Perils and Alternatives

[Gabriel Mathew Schivone spoke with Noam Chomsky via telephone and e-mail at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, November 27, 2007 through February 11, 2008 about 'Perils and Alternatives in the Post 9-11 World'. Excerpts :]

GMS: In a recent interview, Abdel Bari Atwan, author and editor of the London-based Arabic daily newspaper *Al-Quds Al Arabi*, said that President Bush is not ending terrorism nor is he weakening it, as is one of his strongest assertions in his so-called "War on Terror", but that now Al-Qa'ida has powerfully developed into more of an ideology than an organization, as Atwan describes, expanding like Kentucky Fried Chicken, opening franchises all over the world. "That's the problem," he says. "The Americans are no safer. Their country is a fortress now, the United States of Security." Is this accurate?

CHOMSKY: Except for the last sentence, it's accurate. There's good reason to think that the United States is very vulnerable to terrorist attacks. That's not my opinion, that's the opinion of US intelligence, of specialists of nuclear terror like Harvard professor Graham Allison, and former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and others, who have warned that the probability of even a nuclear attack in the United States is not trivial. So, it's not a fortress.

One of the things that Bush hasn't been doing is improving security. So, for example, if you look at the government commission after 9-11, one of its recommendations—which is a natural one—is to improve security of the US-Canadian border. I mean, if you look at that border, it's very porous. You or I could walk across it somewhere with a suitcase holding components of a nuclear bomb. The Bush administration did not follow that recommendation. What it did instead was fortify the Mexican border, which was not regarded as a serious source of potential terrorism. They in fact slowed the rate of growth of border guards on the Canadian Border.

But quite apart from that, the major part of Atwan's comment is quite correct. Bush Administration programs have not been designed to reduce terror. In fact, they've been designed in a way—as was anticipated by intelligence analysts and others—to increase terror.

So take, say, the invasion of Iraq. It was expected that that would probably have the effect of increasing terror—and it did, though far more than was anticipated. There was a recent study by two leading terrorism experts (using RAND Corporation government data) which concluded that what they called the "Iraq effect"—meaning, the effect of the Iraq invasion on incidents of terror in the world—was huge. In fact, they found that terror increased about seven-fold after the invasion of Iraq. That's quite an increase—a lot more than was anticipated.

Also, the invasion increased the threat of nuclear proliferation—for very good reason. One of Israel's leading historians, Martin van Creveld, discussing the possibility of Iran developing a bomb, pointed out the obvious. He said that, after the invasion of Iraq, if Iran isn't developing a nuclear deterrent, "they're crazy" (that's his word, "crazy"). Why? Because the United States made it explicit that it is willing to invade any country it likes, as long as that country can't defend

itself.—It was known that Iraq was basically defenseless. Well, that sends a message to the world. It says, "If you don't obey what the US demands, they can invade you, so you better develop a deterrent."

Nobody's going to compete with the United States in a military capacity. I mean, the US spends as much on the military as the rest of the world combined, and it's far more sophisticated and advanced. So, what they'll do is turn to weapons of the weak. And weapons of the weak are basically two: terror and nuclear weapons.

So, sure, the invasion of Iraq predictably increased the threat of terror and of proliferation, and the same is true of other actions. And we can continue. One of the major parts of the so-called "war on terror" is an effort to carry out surveillance and control of financial interactions which enter into terrorist activities. Well, yeah, that's been going on. But according to the Treasury Bureau [Office of Foreign Assets Control] that's been responsible for it, they're spending far more time and energy on possible violations on the US embargo on Cuba than they are on Al Qa'ida transactions.

Why would elites be making the United States, as you say, more vulnerable to attacks in the future? It doesn't seem reasonable, logically speaking, as educated, sensible, intelligent people, that they'd endanger themselves personally and endanger their families, in the short- or long-term, with raising the threat of terror to manifold levels now. Terror would surely threaten them personally, especially with regard to more attacks being committed inside the US and throughout the world. I mean, isn't there something peculiar in this sort of behavior?

I think there's something pathological about it but it's not peculiar. I mean, if you look at it within the framework of elite perceptions, it has a kind of rationality. Short-term considerations of profit and power quite often tend to overwhelm longer term considerations of security and welfare, even for your own children.

I mean, take environmental concerns. Take, say, lead. It was known in the early 1920s by the huge corporations that were producing lead-based products that lead was poisonous. They knew it. We now know—there's been extensive discussion and revelations—and they knew it right away. But they concealed it. And they paid huge amounts of money and effort and legal maneuvers and lobbying and so on to prevent any constraints on it. Well, you know, those windowsills poisoned with lead paint are going to harm their own children, but the interests of profit overwhelmed it. And that's standard.

And take, say, tobacco. It's been known for decades, from the very beginning, that it's a very poisonous product. That didn't stop the tobacco producers from trying to get everyone possible to smoke. Make women smoke, children and others—even their own. These are conflicting demands of profit and power on the one hand, and care about even your own family on the other hand. And very commonly profit and power win out. I think it's pathological. But it's not a pathology of individuals, it's a pathology of social institutions.

When you say the common loyalty to power and profit among elites superseding any care of other human beings is a "pathology of social institutions" and not individuals, are you referring to certain values of American society?

It is not specific to American society. These are institutional properties of semi-competitive state capitalist societies.

Suppose, for example, that there are three US-based conglomerates that produce automobiles: GM, Ford, Chrysler (no longer). They were able to gain their status through substantial reliance on a powerful state, and they were able to survive the 1980s only because the president, Ronald Reagan, was the most protectionist in post-war history, virtually doubling protective barriers to save these and other corporations from being taken over by more advanced Japanese industry. But they (more or less) survive.

Suppose that GM invests in technology that will produce better, safer, more efficient cars in 20 years, but Ford and Chrysler invest in cars that will sell tomorrow. Then GM will not be here in 20 years to profit from its investment. The logic is not inexorable, but it yields very significant anti-social tendencies.

PRIVATE POWER

Since the so-called "reconstruction" throughout the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2004, one of the policy-initiatives championed by the Bush Administration right up to the present was the dismantling of the New Orleans public school system. The New York Times reported that, of those who could return, children and families were coming back to a "much different" New Orleans with "a smaller [educational] system dominated by new charter schools", along with the termination of nearly 7000 public school employees. What are the implications of private control of public resources, such as education, in this instance, or healthcare, telecommunications, social security, etc.?

Well, there are actually two components to that, both of them leading themes of the Bush Administration's domestic policies, and of reactionary policies generally. One of them is, to put it simply, to put as many dollars as you can in the pockets of your rich friends: that is, to increase profits for the wealthy—to increase the wealth and power of concentrated, private capital. That's one driving force in the administration's policy. The other is to break down the social bonds that lead to people having sympathy and supportive feelings about one another. That contributes to transferring profit and decision-making into the hands of concentrated private power. A component of that is to undermine the normal relations—sympathy and solidarity—that people have.

Take social security. Social security is based on a bond among people. If you earn a salary today—somebody your age—[young people of twenty or so] you're paying for the welfare and survival of your parents' generation. Well, okay, that's a natural feeling. If you want to increase the control of concentrated private power you have to drive that out of people's heads. You have to create the kind of people that Ayn Rand is talking about, where you're after your own welfare and you don't care what happens to anyone else. You have to think, "Why do I have to care about that disabled woman across town who doesn't have enough food to eat? I didn't do it to her. That's her problem. She and her husband didn't invest properly; she didn't work hard enough, so what do I care if she starves to death?" Well, you have to turn people into pathological monsters who think that way, if you want to ensure that unaccountable, concentrated, private power will dominate the world and enrich itself. So, these things go together.

I don't happen to have children in the local school—I did, but my kids are all grown up. So, if I were to follow this line of reasoning, I would say, "Well, why should I pay taxes? My kids don't go to school; I'm not getting anything out of it. What do I care if the kid across the street doesn't go to school?" You can turn people into pathological monsters who think like that. And eliminating the public school system is one part of it.

The public school system is a sign of solidarity, sympathy and concern of people in general—even if it doesn't benefit me, myself. There's a pathological brand of what's called Libertarianism which wants to eliminate that and turn you into a monster who cares only about yourself. And that's one aspect of undermining democracy, and undermining the attitudes that underlie democracy, namely, that there should be a concern for others and a communal way of reacting to community concerns.

Well, let's consider the elimination of the public school system altogether. Would that imply something like what we see in countries in the Third World, where those who can afford to send their children to school, do, and much of the remaining population simply does not have an education? Is this a direction private power might be moving toward in this country?

There are significant forces driving the country in that direction, quite apart from Bush-style reactionaries seeking to enrich the powerful and let the rest fend somehow for themselves.

Take the reliance for school funding on property taxes. In earlier years, when communities were not so sharply separated between rich and poor, that may have been more or less acceptable. Today it means that the wealthy suburbs have better schools than impoverished urban or rural areas. That's only the bare beginning. Suburban elites who work downtown do not have to pay the taxes to keep the city viable for them; that burden falls disproportionately on the poor. Studies of public transportation have shown that the poorer subsidize the richer and more privileged. And these measures proliferate in numerous ways.

THE IRAQ WAR

Everywhere from high school and college campuses to bus stops and dinner tables, we hear a lot about what a "quagmire" and "costly mess" Iraq has become for the United States, now being blamed as a Republican war, for how the Bush Administration handled the occupation—that 'it should've been done this or that way'—and 'now that we're there we can't leave, it's our 'responsibility' to fix the problem we made because it'll only get worse if we leave—those people will kill each other', and so on. What do you say to these arguments that seem to interweave with each other? And what would you suggest in terms of what some might call an 'honorable solution'? International measures, immediate withdrawal—both?

The position of the liberal doves during the Vietnam War was articulated lucidly by historian and Kennedy advisor Arthur Schlesinger, when the war was becoming too costly for the US and they began their shift from hawk to dove. He wrote that "we all pray" that the hawks will be right in believing that the surge of the day will work, and if they are, we "may be saluting the wisdom and statesmanship of the American government" in gaining victory in a land that they have left in "wreck and ruin." But it probably won't work, so strategy should be

rethought. The principles, and the reasoning, carry over with little change to the Iraq invasion.

There is no "honorable solution" to a war of aggression—the "supreme international crime" that differs from other war crimes in that it encompasses all the evil that follows, in the wording of the Nuremberg Tribunal, which condemned Nazi war criminals to death for such crimes as "pre-emptive war." We can only seek the least awful solution. In doing so, we should bear in mind some fundamental principles, among them, that aggressors have no rights, only responsibilities.

The responsibilities are to pay enormous reparations for the harm they have caused, to hold the criminals responsible accountable, and to pay close attention to the wishes of the victims. In this case, we know their wishes quite well. Poll after poll has yielded results similar to those reported by the military in December, after a study of focus groups around the country. They report that Iraqis from all over the country and all walks of life have "shared beliefs," which they enumerated: The American invasion is to blame for the sectarian violence and other horrors, and the invaders should withdraw, leaving Iraq—or what's left of it—to Iraqis.

It tells us a lot about our own moral and intellectual culture that the voice of Iraqis, though known, is not even considered in the thoughtful and comprehensive articles in the media reviewing the options available to Washington. And that there is no comment on this rather striking fact, considered quite natural.

Is there anyone saying the war was fundamentally wrong?

In the case of Vietnam, years after Kennedy's invasion, liberal doves began to say that the war began with "blundering efforts to do good" but by 1969 it was clear that it was a mistake that was too costly to us (Anthony Lewis, at the critical extreme, in the *New York Times*). In the same year, 70% of the public regarded the war as not "a mistake" but "fundamentally wrong and immoral." That gap between public and elite educated opinion persists until the most recent polls, a few years ago.

In the media and journals, it is very hard to find any voice that criticizes the invasion or Iraq on principled grounds, though there are some. Arthur Schlesinger, for example, took a very different position than he did on Vietnam. When the bombs started falling on Baghdad he quoted President Roosevelt's condemnation of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor as "a date which will live in infamy." Now, Schlesinger wrote, it is Americans who live in infamy as their government follows the path of fascist Japan. But that was a lone voice among elites.

Dissidents, of course, describe "the supreme international crime" as fundamentally wrong. I haven't seen polls about public attitudes on this question.

What about when it is that people know to undertake more serious or severe resistance efforts after the point at which "the limits of possible protest" are reached? In a letter to George Steiner in the NYR, in 1967, you gave the example of what this might look like, now 60 years ago during the Spanish Civil War, when people found it quite necessary to join international brigades to fight against the army of their own country; or, applied to Vietnam, the possible action

one might undertake in such circumstances of travelling to Hanoi as a hostage against further bombing. —That's pretty far-reaching, relatively speaking, to what we see in current resistance efforts today against the war. What's your feeling about the possibilities for such methods today in relation to the Iraq war, border action, or other criminal policy in the Middle East and elsewhere? Do situations have to get worse before people or individuals might deem this sort of action necessary?

As for living with the victims to help them or provide them some measure of protection, that is a phenomenon of the 1980s, for the first time in imperial history, to my knowledge, in reaction to Reagan's terrorist wars that devastated Central America, one of his many horrendous crimes. The solidarity movements that took shape then have now extended worldwide, though only in limited ways to Iraq.

NEUTRALITY

Let's talk about the role of intellectuals in all of this. Here's a question that might be relevant for students to hear especially: You've suggested that the major inducements to becoming absorbed into the ideology of the overall scholarship in this country, largely subservient to power interests, are the significant rewards in prestige and affluence, as well as access to power and authority. So, what are some of the things you've observed in your own time in the academy as a kind of source of this process in American education?

Educational institutions like universities don't exist in a social vacuum; they rely for their existence on the external resources of the society. They rely on the state and contributions from, basically, the wealthy. And the state and the wealthy sectors are very closely linked. So, the universities are in a certain social system in which they reflect a certain distribution of power. They're embedded in it. And that means the struggle for university independence—or independence of thought, and willingness to challenge—that's a hard struggle. You're struggling against social conditions that militate against it.

And it's true, what you said is correct, there are rewards and privileges that come along with conformity, but there's more to say. There are also punishments and abuse, loss of jobs, and so on, that come from challenging systems of power. Both factors operate. So, yes, there's a constant struggle to try and maintain university independence, and it's a hard one.

Sometimes it's argued that the universities should just be neutral, that they shouldn't take positions on anything. Well, there's merit in that, I would like to see that in some abstract universe, but in this universe what that position entails is conformity to the distribution of external power.

So let me take a concrete case, aspects of which are still very much alive on my own campus. Let's take some distance so we can see things more clearly. Back in the 1960s, in my university, MIT, the political science department was carrying out studies with students and faculty on counterinsurgency in Vietnam. Okay, that reflected the distribution of power in the outside society. The US is involved in counterinsurgency in Vietnam: it's our patriotic duty to help. A free and independent university would have been carrying out studies on how poor peasants can resist the attack of a predatory superpower. Can you imagine how much support that would have gotten on campus? Well, okay, that's what

neutrality turns into when it's carried out—when the ideal, which is a good ideal, is pursued unthinkingly. It ends up being conformity to power.

Henry Kissinger, who at least has the virtue of honesty, was asked by the *Washington Post* why he is now objecting to same Iranian nuclear programs that he was instrumental in instituting when he was in office back in the 70s. And he said, frankly, Well, they were an ally then. They needed nuclear power. And now they are an enemy so they don't need nuclear power.

ACTIVISM AND SOCIAL CHANGE

For the last question I'd like to talk a little about providing alternatives, for people trying to figure out things, searching for answers, seeing through propaganda, developing solidarity, initiating movements. Here's a good quote I came across that might be a good starting point, from the notable novelist E M Forster, writing at the beginning stages of the Second World War, in 1939, in his essay "What I Believe" :

"I do not believe in Belief. But this is an age of faith, and there are so many militant creeds that, in self-defense, one has to formulate a creed of one's own. Tolerance, good temper and sympathy...in a world rent by religious and racial persecution, in a world where ignorance rules, and science, who ought to have ruled, plays the subservient pimp." He repeats : "Tolerance, good temper and sympathy—they are what matter really, and if the human race is not to collapse they must come to the front before long."

What are some of the things he's getting at here that we can discuss in terms of alternatives for the future, and social organization?

I'm often asked questions like that, in maybe a dozen emails a night or in talks and so on, and I'm always at a loss to answer. Not because I can't think of an answer, but because I think we all know the answer. There aren't any magic keys here; there are no mysterious ways of approaching things. What it takes is just what has led to progress and success in the past. We live in a much more civilized world than we did even when Forster was writing, in many respects.

Say, women's rights, or opposition to torture—or even opposition to aggression—environmental concerns, recognition of some of the crimes of our own history, like what happened to the indigenous population. We can go on and on. There's been much improvement in those areas. How? Well, because people like those working in alternative media, or those we never hear about who are doing social organizing, community building, political action, etc., engage themselves in trying to do something about it. □□□