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The Lessons of the Vietnam War

-an interview with Noam Chomsky

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"American imperialism has suffered a stunning defeat in Indochina. But the same forces are engaged in another war against a much less resilient enemy, the American people. Here, the prospects for success are much greater. The battleground is ideological, not military. At stake are the lessons to be drawn from the American war in Indochina; the outcome will determine the course and character of new imperial ventures."

Noam Chomsky, 1975

The following interview was conducted with Professor Chomsky in October 1982)

- an interview with Noam Chomsky

Q: When the Indochina war ended in 1975 you wrote that our nation's "official" opinion makers would engage in distortion of the lessons to be drawn from the war so that the same basic foreign policy goals could be pursued after the war. You felt then that in order to keep the real meaning of the war from penetrating the general public they faced two major tasks: First, they would have to disguise the fact that the war "was basically an American attack on South Vietnam -- a war of annihilation that spilled over to the rest of Indochina". And secondly, they would have to obscure the fact that the military effort in Vietnam "was restrained by a mass movement of protest and resistance here at home which engaged in effective direct action outside the bounds of propriety long before established spokesmen proclaimed themselves to be its leaders". Where do we stand now on these two issues--seven years later?

Chomsky: As far as the opinion makers are concerned, they have been doing exactly what it was obvious they would do. Every book that comes out, every article that comes out, talks about how -- while it may have been a "mistake" or an "unwise effort" -- the United States was defending South Vietnam from North Vietnamese aggression. And they portray those who opposed the war as apologists for North Vietnam. That's standard to say.

The purpose is obvious: to obscure the fact that the United States did attack South Vietnam and the major war was fought against South Vietnam. The real invasion of South Vietnam which was directed largely against the rural society began *directly* in 1962 after many years of working through mercenaries and client groups. And that fact simply does not exist in official American history. There is no such event in American history as the attack on South Vietnam. That's gone. Of course. It is a part of real history. But it's not a part of official history.

And most of us who were opposed to the war, especially in the early 60's -- the war we were opposed to was the war on South Vietnam which destroyed South Vietnam's rural society. The South was devastated. But now anyone who opposed this atrocity is regarded as having defended North Vietnam. And that's part of the effort to present the war as if it were a war between South Vietnam and North Vietnam with the United States helping the South. Of course it's fabrication. But it's "official truth" now.

Q: This question of *who* the United States was fighting in Vietnam is pretty basic

in terms of coming to any understanding of the war. But why would the U.S. attack South Vietnam, if the problem was not an attack from North Vietnam?

Chomsky: First of all, let's make absolutely certain that was the fact: that the U.S. directed the war against South Vietnam. There was a political settlement in 1954. But in the late 50's the United States organized an internal repression in South Vietnam, not using its troops, but using the local apparatus it was constructing. This was a very significant and very effective campaign of violence and terrorism against the Vietminh -- which was the communist-led nationalist force that fought the French. And the Vietminh at that time was adhering to the Geneva Accords, hoping that the political settlement would work out in South Vietnam. [The Geneva Accords of 1954 temporarily divided Northern and Southern Vietnam with the ultimate aim of reunification through elections. -- editor's note]

And so, not only were they not conducting any terrorism, but in fact, they were not even responding to the violence against them. It reached the point where by 1959 the Vietminh leadership -- the communist party leadership -- was being decimated. Cadres were being murdered extensively. Finally in May of 1959 there was an authorization to use violence in self-defense, after years of murder, with thousands of people killed in this campaign organized by the United States. As soon as they began to use violence in self-defense, the whole Saigon government apparatus fell apart at once because it was an apparatus based on nothing but a monopoly of violence. And once it lost that monopoly of violence it was finished. And that's what led the United States to move in. There were no North Vietnamese around.

Then the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam was formed. And its founding program called for the neutralization of South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. And it's very striking that the National Liberation Front was the only group that ever called for the independence of South Vietnam. The so-called South Vietnamese government (GVN) did not, but rather, claimed to be the government of all Vietnam. The National Liberation Front was the only South Vietnamese group that ever talked about South Vietnamese independence. They called for the neutralization of South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia as a kind of neutral block, working toward some type of integration of the South with North Vietnam ultimately.

Now that proposal in 1962 caused panic in American ruling circles. From 1962 to 1965 the US was dedicated to try to prevent the independence of South Vietnam. The reason was of course that Kennedy and Johnson knew that if any political solution was permitted in the south, the National Liberation Front would effectively come to power, so strong was its political support in comparison with the political support of the so-called South Vietnamese government.

And in fact Kennedy and later Johnson tried to block every attempt at neutralization, every attempt at political settlement. This is all documented. There's just no doubt about it. I mean, it's wiped out of history, but the documentation is just unquestionable -- in the internal government sources and everywhere else.

And so there's just no question that the United States was trying desperately to prevent the independence of South Vietnam and to prevent a political settlement inside South Vietnam. And in fact it went to war precisely to prevent that. It finally bombed the North in 1965 with the purpose of trying to get the North to use its influence to call off the insurgency in the South. There were no North Vietnamese troops in South Vietnam then as far as anybody knew. And they anticipated of course when they began bombing the North from South Vietnamese bases that it would bring North Vietnamese troops into the South. And then it became possible to pretend it was aggression from the North. It was ludicrous, but that's what they claimed.

Well, why did they do it? Why was the United States so afraid of an independent South Vietnam? Well, I think the reason again is pretty clear from the internal government documents. Precisely what they were afraid of was that the "takeover" of

South Vietnam by nationalist forces would not be brutal. They feared it would be conciliatory and that there would be successful social and economic development -- and that the whole region might work!

This was clearly a nationalist movement -- and in fact a radical nationalist movement which would separate Vietnam from the American orbit. It would not allow Vietnam to become another Philippines. It would trade with the United States but it would not be an American semi-colony.

And suppose it worked! Suppose the country could separate itself from the American-dominated global system and carry out a successful social and economic development. Then that is very dangerous because then it could be a model to other movements and groups in neighboring countries. And gradually there could be an erosion from within by indigenous forces of American domination of the region. So this was no small thing. It was assumed that the key to the problem was preventing any successful national movement from carrying out serious social and economic development inside Indochina. So the United States had to destroy it through a process which would become the war against South Vietnam. And, it should be pointed out that on a lower level we were doing the same things in Laos and Cambodia.

Q: So the irony is that the very reason given in the United States for fighting the war -- the independence of South Vietnam -- is exactly what had to be destroyed.

Chomsky: Exactly

Q: Do you think this distortion of the war is successful?

Chomsky: It's hard to say. People who lived through the period know better. But younger people who are being indoctrinated into the contemporary system of falsification -- they really have to do some research to find out what is the truth. In the general population, people forget or don't care that much. And gradually what you hear drilled into your head everyday comes to be believed. People don't understand what you're talking about any more if you discuss the American war on South Vietnam.

Q: And the role of the anti-war movement?

Chomsky: The main effort has been to show that the opposition to the war was of two types. One was the serious responsible type that involved Eugene McCarthy and some senators -- who turned the tide because we realized it wasn't worthwhile or was too expensive or something. And then there were these sort of violent and irrational groups, teenagers and so on, whose behavior had little to do with the war really and whose activity was a form of lunacy. Now, anyone who lived through the period would have to laugh.

But my impression is that the effort to portray the peace movement this way is not working very well. For example, at the beginning of his administration, Reagan tried to set the basis for American military intervention in El Salvador -- which is about what Kennedy did when he came into office in regard to Vietnam. Well, when Kennedy tried it in Vietnam, it just worked like a dream. Virtually nobody opposed American bombing of South Vietnam in 1962. It was not an issue. But when Reagan began to talk of involving American forces in El Salvador there was a huge popular uproar. And he had to choose a much more indirect way of supporting the collection of gangsters in power there. He had to back off. And what that must indicate is a tremendous shift in public opinion over the past 20 years as a result of the participation in the real opposition to the war in Indochina -- which has lasted and was resurrected when a similar circumstance began to arise.

Q: So you see the inability of the government to maneuver as it would like in El Salvador as directly related to the anti-war movement?

Chomsky: Oh yes. They even have a name for it: "Vietnam Syndrome". See, they make

it sound like some kind of disease, a malady that has to be overcome. And the "malady" in this case is that the population is still unwilling to tolerate aggression and violence. And that's a change that took place as a result of the popular struggle against the war in Vietnam.

Q: So you feel it was the group officially defined as the "riff-raff, lunatic fringe" who really was the peace movement?

Chomsky: Oh, there's no question. You can see what happened. There were very extensive grass roots efforts beginning in the mid 60's, developing quite gradually against tremendous opposition. So that in Boston it was impossible to have an outdoor public meeting against the war until about the fall of 1966. Until then they would be broken up. And the media more or less applauded the violence and disruption that prevented people from speaking. But gradually that changed. In fact, it reached such a point that by 1967 it was impossible for the President to declare a national mobilization for war. He was restricted and forced to pretend he was conducting a small war. There were constraints. Because of public opinion which by then was considerably aroused by demonstrations and teach-ins and other types of resistance, Johnson had to fight the war with deficit spending. He had to fight a "guns and butter" war to show it was no big war.

And this policy just collapsed. And it collapsed totally with the Tet Offensive in 1968 [the National Liberation Front's surprise temporary takeover of virtually all of South Vietnam's cities overnight --Ed.] which led major sectors of American power -- corporate power and other centers of power -- to realize we could not carry it off at this level. Either we go to war like in the Second World War, or we pull out. And that was a direct effect of the activities of the peace movement. After this decision was made, then politicians like Eugene McCarthy -- whom you had never heard of before that time, came to announce themselves as the leaders of the peace movement.

But by then the basic decision to put a limit to direct American troop involvement had been made. You had to fight for a long time to get the U.S. out, but the basic decision had been made at the Tet Offensive. That's when the programs related to Vietnamization were put in place, and we began to fight a more capital-intensive war with less direct participation of American ground troops.

Incidentally, another reason for this was that the American army began to deteriorate internally because, after all, the United States was fighting a very unusual type of war. It's very rare for a country to try to fight a colonial war with a conscript army. Usually wars like the Vietnam war are fought with mercenaries -- like the French Foreign Legion. The US tried to fight what amounts to a colonial war with a conscript army. And a colonial war is a very dirty kind of war. You're not fighting armed forces. You're fighting mostly unarmed people. And to fight that kind of war requires professional killers, which means mercenaries. The 50,000 Korean mercenaries we had in Vietnam were professional killers and just massacred people outright. And the American army did plenty of that too, but it couldn't take it after awhile. It's not the kind of job you can give to conscripts who are not trained to be murderers.

Q: And they had also heard of the anti-war movement's ideas against the war back home.

Chomsky: Exactly. It was a citizen's army, not separated from what's happening in American society in general. And the effect was that, very much to its credit, the American army began to crumble and deteriorate. And it became harder and harder to keep an army in the field.

Q: Are you aware of any other time in history when soldiers came home from the war and organized against their government as many Vietnam veterans did through the Vietnam Veterans Against the War organization?

Chomsky: It's rare. For example, it's happening now to a certain extent in Israel with reservists who are also fighting a war against a civilian population in Lebanon. And it's the same kind of phenomenon. If they just kept professional military men involved they could probably carry it off. But reservists are connected with the civilian population. That's why countries like France and England used mercenary forces to carry out these kinds of wars.

Let me make one final point about the peace movement which is often forgotten. When you look back at the internal documents that we have now you can see that when the big decision was made around the Tet Offensive in 1968 -- about whether or not to send a couple hundred thousand more troops -- one of the factors was that the Joint Chiefs of Staff were concerned that they would not have enough troops for internal control of the domestic American population. They feared tremendous protest and disruption at home if they sent more troops to Vietnam. This means that they understood the level of internal resistance to be virtually at the level of civil war. And I think they were probably right about that. That's a good indication from inside as to how seriously they took the peace movement.

There are indications that the huge demonstrations of October and November of 1969 severely limited Nixon 's ability to carry out some of the plans for escalating the war that he had. The domestic population was not under control. And any country has to have a passive population if it is going to carry out effectively an aggressive foreign policy. And it was clear by October and November of 1969 just by the scale of opposition that the population was not passive.

So those are all important events to remember. Again, they're sort of written out of history. But the record is there and the documentation is there, and it's clear that that's what happened.

Q: What is the current U.S. foreign policy toward Indochina?

Chomsky: Well, towards Indochina I think the main policy is what's called "bleeding Vietnam" Even conservative business groups outside the United States are appalled at what the United States has been doing.

We fought the war to prevent Indochina from carrying out successful social and economic development. Well, I think the chances of that happening are very slight because of the devastation, because of the brutality of war. But the U.S. wants to make sure it will continue. And therefore we first of all of course refused any reparations. We refused aid. We try to block aid from other countries. We block aid from international institutions. I mean, sometimes it reaches a point of almost fanatic effort to make them suffer.

For example, there was one point when the United States prevented the government of India from sending a hundred buffalo to Vietnam. (The buffalo stock in Vietnam had been decimated by American bombing.) We prevented them by threatening to cut off Food for Peace aid.

So in every conceivable way the United States has tried to increase the harsh conditions of life in Indochina. And right now one of the main ways we're doing it is by supporting the Khmer Rouge on the Thai-Cambodian border.

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