

Imperial Ambition

by Noam Chomsky and David Barsamian

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David Barsamian: What are the regional implications of the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq?

Noam Chomsky: I think not only the region but the world in general perceives it correctly as a kind of an easy test case to try to establish a norm for use of military force, which was declared in general terms last September. Last September, the National Security Strategy of the United States of America was issued. It presented a somewhat novel and unusually extreme doctrine on the use of force in the world. And it's hard not to notice that the drumbeat for war in Iraq coincided with that. It also coincided with the onset of the congressional campaign. All these are tied together.

The new doctrine was not one of preemptive war, which arguably falls within some stretching of the U.N. Charter, but rather of something that doesn't even begin to have any grounds in international law, namely, preventive war. The doctrine, you recall, was that the United States would rule the world by force, and that if there is any challenge perceived to its domination, a challenge perceived in the distance, invented, imagined, whatever, then the U.S. will have the right to destroy that challenge before it becomes a threat. That's preventive war, not preemptive war.

And if you want to declare a doctrine, a powerful state has the capacity to create what is called a new norm. So if India invades Pakistan to put an end to monstrous atrocities, that's not a norm. But if the United States bombs Serbia on dubious grounds, that's a norm. That's what power means.

So if you want to establish a new norm, you have to do something. And the easiest way to do it is to select a completely defenseless target, which can be completely overwhelmed by the most massive military force in human history. However, in order to do that credibly, at least to your own population, you have to frighten them. So the defenseless target has to be turned into an awesome threat to survival which was responsible for September 11 and is about to attack us again, and so on and so forth. And that was indeed done. Beginning last September there was a massive effort which substantially succeeded in convincing Americans, alone in the world, that Saddam Hussein is not only a monster but a threat to their existence. That was the content of the October congressional resolution and a lot of things since. And it shows in the polls. And by now about half the population even believes that he was responsible for September 11.

So all this falls together. You have the doctrine pronounced. You have a norm established in a very easy case. The population is driven into a panic and, alone in the world, believes fantasies of this kind and therefore is willing to support military force in self-defense. And if you believe this, then it really is self-defense. So it's kind of like a textbook example of aggression, with the purpose of extending the scope of

further aggression. Once the easy case is handled, you can move on to think of harder cases.

Those are the main reasons why so much of the world is overwhelmingly opposed to the war. It's not just the attack on Iraq. Many people perceive it correctly as exactly the way it's intended, as a firm statement that you had better watch out, we're on the way. That's why the United States is now regarded as the greatest threat to peace in the world by probably the vast majority of the population of the world. George Bush has succeeded within a year in converting the United States to a country that is greatly feared, disliked, and even hated.

DB: At the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in late January, you described Bush and the people around him as "radical nationalists" engaging in "imperial violence." Is this regime in Washington substantively different from previous ones?

NC: It is useful to have some historical perspective. So let's go to the opposite end of the political spectrum, the Kennedy liberals, about as far as you can get. In 1963, they announced a doctrine which is not very different from Bush's national security strategy report. This was in 1963. Dean Acheson, a respected elder statesman, a senior adviser to the Kennedy administration, delivered a lecture to the American Society for International Law in which he instructed them that, no legal challenge arises in the case of a U.S. response to a challenge to its position, prestige, or authority. The wording was pretty much like that. What was he referring to? He was referring to the U.S. terrorist war and economic warfare against Cuba. And the timing is quite significant. This was shortly after the missile crisis, which drove the world to the edge of nuclear war. And that was largely a result of a major campaign of international terrorism aimed at what's now called regime change, a major factor that led to the missiles being sent. Right afterwards, Kennedy stepped up the international terrorist campaign, and Acheson informed the Society for International Law that we had the right of preventive war against a mere challenge to our position and prestige, not even a threat to our existence. His wording, in fact, was even more extreme than the Bush doctrine last September.

On the other hand, to put it in perspective, that was a proclamation by Dean Acheson. It wasn't an official statement of policy. And it's obviously not the first or last declaration of this kind. This one last September is unusual in its brazenness and in the fact that it is a formal statement of policy, not just a statement by a high official.

DB: A slogan we have all heard at peace rallies is "No Blood for Oil." The whole issue of oil is often referred to as the driving force behind the U.S. attack and occupation of Iraq. How central is oil to U.S. strategy?

NC: It's undoubtedly central. I don't think any sane person doubts that. The Gulf region is the main energy-producing region of the world. It has been since the Second World War. It's expected to be at least for another generation. It's a huge source of strategic power, of material wealth. And Iraq is absolutely central to it. It has the second largest oil reserves. It's very easily accessible, cheap. To control Iraq is to be in a very strong position to determine the price and production levels, not too high, not too low, to probably undermine OPEC, and to swing your weight around throughout the world. That's been true since the Second World War. It has nothing in particular to do with access to the oil; the U.S. doesn't really intend to access it. But

it does have to do with control. So that's in the background. If Iraq was somewhere in Central Africa, it wouldn't be chosen for this test case. So that's certainly there in the background, just as it's there in less crucial regions, like Central Asia. However, it doesn't account for the specific timing of the operation, because that's a constant concern.

DB: A 1945 State Department document on Middle East oil described it as "...a stupendous source of strategic power, and one of the greatest material prizes in world history." The U.S. imports 15 percent of its oil from Venezuela. It also imports oil from Colombia and Nigeria. All three of those states are perhaps, from Washington's perspective, somewhat problematic right now, with Hugo Chavez in Venezuela and serious internal conflicts, literally civil war, in Colombia and uprisings in Nigeria threatening oil supplies there. What do you think about all of those factors?

NC: That's very pertinent, and those are the regions where the U.S. actually intends to have access. The Middle East it wants to control. But, at least according to intelligence projections, the U.S. intends to rely on what they regard as more stable Atlantic Basin resources—Atlantic Basin means West Africa and the Western Hemisphere—which are more totally under U.S. control than the Middle East, which is a difficult region. So the projections are: control the Middle East, but maintain access to the Atlantic Basin, including the countries you mentioned. It does, therefore, follow that lack of conformity, disruption of one kind or another, in those areas is a significant threat, and there is very likely to be another episode like Iraq, if this one works the way the civilian planners at the Pentagon hope. If it's an easy victory, no fighting, establish a new regime which you will call democratic, and not too much catastrophe, if it works like that, they are going to be emboldened on to the next step.

And the next step, you can think of several possibilities. One of them, indeed, is the Andean region. The U.S. has military bases all around it now. There are military forces right in there. Colombia and Venezuela are both, especially Venezuela, substantial oil producers, and there is more elsewhere, like Ecuador, and even Brazil. Yes, that's a possibility, that the next step in the campaign of preventive wars, once the so-called norm is established and accepted, would be to go on there. Another possibility is Iran.

DB: Indeed, Iran. The U.S. was advised by none other than that, as Bush called him, "man of peace," Sharon, to go after Iran "the day after" they finish with Iraq. What about Iran? A designated axis-of-evil state and also a country that has a lot of oil.

NC: As far as Israel is concerned, Iraq has never been much of an issue. They consider it a kind of pushover. But Iran is a different story. Iran is a much more serious military and economic force. And for years Israel has been pressing the United States to take on Iran. Iran is too big for Israel to attack, so they want the big boys to do it.

And it's quite likely that the war may already be under way. A year ago, over 10 percent of the Israeli air force was reported to be permanently based in eastern Turkey, that is, in these huge U.S. military bases in eastern Turkey. And they are reported to be flying reconnaissance over the Iranian border. In addition, there are credible reports, that there are efforts, that the U.S. and Turkey and Israel are

attempting to stir up Azeri nationalist forces in northern Iran to move towards a kind of a linkage of parts of Iran with Azerbaijan. There is a kind of an axis of U.S.-Turkish-Israeli power in the region opposed to Iran that may ultimately, perhaps, lead to the split-up of Iran and maybe military attack. Although there will be a military attack only if it's taken for granted that Iran would be basically defenseless. They're not going to invade anyone who can fight back.

DB: With U.S. military forces in Afghanistan and in Iraq, as well as bases in Turkey and Central Asia, Iran is literally surrounded now. Might not that objective reality on the ground push forces inside Iran to develop nuclear weapons, if they don't already have them, in self-defense?

NC: Very likely. The little evidence we have—serious evidence—indicates that the 1981 Israeli bombing of the Osirak reactor probably stimulated and may have initiated the Iraqi nuclear weapons development program. They were engaged in building a nuclear plant, but what it was nobody knew. It was investigated on the ground after the bombing by a well-known nuclear physicist from Harvard—I believe he was head of the Harvard physics department at the time. He published his analysis in the leading scientific journal, *Nature*. According to him, it was a power plant. He's an expert on this topic. Other Iraqi sources, exiled, have indicated—we can't prove it—that nothing much was going on. They may have been toying with the idea of nuclear weapons, but that the bombing of it did stimulate the nuclear weapons program. You can't prove this, but that's what the evidence looks like. And it's very plausible. That doesn't have to be true. What you described is highly likely. If you come out and say, "Look, we're going to attack you," and countries know that they have no means of conventional defense, you're virtually ordering them to develop weapons of mass destruction and networks of terror. It's transparent. That's exactly why the CIA and everyone else predicted it.

DB: What does the Iraq war and occupation mean for the Palestinians?

NC: Disaster.

DB: No roadmaps to peace?

NC: It's interesting to read it. One of the rules of journalism—I don't know exactly how it got established, but it's held with absolute consistency—is that when you mention George Bush's name in an article, the headline has to speak of his vision and the article has to talk about his dreams. Maybe there will be a photograph of him right next to it peering into the distance. And one of George Bush's dreams and visions is to have a Palestinian state somewhere, sometime, in some unspecified place, maybe in the desert. And we are supposed to worship and praise that as a magnificent vision. It has become a convention of journalists. There was a lead story in the *Wall Street Journal* on March 21 which I think had the words "vision" and "dream" about ten times.

The vision and the dream is that maybe the United States will stop undermining totally the long-term efforts of the rest of the world, virtually without exception, to create some kind of a viable political settlement. Up until now, the U.S. has been blocking it, for the last twenty-five to thirty years. The Bush administration went

even further in blocking it, sometimes in pretty extreme ways, so extreme that they weren't even reported.

For example, last December at the U.N., for the first time the Bush administration reversed U.S. policy on Jerusalem. Up until now, the U.S. had, at least in principle, gone along with the 1968 Security Council resolution ordering Israel to revoke its annexation and occupation and settlement policies in East Jerusalem. And for the first time, last December, the Bush administration reversed that. That's one of many cases intended to undermine the possibility of any meaningful political settlement. To disguise this, it's called a vision, and the effort to pursue it is called a U.S. initiative, although in fact what it really is, as anyone who pays the slightest attention to the history knows, is a U.S. effort to catch up to long-standing European and Arab efforts and to try to cut them down so they don't mean very much. The great praise for Sharon in the United States, who is now considered a great statesman—he is after, after all, one of the leading terrorist commanders in the world for the last fifty years—that's an interesting phenomenon, and it reveals another substantial achievement of propaganda, the whole story, and a dangerous one.

In mid-March, Bush made what was called his first significant pronouncement on the Middle East, on the Arab/Israeli problem. He gave a speech. Big headlines. First significant statement in years. If you read it, it was boilerplate, except for one sentence. That one sentence, if you take a look at it closely, gives his roadmap: as the peace process advances, Israel should terminate new settlement programs. What does that mean? That means until the peace process reaches a point that Bush endorses, which could be indefinitely far in the future, until then Israel should continue to build settlements. That's a change in policy. Up until now, officially at least, the U.S. has been opposed to expansion of the illegal settlement programs that make a political settlement impossible. But now Bush is saying the opposite: Go on and settle. We'll keep paying for it, until we decide that somehow the peace process has reached an adequate point. So, yes, it was a significant change towards more aggression, undermining of international law, and undermining of the possibilities of peace. That's not the way it was portrayed. But take a look at the wording.

DB: You've described the level of public protest and resistance to the Iraq war as "unprecedented"; never before has there been so much opposition before a war began. Where is that resistance going?

NC: I don't know any way to predict human affairs. It will go the way people decide it will go. There are many possibilities. It should intensify. The tasks are now much greater and more serious than they were before. On the other hand, it's harder. It's just psychologically easier to organize to oppose a military attack than it is to oppose a long-standing program of imperial ambition, of which this attack is one phase, and of which others are going to come next. That takes more thought, more dedication, more long-term engagement. It's the difference between deciding, okay, I'm in this for the long haul and saying, okay, I'm going out to a demonstration tomorrow and then back home. Those are choices, all of them. The same in the civil rights movement, the women's movement, anything.

DB: Talk about threats to and intimidation of dissidents here inside the United States, including roundups of immigrants, and citizens, for that matter.

NC: Vulnerable people like immigrants, definitely have to be concerned. The current government has claimed rights which go beyond any precedents. There are some in wartime, but those are pretty ugly ones, like the 1942 round up of Japanese, or, say, Wilson during the First World War, which was pretty awful. But they're now claiming rights that are quite without precedent, including even the right to arrest citizens, hold them in detention without access to family or lawyers, and do so indefinitely, without charges. Immigrants and other vulnerable people should certainly be cautious. On the other hand, for people like us, citizens with any privileges, though there are threats, as compared with what people face in most of the world, they are so slight that it's hard to get very upset about them. I've just been back from Turkey a couple of times and Colombia, and compared with the threats that people face there, we're living in heaven. And they don't worry about it. They do, obviously, but they don't let it stop them.

DB: Do you see Europe and East Asia emerging as counterforces to U.S. power at some point?

NC: They're emerging all right. There is no doubt that Europe and Asia are economic forces roughly on a par with North America, and have their own interests. Their interests are not simply to follow U.S. orders. They're tightly linked. So, for example, the corporate sector in Europe, the U.S., and most of Asia are linked in all kinds of ways and have common interests. On the other hand, there are separate interests, and these are problems that go way back, especially with Europe.

The U.S. has always had an ambivalent attitude towards Europe. It wanted Europe to be unified, as a more efficient market for U.S. corporations, great advantages of scale. On the other hand, it was always concerned about the threat that Europe might move off in another direction. A lot of the issues about the accession of the East European countries to the European Union have a lot to do with that. The U.S. is strongly in favor of it, because it's hoping that these countries will be more susceptible to U.S. influence and will be able to undermine the core of Europe, which is France and Germany, the big industrial countries, which might move in a somewhat more independent direction.

Also in the background is a long-standing U.S. hatred of the European social market system, which provides decent wages and working conditions and benefits. It's very different from the U.S. system. And they don't want that model to exist, because it's a dangerous one. People get funny ideas. And it's very explicitly stated that with the accession of Eastern European countries, with low wages and repression of labor and so on, it may help undermine the social and worker standards in Western Europe, and that would be a big benefit for the U.S.

DB: With the U.S. economy deteriorating and with more layoffs, how is the Bush administration going to maintain what some are calling a garrison state with permanent war and occupation of numerous countries? How are they going to pull it off?

NC: They have to pull it off for about another six years. By that time they hope they will have institutionalized highly reactionary programs within the United States. They will have left the economy in a very serious state, with huge deficits, pretty much the way they did in the 1980s. And then it will be somebody else's problem to patch it together. Meanwhile, they will have, they hope, undermined social programs,

diminished democracy, which of course they hate, by transferring decisions out of the public arena into private hands. and they will have done it in a way that will be very hard to disentangle. So they will have left a legacy internally that will be painful and hard. But only for the majority of the population. The people they're concerned about are going to be making out like bandits. Very much like the Reagan years. It's the same people, after all.

And internationally, they hope that they will have institutionalized the doctrines of imperial domination through force and preventive war as a choice. The U.S. now in military spending probably exceeds the rest of the world combined, and it's much more advanced and moving out into extremely dangerous directions, like space. They assume, I suppose, that no matter what happens to the American economy, that will give such overwhelming force that people will just have to do what they say.

DB: What do you say to the peace activists who labored for so long trying to prevent the invasion of Iraq and who are now feeling a sense of anger and sadness?

NC: That they should be realistic. Abolitionism. How long did the struggle go on before they made any progress? If you give up every time you don't achieve the immediate gain you want, you're just guaranteeing that the worst is going to happen. These are long, hard struggles. And, in fact, what happened in the last couple of months should be seen quite positively. The basis was created for expansion and development of a peace and justice movement that will move on to much harder tasks. And that's the way these things go. It isn't easy.