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From Indochina to Iraq: At War With Asia

Noam Chomsky interviewed by Kevin Hewison

Vietnam and Laos 1970

Kevin Hewison: The Journal of Contemporary Asia (JCA) is now in its thirty-seventh year of publication, and you have been on the Editorial Board since Volume 1, No. 2. Could you tell us how it was that you came to be associated with this new journal, and why issue 2 rather than issue 1?

Noam Chomsky: This was 1970, which was a pretty complicated time in Southeast Asia, Indochina and the United States. I had been very active in the anti-war movement since the early 1960s, but at that time it was peaking. 1970 was absolutely the peak, with colleges closed; the country was falling apart and there was tremendous opposition to the war in Vietnam. This opposition was explicitly elicited by the Nixon-initiated invasion of Cambodia at a time when there had been enormous pressure to withdraw. The reaction in the administration to this pressure was to escalate - not unlike what is happening now in Iraq. Also, I had just come back from Southeast Asia where I had been in Laos and North Vietnam and so had a personal view of the region - which always enriches what you thought you knew. I may have been invited for the first issue, but in these circumstances I was just extremely busy.

Hewison: I recall you saying that you were in Hanoi at about the time that the first issue came out.

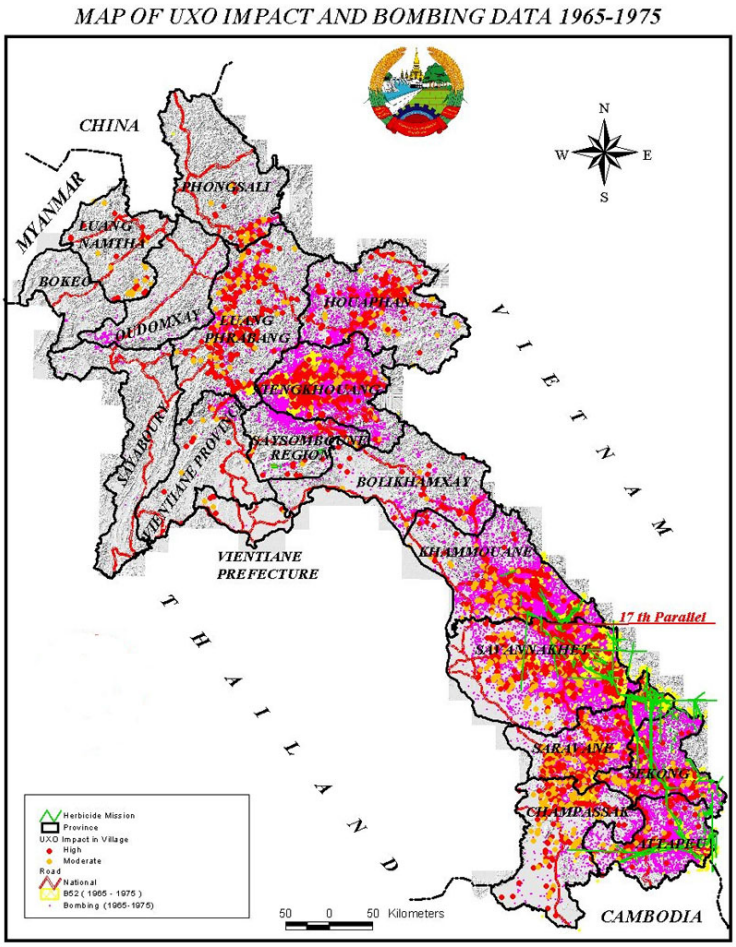
Chomsky: I may have been, or in Vientiane.

Hewison: That trip resulted in the book At War With Asia. Many see the chapter on Laos as being the first extended discussion of the so-called secret War in Laos.[1]

Chomsky: Yes, it is. It is only partially due to me. A lot of it is due to Fred Branfman. I spent most of my week in Laos in late March 1970 with him. He had been living in Laos for several years, knew the language fluently and had been trying desperately to get somebody to pay attention to what was going on. Thanks to him, I was able to spend several days visiting refugee camps about 30 kilometres or so away from Vientiane, and also to meet many people I would never have been able to locate on my own. All of which I wrote about, though sometimes protecting the identity of people in severe danger.

It was the right time to be there. The CIA mercenary army had shortly before cleared out tens of thousands of people from northern Laos - from the Plain of Jars - where many of them had been living in caves for years, subjected to what was, at that time, the most intensive bombing in history, soon to be surpassed in Cambodia. I spent a lot of time interviewing these refugees, which was revealing.

One of the other interesting things I did on this trip related to the story of the time that claimed North Vietnam had 50,000 troops in Laos and that's why the United States had to bomb. I was interested in the sources and did what seemed to be the obvious thing; I went to the American Embassy and asked to speak to the Political Officer - typically, the CIA representative at the Embassy. He came down and was very friendly, and I asked him if I could see some of the background material on the reported 50,000 troops. He took me up to a room and gave me piles of documentation. He also said that I was the first person to ever ask him for background, which was interesting. I read through it and I found that there was evidence that there was one Vietnamese battalion of maybe 2,500 people somewhere up in northern Laos, and the rest of the so-called 50,000 were either invented or were old men carrying a bag of rice on their back trying to make it through the bombing.



Bombing of Laos, 1965-1975

This information was astonishing because at this time the US was already using a forward base in northern Laos to guide the bombing of North Vietnam, so my guess was that there would have been a lot more North Vietnamese than that around. This information was corroborated then by the reports of interviews with captured prisoners and other material that I reviewed. Some of this material was provided by Fred Branfman and some I was able to find as I saw a bit more of the country - not much, but some.

This visit to Laos was a very moving experience. There had been some reporting of the so-called secret War. Jacques Decornoy had had an article in Le Monde[2] and freelance journalist Tim Allman had written about it.[3] So there was scattered material, but I was able to see evidence in some depth that hadn't appeared. I guess of any of the things I've ever written, that was the one that was closest to my feelings. I usually try to keep my feelings out of what I write, but I probably didn't in that one.

Hewison: You were in Laos on the way to North Vietnam in April 1970?

Chomsky: Yes. North Vietnam was interesting but I didn't see much. I was mostly lecturing at the Polytechnic University - more accurately, in the ruins of the University. There was a bombing pause, so faculty and students could be brought back from the countryside. They had been out of touch with the world for five years. I spent every day lecturing on any topic I could think of and that I knew anything about. There were all kinds of questions and interest from international affairs to linguistics and philosophy to what's Norman Mailer doing these days and so on.[4] I did get around a little bit, but not very far from Hanoi.

Hewison: Did you see evidence of bombing in and around Hanoi?

Chomsky: You could see the evidence in Hanoi. With my group of visitors - Doug Dowd and Dick Fernandes - we travelled a bit beyond Hanoi and were able to see the wreckage of Phu Ly, the hospital destroyed in Thanh Hoa city, which the US claimed was never hit, but we could see the shell. The area around the Ham Rong Bridge had been intensively bombed - it was just a kind of moonscape; villages, everything just totally destroyed and the bridge barely standing. But we knew that Hanoi was somewhat protected - because there were embassies, foreign correspondents. The further you got from Hanoi, the more intensive the bombing.

It is rather interesting looking at the Pentagon Papers[5] and other declassified papers that have since emerged. The bombing of North Vietnam was planned in meticulous detail. Just how far do you go, how much money do you expend, when do you stop and so on. The bombing of South Vietnam, which was far more intensive, was barely even discussed; just do it. The same comes through in Robert McNamara's memoirs.[6] He goes through in detail how they planned, considered and thought about the bombing of the North, particularly the beginning of the bombing in February 1965. His memoirs don't even mention the fact that, right at that time, in January 1965, he ordered the bombing of South Vietnam to be vastly extended. In fact at that time, it was at triple the scale of the bombing of the North, as Bernard Fall reported. It is a rather striking fact. What it tells you is clear: the bombing of South Vietnam had no cost to the United States. The bombing of North Vietnam was costly. For one thing the North had some defences and could shoot down bombers. For another thing, around Hanoi, as I mentioned, the bombing would have been around foreign embassies - not in the southern parts of the North, however, and that area was also devastated. Bomb Haiphong and you can hit a Russian ship in the harbour; bomb north of Hanoi and you can hit a Chinese railroad that happens to pass through Vietnam. That's costly. So there was meticulous attention.

I have to say, in criticism of the anti-war movement, that it took pretty much the same position. The condemnation of the war, right to the end, was mostly of the bombing of the North and then Cambodia. Not the bombing of the South, which was far more intensive. By 1967, just before his death, Bernard Fall was saying that he doubted that Vietnam would survive as a historical and cultural entity under the impact of the most intensive bombing that an area of that size had ever undergone. Fall was no dove. In fact, in McNamara's memoirs, he's the one non-government person who is cited with respect as a military historian of Vietnam. He'd been making these

points for some time. But it was not the focus of the anti-war movement. It's mostly the costly bombing of the North that was the focus, and that's not a pretty fact.

Agent Orange Defoliation, South Vietnam

In fact, the war on the South is almost unknown in the US. Very few people even know that it was in 1962 that Kennedy launched outright aggression against South Vietnam. The US had already imposed a sort of Latin American style terrorist state, which had killed maybe 60-70,000 people and had elicited resistance, which it could no longer control. So Kennedy just escalated the war to what we would call direct aggression if anybody else did it. The US Air Force started bombing under South Vietnamese markings, napalm was authorised, chemical warfare to destroy crops and ground cover began and they started rounding people up and moved them into what amounted to concentration camps or urban slums, as it was put, to "protect" them from the indigenous guerrillas who the US government knew they were willingly supporting.

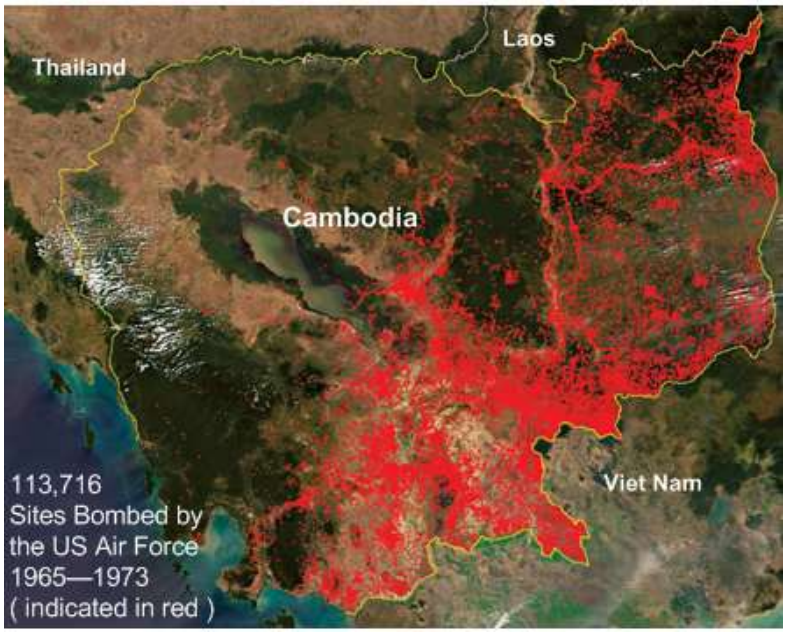
That's aggression and it went on from there. There was no protest, no interest. It wasn't until the bombing of the North started that there finally began to be some substantial protest that escalated quite extensively.

Cambodia 1970

Hewison: When you spoke at the JCA reception recently, you also talked passionately about the bombing of Cambodia.

Chomsky: Well, at the time that I joined JCA, in mid-1970, it was the beginning of the direct US invasion of Cambodia. Actually, the US had been bombing in Cambodia for years, but not extensively. In 1969, Prince Sihanouk, who was supposedly our ally, put out an official White Paper documenting - with pictures, testimonies and other documents - many hundreds of examples of US attacks in Cambodia. He called a conference with the international press corps in Phnom Penh, pleading with the international press to report the US bombing and killing of innocent Khmer peasants that had all passed with barely a whisper. I doubt that the White Paper even got mentioned. I don't know if you'd even be able to locate it today. The international press corps did virtually nothing - there had been some earlier reports. But the invasion in 1970 really flung Cambodia into the middle of the war. Shortly after that began the intensive bombing of Cambodia, and we knew that it was pretty awful, but we didn't know how bad it was.

In fact, only a few months ago, there was an important article by Taylor Owen and Ben Kiernan, specialists on Cambodia - Ben is also director of the Yale Genocide Program which has a project focused on Cambodia.[7] This is an extremely important article and I saw no mention of it in the US other than the things I posted. They went through the US government data that had been released - I think it had been released even during the Clinton years - which showed that the bombing - as awful as we thought it was - was five times as high as what was reported. This made the bombing of rural Cambodia heavier than the entire bombing conducted by the Allies in all theatres of World War II. All that in rural Cambodia, a remarkably small area.



Cambodia Bombing Map 1965-1973

What was mentioned in the press, but generally ignored, was Henry Kissinger transmitting Richard Nixon's orders. His words were something like: "anything that flies on anything that moves" in rural Cambodia. I can't think of a case in the archival record of any state that is such an overt call for large-scale genocide. It was sort of mentioned in passing in the New York Times when the Nixon tapes were released and elicited no comment, which is kind of shocking.[8] The new material on the bombing of Cambodia also passed without comment.

Owen and Kiernan also pointed out that during those years, the Khmer Rouge grew from a marginal force of a couple of thousand people which no one had ever heard of to a huge peasant army; an army of "enraged peasants," mobilised by the Khmer Rouge through the bombing. And then, of course, we know what happened afterwards. That receives a lot of attention because somebody else was responsible. When we in the US are responsible, then it doesn't get reported; sort of characteristic.

Indochina and Iraq

Hewison: Of course, inevitable comparisons are made between Indochina and Iraq.

Chomsky: There is a point of comparison. This is from the Western point of view where they are very similar. From this perspective the only question is, "Can we win at acceptable cost?" There are no other questions. That's the overwhelming question and others are marginal.

In both Vietnam and Iraq the question is how we can win at acceptable cost. The mood was captured rather well by Arthur Schlesinger, the Kennedy advisor and leading historian, at a time when elite opinion was beginning to be worried about the Vietnam War because it was costing too much. At first he was very supportive, but he was writing in, I think it was 1966. At that time there were already concerns, and he writes something like this: we all pray that the hawks will be right, and that the new military forces that are being sent will enable us to win victory. And if it works, we will all be praising the wisdom and statesmanship of the American government in winning victory in a land they have turned to wreck and ruin. But I don't think they're right.

That's almost a quote. It expresses liberal, elite, enlightened opinion about the war. You can translate it almost word for word to criticism of the Iraq war today. We all pray that the hawks are right and that the "surge" will succeed, but we don't think it will, just like Schlesinger didn't think it would. And if it does succeed, we will all be praising the wisdom and statesmanship of the American government in leaving Iraq as one of the worst disasters in military history. That's not a caricature of the critical, dovish, intellectual elite opinion. In both cases the wars are described as "quagmires." We got caught in something that cost us too much. Anthony Lewis, who is way at the left-liberal extreme of what the media tolerate, said in 1975, at the end of the Vietnam War, something like: the war began with benign efforts to do good but by 1969, it was clear that it had become a disaster which was too costly for us. And then Nixon went on and he shouldn't have. He should have pulled out.

Interestingly, that was not the position of the public. The first major polls by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations on public attitudes towards international affairs was in 1969, and of course there were questions about Vietnam. These were open choice questions, maybe about ten choices, and I think about 70% of the public picked "fundamentally wrong and immoral, not a mistake." You couldn't find that phrase anywhere in the mainstream commentary, including criticism. These figures continued up to the latest polls, more or less. I think it's the same in Iraq.

So from the US point of view, in fact, from the Western point of view, that's the perspective on the Iraq War. If the military efforts succeed, we'll be praising the wisdom and statesmanship of the American government in leaving a land where we have created a desert and call it peace. But we don't think it's going to work and it's costing us too much anyway. That's the Western point of view. However, from the point of view of the victims, it's completely different.

Dominoes and Viruses

Even from the point of view of the planners it's totally different. Why did the US invade Vietnam? Why not accept the Geneva agreements of 1954? Well there was a reason and we read it in the internal record, even sometimes in the public record. There was concern at the time for what was called "falling dominos". The domino theory has two versions. One of them is intended for the public and it is totally absurd and every time it is refuted, it's said, "Oh well, we made a mistake" it's "silly" and so on. The public version is Ho Chi Minh's going to get into a canoe and land in California and all the rest of it; the Nicaraguans are two days' drive from Texas, according to Ronald Reagan, and we have to call a national emergency. But that is so obviously idiotic that after it's over, people say how silly it was; we didn't understand.

But there's a rational version of the domino theory, which has never been abandoned because it's correct. It goes all the way through from Greece in 1947 right up until today. The rational version is that if some country in the world - the smaller the worse, it's not a matter of its power - whether it's Grenada, Cuba, Vietnam or somewhere else, shows some indication of independent development in a manner that would be meaningful to others who've had similar problems, that's dangerous. It's what Henry Kissinger called the virus that can spread contagion. He was speaking of Allende's Chile, but you see the same strain right through the planning record. The rotten apple that can spoil the barrel; Cuba might spread the Castro idea of taking matters into your own hands, which has enormous appeal in Latin America where people suffer the same repression. In that sense, dominos are dangerous. If you had a successful development somewhere it can spread contagion. Well, how do you deal with a virus that is spreading contagion? You destroy the virus. You inoculate those who might be affected.

This is exactly what was done in Vietnam. You destroy Vietnam - it's not going to be a model for anyone. As Bernard Fall said, Vietnam would be lucky if it survives as a cultural and historic entity, so it's not going to be a model of independent and successful development. You inoculate the region by installing vicious military dictatorships in country after country.

The most important was Indonesia. Of course, it was the richest. In 1965, there was the Suharto coup. That coup, incidentally, was reported accurately in the West. The New York Times, for example, described it as a "staggering mass slaughter" which is "a gleam of light in Asia."[9] The description of the huge massacres was combined with euphoria - undisguised euphoria. The same was true in Australia. Probably Europe as well, but it hasn't been studied there to my knowledge. The Suharto massacre really made sure that the virus didn't spread to a country that they were really concerned about.

There was also a concern that Japan, what John Dower called the super-domino, might accommodate to an independent Southeast Asia, essentially reconstructing something like a new order in Asia that it had tried to create by force, but the US wasn't about to lose World War II in the Pacific.[10] It's not a small issue and it's taken care of by destroying the virus and inoculating the region with brutal dictators in country after country - Suharto, Marcos and so on - around the region. Well, that was sort of understood by planners. National security Adviser McGeorge Bundy in later years, retrospectively, pointed out that after 1965 our efforts were excessive. Meaning we should have stopped then because we'd already won the war.

My view is that this is a little early, but by the time I was in Indochina in 1970, my feeling was that the US had won the war. It had achieved its major objectives. It was a partial victory as they didn't achieve their maximal objectives; they didn't establish a client state, and if you are a super-imperialist that's a defeat, but you achieved your main objectives. So it's described as a defeat, but I don't think it was. And the business world knew it. For example, the Far Eastern Economic Review was advising in the early 1970s that the US should get out because it had already achieved its main goals.

That's Indochina in a nutshell. Iraq is totally different.

The Stakes in Iraq

You can't destroy Iraq. It's far too valuable. It has probably the second largest energy reserves in the world. They are very easily accessible - no permafrost, no tar sands - just stick a pipe in the ground. It is right at the heart of the world's major energy producing

region, which the US has wanted to control since the Second World War, much as Britain wanted to control it before that. This goes back to the beginning of the oil age. Britain back in 1920 was saying that if we can control the oil of this region we can do whatever we want in the world, or words to that effect. By 1945, the US State Department was describing it as a stupendous source of strategic power, one of the greatest material prizes in world history. Eisenhower called it strategically the most important area in the world. It has the resources.

This is not just a matter of access. In the 1950s, the US was not accessing Middle East oil; it was the world's biggest producer itself. In fact, in 1959, the US shifted to straight domestic sources in order to benefit Texas oil companies and corrupt officials in the Eisenhower administration. For about fourteen years they exhausted domestic resources at a serious cost to national security but at great enrichment. Nevertheless, with regard to the Middle East, we had the same policies. If we were on solar energy right now, we'd still have the same policies. And the reasons are understood. It was pointed out by George Kennan about sixty years ago, when he was a top planner: if we have our hands on the spigot we have veto power over others. He happened to be thinking of Japan, but the point generalizes.

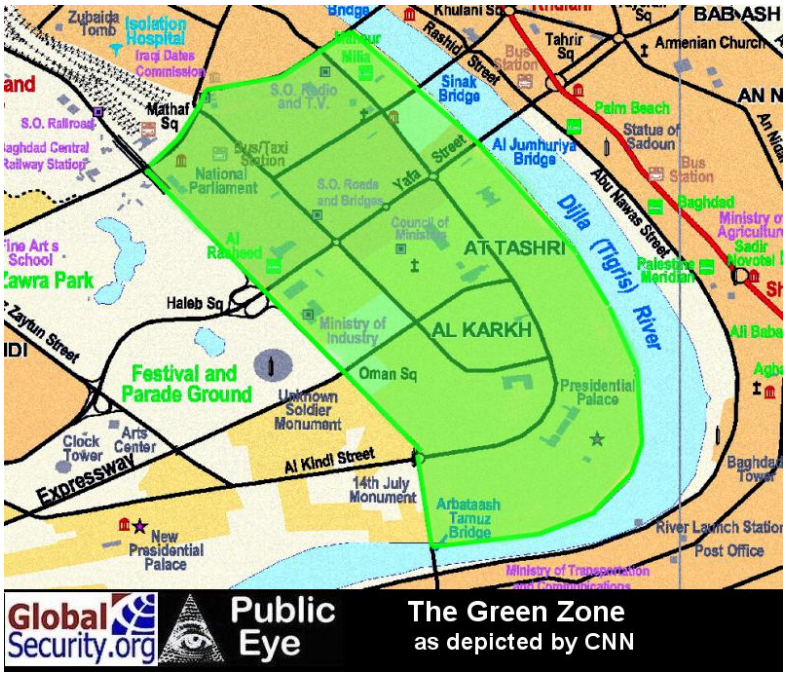
Zbigniew Brzezinski, who was not much in favour of the war in Iraq, nevertheless pointed out that if the US wins the war, establishes a client state and can have military bases and so on, right in the heart of the oil-producing region, we will have "critical leverage" over the industrial powers - Europe, Japan, Asia.

Asians understand this too. That's why they are developing the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation[11] and the Asian energy security grid.[12] Based primarily in China, but bringing in Russia and Central Asian countries, and recently India, Pakistan and - significantly - Iran. They want some degree of control over their own resources. They don't want the United States to hold the lever. In fact, Dick Cheney understands them. On his way to Kazakhstan about a year ago, he had a tirade over how control over pipelines can be tools of intimidation and blackmail. And that's true. Of course, he was saying when it's in the hands of others. The same holds for us, of course, but we're not allowed to see that.

The War in Iraq

So this is a really important invasion. You have to control Iraq. You can't destroy it and then go away, and there's no concern about spreading a virus. This was completely different from Vietnam. In fact, that's part of the reason why neither political party in the United States is really offering a programme of withdrawal.

The Democrats seem to be calling for a withdrawal, but if you look at the details, it's not really that. In fact, there was an analysis of it by General Kevin Ryan at the Kennedy School. He went through the Democratic Party proposals and pointed out, first of all, that they leave the option to Bush that he can waive all requirements in the interest of national security. End of story. Secondly, even if you look at the implementation, he said it should really be called "re-missioning" not withdrawal. American troops are going to be left there for the protection of US installations and forces. Installations include the Embassy in the Baghdad Green Zone, which is more like a city. There's no embassy like it in the world. It's not a building they intend to leave. It's got its own military forces, anti-missile system, baseball fields, everything. Facilities in Iraq probably also include permanent military bases which are quietly being scattered about the desert where they're more or less safe from attack. So you have to protect those and it takes a lot of troops.



The Green Zone

What does "force protection" mean? If you install US forces in Iraqi units, they're in units where the majority of their fellow soldiers may think it's legitimate to kill them. Some 60% of the total population think that American soldiers are legitimate targets. So you're going to have to protect them. Another qualification is you have to leave forces to fight the War on Terror. Also open-ended. And to train Iraqi troops. Open-ended. His calculation is that the total number of American forces would not be very much different from what it has been. And he leaves out a lot. He leaves out logistics, which is the core of a modern army, and which the US is controlling and intends to continue to control. That logistics, right now about 80% of it goes though southern Iraq, which is very vulnerable to guerrilla attack, so you are going to have plenty of US forces to protect that. He leaves out air power. Well, we know what that's like. Owen and Kiernan have pointed out what happened when the US began to withdraw troops from Vietnam. And Ryan leaves out mercenaries. The US has probably 130,000 mercenaries, called contractors. It's sort of like the French Foreign Legion. It's a mercenary force, and who knows how big that will grow; it's under no supervision. So this is not withdrawal.

There's a good reason for it - which we're not allowed to discuss because we'd bring up that unpronounceable word, O-I-L, and you can't mention that because we have to be benign and so on.

But if Iraq was granted sovereignty, it wouldn't be like Vietnam. Sovereignty in Iraq means under majority Shiite influence. Undoubtedly, a

Shiite-dominated Iraq would continue to improve relations with Shiite Iran, as it's doing already. It would incite the Shiite population of Saudi Arabia, on the border, which happens to be where most of the Saudi oil is, and one can imagine a loose Shiite alliance controlling most of the world's oil and independent of the United States. That's like a nightmare. And it gets much worse. Iran already has observer status with the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation, which begins to draw the Middle East - the West Asian energy resources - towards the Asian system. If Shiite-dominated Saudi and Iraqi oil systems joined, that's the world's major energy resources moving off into the enemy camp - China, Russia, India.

India's kind of playing a double game, improving relations with China and they also have observer status with the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation and they've had joint energy planning with China. At the same time, India is happy to play games with the United States if the Bush administration authorises their nuclear weapons - as it just did, leaving the international regime on missile control and nuclear weapons controls shattered. They are happy to keep a foot in both camps.

South Korea will presumably sooner or later join. From the Asian point of view, Siberia is Asian - not European - and it has plenty of resources, making Russia a member. The area we are talking about is the most dynamic economic area in the world. It has the majority of the world's foreign exchange reserves. Japan is not part of the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation, and remains a US ally, but it's tricky as they're very dependent on economic and other relations with China. It's a complicated relation.

This really would be a major shift in world power. Nothing like that was involved in Vietnam. The only respect in which they are similar is from the point of view of the Western, imperial mentality. They both cost us a lot and in that respect they are similar, so analogies are drawn.

Vietnam and the China Connection

Hewison: On the Iraq-Vietnam comparison, one of the ideas floated recently is the notion that one of the initiatives that got the US out of Vietnam and was seen as a positive was the link made with China through Kissinger's visit. Looking back at this, it is now being said that in order to achieve something positive out of the Iraq shambles - and this was mentioned in a recent editorial in The Economist (7 April 2007, US Edition) – the US should make overtures to Iran, and this might ameliorate some of the broader conflicts in the region. In what you've just been saying, this would not seem a viable option.

Chomsky: It made sense from a realpolitik point of view for Nixon and Kissinger to ally with China against Russia as they tried to patch up some sort of détente. That's superpower politics and had nothing to do with Vietnam. That's part of the pretense that the war in Vietnam was some kind of proxy war against the Russians or the Chinese.

Here's another interesting fact about the Pentagon Papers. In it there are twenty-five years of intelligence records, not released by the government, but stolen from it, like some captured enemy archive, and the record is astonishing. In the late 1940s, the US hadn't quite decided whether they were going to support Vietnamese independence the way they did with the Indonesians at the time. But about 1950 they decided to support the French. US intelligence was given orders: prove that Ho Chi Minh is an agent of Russia or Peiping (as it was called) or the Sino-Soviet axis; anything will do, just prove that he is an agent of that massive conspiracy for world control. And they worked hard on it. For a couple of years they searched all over the place, and they found a copy of Pravda in the Vietnamese embassy in Bangkok or something similar, and they didn't come up with anything. They came to a very curious conclusion: Hanoi seemed to be the only part of the region that didn't have any contact with Russia or China. So the wise men in the State Department concluded that this proved their point. Ho Chi Minh is such a loyal slave of [Russia and/or China] that he doesn't even need orders.

From then on, we go on right to 1968, and there is no discussion in intelligence of even the possibility that maybe Hanoi is serving national interests. It has to be serving the master. Now whatever you think about Ho Chi Minh, there's just no doubt that he was following Vietnamese interests. There is no doubt about this. When you first arrive in Hanoi they take you to the war museum to show you how they fought the Chinese centuries ago. It's right in the back of their minds. But in the US it couldn't be thought. If I remember correctly, there was one staff paper that raised the possibility that Hanoi was not a puppet, and I don't think it was even submitted. This is a level of indoctrination which is shocking.

Actually, it has been studied in a lot more detail by James Peck in his book Washington's China.[13] He shows that the paranoia and fanaticism about China just exceeded any conceivable rationality right through the sixties, when the record dries.

So, yes, there was that pretense. In order to maintain the pretense - and maybe they believed it. I don't say they were lying. So Kissinger in his deluded mind may have thought that it was China keeping the war going, but it wasn't. It was the Vietnamese who were keeping the war going. China was giving minimal assistance. Russia was giving some anti-aircraft missiles and so on, but it was a war with the Vietnamese. That could not be faced because that would mean we're not nice people. We don't invade other countries. We liberate other people. We don't attack them. Therefore this picture emerged.

The Economist can't see this as they are much too deeply mired in imperial mentality. In this case, what does it mean to talk to Iran? Is Iran keeping the insurgency going? Is Iran responsible for the Sunni insurgency? You'd have to be a lunatic to believe that. It is striking to see how this is being developed. I presume The Economist is being caught up in a wave of US government propaganda.

Remember the background. The Iraqi population is overwhelmingly calling for a withdrawal. The US government knows this from its own polls. The US population is calling for a withdrawal. The last congressional election was about this. The response? Escalate. As soon as you saw the surge was announced you could predict that there was going to be a flow of propaganda about how Iran was behind it. What happens? A flow of propaganda about how Iran is behind it. Then comes a debate.

This is the way Western democratic propaganda systems operate. You don't articulate the party line - totalitarian states do that - they announce the party line, and if people don't accept it, you beat them over the head. Nobody has to believe it. In free societies that won't work. You have to presuppose the party line - never mention - just presuppose it. Then encourage a vigorous debate within the framework of the party line. That instills the party line even more deeply and it gives the impression of an open, free society.

The Iran Connection

This is a textbook example. The Bush government announces that Iran's serial numbers are on the IEDs. Then it starts a vigorous debate. The hawks say, let's bomb them to smithereens. The doves say maybe it's not true or maybe it’s just the Revolutionary Guard, and so on. The discussion is surreal. You can only carry it out on the assumption that the United States owns the world. Otherwise Iran can't be interfering in a country that is under US occupation. It's as if Germany in 1943 were complaining that the Allies were interfering in free and independent Vichy France. You have to collapse in ridicule. But in the West, very sober, very serious. We are a deeply indoctrinated society, so it isn't even questioned. So, yes, the talk is now that we'll talk with Iran and that this will solve the problem. It isn't going to solve the problem. It's an Iraqi problem.

If Iran is not involved more in Iraq it is astonishing. We're threatening Iran with attack and destruction. Iran is almost completely surrounded by hostile US forces. The US is deploying big naval detachments in the Gulf. What are they there for? Defence? The US is

probably conducting terror inside Iran, trying to stimulate tribal and secessionist movements and so on. And openly threatening to attack Iran, which in itself is a violation of the UN Charter.

In fact, when the US invaded Iraq, that was a signal to Iran to develop nuclear weapons. That was understood. One of Israel's leading military historians Martin van Creveld wrote in the International Herald Tribune that of course he didn't want Iran to have nuclear weapons, but after the US invasion of Iraq, then if they're not developing them, they are "crazy."[14] This is because the invasion was simply a signal: we'll attack anyone we like as long as they are defenceless, and you know we want to go after you because you're defiant. You're not going to be able to survive. So maybe they are doing something, but the fact that the US is capturing Iranian figures in Arbil and apparently going after diplomats - according to Patrick Cockburn's reports[15]- those are real provocations.

The discussion is surreal. Take, say, Tony Blair during the latest naval incident in which fifteen British sailors and marines were captured by Iran. He claims that the ships were in Iraqi waters and then we have a debate over whether they were in Iraqi or Iranian waters. It's a debate that doesn't make any sense. What are British vessels doing in Iraqi waters? How did they get there? Suppose the Iranian Navy was in the Caribbean. Would the US be arguing over whose territorial waters they were in? To take this position you have to assume that the US and its British lackey own the world. Otherwise you can't have the discussion.

From Vietnam to the War on Terror

Hewison: Right at the beginning of At War with Asia, you have a quote from Professor J. K. Fairbank, where he is cited as worrying that the Vietnam War was not only a war against the people of Asia, but resulted in a totalitarian menace in the US itself. Is there a comparison with the so-called War on Terror?

Chomsky: First of all, with regard to the War on Terror, we should bring up something that is constantly repressed. On 11 September 2001, Bush re-declared the War on Terror. It had been declared by Ronald Reagan when he came into office in 1981. He announced right away that the focus of US foreign policy would be on state-directed international terrorism. His administration called it the plague of the modern age, a return to barbarism in our time and so on.[16] And then came something people would prefer to forget. This was a major terrorist war launched by the United States which devastated Central America, killed hundreds of thousands of people, had horrifying results in southern Africa and the Middle East and so on, extending to Southeast Asia.

That was the first War on Terror. So Bush re-declared it. Now when you declare war, whatever it is going to be, it's going to come with internal constraints. That's what a war is. The population has to be mobilized. There aren't a lot of ways of mobilising a population. The simplest way is fear. Fear often has some justification, but we have to remember that the Bush administration is increasing the risk, not decreasing it. Intelligence agencies anticipated that the invasion of Iraq would probably increase the threat of terror and proliferation. Well, it did, but far beyond what was anticipated. The latest studies reveal that terror increased about seven-fold. This is what the analysts call the "Iraq effect." There are many examples where the Bush administration is not decreasing the risk of terrorism. Mobilise the population through fear and try to institute controls. Well, they have tried. A lot of things they have done are outrageous - the Military Commissions Act, which was passed by bipartisan vote last year, is one of the most disgraceful pieces of legislation in American history - but we shouldn't exaggerate.

With all of this, it is nowhere near as bad as it has been in the past. It's a much freer society than it used to be. This is nothing like Woodrow Wilson's Red Scare. It's nothing like the COINTELPRO which ran from the Eisenhower up to the Nixon administration, which was a major FBI programme aimed at destroying opposition movements from the Black movement to the women's movement and the entire New Left.[17] It's nothing like that. Bad enough, but we shouldn't exaggerate; a lot of freedom has been won and it is not going to be given up easily. So, yes, there are efforts to restrict freedom - and that's what states are all about, taking any chance they can get to restrict freedom. But the population has won a lot of rights and it's not going to abandon them easily.

Hewison: That's probably a good place to conclude - optimistic in a sense. We really appreciate your time today. Thank you.

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Notes

[1] At War With Asia was originally published in 1970, by Pantheon/Vintage. It was re-released in 2004 by AK. Press. The chapter on Laos was first published as "A Visit to Laos" in The New York Review of Books, 23 July 1970.
[2] These articles in Le Monde from 3 to 8 July 1968 reported on Decornoy's trip to Pathet Lao strongholds in northeastern Laos. Also see J. Decornoy (1970) "Laos: The Forgotten War," Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars, 2, April-July, pp. 21-3.
[3] See T.D. Allman (1970) "Laos: the labyrinthine war," Far Eastern Economic Review, 16, April and his articles in the New York Times, 25 August 1968, 18 September 1968, 28 September 1968, 17 October 1969, 26 October 1969, and 6 March 1970.
[4] See Chomsky's article, "In North Vietnam," The New York Review of Books, 13 August 1970. The essay is also included in At War with Asia.
[5] New York: Quadrangle Books, 1971.
[6] Robert S. McNamara, In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam, New York: Times Books, 1995. See Chomsky's assessment of these memoirs in "Memories," Z Magazine, July-August 1995.
[7] The article is "Bombs over Cambodia," The Walrus (Canada), October 2006, pp. 62-9. The Yale University Genocide Studies Program is here and the Cambodia project is here.
[8] On 26 May 2004, the National Security Archive released a series of Kissinger telephone conversations, including Nixon's call to Kissinger ordering the bombing of Cambodia. Nixon stated, ". . . I want a plan where every goddamn thing that can fly goes into Cambodia and hits every target that is open." He added, "I want everything that can fly to go in there and crack the hell out of them. There is no limitation on mileage and no limitation on budget." ("Mr. Kissinger/President, December 9, 1970," Box 29, File 2. See the Archive. According to Elizabeth Becker (New York Times, 27 May 2004), Kissinger transmitted this order as "A massive bombing campaign in Cambodia. Anything that flies on anything that moves."
[9] New York Times, 22 December 1965, 17 February 1966 and 19 June 1966.
[10] See John W. Dower, Embracing Defeat. Japan in the Wake of World War II, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999.
[11] See the organisation's website.
[12] For reports on the Asian energy grid, see Asia Times Online, 1 December 2005.
[13] Washington's China. The National Security World, the Cold War, and the Origins of Globalism (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006).
[14] See Martin van Creveld, "Iraq: a lost peace: When the Americans leave," International Herald Tribune, 19 November 2003.
[15] See Cockburn's "How a bid to kidnap Iranian security officials sparked a diplomatic crisis," The Independent (UK), 3 April 2007 and

his reporting at Counterpunch, for example, "Behind the Denials: A De Facto Hostage Exchange," 5 April 2007.
[16] See Noam Chomsky, "War on Terror," Amnesty International Annual Lecture, Trinity College, Dublin, 18 January 2006 .
[17] See here.

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