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CHOMSKY ON OBAMA

April 13, 2009

Noam Chomsky on the Global Economic Crisis, Healthcare, US Foreign Policy and Resistance to American Empire

Part II of our conversation with MIT professor and author Noam Chomsky on the global economic crisis, healthcare, the media, US foreign policy, the expanding wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan, resistance to American empire, and more.

"As far as policy is concerned, unless [Obama] is under a lot of pressure from activist sectors, he's not going to go beyond what he's presented himself as in actual policy statements or cabinet choices and so on: a centrist Democrat [who's] going to basically continue Bush's policies, maybe in a more modulated way," says Chomsky.

[includes rush transcript]

Guest:

Noam Chomsky, author and Institute Professor Emeritus at MIT, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he taught for over half a century. Among his many dozens of books are *Rogue States: The Rule of Force in World Affairs*, *The New Military Humanism: Lessons from Kosovo*, *Fateful Triangle: The United States, Israel, and the Palestinians*, *Manufacturing Consent*, *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies*, and *Failed States: The Abuse of Power and the Assault on Democracy*.

AMY GOODMAN: Today, a conversation with one of the most important dissident intellectuals of our time, Noam Chomsky, on the global economic crisis, healthcare, the media, US foreign policy, the expanding wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and resistance to American empire. Noam Chomsky is a world-renowned linguist, philosopher, social critic, and Institute Professor Emeritus at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Among his many books over the past few decades are *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance*, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, *Profit over People: Neoliberalism and Global Order*, and *Human Rights and American Foreign Policy*. There's a great collection of his work, just out now, edited by Anthony Arnone, called *The Essential Chomsky*.

I spoke to Noam Chomsky earlier this month when we were on the road in Boston. This is Part II of our conversation. I began by asking him to talk about the current economic meltdown.

NOAM CHOMSKY: Well, let's start with G20. If you look at the *Financial Times*, the world's major business journal, the day before the G20 meeting, they had a section on it, and they pointed out, I think correctly, that the main purpose is to present a picture of harmony and agreement. It doesn't matter what you do, but make it look as if we're all together on this. Now, there are sharp splits about how to approach the issue, but you have to make it look as if we're all together. That's pretty much what happened.

Now, in the communiqué, which you read before, the crucial word was "voluntary." So, the countries there are supposed to voluntarily choose to do x, y and z. Well, that means we couldn't make an agreement. So we'll call it voluntary agreement.

Now, there was one point on which they agreed: a sharp recapitalization of the International Monetary Fund; pour a lot of money into the IMF. That's a pretty dubious move. I mean, the record of the IMF has—the IMF is more or less a branch of the US Treasury, even though it has a European director. Its past role has been extremely destructive. In fact, its American US executive director captured its role when she described it as "the credit community's enforcer," meaning if a third world dictator incurs a huge debt—people didn't, but the dictator did; say, Suharto in Indonesia—and then the debt defaults, the lenders, who have made plenty of money because it was a risky loan so they get high interest and so on, they have to be protected, meaning not by the dictator, by the people of Indonesia, who are subjected to harsh structural adjustment programs so that they can pay back the debt, which they didn't incur, so that we can be compensated, rich Westerners can be compensated. So that's the IMF, the credit community's enforcer, a very destructive role in the third world. Now it's to be recapitalized.

Now, there's discussion about this, and it's interesting. You can read it in the financial pages. The supporters of the recapitalization say, "Well, the IMF has changed its spots. It's going to be different from now on. We realize that it had this terrible role, but now it's going to be different." Well, is there any reason to believe it will be different? In fact, if you look today, it's quite striking to see the advice that the Western powers are following, the programs that they're following, and compare them to the instructions given to the third world.

So, say, take Indonesia again. Indonesia had a huge financial crisis about ten years ago, and the instructions were the standard ones: "Here is what you have to do. First, pay off your debts to us. Second, privatize, so that

we can then pick up your assets on the cheap. Third, raise interest rates to slow down the economy and force the population to suffer, you know, to pay us back." Those are the regular instructions the IMF is still giving them.

What do we do? Exactly the opposite. We forget about the debt, let it explode. We reduce interest rates to zero to stimulate the economy. We pour money into the economy to get even bigger debts. We don't privatize; we nationalize, except we don't call it nationalization. We give it some other name, like "bailout" or something. It's essentially nationalization without control. So we pour money into the institutions. We lectured the third world that they must accept free trade, though we accept protectionism.

Take the "too big to fail" principle, which the House committee is discussing today. But what does "too big to fail" mean? "Too big to fail" is an insurance policy. It's a government insurance policy. Government means the public pays, which says, "You can take huge risks and make plenty of profit, and if anything goes wrong, we'll bail you out." That's "too big to fail." Well, that's extreme protectionism. It gives US corporations like Citigroup an enormous advantage over others, like any other kind of protection.

But we don't allow the third world to do that. I mean, they've got to privatize, so that we can pick up their assets. Now, these are happening side by side. Now, here's the instructions for you, the poor people; here's the policies for us, the rich people. Exactly the opposite. Is there any reason to think the IMF is going to change it?

AMY GOODMAN: Do you think President Obama is any different than President Bush when it comes to the economy? And if you were in the Congress, would you have voted for the bailouts and the stimulus packages?

NOAM CHOMSKY: He's different. I mean, first of all, there's a rhetorical difference. But we have to distinguish the first and the second Bush terms. They were different. I mean, the first Bush term was so arrogant and abrasive and militaristic and dismissive of everyone that they offended,

they antagonized even allies, close allies, and US prestige in the world plummeted to zero. Now, the second Bush administration was more—moved more toward the center in that respect, not entirely, but more, so some of the worst offenders, like Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz and others, were thrown out. I mean, they couldn't throw out Dick Cheney, because he was the administration, so they couldn't get rid of him. He stayed, but the others, a lot of them, left. And they moved towards a somewhat more normal position.

And Obama is carrying that forward. He's a centrist Democrat. He never really pretended to be anything else. And he's moving towards a kind of a centrist position. He's very popular in Europe, not so much because of him, but because he's not Bush. So there is the kind of rhetoric that the European leaders and, in fact, the European population tend to accept. In fact, you know, even in the Middle East, where you'd think people would know better, they accept the illusions. And they are illusions, because there's nothing to back them up. So, yes, he is different from Bush.

Same—on the economy, well, you know, the current Obama-Geithner plan is not very different from the Bush-Paulson plan. I mean, somewhat different, but circumstances have changed. So, of course, it's somewhat different. But it's still based on the principle that we have to—somehow, the taxpayer has to rescue the institutions intact. They have to remain intact, including the people who, you know, destroyed the economy. In fact, they are the ones who Obama picked to fix it up.

AMY GOODMAN: Explain.

NOAM CHOMSKY: Like Larry Summers, for example, who is now his chief economic adviser. I mean, he was Secretary of Treasury under Bill Clinton. His great achievement was to prevent Congress from regulating derivatives, exotic financial instruments. Well, that's one of the main factors that led to the crisis.

His kind of senior adviser, one of the first, was Robert Rubin, who was Secretary of Treasury right before Summers.

His main achievement—many achievements, like what he did to Indonesia and the third world, but here, his main achievement was to lead the way to revoke the Glass-Steagall legislation from the New Deal, which protected commercial banks from risky investments. It broke down those barriers. Immediately after having done this, he left the government, joined Citigroup as a director, and they began to make huge profits, including him, from picking up insurance companies and so on and making very risky loans, relying on the “too big to fail” doctrine, meaning if we get in trouble, the taxpayer will bail us out, which is just what’s happening, taxpayers now pouring tens of billions of dollars into rescuing Citigroup.

Well, these are the advisers who were supposed to fix up the system. Tim Geithner was right in the middle of this. He was head of the New York Federal Reserve, so, yes, he was supervising these actions. Now, you know, you can argue about whether they’re doing the right thing or the wrong thing, but are these the people who should be fixing up the system?

Actually, the business press just had some interesting things to say about this. Bloomberg News, you know, main business press, had an article in which they reviewed the records of the people who Obama invited to his economic summit. I think it must have been last November or December. They just reviewed the record. I think there were a couple dozen of them. People on the—you know, people like, say, Stiglitz, Krugman, they were never even allowed close to it, let alone anyone from the left or labor and so on, given token representation. So they went through the records, and they concluded that these people should not be invited to fix up the economy. Most of them should be getting subpoenas because of their record of accounting fraud, malpractice and so on, and helping bring about the current crisis.

AMY GOODMAN: Professor Noam Chomsky. We’ll continue the conversation in a minute. If you’d like a copy of today’s show, you can go to our website at democracynow.org. Stay with us.

[break]

AMY GOODMAN: We return now to my conversation with Noam Chomsky about the economic crisis and how the Obama administration is handling it.

AMY GOODMAN: Why do you think Obama chose to surround himself?

NOAM CHOMSKY: Because those are his beliefs. I mean, his support comes from the—his constituency is basically the financial institutions. Just take a look at the funding for his campaign. I mean, the final figures haven't come out, but we have preliminary figures, and it seems to be mostly financial institutions. I mean, the financial institutions preferred him to McCain. They are the main funders for both—you know, I mean, core funders for both parties, but considerably more to Obama than McCain.

You can learn a lot from campaign contributions. In fact, one of the best predictors of policy around is Thomas Ferguson's investment theory of politics, as he calls it—very outstanding political economist—which essentially—I mean, to say it in a sentence, he describes elections as occasions in which groups of investors coalesce and invest to control the state. And he takes a look at the formation of campaign contributors, and it gives you a surprisingly good prediction of what policies are going to be. It goes back a century, New Deal and so on. So, yeah, it can predict pretty well what Obama is going to do. There's nothing surprising about this. It's the norm in what's called political democracy.

AMY GOODMAN: Would you have let Citibank, would you have let Citigroup, would do have let the AIG fail?

NOAM CHOMSKY: Well, there are other possibilities. So, the government could just take over the viable parts. And parts of them are functioning; parts are dysfunctional, like the toxic—what they call the toxic asset parts, you know, the financial manipulations.

Well, one thing you could do, which has been suggested by a number of economists like Dean Baker, just take over the good parts, essentially nationalize them, put them under public control. And "nationalize" means public control, at least if you have a democracy. Not here, but if you had a functioning democracy, it would mean let them be under public control, and the parts that are responsible for the huge losses, just let them go off by themselves. In fact, that would be the way of taking care of the AIG bonuses that everyone's screaming about. In fact, as Baker pointed out, just spin off the parts that were involved in financial manipulations and caused the crisis, let them go bankrupt and let the executives try to get the bonuses from a bankrupt firm, OK, with no legislation necessary. That's what should be done with Citigroup.

And in fact, it's interesting, it's kind of happening. You know, after the breakdown of Glass-Steagall, they did bring in—they made use of it, under Rubin's direction, among others, to take—bring in insurance companies and other risky investors. Now they're divesting them. And they're going in the direction of becoming, you know, commercial bank.

Now, incidentally, this is not the first time this has happened. Paul Volcker is on the news today, you know, saying, "Let's slow down," and so on. Well, he's the one who, under Reagan, who helped bail out Citigroup last time they crashed. At that time they were Citibank. They had followed World Bank and IMF instructions and lent huge amounts of money to Latin America and were assured by the World Bank that it's all fine, you know, markets will take care of it, etc. Well, in a crash, Paul Volcker came in. He raised interest rates very sharply. Third world countries, whose payments are tied to US interest rates, couldn't pay their debts. The IMF moved in, took care of it, and essentially recapitalized Citibank. That's the way the system works: you make risky loans, you make a lot of money, and if you get into trouble, we're here to bail you out, namely the taxpayer.

AMY GOODMAN: And how do the Republicans differ from the Democrats in this? What do you make of—do you see it as

just a minor footnote that Republicans, or some of the governors like Palin, like Jindal—

NOAM CHOMSKY: There's a difference.

AMY GOODMAN: —are saying they're not going to take stimulus money?

NOAM CHOMSKY: There's a difference. I mean, we basically are a kind of a one-party state. I think C. Wright Mills must have pointed this out fifty years ago. It's a business party, but it has factions—Democrats and Republicans—and they're different. They have somewhat different constituencies and different policies. And if you look over the years, the population has—the majority of the population has tended to make out better under Democrats than Republicans; the very wealthy have tended to make out better under Republicans than Democrats. So they're business parties, but they're somewhat different, and the differences can have an effect. However, fundamentally, they're pretty much along the same lines.

So take, say, the current financial crisis. Actually, it began under Carter. The late Carter administration is the one that began—was pushing for financialization of the economy, you know, huge growth of speculative financial capital, deregulation, and so on. Reagan carried it much further, and Clinton continued it. And then, with Bush, it kind of went off the rails.

So there are differences, but differences within a pretty narrow spectrum. And anyone who's a little off the spectrum, like Nobel laureates in economics who are a couple of millimeters off the spectrum, they're basically on the outside. You can interview them, but they don't show up at the economic summit.

AMY GOODMAN: How does the global economy and our own economy relate to the issue of war and US foreign policy?

NOAM CHOMSKY: Well, actually, you had a pretty good interview with Joseph Stiglitz about that a couple of months ago, in which he discussed the relationship of—

was talking about the Iraq war. And as you'll recall, he pointed out correctly that the Iraq war, which, first of all, is going to cost trillions of dollars, also had the effect of sharply increasing the price of oil, predictably. And as he pointed out, we could sort of paper that over for a while by a housing bubble, so there was a huge housing bubble which anyone with eyes open could see. I mean, for a century, housing prices had sort of tracked the economy, GDP; then, all of a sudden, they shot way beyond the trend line, which means there's a bubble, and it's going to burst, and you get into trouble. But the housing bubble, which was supervised by Alan Greenspan and with the Democrats—actually, it started under Clinton—it replaced the tech bubble under Clinton, and it gave an illusion of prosperity, which—so you didn't see the effects of the rise in oil prices, which went very high. But if you trace all the connections, yes, there's a clear connection, as he pointed out, between the war and the economic crisis.

And in fact, it's deeper than that. The US is just in a class by itself in military expenses. It basically matches the rest of the world, and it's far more advanced. Well, that's drawn from somewhere. You know, that's money that's not being used to develop the economy.

Now, in fact, you have to add a footnote here, because part of the very high level of US violation of free trade principles is that the economy itself is based on military spending to a substantial extent. So the modern information revolution—computers, the internet, fancy software and so on—most of that comes straight out of the Pentagon. My own university, MIT, was one of the places where all of this was developed under Pentagon contracts in the 1950s and the 1960s.

In fact, that's another critical part of the way the economy works. The public pays the costs and takes the risk of economic development, and if anything works, maybe decades later, it's handed over to private enterprise to make the profits. And that's a core element of the economy. Of course, we don't permit the third world to do that. That's considered a violation of free trade when they do it. But it's the way our economy works. And it's kind of

complementary to the "too big to fail" doctrine of protectionism for financial institutions. But the general—we do not have a capitalist economy. We have kind of a state capitalist economy in which the public has a role: pay the costs, take the risks, bail out if they get into trouble. And the private sector has a role: make profit, and then turn to the public if you get into trouble.

AMY GOODMAN: Would you extend that to healthcare?

NOAM CHOMSKY: Well, healthcare is a dramatic case. I mean, for decades, the healthcare issue has been right at the top of domestic concerns, for very good reasons. The US has the most dysfunctional healthcare system in the industrial world, has about twice the per capita costs and some of the worst outcomes. It's also the only privatized system. And if you look closely, those two things are related. And the privatized system is highly inefficient: a huge amount of administration, bureaucracy, supervision, you know, all kinds of things. It's been studied pretty carefully.

Now, the public has had an opinion about this for decades. A considerable majority want a national healthcare system, like other industrial countries have. They usually say a Canadian-style system, not because Canada is the best, but at least you know that Canada exists. Nobody says an Australian-style system, which is much better, because who knows anything about that? But something like what's sometimes called Medicare Plus, like extend Medicare to the population.

Well, up until—it's interesting. Up until the year 2004, that idea was described, for example, by the New York Times as politically impossible and lacking political support. So, maybe the public wants it, but that's not what counts as political support. The financial institutions are opposed, the pharmaceutical institutions are opposed, so it's not—no political support. Well, in 2008, for the first time, the Democratic candidates—first Edwards, then the others—began to move in the direction of what the public has wanted, not there, but in that direction.

So what happened between 2004 and 2008? Well, public

opinion didn't change. It's been this way for decades. What changed is that manufacturing industry, a big sector of the economy, has recognized that it's being severely harmed by the highly inefficient privatized health system. So, General Motors said that it costs them over a thousand dollars more to produce a car in Detroit than across the border in Windsor, Canada. And, you know, when manufacturing industry becomes concerned, then things become politically possible, and they begin to have political support. So, yes, in 2008, there's some discussion of it.

Now, you know, this is very revealing insight into how American democracy functions and what is meant by the term "political support" and "politically possible." Again, this should be headlines. Will a proposal come that approaches what the public wants? Well, we're already getting the backlash, strong backlash. And what private healthcare systems are claiming is that this is unfair. The government is so much more efficient that they'll be driven—there's no level playing field if the government gets into it, which is true.

AMY GOODMAN: If you had a public and a private plan.

NOAM CHOMSKY: Yeah.

AMY GOODMAN: If it were like Medicare.

NOAM CHOMSKY: If you had them side by side—

AMY GOODMAN: Most people go for Medicare—

NOAM CHOMSKY: —they will.

AMY GOODMAN: —but if you wanted to go for a private plan, you could.

NOAM CHOMSKY: Yeah, if you could. But they're not—they say, "Well, we can't compete." For good reasons. I mean, in every country except—industrial country except the United States, the government uses its massive purchasing power to negotiate drug prices. That's one of the reasons prices are

so much higher in the United States than in other countries. Well, they could—the Pentagon can use purchasing power to negotiate prices for, you know, paper clips or something, but, by law, the government is not permitted to do that in the case of healthcare. Well, if you had Medicare Plus, they would, and that would drive down drug prices, and the private industries can't compete.

AMY GOODMAN: FAIR, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, did a study of the week leading up to the White House healthcare summit of the networks and how they were covering single payer, the issue of like Medicare Plus, and I think they found that absolutely—that almost—there was almost no representation in the media of a single-payer advocate—

NOAM CHOMSKY: Yeah.

AMY GOODMAN: —and almost the only mention was someone blasting single payer.

NOAM CHOMSKY: Yeah, yeah. That's because it has no political support; only the majority of the public. It's the same as the media commentary in 2004. In fact, if you take a look back at the end of the last electoral campaign, Kerry-Bush campaign, in October 2004, right before the election, there was a debate on domestic issues. I think it was maybe October 28th or so. Just take a look—read the New York Times report of it the next day. It was very dramatic. It said Kerry never brought up the idea of any government involvement in healthcare, not, you know, Medicare Plus, but any government involvement, because it is not politically possible and lacks political support—just the population. Well, that—

AMY GOODMAN: What studies show you the population wants this?

NOAM CHOMSKY: I mean, there's been poll after poll, goes back, in fact—

AMY GOODMAN: So, what do you think is going to break through?

NOAM CHOMSKY: Well, it's a problem of the general dysfunction of formal democracy. I mean, there's a very substantial gap between public opinion and public policy on a host of major issues. And on many of these issues, both parties are well to the right of the public, international and domestic.

Incidentally, that's one reason why elections are run the way they are. Elections are run as marketing extravaganzas, and that's not kept secret. So the advertising industry gives an award every year for best marketing campaign of the year. For 2008, they gave it to Obama. He beat out, I think, Apple Computer. And if you look at the comments of financial-of advertising executives, PR executives, they were euphoric. In fact, they said-you can read it in the Financial Times, business press-they said, you know, "We've been marketing candidates like commodities ever since Reagan, but this is the best we've ever done. It's going to change the atmosphere in corporate boardrooms. We have a new style of selling things, you know, the Obama style, you know, soaring rhetoric, hope and change, and so on." Yeah, that's true.

And if you look at the campaigns themselves, they're designed essentially by the advertising industry to sell the commodity-it happens to be a candidate-and they're pretty carefully designed so that you marginalize issues and you focus on what are called "qualities." In Obama's case, you know, soaring rhetoric and so on; in Bush's case, a nice guy and like to have a beer with him and so on. That's the kind of thing you focus on. Where do they stand on issues? Well, the public is mostly uninformed. I haven't seen current polls on 2008, but the 2004 election, where there were polls shortly after, showed the public had almost no idea what Bush's stand was. In fact, a majority of Bush voters thought that he supported the Kyoto Protocol, because they support it, and he's a nice guy, so he must support it.

And elections are designed that way, and it makes good sense. I mean, the people who run the elections, they read the polls, and very carefully, in fact. In fact, they

mostly the design them for their own interest. And they know that the parties are to the right of the public, so you better—on a large number of issues, including crucial ones like Iran and others—so you better keep issues off the table, which is what's done. So what the—healthcare is a dramatic case of it, but it's only one instance.

AMY GOODMAN: Renowned linguist Noam Chomsky, speaking to me in Boston last week. We will return to the last part of our conversation after this break. You can get a copy of the full two parts by going to democracynow.org. Stay with us.

[break]

AMY GOODMAN: We return now to the last part of my conversation with leading American intellectual and anti-imperialist critic Noam Chomsky.

AMY GOODMAN: The whole issue of populist rage, Noam Chomsky, actually, do you think that this rage is going to boil over as the unemployment figures rise?

NOAM CHOMSKY: It's very hard to predict those things. I mean, it has a potentially positive side, like it could be like the activism of the 1930s or the 1960s, which ended up making it a more civilized society in many ways, or it could be like an unfortunate precedent that quickly comes to mind. I've written about it.

Take a look at Germany. In the 1920s, Germany was the absolute peak of Western civilization, in the arts and the sciences. It was regarded as a model of democracy and so on. I mean, ten years later, it was the depths of barbarism. That was a quick transition. "The descent into barbarism" it's sometimes called in the scholarly literature.

Now, if you listen to early Nazi propaganda, you know, end of the Weimar Republic and so on, and you listen to talk radio in the United States, which I often do—it's interesting—there's a resemblance. And in both cases, you have a lot of demagogues appealing to people with real grievances.

Grievances aren't invented. I mean, for the American population, the last thirty years have been some of the worst in economic history. It's a rich country, but real

wages have stagnated or declined, working hours have shot up, benefits have gone down, and people are in real trouble and now in very real trouble after the bubbles burst. And they're angry. And they want to know, "What happened to me? You know, I'm a hard-working, white, God-fearing American. You know, how come this is happening to me?"

That's pretty much the Nazi appeal. The grievances were real. And one of the possibilities is what Rush Limbaugh tells you: "Well, it's happening to you because of those bad guys out there." OK, in the Nazi case, it was the Jews and the Bolsheviks. Here, it's the rich Democrats who run Wall Street and run the media and give everything away to illegal immigrants, and so on and so forth. It sort of peaked during the Sarah Palin period. And it's kind of interesting. It's been pointed out that of all the candidates, Sarah Palin is the only one who used the phrase "working class." She was talking to the working people. And yeah, they're the ones who are suffering. So, there are models that are not very attractive.

AMY GOODMAN: And she very much is being talked about as a leader, really, of the Republican Party.

NOAM CHOMSKY: Well, she was kind of a model. You know, the talk radio mob went crazy over her. And one shouldn't demean it. You know, they describe themselves—it's really worth listening to: "We're fly-by country. You know, they don't care about us, those rich Democrats on the East Coast and the West Coast who are all, you know, interested in gay rights and giving things away to illegal immigrants and so on. They don't care about us, the hard-working, God-fearing people, so we've got to somehow rise up and take over and elect Sarah Palin or Rush Limbaugh or someone like that." As I say, the precedents are not attractive. Now, if—now even before the next presidential, if in the next congressional election the economy has not begun to recover, this kind of populist rage could boil over and could have very dangerous consequences. This country has a long history of being kind of ridden by fear. It's a very frightened country. This goes back to colonial times. I mean, we're very lucky that we have never had an honest demagogue. I mean, the demagogues we've had are so corrupt that they never got anywhere—you know, Nixon, McCarthy, you know, Jimmy Swaggart and others. So they were kind of

destroyed by their own corruption.

But suppose we had an honest demagogue, you know, a Hitler type, who was not corrupt. There's probably—it could be unpleasant. There's a background of concern and fear, tremendous fear, and searching for some answer, which they're not getting from the establishment. "Who's responsible for my plight?" You know, and that can be exploited. And unless there's active, effective organizing and education, it's dangerous.

AMY GOODMAN: Your assessment of President Obama so far?

NOAM CHOMSKY: Frankly, I never had any expectations. I wrote about it over a year ago. I thought then, and I think it's been confirmed, that he's essentially a centrist Democrat. He's moving back—I mean, the Bush administration was kind of off the spectrum, especially the first term. So he's moving things back toward the center with a kind of a public posture, which was recognized by the advertising industry. That's why they gave him the award for best marketing campaign, which—but as far as policy is concerned, unless he's under a lot of pressure from activist sectors, he's not going to go beyond what he's presented himself as in actual policy statements or cabinet choices and so on: a centrist Democrat, going to basically continue Bush's policies, maybe in a more modulated way.

AMY GOODMAN: Do you see Afghanistan becoming an ever-expanded war in the next decade or so? Do you—now we're talking about doubling the US troops there.

NOAM CHOMSKY: No, that's the way Obama and the Pentagon see it. In fact, they say so: this is going to be a long war, it's going to be extended, the US is going to take over the military side, and it's going to expand it, it's going to expand into Pakistan. And, I mean, we'll talk about development, but the focus will be on the military. Obama, right now, is trying to get NATO to cooperate, but recognizing that they're not going to send military forces. The populations are opposed.

AMY GOODMAN: Canada is pulling out.

NOAM CHOMSKY: Yeah, Canada's pulling out, and the others—maybe Holland has made a termination date, but we'll at least ask them to come in and sort of help out on the civilian side. That's their job. It's the famous line of, I guess it was Robert Kagan: you know, "they're Venus, we're

Mars." So we'll move in like Mars and take care of the military side. You know, we're good at killing people. And they can come in and sort of put on the band-aids and make it look like something good is happening. It's not the right direction.

AMY GOODMAN: The unmanned drones bombing Pakistan?

NOAM CHOMSKY: Yeah, drones. And that has effects. So a lot of the worst fighting recently has been in the Bajaur province, right on the border. It's in Pakistan's side. And militants in the area have reported to the press that part of the reason is that an American drone attack hit a madrasa, a school, and killed about eighty people. Well, you know, they're "uncivilized barbarians"; they sort of don't like that. So they reacted. And now, one of the militants has said, "OK, we're going to bomb the White House," which is considered totally outrageous. But, you know, if we kill as we like, there's going to be a reaction.

AMY GOODMAN: Where do you see American empire in ten, twenty, thirty years?

NOAM CHOMSKY: Prediction in human affairs is a very low—has very little success, too many complications. The United States, I think, will come out of the economic crisis, very likely, as the dominant superpower. There's a lot of talk about China and India, and it's real, they're changing, but they're just not in the same league. I mean, both China and India have enormous internal problems that the West doesn't face.

You get kind of a picture of this by looking at the Human Development Index of the United Nations. The last time I looked, India was about 125th or something. And I think China was about eightieth. And China would be worse, I think, if it wasn't such a closed society. In India, you sort of get better data, so you can see what's happening. China is kind of closed. You don't see what's going on in the peasant areas, which are in turmoil, you know. They have environmental problems. They have huge—hundreds of millions of people are kind of like at the edge of starvation.

We don't have—you know, we have problems, but not those problems. And even the industrial growth, which is there—you know, for part of the population, there's been

improvement. But when you take, say, India, where we know more, in the areas where high-tech industries developed—and it's pretty impressive. I've visited some of the labs in Hyderabad. You know, it's as good or better than MIT. But right nearby, the rate of peasant suicides is going up, very sharply, in fact. And it's the same source. It's the neoliberal policies, which privilege a certain sector of the population and a certain—and let the rest take care of themselves.

AMY GOODMAN: And yet, the rise of progressives in Latin America?

NOAM CHOMSKY: That's important. I mean, Latin America, for the first time in 500 years, is moving towards a degree of independence and a kind of integration, which is a prerequisite for independence, and also at least is beginning to face some of its massive internal problems. I mean, Latin America has probably the worst inequality in the world. There's a wealthy sector, small wealthy sector, which is extremely rich, but they have—their tradition is that they have no responsibility to the country, so they send their capital to Zurich. You know, they have their second homes in the Riviera, and their children study in Oxford or whatever. This is beginning to be faced in different ways, but it's sort of happening all over the continent. And they are beginning to integrate. The United States obviously doesn't like it. In fact, it's barely reported most of the time.

So there was a very interesting case last September, when President Morales in Bolivia—Bolivia is, in my opinion at least, probably the most democratic country in the world. Nobody says that, but if you look at what happened in the last couple of years, there were huge, popular, mass organizations of the most repressed population in the hemisphere, the indigenous population, which for the first time ever has entered the political arena significantly and were able to elect a president from their own ranks and one who doesn't give instructions to his army, but who's following policies that were largely produced by the population. So he's their representative, in a sense in which democracy is supposed to work. And they know the issues. It's not like our elections. They

know the issues. They're serious issues: control over resources, economic justice, cultural rights, and so on. You can say they're right or wrong, but at least it's functioning.

Now, the elites that have traditionally ruled the country, of course, don't like it. And they're threatening virtual secession. And, of course, the United States is backing them, as the media are. And it got to the point last summer, I suppose, where it led to real violence.

Well, there was a meeting of UNASUR, the Union of South American Republics—that's all of South America—a meeting in Chile, Santiago, Chile. And it came out with a declaration, important declaration, in which it supported President Morales and opposed the—condemned the violence being led by the quasi-secessionist forces. And Morales responded, thanking them for their gesture of support, but also saying, correctly, that this is the first time in 500 years that South America is beginning to take its affairs in its own hands without the intervention of foreign powers, primarily the US.

Well, that was so important that I don't think it was even reported here. I mean, the meeting was known, so you see vague references to it. But it's an indication of developments that are taking place in various ways.

AMY GOODMAN: Noam Chomsky, you've just hit eighty. We just have a few minutes to go. And how does it feel?

NOAM CHOMSKY: I have a few years to go. I don't think about it much.

AMY GOODMAN: But as you reflect, talking about these huge social movements, cataclysmic times in the world, your life experience, what gives you hope?

NOAM CHOMSKY: Well, there's both hope and fear. I mean, I'm old enough to have grown up in the Depression. And some of my memories—I didn't understand that much at the time—childhood memories, are listening to Hitler's speeches. I didn't understand them, but I could sense the reaction of my parents, you know, and had a feeling of fear, you know, a tremendous fear. In fact, the first article I wrote was in 1939, when I was in fourth grade, and it was about the expansion of fascism over Europe, a kind of a dark cloud that may envelop everything. And as I mentioned before, I have some of those same concerns now.

On the other hand, there's been tremendous progress. The country is far more civilized than it was, say, forty years ago, thanks to the activism of the '60s and its aftermath. And some of the most important developments were after the '60s, like, say, the feminist movement, which has probably had more of an impact on this society than any other. It's mostly post-'60s. The solidarity movements, which are unique in the history of imperialism, there's never been anything like them. That's from the '80s. The global justice movements, what's called anti-globalization—shouldn't be—that's, you know, the '90s and this century. These were all very positive developments.

They haven't changed the institutions. In fact, the institutions have reacted by becoming harsher, not surprisingly. But they've changed the culture. I mean, take, say, the 2008 election. I mean, I didn't like the candidates, as I've made clear. On the other hand, forty years ago, or maybe ten years ago, you couldn't have imagined that the Democratic Party would have two candidates, an African American and a woman. OK, that's a sign of the civilizing effect of the activism of the '60s and everything that followed.

Well, that can be mobilized. In fact, it's already. If you count the number of activists in the country, it's, I suspect, well beyond the '60s, except maybe for a very brief moment at the peak of the antiwar movement. OK, that can be a basis for proceeding onward. So, that's a reason for hope.

END OF CHOMSKY INTERVIEW, OBAMA NEWSLETTER #3

BBlum6@aol.com

Anti-Empire Report, April 4, 2009

<http://www.killinghope.org/bblum6/aer68.html>

Barack Obama and Afghanistan: a closer look

by Mariano Aguirre

Barack Obama announced a comprehensive new strategy for Afghanistan on 27 March 2009. This recognises that a military victory is unattainable. It adopts a regional approach, focusing more intensively on Pakistan, and opens the way to negotiate with some sectors of the insurgency. More emphasis is laid on development and creating jobs in

agriculture. The United States president also acknowledges the need for a strategy towards the eventual withdrawal of military forces.

Mariano Aguirre is the director of the Norwegian Peacebuilding Centre (NOREF) in Oslo.

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Barack Obama and Afghanistan: a closer look

Mariano Aguirre

The United States's shift of strategy towards "AfPak" needs to go further by taking account of regional concerns and local agencies, says Mariano Aguirre.

8 - 04 - 2009

Barack Obama announced a comprehensive new strategy for Afghanistan on 27 March 2009. This recognises that a military victory is unattainable. It adopts a regional approach, focusing more intensively on Pakistan, and opens the way to negotiate with some sectors of the insurgency. More emphasis is laid on development and creating jobs in agriculture. The United States president also [acknowledges](#) the need for a strategy towards the eventual withdrawal of military forces.

A strategy has been presented as a significant departure from the approach of George W Bush in 2001, which - in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington - was essentially based on defeating the Taliban and al-Qaida. By comparison, Obama has narrowed his ambitions to defeating al-Qaida, stabilising [Afghanistan](#) and eliminating terrorist threats. The new aspects of the plan - governance, economic aid, social reconstruction and eventually dialogue and negotiations - are presented as means to achieve the original purpose of removing an international terrorist threat.

The continued emphasis on the military component is consistent with this overall goal. The deployment (already announced) of 17,000 [extra](#) US troops is supplemented by 4,000 troops more who will act as trainers of the Afghan army and police force, as well as hundreds of civilian advisers (who will include experts in agriculture, education and law). This will take the total number of US troops in Afghanistan to 60,000.

Since 2001, intervention in Afghanistan has been described as part of the "war on terror", a nation-building mission and a test of Nato's legitimacy. By contrast, Obama has described his goal as being to "disrupt, dismantle and defeat al-Qaida in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent its return to either country in the future." He has also emphasised the need to ensure that Afghanistan will no longer be used to plan attacks on the United States - which recalls (as Robert Matthews of Fride [argues](#)) Donald Rumsfeld's notion of a "light nation-building footprint". In this light, the new thinking is a definite shift away from the ambition of promoting a wide-ranging agenda for democracy-promotion, civil society and governance.

The heart of Obama's plan thus [stresses](#) the need to protect the United States - at a time when US intelligence services warn of the possibility of another 9/11-style attack in American homeland. At the same time, the insurgency in "AfPak" is in his view a crucial battle for the entire world as well as the United States; and as such, it is a task that needs to be shared globally, especially among Nato allies.

The allied dimension

The president has also indicated that allied cooperation should not be restricted to contributing more troops, but could take the shape of police training, provision of electoral advisers and support for Afghan society. This mirrors the position of European governments, which are willing to send advisers and aid but are more [reluctant](#) to send further troops. Spain, the Netherlands, Portugal, Italy, Greece, Poland, Turkey, Croatia and Germany announced at the [Nato summit](#) on 3-4 April that they will contribute up to 5,000 new troops, but most will be deployed to provide security for the presidential elections in Afghanistan in August.

Obama has also appealed to the United Nations to broaden its mandate to coordinate international action and assistance and to strengthen Afghan institutions. The White House has named diplomat [Peter Galbraith](#), a harsh [critic](#) of the Iraq war, as the UN's second-in-command to the mission's special representative, [Kai Eide](#) of Norway. In July 2008, Eide indicated to the UN Security Council the [need](#) for "a broad-based Afghan political dialogue".

The focus is on supporting Afghanistan and preserving Pakistani democracy. The attempt to build western-style democracy, as voiced by the Bush administration after 2004, is notable by its absence. The intention is to create economic security in order to win over those who (either voluntarily or under coercion) joined armed groups. At the same time, specific benchmarks and metrics will be put in place to condition aid flows to Pakistan on Islamabad's cooperation against the [Taliban](#), and to monitor concrete results in Afghanistan in areas such as corruption and the fight against drug-trafficking. In this sense, the combined military and civilian "surge" is also intended to strengthen Washington's position in any future negotiations.

The regional dimension

The regional approach is fundamental to Obama's strategy: specifically the creation of a contact-group bringing together countries that have a [stake](#) in the region - India, China, Russia, Iran, the central Asian states, and the Gulf nations (particularly Saudi Arabia). The hastening of cooperation with Iran, in line with the parallel diplomacy that Washington has initiated (such as the meeting with Iran's deputy foreign minister, Mohammad Mehdi Akhondzadeh, at The Hague [conference](#) on Afghanistan on 31 March 2009) is especially important.

The US's outreach here echoes the proposal of two experts that the way forward lies in a "great bargain" for the region (see Barnett R Rubin & Ahmed Rashid, "[From Great Game to Grand Bargain: Ending Chaos in Afghanistan and Pakistan](#)" [*Foreign Affairs*, November-December 2008]).

The immediate responses by the two countries most affected by the strategy was positive. The Afghan president, Hamid Karzai, [welcomed](#) the initiative's focus on countering militant sanctuaries in Pakistan, and endorsed the plan to negotiate with some insurgent groups in Afghanistan. Pakistan's president, [Asif Ali Zardari](#), was pleased with the United States's [increase](#) in economic and social aid: \$1.5 billion per year during 2009-13, with a new emphasis on development and the strengthening of democratic institutions.

The five problems

The new plan faces five obstacles that must be overcome if its aims are to be achieved.

The first is its likely impact on the Taliban enemy. The US's bolstering of its military, alongside Obama's declaration that a "victory" is not possible, may encourage the Taliban and other

armed groups to dig in for long-term [resistance](#). They will interpret the combination of reinforcement and doubt as evidence that their own insurgency, the passing of time, and public opinion in the west will force the "occupiers" to leave before their mission has been completed (see Paul Rogers, "[Afghanistan: the last throw](#)", 3 April 2009).

Already, it is reported that several Taliban groups operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan are coordinating a new offensive to "welcome" the arriving US troops. At the same time, Pakistan's powerful Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) service is said to be continuing to collaborate with the Taliban, [providing](#) the movement with logistical information and economic and military support. This collaboration has a long history: it started in the 1980s when Pakistan played a crucial role as the rearguard of the US support strategy for the *mujahideen* against the Soviet troops then in Afghanistan.

The second problem is that the Taliban and the Hizb-e-Islami militant opposition may not be very interested in negotiating with the US and the weak, externally-dependent Hamid Karzai government. The tactics of Obama and his special representative [Richard Holbrooke](#) are reminiscent of those applied in the mid-1990s in the Balkan wars (when Holbrooke was US special envoy, negotiating with Slobodan Milosevic and Radovan Karadzic among others), as well as in Iraq in the mid-2000s: an attempt to draw armed actors into consultation in the wake of military offensives of uncertain result.

The very term "Taliban" highlights the problems here - for it refers to a diversity of groups (tribal, sub-tribal and clan) that range from Pashtun tribes who are radically anti-western though not all "Taliban" to local criminal organisations and warlords. In addition, there are other non-Taliban organisations that are fighting against the foreign presence and for control of local resources and populations.

Thus, the broad range of groups and internal alliances in Afghanistan and Pakistan - and the fact that for the moment these actors believe that more can be gained from war than peace - may make them reluctant to engage in negotiations. In the same vein, neither the weak Hamid Karzai government nor the Afghan parliament have sufficient popular credibility to encourage the militant opposition to trade peace for integration in the political system.

The fact that the Taliban succeeded in forcing the Pakistani government to concede economic, police and judicial control of the Swat valley area is [viewed](#) as a victory that could be repeated in other areas.

Moreover, several experts have serious doubts that the US and Nato can launch an offensive and at the same time present themselves as willing to negotiate. "There is a need for a third actor", [says](#) Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh of the *Centre d'etudes et Recherches Internationales* (CERI), "and nobody is playing that role. But the UN should be empowered to do it."

The third problem is that sectors of the Pakistani armed forces and intelligence services are not willing to accept the new conditions and benchmarks for Washington's aid, and fear that US strategy seeks to isolate Pakistan by supporting greater Indian influence in Afghanistan (see Kanchan Lakshman, "[India in Afghanistan: a presence under pressure](#)", 11 July 2008). Both Pakistani and Indian diplomatic efforts are, in fact, using the Afghan conflict to advance their respective geopolitical agendas in the region. Pakistan and India have been in permanent tension since 1947, with intermittent armed confrontations and an ongoing dispute over Kashmir.

The fourth problem is that the regional approach is a good idea wrapped in a [complex reality](#). Afghanistan is a mirror in which are [projected](#) a series of geopolitical tensions and interests:

among China, Russia and Iran as well as between India and Pakistan. Ultimately, however, Afghanistan is not a priority for any of these countries. The issues at stake are commerce, access to energy resources, drug-trafficking, refugees, political instability in central Asia, the expansion of radical Islamism, and - yes - geopolitical leadership. Each of these countries is also involved in its own alliances, and there are already regional organisations in place: for example, the [Shanghai Cooperation Organisation](#), which groups Russia, China and four ex-Soviet central-Asian states.

The fifth problem is that Europeans (and Canadians) are unwilling to invest resources and soldiers' lives in protecting American security. By focusing on the stabilisation of Afghanistan to protect the US from terrorist attacks, President Obama has prepared the ground for possible future disagreements in transatlantic relations. This might explain why, at the French-hosted part of Nato's [sixtieth-anniversary](#) summit in Strasbourg on 3 April, Obama announced: "It is probably more likely that al-Qaida would be able to launch a serious terrorist attack in Europe than in the United States because of its proximity. This is not an American mission - this is a Nato mission, and this is an international mission".

A joint report by two Norwegian research centres - the [International Peace Research Institute](#) (PRIO) and the [Chr Michelsen Institute](#) (CMI) - is sceptical about the Nato rationale of increasing troops and negotiating "from strength" (see Astri Suhrke et al., [Conciliatory Approaches to the Insurgency in Afghanistan: An Overview](#) [CMI/PRIO, 2009]). The authors recommend that the Kabul government, with the support of the international community, should use traditional institutions in Afghanistan and Pakistan to promote local-level truces, arrangements for peaceful coexistence and reconciliation at national and local levels. At the same time, they say, the foreign missions in Afghanistan should [revive](#) bottom-up peacebuilding strategies, such as promoting the conflict-resolution mechanisms of local instruments such as the *jirga* and the *shura*; as well as local development, rehabilitation and civic-education projects.

Barack Obama insisted several times during his week-long trip to Europe that he was ready to "listen" to allies and critics. The ability to listen to the conclusions of researchers on the way forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan will be an important test of his presidency.

VIOLENCE, WARS, MASCULINITY, BUSH, OBAMA

By Larry Woodall

You couple the fact of violence-conditioning with another situation now prevalent in the U.S.- absent fathers.

Boys think to be a man you must be macho, mean and willing to inflict harm on others. Tv and their peers have taught them that, especially in the lower income families. They have been led to believe that violence is a certifiably correct way to solve problems. The turnaround is going to be long and difficult but not impossible

I didn't vote for Barack Obama but I'm hoping one of his best side benefits will be a new role model for boys.

Bush glorified war and is reportedly a bit of a sadist him self. Obama glorifies education and how it can lift you from one status to a higher one. He came from meager beginnings, the absent father and has overcome deep seated racial prejudice and bigotry to achieve his goal. He proves that being smart and educated is the path to success.

OBAMA'S FRIENDS AND ADMINISTRATIVE APPOINTMENTS

THE MEN BEHIND OBAMA

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MouUJNG8f2k&feature=related>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-KJCMWcoms&feature=related>

RETURN TO CONSTITUTION AND RULE OF LAW

Feingold's Outline for a Constitutional Presidency

<http://www.thenation.com/blogs/thebeat/394523/print>

posted by John Nichols on 01/07/2009 @ 2:15pm

The new U.S. Senate is struggling to constitute itself this week, and the picture is a sorry one.....

The exception to the misrule is Sen. Russ Feingold, the Wisconsin Democrat who chairs the Judiciary Committee's subcommittee on the Constitution.

Feingold wants the Senate to get serious about renewing the system of checks and balances that essentially collapsed under the monarchical pressures brought upon it by George Bush, Dick Cheney and their willing accomplices in the House and Senate.

Feingold has been needling President-elect Barack Obama to use his inaugural address to "affirm to the nation, and the world, that respect for the rule of law has returned to the Oval Office."...

Feingold's letter calls the president-elect's attention to a September hearing of the Constitution subcommittee entitled "Restoring the Rule of Law," at which more than three dozen historians, law professors and advocates -- including John Podesta, now a key player in the transition process -- testified.

Out of that hearing came a series of recommendations for steps the new president can and should take to renew the rule of law:

- 1.) Close the facility at Guantanamo Bay.
- 2.) Ban torture and establish a single, government-wide standard of humane detainee treatment.
- 3.) Conduct a comprehensive review of Office of Legal Counsel opinions and repudiate or revise those that overstate executive authority.

- 4.) Support significant legislative changes to the Patriot Act and the FISA Amendments Act.
- 5.) Cooperate with congressional oversight, including providing full information to intelligence committees.
- 6.) Establish presumptions of openness and disclosure in making decisions on the classification of information and respond to requests under the Freedom of Information Act.....

For the complete article go to:

<http://www.thenation.com/blogs/thebeat/394523/print>

DIVERSE QUESTIONS ABOUT OBAMA IN 2009

RULE OF LAW: TRUTH COMMISSION

An independent Truth Commission is necessary now to dig out all the actions of the Bush Admin. still hidden. Will Obama do it? And prosecution of Bush and Cheney should be pursued, since they committed felonies, and the US is supposed to be a nation of laws. Will Obama do it? (DICK)

FROM BUSH'S WARS, CAPITALISM, LAWLESSNESS, DEBT, AND DEFICIT TO OBAMA: WHAT WILL HE DO?

Harper's Magazine is offering a series of comprehensive studies of the Bush Admin. that stimulate us to ask whether Obama can and how he might make significant changes: "The Way Out of War: A Blueprint for Leaving Iraq Now" by George McGovern and William Polk (Oct. 2008); "How to Save Capitalism: Fundamental Fixes for a Collapsing System" by James K. Galbraith, et al. (Nov. 2008); "Justice After Bush: Prosecuting an Outlaw Administration" by Scott Horton (Dec. 2008); and "The \$10 Trillion Hangover: Paying the Price for Eight Years of Bush" by Linda Bilmes and Joseph Stiglitz (Jan. 2009). (See Amy Goodman's interview of Bilmes 12-22-10)

ECONOMIC FAIRNESS

"Obama will need to be able to point to some turbulence at the grassroots...in order talk the Washington establishment into accepting radical shifts in the economic order." The Clinton/Bush toxic blend of free-trade absolutism, banking deregulation and disdain for industrial and agricultural planning" will need to be reversed. *The Nation* 12/29/08 (p. 4)

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION REFORM

Education secretary favored contenders Arne Duncan and Joe Klein are "two corporate-style school chiefs" that share a philosophy despised by educators and parents in Klein's district. *The Nation* 12/29/08 (p. 7)

ARMS PROLIFERATION

Global treaty for controlling international sale of arms opposed by us Nov 1, 2008

The US and Zimbabwe were the only two nations against 147 countries voting for the treaty. Will Obama see the treaty's benefits?

RELIGION: Rev. Rick Warren

Amy Goodman 12-23-08 interviewed Max Blumenthal, author of “Rick Warren’s Hypocritical Double Life,” describing Warren’s homophobia, sexism, support for assassinating the pres. of Iran, belief only a few (Christians) will go to heaven, and so on. Yet Obama has invited this right-wing authoritarian to participate in his official inauguration. Will Obama go to Heaven? An article in *The Humanist* (Jan.-Feb. 08) “Son of a Humanist” describes Obama’s earliest education, from his mother, as humanist—“to see all humanity as one, to see beyond tribalism to find common ground and unity, and his inclination towards empathy.”

EQUITY FOR WOMEN

“Barack Obama, Feminist in Chief?” by Katha Pollitt, *The Nation* (12-22-08): “the jury is still out on Obama.”

CRITICISM FROM ADOLPH REED JR.

“Obama’s Centrism Is No Surprise.” *The Progressive* (Jan. 2009). Obama’s notions of social justice and racial equality are narrow and class-bound. He “caters domestically to the investor class and continues to pursue...an interventionist foreign policy.”

END OF OBAMA NEWSLETTER #3