



## Taming the Rascal Multitude

*Essays, Interviews, and Lectures 1997–2014*

NOAM CHOMSKY

---

*Afterword by Michael Albert*

# Taming the Rascal Multitude

# K

K A I R O S

In ancient Greek philosophy, *kairos* signifies the right time or the “moment of transition.” We believe that we live in such a transitional period. The most important task of social science in time of transformation is to transform itself into a force of liberation. Kairos, an editorial imprint of the Anthropology and Social Change department housed in the California Institute of Integral Studies, publishes groundbreaking works in critical social sciences, including anthropology, sociology, geography, theory of education, political ecology, political theory, and history.

Series editor: Andrej Grubačić

## **Recent and featured Kairos books:**

*A New World in Our Hearts: Noam Chomsky in Conversation with Michael Albert*

*Between Thought and Expression Lies a Lifetime: Why Ideas Matter* by Noam Chomsky and James Kelman

*Mutual Aid: An Illuminated Factor of Evolution* by Peter Kropotkin, illustrated by N.O. Bonzo

*Asylum for Sale: Profit and Protest in the Migration Industry* edited by Siobhán McGuirk and Adrienne Pine

*Building Free Life: Dialogues with Öcalan* edited by International Initiative

*The Art of Freedom: A Brief History of the Kurdish Liberation Struggle* by Havin Guneser

*The Sociology of Freedom: Manifesto of the Democratic Civilization, Volume III* by Abdullah Öcalan

*Facebooking the Anthropocene in Raja Ampat* by Bob Ostertag

*In, Against, and Beyond Capitalism: The San Francisco Lectures* by John Holloway

*Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* by Silvia Federici

*Practical Utopia: Strategies for a Desirable Society* by Michael Albert

**For more information visit [www.pmpress.org/blog/kairos/](http://www.pmpress.org/blog/kairos/)**

# Taming the Rascal Multitude

Essays, Interviews, and  
Lectures 1997–2014

Noam Chomsky

With an afterword by Michael Albert



*Taming the Rascal Multitude: Essays, Interviews, and Lectures 1997–2014*

Noam Chomsky

© Valeria Chomsky

Foreword © Lydia Sargent

Afterword © Michael Albert

This edition © PM Press 2022

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be transmitted by any means without permission in writing from the publisher

ISBN: 978–1–62963–878–2 (paperback)

ISBN: 978–1–62963–879–9 (hardcover)

ISBN: 978–1–62963–899–7 (ebook)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020947228

Cover design by John Yates

Layout by briandesign

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

PM Press

PO Box 23912

Oakland, CA 94623

[www.pmpress.org](http://www.pmpress.org)

Printed in the USA.

# Contents

Foreword	vii
----------	-----

## PART ONE **1997–2004**

Hordes of Vigilantes	2
Expanding the Floor of the Cage	8
Imperial Presidency	28
Market Democracy in a Neoliberal Order	45
Rogue States	71
Crisis in the Balkans	94
The Colombia Plan	111
Voting Patterns and Abstentions	126
The War in Afghanistan	129
What Makes Mainstream Media Mainstream?	139
Confronting the Empire	149
Iraq as Trial Run	163
The US and Haiti	170

## PART TWO **2005–2014**

Cold War II	178
Kicking Away the Ladder	188
Wars, Bailouts, and Elections	201
Domestic Constituencies	213
Coups, UNASUR, and the US	230
The Obama-Netanyahu-Abbas Meetings	243
Torture Has Been Routine Practice	259
Obama on Israel-Palestine	271
Elections 2000 and 2008	278
Government Involvement with Science and Art	312
Human Rights in the New Millennium	322
The Unipolar Moment and the Obama Era	335
The US in Mexico and Elsewhere	350
Israel, Palestine, and Campus Activism	354
Imminent Crises	359
The Most Dangerous Belief	373
Afterword <i>by Michael Albert</i>	393
INDEX	423
ABOUT THE AUTHORS	439

# Foreword

Noam Chomsky is an American linguist, philosopher, cognitive scientist, logician, political commentator and activist. Sometimes described as the “father of modern linguistics,” Chomsky is also a major figure in analytic philosophy. He is laureate professor of linguistics at the University of Arizona and institute professor emeritus at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and has authored over one hundred books. He has been described as a prominent cultural figure and was voted the “world’s top public intellectual” in a 2005 poll.

The articles, interviews, and transcriptions of talks in this collection represent a portion of the numerous Chomsky articles that have been published in *Z Magazine* from 1997 to 2014. Others appear in the recently published *Z Reader on Empire: We Own the World*.

## Chomsky on imperialism:

The US, the most powerful state in history, has proclaimed loud and clear, that it intends to rule the world by force, the dimension in which it reigns supreme. They have also declared that they will tolerate no competitors, now or in the future. They evidently believe that the means of violence in their hands are so extraordinary that they can dismiss with contempt anyone who stands in their way. The doctrine is not entirely new or unique to the US, but it has never before been proclaimed with such brazen arrogance—at least not by anyone we would care to remember.



### Chomsky on corporate America's attack on democracy:

The "corporatization of America" during the past century was an attack on democracy—and on markets, part of the shift from something resembling "capitalism" to the highly administered markets of the modern state/corporate era. A current variant is called "minimizing the state," that is, transferring decision-making power from the public arena to somewhere else. . . .

All such measures are designed to limit democracy and to tame the "rascal multitude," as the population was called by the self-designated "men of best quality" during the first upsurge of democracy in the modern period, in seventeenth century England; the "responsible men," as they call themselves today.

### Chomsky on American exceptionalism and dangerous beliefs:

Actually, one of the most dangerous religious beliefs, maybe the most dangerous belief, is the secular faith in the sanctity and power of the state. . . . Take what is called "American exceptionalism," the notion that we are unique in history; there is the fundamental benevolence of our leaders; they may make mistakes, but always with good intentions. That is one of the most dangerous beliefs. It is a religious belief and has no foundation in fact.

The thirty articles presented here not only expose imperial policies/institutions but also indicate important areas for organizing such as: (1) challenging institutions like capitalism, which demand hierarchical structures of class, race, and gender; (2) challenging all attempts by the US Empire and its satellite/client states to ignore the will of the population; that is, to fight for, reclaim, and develop new truly democratic structures and institutions, which are counter to the current savage imperialism, oppressive hierarchies, and the democracy deficit.

**Lydia Sargent, editor**

PART ONE  
1997-2004

# Hordes of Vigilantes

## **The Rules of Global Order Continue to Be Written by Lawyers and Businesspeople**

The Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) was due to be signed by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OCED) countries on April 27, 1998. At the time, it was fairly clear that the MAI agreement would not be reached and that it was not an important event worth considering carefully. In part, the failure resulted from internal disputes—European objections to the US federal system and the extra-territorial reach of US laws, concerns about maintaining some degree of cultural autonomy, and so on. But a much more significant problem was looming. It was becoming difficult to ensure that the rules of global order would continue to be “written by the lawyers and businesspeople who plan to benefit” and “by governments taking advice and guidance from these lawyers and businessmen,” while “invariably, the thing missing is the public voice”—the *Chicago Tribune*’s accurate description of the negotiations for the MAI, as well as ongoing efforts to “craft rules” for “global activity” in other domains without public interference. It was, in short, becoming more difficult to restrict awareness and engagement to sectors identified by the Clinton administration as its “domestic constituencies”: the US Council for International Business, which “advances the global interests of American business both at home and abroad,” and concentrations of private power generally—but crucially not Congress (which had not been informed, in violation of Constitutional requirements) and the general public, its voice stilled by a “veil of secrecy” that was maintained with impressive discipline during three years of intensive negotiations.

---

From *Z Magazine*, August 1998.

The problem had been pointed out a month earlier by the London *Economist*. Information was leaking through public interest groups and grassroots organizations, and it was becoming harder to ignore those who “want high standards written in for how foreign investors treat workers and protect the environment,” issues that “barely featured” as long as deliberations were restricted to the “domestic constituencies” of the democratic states.

As expected, the OECD countries did not reach agreement on April 27, and we move to the next phase. One useful consequence was that the national press departed from its (virtual) silence. In the business pages of the *New York Times*, economic affairs correspondent Louis Uchitelle reported that the target date for the MAI had been delayed six months, under popular pressure. Treaties concerning trade and investment usually “draw little public attention” (why?); and while “labor and the environment are not excluded,” the director of international trade at the National Association of Manufacturers explained, “they are not at the center” of the concerns of trade diplomats and the World Trade Organization.

But “these outsiders are clamoring to make their views known in the negotiations for a treaty that is to be called the Multilateral Agreement on Investment,” Uchitelle commented (with intended irony, I presume), and the clamor sufficed to compel the delay.

The Clinton administration, “acknowledging the pressure,” strove to present the matter in the proper light. Its representative at the MAI negotiations said, “There is strong support for measures in the treaty that would advance this country’s environmental goals and our agenda on international labor standards.” So the clamoring outsiders are pushing an open door and Washington has been the most passionate advocate of their cause, they should be relieved to discover.

The *Washington Post* also reported the delay, in its financial section, blaming primarily “the French intelligentsia,” who had “seized on the idea” that the rules of the MAI “posed a threat to French culture,” joined by Canadians as well. “And the Clinton administration showed little interest in fighting for the accord, especially given fervent opposition from many of the same American environmental and labor groups that battled against [NAFTA],” and that somehow fail to comprehend that their battle is misdirected since it is the Clinton administration that has been insisting upon “environmental goals” and “international labor standards” all along—not an outright falsehood, since the goals and standards are left suitably vague.

That labor “battled against NAFTA” is the characteristic way of presenting the fact that the labor movement called for a version of NAFTA that would serve the interests of the people of the three countries, not just investors; and that their detailed critique and proposals were barred from the media (as were the similar analyses and proposals of Congress’s Office of Technology Assessment). *Time* reported that the deadline was missed “in no small part because of the kind of activism on display in San Jose,” California, referring to a demonstration by environmentalists and others. “The charge that the MAI would eviscerate national environmental protections has turned a technical economic agreement into a cause célèbre.” The observation was amplified in the Canadian press, which alone in the Western world began to cover the topic seriously after only two years of silence (under intense pressure by popular organizations and activists). The *Toronto Globe and Mail* observed that the OECD governments “were no match . . . for a global band of grassroots organizations, which, with little more than computers and access to the internet, helped derail a deal.”

The same theme was voiced with a note of despair, if not terror, by the world’s leading business daily, the *Financial Times* of London. In an article headlined “Network Guerrillas,” it reported that “fear and bewilderment have seized governments of industrialized countries” as, “to their consternation,” their efforts to impose the MAI in secret “have been ambushed by a horde of vigilantes whose motives and methods are only dimly understood in most national capitals”—naturally enough; they are not among the “domestic constituencies,” so how can governments be expected to understand them? “This week the horde claimed its first success” by blocking the agreement on the MAI, the journal continued, “and some think it could fundamentally alter the way international economic agreements are negotiated.”

The hordes are a terrifying sight: “they included trade unions, environmental and human rights lobbyists and pressure groups opposed to globalization”—meaning, globalization in the particular form demanded by the domestic constituencies. The rampaging horde overwhelmed the pathetic and helpless power structures of the rich industrial societies. They are led by “fringe movements that espouse extreme positions” and have “good organization and strong finances” that enable them “to wield much influence with the media and members of national parliaments.” In the United States, the “much influence” with the media was effectively zero, and in Britain, which hardly differed, it reached such heights that Home

Secretary Jack Straw of the Labour government conceded over BBC that he had never heard of the MAI. But it must be understood that even the slightest breach in conformity is a terrible danger.

The journal goes on to urge that it will be necessary “to drum up business support” so as to beat back the hordes. Until now, business hasn’t recognized the severity of the threat. And it is severe indeed. “Veteran trade diplomats” warn that with “growing demands for greater openness and accountability,” it is becoming “harder for negotiators to do deals behind closed doors and submit them for rubber-stamping by parliaments.”

“Instead, they face pressure to gain wider popular legitimacy for their actions by explaining and defending them in public,” no easy task when the hordes are concerned about “social and economic security,” and when the impact of trade agreements “on ordinary people’s lives . . . risks stirring up popular resentment” and “sensitivities over issues such as environmental and food safety standards.” It might even become impossible “to resist demands for direct participation by lobby groups in WTO decisions, which would violate one of the body’s central principles”: “‘This is the place where governments collude in private against their domestic pressure groups,’ says a former WTO official.” If the walls are breached, the WTO and similar secret organizations of the rich and powerful might be turned into “a happy hunting ground for special interests”: workers, farmers, people concerned about social and economic security and food safety and the fate of future generations, and other extremist fringe elements who do not understand that resources are efficiently used when they are directed to short-term profit for private power, served by the governments that “collude in private” to protect and enhance their power. It is superfluous to add that the lobbies and pressure groups that are causing such fear and consternation are not the US Council for International Business, the “lawyers and businessmen” who are “writing the rules of global order,” and the like, but the “public voice” that is “invariably missing.”

The “collusion in private” goes well beyond trade agreements, of course. The responsibility of the public to assume cost and risk is, or should be, well known to observers of what its acolytes like to call the “free enterprise capitalist economy.” In the same article, Uchitelle reports that Caterpillar, which recently relied on excess production capacity abroad to break a major strike, has moved 25 percent of its production abroad and aims to increase sales from abroad by 50 percent by 2010, with the assistance of US taxpayers: “the Export-Import Bank plays a significant role in [Caterpillar’s] strategy,”

with “low-interest credits” to facilitate the operation. Ex-Im credits already provide close to 2 percent of Caterpillar’s \$19 billion annual revenue and will rise with new projects planned in China. That is standard operating procedure: multinational corporations typically rely on the home state for crucial services. “In really tough, high-risk, high-opportunity markets,” a Caterpillar executive explains, “you really have to have someone in your corner,” and governments—especially powerful ones—“will always have greater leverage” than banks and greater willingness to offer low-interest loans, thanks to the largesse of the unwitting taxpayer.

Management is to remain in the US, so the people who count will be close to the protector in their corner and will enjoy a proper lifestyle, with the landscape improved as well: The hovels of the foreign workforce will not mar the view. Profits aside, the operation provides a useful weapon against workers who dare to raise their heads (as the recent strike illustrates), and who help out by paying for the loss of their jobs and for the improved weapons of class war. In the conflict over the MAI, the lines could not have been more starkly drawn. On one side are the industrial democracies and their “domestic constituencies.” On the other, the “hordes of vigilantes,” “special interests,” and “fringe extremists” who call for openness and accountability and are displeased when parliaments rubber-stamp the secret deals of the state-private power nexus. The hordes were confronting the major concentration of power in the world, arguably in world history—the governments of the rich and powerful states, the International Financial Institutions, and the concentrated financial and manufacturing sectors, including the corporate media. And popular elements won—despite resources so minuscule and organization so limited that only the paranoia of those who demand absolute power could perceive the outcome in the terms just reviewed.

It’s not the only such victory in recent months. Another was achieved last fall, when the administration was compelled to withdraw its proposed “Fast Track” legislation. Recall that the issue was not “free trade,” as commonly alleged, but democracy—the demand of the hordes “for greater openness and accountability.” The Clinton administration had argued, correctly, that it was asking for nothing new, just the same authority its predecessors had enjoyed conducting “deals behind closed doors” that are submitted “for rubber-stamping by parliaments.” But times are changing. As the business press recognized when “Fast Track” faced an unexpected public challenge, opponents of the old regime had an “ultimate weapon”:

the general population, which was no longer satisfied to keep to the spectator role as their betters do the important work. The complaints of the business press echo those of the liberal internationalists of the Trilateral Commission twenty-five years ago, lamenting the efforts of the “special interests” to organize and enter the political arena. Their vulgar antics disrupted the civilized arrangements before the “crisis of democracy” erupted, when “Truman had been able to govern the country with the cooperation of a relatively small number of Wall Street lawyers and bankers” as explained by Harvard’s Samuel Huntington. And now they are intruding in even more sacred chambers.

These are important developments. The OECD powers and their domestic constituencies are not going to accept defeat. They will undertake more efficient public relations to explain to the hordes that they are better off keeping to their private pursuits while the business of the world is conducted in secret and they will try to implement the MAI in the OECD or some other framework. Efforts are already underway to change the IMF Charter to impose MAI-style provisions as conditions on credits, thus enforcing the rules for the weak, ultimately others. The powerful will follow their own rules, as when the Clinton administration demonstrated its devotion to free trade by slapping prohibitive tariffs on Japanese supercomputers that were undercutting US manufacturers (called “private,” despite their massive dependency on public subsidy and protection) or by banning Mexican tomatoes because they were preferred by American consumers, as frankly conceded.

Though power and privilege surely will not rest, nonetheless, the popular victories should be heartening. They teach lessons about what can be achieved even when opposing forces are so outlandishly unbalanced as in the MAI confrontation. It is true that recent victories are defensive. They prevent, or at least delay, steps to undermine democracy even further and to transfer even more power into the hands of the rapidly concentrating private tyrannies that seek to administer markets and to constitute a “virtual Senate” that has many ways to block popular efforts to use democratic forms for the public interest—threat of capital flight, transfer of production, and other means. But the defensive victories are real. One should attend carefully to the fear and desperation of the powerful. They understand very well the potential reach of the “ultimate weapon” and only hope that those who seek a more free and just world will not gain the same understanding and put it effectively to use.



# Expanding the Floor of the Cage

## Welfare Capitalism and Democracy

**DAVID BARSAMIAN:** The American people have spoken once again in the 1996 elections. Clinton says it's a vindication of "the vital center," which he locates somewhere between "overheated liberalism and chilly conservatism." What was your reading of the elections?

**CHOMSKY:** Was there any choice other than the vital center? As far as I know, Clinton and Dole are moderate Republicans, more or less interchangeable representatives of the business community, old-time government insiders. Maybe there were personality differences. They have somewhat different constituencies. They behave slightly differently. I think the election was not a vote for the vital center, it was just a vote against. Both candidates were unpopular. Very few people expected anything from either of them. Voting was at a historic low. I think it reflected the general sense that the political system isn't functioning.

In Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, there are characters called Tweedledum and Tweedledee. They seem to be quite different, but there was no difference between them. Ralph Nader has been talking about the Republicans and the Democrats as Tweedledum and Tweedledee.

There's never much of a difference between the parties. After all, they are two business parties. But over the years it's probably been narrowing. In my view, the last liberal president was Richard Nixon. After that it's been straight, what they call here, conservatives, starting with Carter,

---

David Barsamian interview with Chomsky, Parts 1 and 2, *Z Magazine*, April and June 1997.

running through to the present. I think it's a reflection of things happening in the economy, in social life, and more general things. The kind of gesture to liberalism that was required from the New Deal through, say, Nixon, became less necessary with new weapons of class war developing in the early 1970s and proceeding on to what the business press, in one of my favorite phrases, calls "capital's subjugation of labor" for fifteen years. Actually, I'd say twenty years. Under those circumstances you can drop the window dressing. That's the standard story about welfare capitalism, which is introduced in order to undercut democracy.

A classic example was in Flint, Michigan, early in this century. Flint was the center of General Motors, at the heart of the automobile revolution. Around 1910 there was a good deal of popular, socialist, and labor organizing. There were plans to really take things over, run things themselves, support unions, have public services done democratically. Flint was a GM town at that time. The wealthy business community was very upset by that, naturally. It meant that it was no longer going to be a company town.

They finally decided to come along with the progressive line, say, "Everything you're doing is right. We'll run a candidate who will support and do all those things. We can do it a lot better because we have all these resources. So we'll take it over. You want a park? Fine. Vote for the business candidate. He'll put in a park. Look at the resources we have and the business acumen." And that won. The array of resources was such that it undermined and eliminated the incipient democratic and popular structures and indeed there was welfare capitalism until such time as they didn't need it anymore. When they didn't need that weapon, then it was dropped.

During the Depression, there was a lot of popular struggle. Rights were won. They were extended. There was a union movement. There were other pressures. After World War II, attacks started on this right away. But it took time. It was getting somewhere in the 1950s, but in the 1960s there was a lot more ferment, so you get new programs; the War on Poverty, things coming out of the civil rights movement. By the early 1970s, the business attack was reaching new heights and had new weapons. "You can forget the social contract. Forget welfare capitalism. Since we've been running it, we're going to throw it out." That's pretty much what's been going on since. The population knows the political parties don't recognize them. By now, it's reached enormous disaffection. There are interesting things about the disaffection: It's mostly directed against government. We don't really know if it's directed against business because that's not the

kind of question that's asked in the polls. Remember, business propaganda is designed to direct your attention to the government, not to business.

The typical picture in business propaganda since World War II has been, "There's all of us together. We live in harmony: Joe Six-Pack, his loyal wife, the hardworking executive, the friendly banker—we're all one big happy family. Then there are those bad guys out there who are trying to disrupt our harmony, like union organizers and big government. But we're all going to try to get together and defend ourselves against them." That's the picture presented everywhere. And it's understandable: You want to pretend that there's class harmony between the person with the hammer and the person he is beating over the head.

Actually, the attitude is ambivalent. The popular aspects of government, the kinds of government that allow participation, they have to be beaten down. But the so-called conservatives want a very powerful state, one that works for them and is removed from public control.

You have to talk about minimizing the state and increasing the Pentagon because the Pentagon is the funnel for subsidizing high-tech industries. That's a tricky line to follow. But as long as there isn't much public debate you can get away with it. So people hate the government. What they feel about business power is unclear.

**There is a recent poll which showed that 71 percent of Americans feel that corporations have too much influence in the political system.**

If you look at those polls, some of them are outlandish: 95 percent of people think that "corporations should sometimes sacrifice some profit for workers and the community." That was the way the question was asked. That shows overwhelming feeling. You never get numbers like that in polls unless something is seriously wrong. On the other hand, notice that that's still a call for welfare capitalism. It falls way short of what working people were asking for, say, 150 years ago right in Boston. I wrote up some of this stuff in Z a couple of months ago. At that time, the question wasn't being more benevolent, it was give us a little bit of your profits. It was, you have no right to rule. We should own the factories.

A benevolent autocrat is always going to try to make it appear as if autocracy is necessary. The only choice is, will I be a harsh autocrat or a benevolent autocrat? The propaganda system obviously wants to have the same attitude with regard to the contemporary autocrats. So business can be a little nicer and maybe you don't have quite as much corporate welfare,

but you have more welfare capitalism and the autocratic structure remains. That you're not allowed to challenge. That's distinct from the past where it was challenged, and rightly.

**Voter turnout in the 1996 election was 49 percent, the lowest since 1924.** It's the lowest ever—1924 is misleading because it was the first year in which women were allowed to vote. So a smaller percentage of the electorate voted because a lot of women didn't vote the first time around. But this is the lowest percentage ever.

**The other figure is that more money than ever before was spent on the campaign—\$1.6 billion that we know about.**

As a television commentator pointed out, these weren't conventions, they were coronations. It's another step toward eliminating whatever functioning elements there are in formal democracy. We shouldn't suggest that it was ever all that different, but yes, it's narrowing, and it's narrowing as part of these general tendencies. On the other hand, if you find union organizing building up and the grassroots organizations developing and people pressuring, it will change.

**There's some clamoring now for "campaign finance reform." What's your take on that?**

It's not a bad thing, but it's not going to have much effect. There are too many ways to cheat. It's like trying to pretend to stop drugs. There are so many ways to bring drugs in that it will always happen. I don't think the real problem is campaign financing. The real problem is the overwhelming power of corporate tyrannies in running society, and campaign finance reform is not going to change that.

**In August 1996, the president signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, which eliminated a sixty-one-year-old federal government commitment to the poor. You've commented that that commitment has always been very limited and declined sharply since around 1970. Since the assault began.**

**You've got to like the wording.**

The wording's fine. It says seven-year-old children have to have personal responsibility and now they have an opportunity which was deprived to

them before, the opportunity to starve. It's just another assault against defenseless people. It's now felt, "Well, okay, we can kick them in the face." This, too, is based on a very effective propaganda campaign to make much of the population hate and fear the poor. That's smart. You don't want to get them to look at the rich guys. Don't let them take a look at the pages of *Fortune* and *Business Week* talking about the "dazzling" and "stupendous" profit growth. Don't let them look at the way the military system is pouring funds into advanced technology. You're not supposed to look at that. What you're supposed to look at is the black mother driving a Cadillac and picking up her welfare check so she can have more babies. "Why should I pay for that?" That's been done very effectively. It's striking, again, when you look at attitudes. Most people think the government has a responsibility to ensure reasonable standards, minimal standards for poor people. On the other hand, most people are against welfare, which does exactly that. That's a propaganda achievement that you have to admire.

Incidentally, there's another aspect of this which is being much less discussed, but is quite crucial. One of the purposes of driving people into work away from welfare is to lower wages. Remember there's supposed to be a natural unemployment rate. We're not allowed to get below that unemployment rate or all sorts of terrible things happen. We can talk about that.

But assuming that that's true, we ought to be paying these people to be on welfare. They're keeping the unemployment rate high. Suppose you put them in the labor market. What's going to happen? Presumably, they're going to take jobs. If they get jobs it's going to lower unemployment. Terrible thing. If they don't get jobs, they're going to drive down the wages. In fact, even if they do, it will drive down wages. It's already happening.

In New York, city services are now using partially subsidized workfare, which simply eliminates union labor. That's a good way of making everybody suffer. So put a lot of unskilled, hopeless labor into the workplace, make conditions so awful that people will take virtually anything, maybe have some public subsidy to keep them doing it, and you can drive down wages that way.

### **There is a campaign to undermine public confidence in Social Security.**

Most of the talk about Social Security is pretty fraudulent. Take the question about privatizing it. That's a nonissue. If people believe that it would be better for Social Security to be invested in the stock market, rather than in, say, Treasury bonds, that can be done whether it's public or private.

I think the main goal is really to privatize it, that is, to make people in charge of their individual assets and not to have the solidarity that comes from doing something together. It's extremely important to break down the sense that I have any responsibility for the next person. The ideal is a society based on a social unit which consists of you and your television set and nothing to do with any other people. If a person next door has invested her assets badly and is now starving in her old age, well, it isn't your responsibility.

Social Security was something that brought people together. They said we're going to have a common responsibility to ensure that all of us have a minimal standard of living. That's dangerous because it implies that people can work together.

If you can work together, for example, you can replace corporate tyranny by worker control. You can get involved in the democratic process and make your own decisions. Much better to create a mentality in which each person behaves individually. The powerful will win. The poor will get smashed. There won't be any solidarity or communication or mutual support or information sharing or any of these things that might lead to democracy and justice. I think that's what lies behind the Social Security propaganda. The other issues are technical and of whatever significance they are, but probably not much. So a slightly more progressive taxation could keep Social Security functioning the way it is functioning for the indefinite future.

**The CEO of Archer Daniels Midland, the Decatur, Illinois-based grain giant says, "The only place you see a free market is in the speeches of politicians." Usually managers are careful about what they say.**

Who was he talking to?

**I don't know. Internal?**

I imagine. That's not the kind of thing that you tell the public. But, of course, it's true. Take what's called "trade." That's the most dramatic example. About 50 percent of US trade actually is internal to a single corporation. For example, if Ford Motor Co. ships a part from Indiana to Illinois, it's not called trade. If it ships it from Illinois to northern Mexico, it is called trade. It's called an export when it goes and an import when it comes back.

But all of this is centrally managed in ways which undercut markets, designed for the obvious purpose of exploiting cheaper labor and avoiding

environmental regulations and playing games with where you pay your taxes. That's about 50 percent of US trade. Japan is about the same. England is even higher.

When people talk about the growth in world trade, what they're talking about is largely a joke. What's growing are complicated interactions among centrally managed institutions which are on the scale of command economies. Within them there's no free trade, and among them there are various oligopolistic relationships. But I disagree with this person when he says there's no free trade. There is free trade for seven-year-old kids and for poor people in the Third World. They have to meet responsibility.

There was an interesting study recently in England by two technical economists studying the top one hundred transnational corporations on the *Fortune* list. One thing they discovered was that every single one had benefited from the industrial policy of its home country.

They say at least twenty of the one hundred would not have survived if it hadn't been for either state takeover or large-scale state subsidy at points when they were facing losses. Also most of them depend heavily on the domestic market. One of them is Lockheed, Newt Gingrich's favorite, which was saved from destruction by a \$2 billion government-subsidized loan when it faced disaster back in the early 1970s. Okay, that tells you what free trade is. Big multinationals are invariably, if this is correct, dependent on the state, meaning the public, to keep them going. They're not going to face market risks.

**There's a cover story in the *Nation* entitled "Eurobattle: Attacking the Welfare State" by Daniel Singer. He says, "What's at stake is the unmistakable attempt by the international financial establishment and continental governments to use this whole operation as a cover for adapting the US model of Reaganomics."**

I'd be careful about using phrases like "Reaganomics," because it's a fraud. Reagan didn't know what was going on, but the people around him were the most protectionist in postwar American history. They virtually doubled various import restrictions. They poured money into advanced technology. If it hadn't been for their market interference, there probably would be no automobile or steel or semiconductor industries in the US today. That's Reaganomics. So they were preaching free markets to the poor. On the other hand, James Baker, when he was secretary of the treasury, was

boasting to the business world that they had raised protection higher than any preceding government.

**In France, there are fewer workers in unions than in the US, which is already very low. Yet the support for French general strikes which shut down cities, and at one point the whole country in December 1995, was very high. What accounts for that?**

There are a lot of differences. One factor is the power of business propaganda in the US. This is the country where the public relations industry was developed, where it was most sophisticated. It's the home of the international entertainment industry, which is mainly propaganda. Huge funds are put into controlling the "public mind," as they put it. Although there isn't a capitalist society—and such a society wouldn't survive—this is toward the capitalist end and tends to be more business-run than others, meaning there's a huge amount of expenditure on marketing, which is a form of manipulation and deceit. The most recent estimate is that something like one-sixth of the gross domestic product goes to marketing. A large part of that is advertising. Advertising is tax-deductible, so you pay for the privilege of being manipulated and controlled. This is unusually developed here. The social democracies of, say, Sweden, have big multinationals. Sweden's economy rests heavily on some of them.

They depend, like most of the big exporters, on public subsidies and in Sweden, in particular, the military industry. The military industry seems to have provided much of the technology which allowed Ericsson to dominate a good part of the mobile phone market. Meanwhile the Swedish welfare state is being cut back. It's still way beyond us, but cut back while profits increase for the multinationals, which are publicly subsidized. That's Sweden. This is the US. They're different societies and different understandings. But the same processes are at work globally.

**Have you been following the new domestic political formations? The Labor Party had its founding convention in Cleveland in June 1996. The Alliance had its founding convention in Texas in November 1996. The New Party is already established and running candidates. Ralph Nader ran for president on the Green Party ticket.**

There are certainly new formations developing. They ought to get together. Scattering limited energies and resources is not a good idea. But allowing



new options to enter the political system is, in general, a good idea. I think probably the right way to do it might be the way that the New Party has developed, with fusion candidates, concentrating on winnable elections. But a labor-based party is a very good idea as well. They ought to be the same party. They have the same interests. If something can be created that is like the New Democratic Party in Canada or the Workers' Party in Brazil, big umbrella organizations which foster and support grassroots activities, provide resources, bring people together, provide an umbrella under which often parallel activities can be carried out, take some part, as much as possible, in the political system, that's going to be to the good. And it can be progress toward something else. It's not going to overcome the fact that we have one business party and they're going to run things because that's rooted in the structure of the institutions. Until we democratize the basic institutions, we won't break out of that.

**When we do something, do we have to have a clear idea about the long-term goal in order to devise a strategy?**

You learn by trying. New ways of thinking about the next step. You can't start now, with current understandings, and say, "Okay, let's design a libertarian society." You have to create the understanding and gain the insight that allows you to move step by step toward that end. Just like in any other aspect of life, or science for that matter, the strategy is to do more and learn more and find out the answers and find out ways of associating with other people and create the institutions. Out of them come new problems, new methods, new strategies. If somebody can come up with a general all-purpose strategy, everybody will be delighted. It hasn't happened in the last couple thousand years. So if you look at Marxist literature, it doesn't offer any such strategies.

If, say, Marx had been asked, "What's the strategy for overthrowing capitalism?" he would have laughed. Even somebody who is overwhelmingly a tactician, like Lenin, didn't have such comprehensive strategies. His general strategy was "follow me." That's a kind of strategy, I suppose. But Lenin, Trotsky, and others just adapted strategies to particular situations, circumstances, looking for their own goal—taking state power. I don't think that should be our goal. But a general strategy for overcoming authoritarian institutions, how could there be an answer to that question? There isn't any. In fact, I think those questions are mostly asked by people who don't want to become engaged. If you want to become engaged and do

it, there are plenty of problems around that you can work on, whether it's what you started with, hungry children, or the destruction of the environment, the breakdown of security in the workplace, public subsidy to huge transnationals, we can go on and on.

But it's not going to happen by pushing a button. It's going to happen by dedicated, concentrated work which will slowly build up the understanding, the relationships among people, the perceptions, the support systems, the alternative institutions and so on. Then something can happen. But there's no general all-purpose strategy for that.

**Urvashi Vaid, author of *Virtual Equality*, castigates what she calls the "purist Left" for waiting for the perfect vision, the one and only answer, and a charismatic leader. Something which I hear when I travel around the country is the one great solution—the internet.**

I agree with that criticism. Waiting for a charismatic leader is demanding disaster. As far as the internet is concerned, like other technology, it should be taken seriously. It has lots of opportunities, lots of dangers. Right now it's in a crucial phase, I think. Bob McChesney has pointed out that the effect of last year's telecommunications act is part of the biggest giveaway of public assets in history. As an act of privatization, meaning handing over public resources to private power, it has no counterpart. There aren't even token payments for it, as there were in, say, privatization in Mexico.

He also makes the important point that this issue was not treated as a social and political issue. It was treated as a business issue. So you read about it in the business pages. The issue, shall we give away these public resources to private power, was not discussed. "How shall we give them away. Shall we give them away to five mega corporations or twelve?" But not "Shall we give it away?" That is a tremendous propaganda victory.

Here's this enormous resource built at public expense being handed over to private power, which has its obvious interests; namely to create a society based on social units consisting of you and maybe your internet connection. Sure, they have very good reasons for wanting that. But do we want that? The internet could be used for all sorts of other things if it remains under public control. So, of course, the internet is not the answer. It's important. Modes of communication and interaction are, of course, important. Print is important. Radio is important. Television is important. This mode of communication and interaction is important and can be used efficiently and has been, in fact. But it can also be used very destructively.

Technology is usually like that. You can't ask, is a hammer good or bad? Put it in the hands of a torturer, it can be bad. Put it in the hands of somebody who's trying to build a house, it can be good. The internet is the same.

On the other hand, the comment you quoted earlier, "don't sit around waiting for a charismatic leader" or, for that matter, for a grand strategy, is good advice. If that comes it will be a disaster, like it always has been. If something grows out of popular action and participation it can be healthy. Maybe it won't, but at least it can be. There's no other way.

**But you've traditionally seen top-down strategies and movements as always inherently doomed?**

They can succeed in doing exactly what they're designed to do: namely, maintain top-down leadership, control, and authority. It shouldn't have come as a tremendous surprise to anyone that a vanguard party would end up being a totalitarian state. In fact, Trotsky had predicted that years before he decided to play the game.

**I was talking to Howard Zinn about how social change happens. He suggests that we need to reconceptualize time in terms of social change, comparing it to a sprinter versus the long-distance runner. What do you think of that?**

He's right. I don't know if he was thinking of this, but it was striking in the 1960s in parts of the student movement. It was, in a way, coming out of nowhere. There wasn't an organized, well-established popular-based left that it could join. So the leadership was sometimes in the hands of young people, often nice, decent people who were then going to do something. It was striking what they wanted to do. I don't know how much of this you were a part of.

The perception was often quite short-range. I remember at the time of the Columbia University strike their conception was, for many of them, not all of them, "We'll strike at Columbia, close down the buildings for a couple of weeks. After that we'll have a revolution." A lot of the spirit of 1968 was like that. That's not the way things work. It was a disaster for the people involved. It left a sad legacy. You have to build slowly and ensure that the next step comes out of a basis that's already established in people's understanding and their perceptions and their attitudes toward one another, their conception of what they want to attain and the circumstances in which you can attain it. For example, it makes absolutely no

sense to expose yourself and others to destruction when you don't have a social base in which you can protect the gains that you've made. That has been found over and over again in guerrilla movements, in popular movements, and elsewhere. You get cut off by the powerful.

**You've been spending time in South America, where you've observed popular grassroots movements. Do you see any lessons that people in the US can learn from these situations?**

First of all, these are very vibrant and dynamic societies with huge problems. One thing I was immediately struck by was that no one ever asked about the grand strategy for overthrowing this and that. People don't say, "What should I do?" They say, "Here's what I'm doing." What do you think about it? There are lots of things going on. They are impressive. The circumstances are extremely difficult, much harder than anything we face. Brazil, for example, has the largest labor-based party in the world which would have won any fair election. By that I don't mean that the votes were stolen. I mean that the resources and the media were so overwhelmingly on the other side that there wasn't a serious election, otherwise they would have won. It has its problems, but it's an impressive organization with a radical democratic and socialist thrust, a lot of popular support, lots of potential. The landless workers' movement is struggling under very hard circumstances to deal with a core problem of Brazilian society, the incredible inequality of land ownership and inequality generally. There's organizing in shantytowns.

Is it enough to change things? I think they're trapped by many delusions. You have to free your mind. The weapon that is being used—to carry out the analogy to Reaganomics—in Brazil is the debt. The same with most of Latin America. "We've got this terrible debt; we've got to minimize the state." They don't have any debt. They have to understand that. Just as we have to understand that private tyrannies have no legitimacy.

People don't liberate themselves alone. You liberate yourself through participation with others. Just like you learn things in science by interacting with others. The complicated network of popular organizations and umbrella groups like the Workers Party help create a basis for this.

We have all sorts of advantages that they don't have, like for example, enormous wealth. Also, we have the unique advantage that we don't have a superpower standing over us. We are the superpower. That makes a huge difference. So the opportunities here are greater. It's kind of striking to

see. You feel how stultifying it is, in many ways, when you come from there back here. For one thing, the doctrinal rigidity here is startling. Anybody who comes back from the Third World to the West in general, but here in particular, is struck by the narrowing of thought and understanding, the limited nature of legitimate discussion, the separation of people from one another.

I wasn't in Chile long enough to get much of an impression, but I think it's probably true there too. That's a country which is clearly under military rule. We call it a democracy, but it's a democracy with the military setting very narrow bounds as to what can happen. And it's in people's attitudes. You can see it. They know there are limits you don't transcend.

**Do you have any ideas on getting your ideas to the larger public? This seems to be a problem.**

It's the usual problem. First of all, I think almost everybody agrees with these ideas. For example, 95 percent of the population thinks that corporations ought to sacrifice profits for the benefit of workers and the community. I don't think that's enough, but I certainly agree with that. Over 80 percent of the population thinks that the economic situation is inherently unfair and ought to be changed. I agree with that.

How do you get out? By doing it. Everywhere you go or I go or anybody else goes, it's because some organized group has set something up. I can't go to Kansas City and say I'm going to give a talk. I won't have one person showing up. Why should they? On the other hand, if some group there which is organizing and active says, "Let's put together a meeting and bring people in," then I can go and give a talk and people come from all over the place to hear it. All this goes back to the same thing. If people are going to dedicate themselves to organizing and activism, whether it's in unions or community organizations or working on health programs or on and on, yes, then you can have access to broader and broader audiences. How broad? It depends on the movement.

**Michael Moore is a filmmaker who made *Roger and Me*. He has a book called *Downsize This!* He says the problem with the Left is that it whines too much and is very negative.**

That may be. If it is, it's making a mistake. For example, I don't think Howard Zinn whines too much and turns people off. Probably plenty of people do. Take the example I gave you of that media group in Brazil, which,

after very careful planning and working with leadership in the community, presented television skits in public which turned people off because they were boring and full of jargon and intellectual talk. When they let the people do it themselves and gave them the technical assistance, it turned out not to be boring and not to turn people off. This is for people who like to write articles about the responsibility of intellectuals. That's their responsibility. Go out and do things like that. And make sure it's the people themselves who are doing it. You give them what help you can. Learn from them. That's the responsibility of intellectuals.

**I produce *Alternative Radio*, a one-hour program. It is pretty effectively locked out of the Boston-to-Miami corridor. In contrast, in Montana, Colorado, New Mexico, places like that, it's much easier to get on the air.** The institutional reasons are pretty obvious, the same reason why discussion is narrower and more stultifying here than in other countries. This is the part of the country where the decisions are being made, so you've got to keep it under tight doctrinal control and make sure that nothing gets out of hand. It doesn't matter what people are talking about in Laramie, Wyoming. Still less in the slums of Rio. So there are institutional reasons.

On the other hand, don't just blame them. People here are not making use of the possibilities they have. So take, say, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Cambridge, like other towns, has a community cable television station. That was part of the communications act. The companies had to provide facilities. I've been there. I'm not a big techie, but even I can see that it has pretty good equipment. They claim to have outreach to the Cambridge area. It's available to the public. The one time I was there, the program was so crazy I almost walked off. Is it being used? No.

In the slums of Rio do they have cable television stations which the people can use? They'd be delighted if they had them.

**Criticisms are made of what's happening to the content of the news. The program directors are saying, "We're giving the public what it wants. No one's forcing them to turn on the TV and watch crime stories and sports." What do you think about that?**

There are studies of what people want. What they want overwhelmingly is commercial-free television. Do you see commercial-free television? The television system here is a business where big corporations sell audiences to other businesses and they're going to keep it within a narrow framework.

What people want is socially created. For example, take again that working-class slum in Brazil that I mentioned. I was there in prime television time. They had all the soap operas and all the junk.

But what people wanted was things they themselves were producing about racism and debt and internal problems and so on. What you want depends on who you are. Who you are depends on what options you've had, what kind of training you've had, what experiences you've had. The kinds of wants that come out of interactions with other people to solve a problem, those wants aren't going to be there unless there is interaction with other people to solve the problem. You can't just say, "That's what people want." Sure, under that structured arrangement that's what people will choose. Change the structure, they'll choose different things.

**In 1996, Gary Webb, a reporter for the *San José Mercury News*, wrote a three-part article entitled "Dark Alliance" purporting to show that there was a connection between the explosion of crack cocaine in the black ghetto in LA and the CIA. You've often stayed away from such stories.**

That's not quite true. I just put it differently. For example, the relation between the CIA and drugs is certain. That's been well studied since Al McCoy's work twenty-five years ago. The trail of clandestine activities is followed very closely by drug activities. There are pretty good reasons for that. Clandestine activities require untraceable money. They require lots of thugs. Where do you go? It's natural. So it starts right after World War II.

We can follow the trail through the French Connection in Marseilles, trying to undermine the resistance in the unions, to the Golden Triangle in Laos, Burma, and on to Afghanistan and all these places. The CIA has been involved but as an agency of state policy. What I don't agree with, and here I differ from a lot of others, is that the CIA is an independent agency. I think it does what it's told.

You can maybe find examples, but as far as I read the records, the CIA is basically the agency of the White House, carrying out operations that require plausible deniability. Take the source of the Webb story, which is fundamentally correct. Bob Parry and Brian Barger exposed a lot of it ten years ago. They were shut up very quickly. But their evidence was correct. The US was involved in massive international terrorism throughout Central America.

It was clandestine to a large extent, meaning everybody knew about it, but it was below the surface enough so you could pretend you didn't.



They needed the usual things: untraceable money and brutal thugs. They naturally turned right away to the narcotraffickers. Noriega was our great friend, remember, until he decided not to play a part in this any longer. He became too independent and had to be thrown out. But in the beginning he was fine, an ordinary thug narcotrafficker helping with the contras.

So, of course, there's a connection between the CIA and drugs. What Webb did was trace some of the details and find that one aspect of that connection was that cocaine got into the ghetto through such-and-such a passage. That's predictable. When the CIA says they didn't know anything about it, I assume they're right. Why should they know anything about it? It's not their business. The structure of the system, however, is very clear. And it's not just this case. It's many other cases. That it's going to end up in the ghettos is not a plot. It's just going to happen in the natural course of events. It's not going to sneak into well-defended communities which can protect themselves. It will break into communities that are being devastated, often by external social forces where people are alone and have to fight for survival. Kids aren't cared for because their parents are working to put food on the table. That's where it's going to break into.

**You wrote to a mutual friend about when educated classes line up for a parade, a person of conscience has three options: one can join them and march in the parade, join the cheering and watch from the sidelines, or speak out against it and expect to pay the price.**

That's about right. That's been going on for a couple of thousand years, too.

**Where do you see yourself in that structure?**

It's a question of choice, but I would like to see myself with those who are not joining and not cheering. Incidentally, the origins of our own history are exactly that. Go back to the oldest recorded texts. Just notice what happens to people who didn't march in the parade, like what happened to Socrates: He wasn't treated very nicely. Or take the Bible. The Bible had intellectuals. They called them "prophets." They fell into the usual two classes. There were the ones who were flattering the kings and telling them how wonderful they were and leading the parade or cheering the parade. They were the ones who were honored and respected. A couple of hundred years later, a thousand years later, they were called false prophets, but not at the time. There were other people like, say, Amos, who incidentally insisted, "I am not an intellectual," or, as he put it, "I am not a



prophet. I am not the son of a prophet. I am a poor farmer.” He had other things to say, as did many of the people who were much later honored as prophets. They were imprisoned, persecuted, hated, and despised. Any surprise in that? If you don’t join in the parade—remember the prophets were giving geo-political analysis as well as moral lessons—you’re hated. The geopolitical analysis turned out to be pretty accurate. The moral prescriptions were often very elevated. Why were people in power going to like that? Of course they were going to drive them out. You might say, going back to your television producer about people watching what they want, yeah, it was the public who was driving them into the desert and imprisoning them.

They don’t want to hear it either. Not because they’re bad people, but for the usual reasons: short-term interest, manipulation, dependence on power. That’s an image of what the world is like. Of course, that’s a negative image. There are plenty of successes. The world is way better than it was. Go back to the eighteenth century, the way people were treating each other was an unbelievable horror. Go back fifty years and the circumstances were indescribably bad. Right now we’re trying to defend a minimal health-care system. Thirty years ago we weren’t because there wasn’t any. That’s progress. Over a long period there were plenty of successes. They’re cumulative. Nobody ever said that it was going to be easy.

**José Ramos-Horta and Bishop Carlos Belo of East Timor were honored with the Nobel Prize.**

That was great, a wonderful thing. I ran into José Ramos-Horta in Sao Paolo. I haven’t seen his official speech yet, but certainly he was saying in public that the prize should have been given to Xanana Gusmao, who is the leader of the resistance to Indonesian aggression. He’s in an Indonesian jail. But the recognition of the struggle is a very important thing, or will be an important thing if we can turn it into something. If not, it will be suppressed as quickly as possible, polite applause, and let’s forget about it. If that happens it’s our fault, nobody else’s. This gives an opportunity to keep this issue up front. Right now the Clinton administration is planning to send advanced arms to Indonesia. That doesn’t have to work. But it will work unless there’s a real public outcry. The granting of the Nobel Peace Prize offers a golden opportunity for people who care about the fate of a couple hundred thousand people to do something about it. But it’s not going to happen by itself. In fact, some of the major issues about this have

never even made it to the American press, like the oil issue. A large part of the reason for the Indonesian invasion and the US and Australian support for it was that Timor has rich oil resources which are now being robbed in an outlandishly disgraceful Australian-Indonesian treaty, with US oil companies involved. We can do something about that.

**Didn't you go in the early 1980s to the *New York Times* with a Portuguese Timorese?**

What actually happened was that they were refusing to interview Timorese refugees in Lisbon and Australia, claiming they had no access to them.

**The *Times* was claiming this?**

Everybody was. We brought over some Timorese refugees. I paid to bring them from Lisbon and tried to bring them to the editorial offices. It didn't work. The case you're mentioning was a little more complicated. The story has not been told because I'm not sure how much to tell of it. Someday it will be told. I arranged to have a Portuguese priest, Father Leoneto do Rego, interviewed by the *New York Times*. He was an interesting man and a credible witness. He had been living in the mountains with the Timorese resistance and had been driven out during the really near-genocidal campaign of 1978, when then-president Carter vastly increased the flow of weapons, and Indonesia really smashed people. When they talk about hundreds of thousands of people being killed, that's then. A lot of people were driven out of the hills. He was one of them. He's Portuguese, so they didn't murder him. He was a classmate of the archbishop of Boston—pretty hard to disregard. He could describe what was happening. Nobody would talk to him. Finally, in a complicated way, I got the *Times* to agree to interview him. The interview by Kathleen Teltsch ran, and it was an utter disgrace. It said almost nothing about what was happening. It had one line in it saying, "Things aren't nice in Timor," or something like that. I think it must be that event that shamed the *Times* editors into running their first serious editorial on the problem. That's my strong suspicion. The transcript of that interview later leaked. I was working very hard to get the *Boston Globe* to cover the story. They were just publishing State Department handouts and apologetics from Indonesian generals.

I finally got them to agree to look at the facts. They offered to let me write an op-ed. I said, "No, I don't want to write an op-ed. Get one of your

reporters to look into it.” So they didn’t take it too seriously. They gave it to an extremely good local reporter. He was not an international reporter. The last I heard he was reporting on restaurants. He dug the way you dig into a local story, like investigating a corrupt judge, good reporting. We helped him with some leads, but he picked it up and ran with the story. He wrote the best story on Timor that had ever appeared in the American press. One of the things he did was get to the State Department and find a guy who had been transferred away from the Indonesia desk because he didn’t like what was going on. Somehow this guy leaked to him a transcript of the actual *New York Times* interview and he published good parts of it. It was a powerful interview with Father Leoneto saying extremely important things. So that *Times* interview did appear in the *Boston Globe*. That must have been around 1981.

All this stuff was going on. Censorship had been total, and I mean total. In 1978, when the atrocities peaked and US and British arms flow peaked, coverage was literally zero. The first article in the US, at least it’s listed in the *Reader’s Guide*, that specifically deals with Timor, is one of my own. It was from *Inquiry*, a right-wing libertarian journal where I was writing in those days. It was basically testimony that I had given in the UN on the suppression of the issue by the Western, primarily the US, press. There had been an earlier article by Arnold Kohen about Indonesia in the *Nation*, which had discussed this, and that’s it for the journals. It’s not that nobody noticed it. You go back to 1974–75, there was extensive coverage in the context of the collapse of the Portuguese empire. It dropped to zero at the peak of the atrocities, started picking up again around 1979–80 as a result largely of these activities.

Incidentally, here’s a case where a small number of people, the most important by far being Arnold Kohen, managed to get the issue to some extent into the public arena. It certainly saved tens of thousands of lives. The Red Cross was allowed in. There was some attention. The terror continued but lessened. And on to the present. Here’s also a case where the internet made a difference. The East Timor Action Network was a small and scattered support group until the internet came along. That was used constructively by Charlie Scheiner and others to set up a wide base of support to bring the information to people who couldn’t get it. I was getting information from the Australian press, but how many people have friends in Australia who send them the press? The movement grew and began to have an impact.

**Does the Guatemala peace treaty that was signed signal the end to this three-decade-old bloodbath?**

I'm sort of glad it's being signed, but it's a sad occasion. What it reflects is the great success of state terror, which has devastated any serious opposition, has intimidated people, has made it not only acceptable but even desirable for them to have the rule of ultraright business interests, mostly foreign interests, in a peace treaty which may, let's hope, put an end to the real horrors. So in the context a step forward, but in the broader picture a very ugly outcome of one of the biggest state terror operations of the modern period, which started in 1954 when the US took part in overthrowing the one democratic government.

**I'd like to end with an incident that you told me about. Do you remember?**

I remember it very well. My family was first-generation, so we lived in Philadelphia, but there were two big branches of the family. My father's family was in Baltimore and my mother's family was in New York. The one in Baltimore was very religious. We were sort of observant, but not super-Orthodox. My brother and I—I was maybe six or seven, he was maybe two. We went there for the holidays. It was nice to see cousins. But there was always a tone of fear, the fear that I would do something wrong. I don't know what it is, but I'm going to do something wrong. Because I don't know the rules. It wasn't that they were harsh, it was just that you knew you were going to do something wrong and you were going to be ashamed of it. It's one of these things that's inevitable. The incident I remember was when my brother on Saturday turned on a radio very loud. Saturday is the big family day, everybody is sitting around the kitchen having fun and this radio starts blaring, driving everybody crazy. Of course, nobody could turn it down. You're not allowed to touch it on Saturday. He understood enough to know that he had done something really criminal. He had made everybody suffer this horrible noise all through Saturday. I was a few years older and I could perceive the criminality.

David Barsamian is a radio broadcaster, writer, and founder of Alternative Radio in Boulder, Colorado. His interviews have appeared in *Z Magazine*, the *Progressive*, and the *Nation*.

# Imperial Presidency

## **The Conception of Presidential Sovereignty Is So Extreme That It Has Drawn Unprecedented Criticism**

It goes without saying that what happens in the US has an enormous impact on the rest of the world, and conversely, what happens in the rest of the world cannot fail to have an impact on the US, in several ways. First, it sets constraints on what even the most powerful state can do. Second, it influences the domestic US component of “the second superpower,” as the *New York Times* ruefully described world public opinion after the huge protests before the Iraq invasion. Those protests were a critically important historical event, not only because of their unprecedented scale, but also because it was the first time in hundreds of years of the history of Europe and its North American offshoots that a war was massively protested even before it was officially launched.

We may recall, by comparison, the war against South Vietnam launched by JFK in 1962, brutal and barbaric from the outset invoking bombing and chemical warfare to destroy food crops so as to starve out the civilian support for the indigenous resistance, programs to drive millions of people to virtual concentration camps or urban slums to eliminate its popular base. By the time protests reached a substantial scale, the highly respected and quite hawkish Vietnam specialist and military historian Bernard Fall wondered whether “Viet-Nam as a cultural and historic entity” would escape “extinction” as “the countryside literally dies under the blows of the largest military machine ever unleashed on an area of this size”—particularly South Vietnam, the main target of the US assault. When protest did finally develop, many years too late, it was mostly directed

---

From a talk delivered in Toronto on November 4, 2004.

against the peripheral crimes: the extension of the war against the South to the rest of Indochina—hideous crimes but lesser ones.

It's quite important to remember how much the world has changed since then. As almost always, not as a result of gifts from benevolent leaders but through deeply committed popular struggle—far too late in developing but ultimately effective. One consequence was that the US government could not declare a national emergency, which should have been healthy for the economy, as during World War II when public support was very high. Johnson had to fight a “guns-and-butter” war, buying off an unwilling population, harming the economy, ultimately leading the business classes to turn against the war as too costly, after the Tet Offensive of January 1968 showed that it would go on a long time. There were also concerns among US elites about rising social and political consciousness stimulated by the activism of the 1960s, much of it reaction to the miserable crimes in Indochina, then at last arousing popular indignation. We learn from the last sections of the *Pentagon Papers* that after the Tet Offensive, the military command was reluctant to agree to the president's call for further troop deployments, wanting to be sure that “sufficient forces would still be available for civil disorder control” in the US, and fearing that escalation might run the risk of “provoking a domestic crisis of unprecedented proportions.”

The Reagan administration assumed that the problem of an independent, aroused population had been overcome and, apparently, planned to follow the Kennedy model of the early 1960s in Central America. But they backed off in the face of unanticipated public protest, turning instead to “clandestine war,” employing murderous security forces and a huge international terror network. The consequences were terrible, but not as bad as B-52s and mass murder operations of the kind that were peaking when John Kerry was deep in the Mekong Delta in the South, by then largely devastated. The popular reaction to even the clandestine war, so-called, broke entirely new ground. The solidarity movements for Central America, now in many parts of the world, are again something new in Western history.

State managers cannot fail to pay attention to such matters. Routinely, a newly elected president requests an intelligence evaluation of the world situation. In 1989, when Bush I took office, a part was leaked. It warned that when attacking “much weaker enemies”—the only sensible target—the US must win “decisively and rapidly.” Delay might “undercut political support,” recognized to be thin, a great change since the Kennedy-Johnson

years when the attack on Indochina, while never popular, aroused little reaction for many years.

The world is pretty awful today, but it is far better than yesterday, not only with regard to unwillingness to tolerate aggression, but also in many other ways, which we now tend to take for granted. There are very important lessons here, which should always be uppermost in our minds—for the same reason they are suppressed in the elite culture.

Without forgetting the very significant progress toward more civilized societies in past years, and the reasons for it, let's focus nevertheless on the notions of imperial sovereignty now being crafted. It is not surprising that as the population becomes more civilized, power systems become more extreme in their efforts to control the "great beast" (as the Founding Fathers called the people). And the great beast is indeed frightening.

The conception of presidential sovereignty crafted by the statist reactionaries of the Bush administration is so extreme that it has drawn unprecedented criticism in the most sober and respected establishment circles. These ideas were transmitted to the president by the newly appointed attorney general, Alberto Gonzales, who is depicted as a moderate in the press.

They are discussed by the respected constitutional law professor Sanford Levinson in the summer 2004 issue of *Daedalus*, the journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Levinson writes that the conception is based on the principle, "There exists no norm that is applicable to chaos." The quote, Levinson comments, is from Carl Schmitt, the leading German philosopher of law during the Nazi period, who Levinson describes as "the true *éminence grise* of the Bush administration." The administration, advised by Gonzales, articulated "a view of presidential authority that is all too close to the power that Schmitt was willing to accord his own Führer," Levinson writes. One rarely hears such words from the heart of the establishment. The same issue of the journal carried an article by two prominent strategic analysts on the "transformation of the military," a central component of the new doctrines of imperial sovereignty, including the rapid expansion of offensive weaponry such as militarization of space and other measures designed to place the entire world at risk of instant annihilation.

These elicited the anticipated reactions by Russia and recently China. The analysts concluded that these US programs may lead to "ultimate doom." They express their hope that a coalition of peace-loving states will

coalesce as a counter to US militarism and aggressiveness, led by China. We've come to a pretty pass when such sentiments are voiced in sober respectable circles not given to hyperbole.

Going back to Gonzales, he transmitted to the president the conclusions of the Justice Department that the president has the authority to rescind the Geneva Conventions—the supreme law of the land, the foundation of modern international humanitarian law. Gonzales, who was then Bush's legal counsel, advised him that this would be a good idea because rescinding the Conventions “substantially reduces the threat of domestic criminal prosecution [of administration officials] under the War Crimes Act” of 1996, which carries the death penalty for “grave breaches” of Geneva Conventions.

We can see on the front pages why the Justice Department was right to be concerned that the president and his advisers might be subject to the death penalty under the laws passed by the Republican Congress in 1996—and under the principles of the Nuremberg Tribunal, if anyone took them seriously.

In early November, the *New York Times* featured a front-page story reporting the conquest of the Falluja General Hospital. It reported, “Patients and hospital employees were rushed out of rooms by armed soldiers and ordered to sit or lie on the floor while troops tied their hands behind their backs.” An accompanying photograph depicted the scene. That was presented as an important achievement. “The offensive also shut down what officers said was a propaganda weapon for the militants—Falluja General Hospital, with its stream of reports of civilian casualties.” These “inflated” figures—inflated because our Leader so declares—were “inflaming opinion throughout the country” and the region, driving up “the political costs of the conflict.” The word “conflict” is a common euphemism for US aggression, as when we read on the same pages that the US must now rebuild “what the conflict just destroyed”—just “the conflict,” with no agent, like a hurricane.

Let's go back to the NYT picture and story about the closing of the “propaganda weapon.” There are some relevant documents, including the Geneva Conventions, which state, “Fixed establishments and mobile medical units of the Medical Service may in no circumstances be attacked, but shall at all times be respected and protected by the Parties to the conflict.” So page one of the world's leading newspaper is cheerfully depicting war crimes for which the political leadership could be sentenced to death under US law.



The world's greatest newspaper also tells us that the US military "achieved nearly all their objectives well ahead of schedule," leaving "much of the city in smoking ruins." But it was not a complete success. There is little evidence of dead "packrats" in their "warrens" or the streets, which remains "an enduring mystery." The embedded reporters did find a body of a dead woman, though it is "not known whether she was an Iraqi or a foreigner," apparently the only question that comes to mind.

The front-page account quotes a Marine commander who says, "It ought to go down in the history books." Perhaps it should. If so, we know on just what page of history it will go down and who will be right beside it, along with those who praise, or for that matter, even tolerate it. At least, we know that if we are honest.

One might mention some of the recent counterparts that immediately come to mind, like the Russian destruction of Grozny ten years ago, a city of about the same size; or Srebrenica, almost universally described as "genocide" in the West. In that case—as we know in detail from a Dutch government report and other sources—the Muslim enclave in Serb territory, inadequately protected, was used as a base for attacks against Serb villages and, when the anticipated reaction took place, it was horrendous. The Serbs drove out all but military age men and then moved in to kill them. There are differences with Falluja. Women and children were not bombed out of Srebrenica, but trucked out and there will be no extensive efforts to exhume the last corpse of the packrats in their warrens in Falluja. There are other differences, arguably unfair to the Serbs.

It could be argued that all this is irrelevant. The Nuremberg Tribunal, spelling out the UN Charter, declared that initiation of a war of aggression is "the supreme international crime differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole." Hence the war crimes in Falluja and Abu Ghraib, the doubling of acute malnutrition among children since the invasion (now at the level of Burundi, far higher than Haiti or Uganda), and all the rest of the atrocities. Those judged to have played any role in the supreme crime—for example, the German foreign minister—were sentenced to death by hanging. The Tokyo Tribunal was far more severe.

There is a very important book on the topic by Canadian international lawyer Michael Mandel, who reviews in convincing detail how the powerful are self-immunized from international law.

In fact, the Nuremberg Tribunal established this principle. To bring the Nazi criminals to justice, it was necessary to devise definitions of “war crime” and “crime against humanity.” How this was done is explained by Telford Taylor, chief counsel for the prosecution and a distinguished international lawyer and historian: “Since both sides [in World War II] had played the terrible game of urban destruction—the Allies far more successfully—there was no basis for criminal charges against Germans or Japanese and, in fact, no such charges were brought. Aerial bombardment had been used so extensively and ruthlessly on the Allied side, as well as the Axis side, that neither at Nuremberg nor Tokyo was the issue made a part of the trials.”

The operative definition of “crime” is: “Crime that you carried out, but we did not.” To underscore the fact, Nazi war criminals were absolved if the defense could show that their US counterparts carried out the same crimes. Taylor concludes that “to punish the foe—especially the vanquished foe—for conduct in which the enforcer nation has engaged, would be so grossly inequitable as to discredit the laws themselves.” That is correct, but the operative definition also discredits the laws themselves, along with all subsequent tribunals. Taylor provides this background as part of his explanation of why US bombing in Vietnam was not a war crime. His argument is plausible, further discrediting the laws themselves.

Some of the subsequent judicial inquiries are discredited in perhaps even more extreme ways, such as the *Yugoslavia v. NATO* case adjudicated by the International Court of Justice. The US was excused, correctly, on the basis of its argument that it is not subject to the jurisdiction of the Court in this case. The reason is that when the US finally signed the Genocide Convention (which is at issue) after 40 years, it did so with a reservation stating that it is not applicable to the United States.

In an outraged comment on the efforts of Justice Department lawyers to demonstrate that the president has the right to authorize torture, Yale Law School dean Harold Koh said, “The notion that the president has the constitutional power to permit torture is like saying he has the constitutional power to commit genocide.” The president’s legal advisers and the new attorney general should have little difficulty arguing that the president does have that right, if the second superpower permits him to exercise it. The sacred doctrine of self-immunization is sure to hold for the trial of Saddam Hussein, if it is ever held. We see that every time

Bush, Blair, and other worthies in government and commentary lament over the terrible crimes of Saddam Hussein, always bravely omitting the words “with our help, because we did not care.” Surely no tribunal will be permitted to address the fact that US presidents from Kennedy until today, along with French presidents, British prime ministers, and Western businesses, have been complicit in Saddam’s crimes, sometimes in horrendous ways, including current incumbents and their mentors. In setting up the Saddam tribunal, the State Department consulted US legal expert professor Charif Bassiouni, recently quoted as saying: “All efforts are being made to have a tribunal whose judiciary is not independent but controlled, and by controlled I mean that the political manipulators of the tribunal have to make sure the US and other western powers are not brought in cause. This makes it look like victor’s vengeance and it makes it seem targeted, selected, unfair. It’s a subterfuge.” We hardly need to be told.

The pretext for US-UK aggression in Iraq is what is called the right of “anticipatory self-defense,” now sometimes called “preemptive war” in a perversion of that concept. The right of anticipatory self-defense was affirmed officially in the Bush administration’s National Security Strategy (NSS) of September 2002, declaring Washington’s right to resort to force to eliminate any potential challenge to its global dominance. The NSS was widely criticized among the foreign policy elite, beginning with an article in the main establishment journal *Foreign Affairs* (FA), warning that “the new imperial grand strategy” could be very dangerous. Criticism continued at an unprecedented level, but on narrow grounds—not that the doctrine itself was wrong, but rather its style and manner of presentation. Clinton’s secretary of state Madeleine Albright summed the criticism up accurately, also in FA. She pointed out that every president has such a doctrine in his back pocket, but it is foolish to smash people in the face with it and to implement it in a manner that will infuriate even allies. That is threatening to US interests and therefore wrong. Albright knew, of course, that Clinton had a similar doctrine.

The Clinton doctrine advocated “unilateral use of military power” to defend vital interests, such as “ensuring uninhibited access to key markets, energy supplies and strategic resources,” without even the pretexts that Bush and Blair devised. Taken literally, the Clinton doctrine is more expansive than Bush’s NSS. But the more expansive Clinton doctrine was barely even reported. It was presented with the right style and implemented less brazenly.

Henry Kissinger described the Bush doctrine as “revolutionary,” pointing out that it undermines the seventeenth century Westphalian system of international order and of course the UN Charter and international law. He approved of the doctrine, but with reservations about style and tactics and with a crucial qualification that it cannot be “a universal principle available to every nation.” Rather, the right of aggression must be reserved to the US, perhaps delegated to chosen clients. We must forcefully reject the principle of universality—that we apply to ourselves the same standards we do to others, more stringent ones if we are serious. Kissinger is to be praised for his honesty in articulating prevailing doctrine, usually concealed in professions of virtuous intent and tortured legalisms. He understands his educated audience. As he doubtless expected, there was no reaction.

His understanding of his audience was illustrated, rather dramatically, when the Kissinger-Nixon tapes were released, over Kissinger’s strong objections. There was a report in the world’s leading newspaper. It mentioned, in passing, the orders to bomb Cambodia that Kissinger transmitted from Nixon to the military commanders. In Kissinger’s words, “A massive bombing campaign in Cambodia. Anything that flies on anything that moves.” It is rare for a call for horrendous war crimes—what we would not hesitate to call “genocide” if others were responsible—to be so stark and explicit. It would be interesting to see if there is anything like it in archival records. The publication elicited no reaction, refuting Dean Koh. Apparently, it is taken for granted in the elite culture that the president and his national security adviser do have the right to order genocide.

Imagine the reaction if the prosecutors at the Milošević Tribunal could find anything remotely similar. They would be overjoyed, the trial would be over, Milošević would receive several life sentences, the death penalty if the Tribunal adhered to US law. But that is them, not us.

### **Anticipatory Self-Defense**

The principle of universality is the most elementary of moral truisms. It is the foundation of “just war theory” and of every system of morality deserving of anything but contempt. Rejection of such moral truisms is so deeply rooted in the intellectual culture as to be invisible. To illustrate again how deeply entrenched it is, let’s return to the principle of “anticipatory self-defense,” adopted as legitimate by both political organizations in the US and across virtually the entire spectrum of articulate opinion, apart from the usual margins. The principle has some immediate corollaries. If the

US is granted the right of “anticipatory self-defense” against terror, then, certainly, Cuba, Nicaragua, and a host of others have long been entitled to carry out terrorist acts within the US because there is no doubt of its involvement in very serious terrorist attacks against them, extensively documented in impeccable sources and, in the case of Nicaragua, even condemned by the World Court and the Security Council (in two resolutions that the US vetoed, with Britain loyally abstaining). The conclusion that Cuba and Nicaragua, among many others, have long had the right to carry out terrorist atrocities in the US is, of course, utterly outrageous and advocated by no one. Thanks to our self-determined immunity from moral truisms, there is no fear that anyone will draw outrageous conclusions. There are still more outrageous ones. No one, for example, celebrates Pearl Harbor day by applauding the fascist leaders of Imperial Japan. But by our standards, the bombing of military bases in the US colonies of Hawaii and the Philippines seems rather innocuous.

The Japanese leaders knew that B-17 Flying Fortresses were coming off the Boeing production lines and were surely familiar with the public discussions in the US explaining how they could be used to incinerate Japan’s wooden cities in a war of extermination, flying from Hawaiian and Philippine bases—“to burn out the industrial heart of the Empire with firebombing attacks on the teeming bamboo ant heaps,” as retired Air Force general Chennault recommended in 1940, a proposal that “simply delighted” President Roosevelt. That’s a far more powerful justification for anticipatory self-defense than anything conjured up by Bush-Blair and their associates—and accepted, with tactical reservations, throughout mainstream articulate opinion.

Examples can be enumerated virtually at random. To add one last one, consider the most recent act of NATO aggression prior to the US-UK invasion of Iraq: the bombing of Serbia in 1999. The justification is supposed to be that there were no diplomatic options and that it was necessary to stop ongoing genocide. It is not hard to evaluate these claims.

As for diplomatic options, when the bombing began, there were two proposals on the table, a NATO proposal and a Serbian proposal. After seventy-eight days of bombing, a compromise was reached between them—formally at least. It was immediately undermined by NATO. All of this quickly vanished into the mists of unacceptable history, to the limited extent that it was ever reported. What about ongoing genocide—to use the term that appeared hundreds of times in the press as NATO geared up for

war? That is unusually easy to investigate. There are two major documentary studies by the State Department, offered to justify the bombing, along with extensive documentary records from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), NATO, and other Western sources—and a detailed British Parliamentary Inquiry. All agree on the basic facts: the atrocities followed the bombing, they were not its cause. Furthermore, that was predicted by the NATO command, as General Wesley Clark informed the press right away and confirmed in more detail in his memoirs. The Milošević indictment, issued during the bombing—surely as a propaganda weapon, despite implausible denials—and relying on US-UK intelligence as announced at once, yields the same conclusion: virtually all the charges are postbombing. Such annoyances are handled quite easily. The Western documentation is commonly expunged in the media and even scholarship. The chronology is regularly reversed, so that the anticipated consequences of the bombing are transmuted into its cause.

There were indeed prebombing atrocities: about two thousand were killed in the year before the March 1999 bombing, according to Western sources. The British, the most hawkish element of the coalition, made the astonishing claim—hard to believe just on the basis of the balance of forces—that until January 1999 most of the killings were by the Albanian KLA guerrillas attacking civilians and soldiers in cross-border raids in the hope of eliciting a harsh Serbian response that could be used for propaganda purposes in the West, as they candidly reported, apparently with CIA support in the last months. Western sources indicate no substantial change until the bombing was announced and the monitors withdrawn a few days before the March bombing.

In one of the few works of scholarship that even mentions the unusually rich documentary record, Nicholas Wheeler concludes that five hundred of the two thousand were killed by Serbs. He supports the bombing on the grounds that there would have been worse Serbian atrocities had NATO not bombed, eliciting the anticipated crimes. That's the most serious scholarly work. The press, and much of scholarship, chose the easier path of ignoring Western documentation and reversing the chronology. It is all too easy to continue. But the—unpleasantly consistent—record leaves open a crucial question: how does the “great beast” react, the domestic US component of the second superpower? The conventional answer is that the population approves of all of this, as shown by the election of George Bush. But, as is often the case, a closer look is helpful.