

# An Interview with Noam Chomsky

*Noam Chomsky first came to public notice in the 1960s as an outspoken opponent of the Vietnam War. Already well-known in academic circles because of his breakthrough work in linguistics, beginning with *The Logical Structure of Linguistic Theory*, he became better known, if not infamous, over the next few decades, for his criticism of U.S. foreign policy and “state-supported private power.”*

*While he has been one of the nation’s best-known radical thinkers for decades, he is not easy to pin down politically. At times, he’s called himself an anarchist of the anarcho-syndicalist variety, at other times, a conservative of the classical liberal variety. He has also defined himself as Zionist, although he uses a classical definition of Zionism, far removed from how the term is understood today. Chomsky, in fact, has been roundly criticized by both conservatives and liberals for his writings on the Israel-Palestine question and his accusation that the major sources of international terrorism are the world’s major powers, led by the United States.*

*Chomsky is the author of more than two dozen books and well over 100 articles related to linguistics and scores more books and articles on political topics. According to analysts of the Arts and Humanities Citation Index, he has been cited more often than any other living scholar and comes in eighth on the all-time citation list, between Freud and Hegel.*

*Despite his controversial pronouncements, Chomsky has long praised the freedom of expression enjoyed in the United States, though he credits the citizens themselves, rather than the government, with battling to ensure that the nation keeps those freedoms. He has also long been a champion of academic freedom and the academy and has taught at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which he also praises for its openness of discussion, for 50 years. For this *National Security and the Academy* issue of *Thought & Action*, we asked Professor Chomsky whether the nation’s new emphasis on security threatens this freedom of expression he admires.*

**THOUGHT & ACTION** How would you describe the intellectual climate on the nation's campuses? And is the climate different now than it was before September 11, 2001?

**NOAM CHOMSKY** In general, I think the campuses are like the country as a whole. This is a very insular society. Most people don't pay much attention to anything beyond the borders. But one effect of 9/11, which was very striking, was that there was enormous increase in people's interest—not only on college campuses, everywhere—in learning something about the outside world. They became a lot more open in the aftermath of the events of September 11. The whole country became a lot more open. It's quite remarkable. It's as if what happened on September 11, 2001, broke through the sense that we don't have to know anything about the outside world. Plainly, we do.

**THOUGHT & ACTION** What are some examples of this increased interest in the outside world?

**NOAM CHOMSKY** People like me, who are giving talks all the time, can see it very dramatically. The number of invitations to give talks—political talks—shot up after 9/11. And audiences became much larger than they were before, all over the country. And the same is true of books. The small publishers that publish more-or-less dissident political literature suddenly got a rush of orders and had to start reprinting books that had barely sold 20 or 30 years before, when they were published. Now lots of people wanted them. And that reflected itself on college campuses too but as part of a more general tendency. So in that respect, the effect was to make college campuses and the whole society more open.

**THOUGHT & ACTION** Were there other, perhaps different, reactions to 9/11?

**NOAM CHOMSKY** There is an effect in the opposite direction, coming from an extremist, right wing that is trying to stifle discussion on campuses by imposing standards on what people are allowed to talk about. I think maybe 20 or so state legislatures are considering legislation—maybe some have passed it—monitoring and organizing students to monitor whether things that happen in the classroom meet the doctrinal standards of the right-wing extremists. A lot of this is focused on the Middle East departments.

**THOUGHT & ACTION** In what way?

**NOAM CHOMSKY** They've been more under attack than anyone, with the demand that they satisfy the orthodoxy of the doctrinaire right-wingers. These groups say they're concerned about academic freedom, but it has nothing to do

with academic freedom. It has to do with shutting down discussion. They already have an overwhelming dominance of discussion without any pressure, but they want it to approach a hundred percent. You can see that at Columbia right now, which is a striking case.

*Ed. Note:* See Roy and Schrecker articles in this issue.

**THOUGHT & ACTION** **What about the argument that conservatives are being discriminated against on the nation's campuses? Is such discrimination occurring?**

**NOAM CHOMSKY** No. They have not one particle of evidence for that. In fact, what they call “conservative” means “far right.” And it’s the far right that wants to discriminate. The college campuses are pretty conservative, if you look at the faculty. Take one of the issues the right wing is focusing on, the claim that Israel’s right to exist is being threatened. Is the right wing arguing that students and faculty who claim that Israel should have the rights of all other states are being silenced on campus? There’s an easy way to test that. And they don’t test it, because they know what the answer is going to be. Just do a poll of college faculty and see if more than .001 percent disagree with the simple proposition that Israel should have all the rights of any state in the international system. Everybody agrees with it.

The harassment on the nation’s campuses goes the other way, and it is massive. Take Columbia University again. Edward Said, whom the right wing of course hated, was subjected to ongoing harassment. He had to have police protection at his office, at his home. He had to have a buzzer in his home so he could call the police station. That went on all the time. I’ve been under police protection when I gave a talk on college campuses about the Middle East. But nobody’s complaining about that. That’s the way it is.

Actually, there’s a name for what the right wing is doing. It’s called the “thief, thief technique.” The idea is when you’re caught with your hand in somebody’s pocket, you point to someone else and say, “Thief, thief!” Maybe everyone will run after the other person and forget you’re the robber. The fact is, there has been extreme discrimination on campus, and very serious harassment, but it’s of anyone who questions the orthodoxy, not against conservatives.

**THOUGHT & ACTION** **What is the orthodox consensus, what does it mean to deviate from it, and what are the costs of deviating?**

**NOAM CHOMSKY** The orthodoxy, as is usually the case, supports the U.S. government position. And the U.S. government position happens to be

extremely rejectionist in the case of the Middle East. Since the mid-1970s, the U.S. alone has blocked the overwhelming international consensus that there should be a two-state settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian question. And anyone who points out this rejectionist stance or wants to discuss it often faces serious harassment.

**THOUGHT & ACTION** **Would you say that the intellectual community's response to attacks on Middle Eastern scholars has been adequate?**

**NOAM CHOMSKY** The nation's intellectual leaders are intimidated. Did you ever hear of any protest because someone who raised questions about the dominant orthodox position on the Middle East had to be given police protection when they were giving talks on campus? I don't recall any protests about that. It happens all the time even in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where I live. I've gotten to know a fair number of the police on campus and the town because they're often present when there's a talk on campus. And it's not just me. It is anyone who deviates marginally from the overwhelming orthodox consensus.

**THOUGHT & ACTION** **To go back to my original question, many Americans, including large numbers of our students, are afraid of the possibility of terrorist attacks being carried out against civilian targets—**

**NOAM CHOMSKY** I'm a lot more afraid than they are, because I've been reading and writing about it for many years before 9/11. No, to anyone who reads the newspapers, it's been obvious since 1993 that the U.S. is very likely to be subject to major terrorist attack. That's when the first effort was made to blow up the World Trade Center, which came pretty close to succeeding, carried out by the Jihadi terrorists who were organized and trained by the U.S. and its allies in the 1980s. And pretty much the same people who did it in 2001. And there's a substantial literature in those years. So, sure, there's every reason to be afraid.

**THOUGHT & ACTION** **What is the best way for college professors and staff to respond to these fears that students have?**

**NOAM CHOMSKY** What students ought to be taught is what the reasons are for this. For example, they ought to focus on the fact that public policy, government policy, is in fact increasing that threat and, in fact, consciously so. So, for example, take the invasion of Iraq. The U.S. intelligence services predicted—informed the President a few weeks before the invasion—that the invasion was likely to increase the threat of terror. It wasn't unique to U.S.

intelligence; this was being pointed out by intelligence agencies everywhere. And in fact, that turned out to be correct. It did substantially increase the threat of terror. And the government knew it, but it's just a low priority for them.

**THOUGHT & ACTION** **Aren't a lot of institutions, even the government, using that fear to chill debate on these issues?**

**NOAM CHOMSKY** Trying, of course. But that's not just true of the U.S. government. In the first interviews I had after 9/11, which were a couple of hours after the terrorist attacks took place, one thing I pointed out—it's so obvious that I don't take any credit for pointing it out—is that every power system in the world is going to use this as an excuse to increase repression if they're carrying out repression, or to control their own populations. That's the way power systems react in a crisis.

So the Russians used it to step up their atrocities in Chechnya, and Israel used it to step up its repression in the West Bank, Indonesia used it in Aceh, China used it in Western China, other governments that weren't carrying out violent repression used it to institute things that they call "protection against terrorism acts," or something like that, to discipline and control their own populations. That's the way power systems react.

In the [United States] it was almost comical. Robert Zoellick, who was the Trade Representative, said, "Well, as a result of 9/11, we have to give the president fast-track authority." That is, Kremlin-style authority to negotiate international economic agreements without congressional participation. What does that have to do with protecting us from terrorist attacks? Nothing. It's just that they knew perfectly well that the public was opposed to this, and here was a possibility of pressuring them to accept it. Every power system in the world did that, not just the United States.

But, as I mentioned at the outset, another of the effects—and a major effect—of 9/11 in the United States, was quite the opposite. It was to open people's minds, to make them think they'd better raise questions about what's going on in the world.

**THOUGHT & ACTION** **Would you briefly explain your view of the society that higher education is functioning within in the United States, that is, what does "state-supported private power" mean to higher education?**

**NOAM CHOMSKY** Let's take where I'm sitting—MIT—which is a great university. I've been very happy for here for over 50 years. So I'm not criticizing it. It's technically a private institution. But it's overwhelmingly state-supported.

Up until about 1970, I mean, I don't remember the numbers exactly, but my recollection is that it was approximately 90 percent Pentagon-supported. By now, the mix is different. The Pentagon funding has declined, and funding from health-related sectors of the government, like NIH (National Institutes of Health) and others, has gone way up. But that's because of a shift in the nature of the overall economy. The cutting edge of the economy for the first several decades after World War II was electronics-based, and that was covered by Pentagon funding extensively. That's why we have computers and the Internet and telecommunications and so on. The cutting edge of the next phase of the economy is going to be biology-based. So therefore public funding, state funding, will be toward the biology-oriented industries. The general point is the same. Corporate power, private business power, wants the public to pay the costs and take the risks of fundamental research and development, and then they'll pick up the profits. That's the way our economy works. And an institution like MIT reflects that. So, yes, it's a dramatic example of state-supported private institutions

**THOUGHT & ACTION** You've written about how institutions like the press—and presumably the academy—are used to control the population and to thwart democracy. But you've also paraphrased John Dewey as saying that education is one means of combating the undermining of democracy.

**NOAM CHOMSKY** That's what John Dewey was hoping: that education would promote democracy. So, yes, in a free society, universities ought to be, schools too, for that matter, should be places where people—faculty and students—are encouraged to challenge, question, press the borders of inquiry, to be completely open to challenging received and accepted ideas. In fact, that's the way the sciences work. The sciences wouldn't survive if that wasn't the atmosphere. And it should be the atmosphere throughout education. But when you get to areas that reflect public policy, the hammer comes down and you get repression of challenges to authority. As in the cases we were discussing.

**THOUGHT & ACTION** What can concerned faculty and staff do to further democracy and the open debate that you're talking about?

**NOAM CHOMSKY** Our colleges and universities can do exactly what is done necessarily in the sciences, encourage faculty and students to question, to challenge, to press the borders of inquiry, to be quite open to asking questions about established doctrines. I'm not suggesting that nobody does this. Many people do it. But there is pressure to conform. Sometimes it's extreme, as in the

quasi-totalitarian attacks on the colleges that we were talking about before. But it's always there, more or less. I can give you plenty of cases from personal experience—not at MIT, but elsewhere—where dissident questioning faculty were essentially informed that they'd better shape up and keep to doctrinal orthodoxy or they'll be out. Anyone in most universities can tell you about this—and it's done in subtle ways, you know. It's not, "I'm going to kick you out," but, "You're lacking in collegiality," or something like this.

There are all sorts of ways of inducing—not forcing—but inducing conformity and obedience. Sometimes it's extreme, like the example I was mentioning, where somebody who questions U.S. policy in the Middle East has to have police protection. But there are many less extreme measures.

**THOUGHT & ACTION Is the intellectual community on college campuses challenging orthodoxy and promoting open discussion?**

**NOAM CHOMSKY** It varies with the institutions. In the sciences, I think it's done very well, as far as I can see. And I think that's one of the reasons why MIT has been such a free and open institution for many years. It's a science-based university. In the sciences, you have to do it, or the sciences will die. In the sciences, you expect graduate students and junior faculty to challenge your own theories and your own beliefs, and to come up with counter-examples to them and improvements. I just talked to a student, just before this interview—and that's exactly what she was doing. She was explaining to me reasons why proposals I've made can't work for the languages she's working on. Great. That's what school is supposed to be. And it ought to happen at every level.

**THOUGHT & ACTION What do you mean that the challenging of theories and beliefs is not taking place in subject areas outside the sciences?**

**NOAM CHOMSKY** Let's go back to the Middle East, with regard to the fact that for 30 years the United States has been blocking the international consensus on a two-state settlement between Israel and Palestine ever since it vetoed the first Security Council resolution on this in 1976. I think that ought to be discussable.

And there are other things. Let's take, for example, the fact that in March we should have been commemorating the 25th anniversary of the assassination of the Archbishop of El Salvador by security forces backed and supported by the United States. And before that the 15th anniversary of the murder of the 15 Jesuit intellectuals by an elite battalion armed and trained by the U.S., which had already killed tens of thousands—but we didn't. If these things had happened in

Czechoslovakia, under the Russians, we'd be commemorating it. When it happens under our domination and with our guns, it's forgotten. It's deep in the memory hole. Well, that should be challenged.

You don't have to cite John Dewey on this. All of us are responsible for our own actions. That's the most elementary moral principle you can imagine. So therefore there should be a focus on our own actions—what they were, what they have been, what we can do about them, and so on. But, on the contrary, overwhelmingly this is marginalized, put to the side, and when it's brought up it does elicit considerable hysteria.

**THOUGHT & ACTION** **These days, there's a strong emphasis on the utilitarian value of higher education, the idea that people, especially poor people and people of color, need jobs and don't have time for this idea of educating the whole person. What do you think of this idea?**

**NOAM CHOMSKY** That's a point of view that belongs in dictatorships, not in democracies. It assumes that if you're poor, you don't have any need—there's no justification—for you to be offered the opportunity to participate in high culture. I mean, that is garbage.

I happened to grow up in an immigrant community where my relatives were working class, and mostly unemployed working class, this was in the 1930s. But they were active participants in high culture. And this goes way back to the 19th century, the British and the American working classes were expected to be and had an opportunity to be involved in high culture. There is certainly no reason why working people should be deprived of those opportunities today, and it has nothing to do with whether they should be also given the kind of training which will allow them to enter the economic system. You can do both.

**THOUGHT & ACTION** **Where does the impetus for one without the other—for training without, as you say, the high culture—come from?**

**NOAM CHOMSKY** It comes from the effort to turn people into tools of production. And in fact, if you go back to the origins of the modern school system in the United States—which is one of the best in the world, incidentally, had been, at least—a large part of the pressure behind it was an effort to turn independent farmers into factory workers.

Sometimes this took extreme forms, like Taylorism. Taylorism became popular around the 1920s, roughly, as a way of turning people on the job into robots. And then came the recognition that you could carry out what was sometimes called off-job control, through propaganda and control of attitudes.

That's a large part of where the public relations industry derives from. But all of these are attempts to control people, marginalize them, separate them from one another, to "just make sure they don't get in our hair."

**THOUGHT & ACTION Is there an anti-democratic strain of thinking in the United States?**

**NOAM CHOMSKY** This is pretty explicit in the liberal intellectual ideology, even for respected people like, say, Walter Lippmann, maybe the leading public intellectual of the 20th century. His point of view was that what he called the "responsible men," have to be protected from the roar and trampling of the bewildered herd, from the ignorant and meddlesome outsiders, like the majority of the population. Those are virtually quotes.

Harold Lasswell, one of the founders of modern political science, his view was that we should not succumb to democratic dogmatism about people being the best judges of their own interests. They are not. We are. And therefore, for their own good, we have to resort to propaganda to control them. This was the early '30s; people were still using the term "propaganda." And yes, we have to control them and make them obedient and marginalized, for their own good. Because we're the ones who know what's good for them.

And if you want to talk about where that gets to today, simply have a look at the major studies of public opinion released right before the election—which were barely reported in the press and almost nobody knows about. They show that both political parties and the media are far to the right of the general population on a host of important issues. People ought to know about that.

**THOUGHT & ACTION To summarize, are you worried that the national security state will curtail freedom of expression?**

**NOAM CHOMSKY** Well, it's going in both directions. There is greater and greater success in marginalizing people and in reducing the formal democratic system to empty forms. The November election was an example. Very few people even had an idea what the stand of the candidates was on issues. For example, a majority of Bush voters thought that he supported the Kyoto Protocol on global warming, which is overwhelmingly supported by the U.S. population. That's true in case after case, as careful studies have shown. All of that shows that the United States is becoming a kind of a failed state in which it has democratic forms but many pressures that converge to ensure its orderly function. That's one tendency.

On the other hand, there are opposite tendencies: concern, engagement,

openness on the part of the general public, and very surprising attitudes when you look at the polling results. I mean, I'm regarded as sort of radical, whatever that's supposed to mean. But I'm pretty much in the mainstream of the public.