 57–58.