

The Propaganda System

Noam Chomsky
Lies of Our Times, May 1992

Letter from Lexington April 6, 1992

Dear LOOT,

Media critique has generally focused on how the news and opinion sections ensure right thinking. Book reviews are another intriguing element of the system of doctrinal control. In particular, the *New York Times Book Review* serves as a guide to readers and librarians with limited resources. The editors must not only select the right books, but also reviewers who adhere to the norms of political correctness. What follows are some illustrations, drawn from successive weeks.

In the study of any system, it is often useful to look at something radically different, to highlight crucial features. Let's begin, then, by looking at a society that is close to the opposite pole from ours: Brezhnev's USSR.

Consider policy formation. In Brezhnev's USSR, economic policy was determined in secret, by centralized power; popular involvement was nil, except marginally, through the Communist Party. Political policy was in the same hands. The political system was meaningless, with virtually no flow from bottom to top.

Consider next the information system, inevitably constrained by the distribution of economic-political power. In Brezhnev's USSR there was a spectrum, bounded by disagreements within centralized power. True, the media were never obedient enough for the commissars. Thus they were bitterly condemned for undermining public morale during the war in Afghanistan, playing into the hands of the imperial aggressors and their local agents from whom the USSR was courageously defending the people of Afghanistan (see E.S. Herman and N. Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*, 226f.). For the totalitarian mind, no degree of servility is ever enough.

There were dissidents and alternative media: underground *samizdat* and foreign radio. According to a 1979 US government-funded study, 77% of blue-collar workers and 96% of the middle elite listened to foreign broadcasts, while the alternative press reached 45% of high-level professionals, 41% of political leaders, 27% of managers, and 14% of blue-collar workers. The study also found most people satisfied with living conditions, favoring state-provided medical care, and largely supportive of state control of heavy industry; emigration was more for personal than political reasons (James Miller and Peter Donhowe, *Washington Post Weekly*, Feb. 17, 1986, p. 16).

Dissidents were bitterly condemned as "anti-Soviet" and "supporters of capitalist imperialism," as demonstrated by the fact that they condemned the evils of the Soviet system instead of marching in parades denouncing the crimes of official enemies. They were also punished, not in the style of US dependencies such as El Salvador, but harshly enough.

The concept "anti-Soviet" is particularly striking. We find similar concepts in Nazi Germany, Brazil under the generals, and totalitarian cultures generally. In a relatively free society, the concept would simply evoke ridicule. Imagine, say, that Italian critics of state power were condemned for "anti-Italianism." Such concepts as "anti-Soviet" are the very hallmark of a totalitarian culture; only the most dedicated and humorless commissar could use such terms.

Well-behaved party hacks were guilty of no such crimes as anti-Sovietism. Their task was to applaud the state and its leaders; or even better, criticize them for deviating from their grand principles, thus instilling the propaganda line by presupposition rather than assertion, always the most effective technique. The commissar might say that leaders erred in their defense of Afghanistan against "the assault from the inside, which was manipulated" by Pakistan and the CIA. They should have understood that "it was an Afghan war, and if we converted it into a white man's war, we would lose." Similarly, a Nazi ideologue might have conceded that the "encounter" between Germans and Slavs on the Eastern front was "less than inspiring," though for balance, we must recall that it was "a total war between rival nations for control of a territory both groups were willing to die for"; and for the Slavs "the terms of the conflict" were "less mortal" than for the Germans needing *Lebensraum*, "staking not only their fortunes but also their very lives on the hope of building new lives in untried country." The Slavs, after all, could trudge off to Siberia. I return to the source of the quotes directly.

With these observations as background, let us turn to our own free society.

Begin again with policy formation. Economic policy is determined in secret; in law and in principle, popular involvement is nil. The Fortune 500 are more diverse than the Politburo, and market mechanisms provide far more diversity than in a command economy. But a corporation, factory, or business is the economic equivalent of fascism: decisions and control are strictly top-down. People are not compelled to purchase the products or rent themselves to survive, but those are the sole choices.

The political system is closely linked to economic power, both through personnel and broader constraints on policy. Efforts of the public to enter the political arena must be barred: liberal elites see such efforts as a dangerous "crisis of democracy," and they are intolerable to statist reactionaries ("conservatives"). The political system has virtually no flow from bottom to top, apart from the local level; the general public appears to regard it as largely meaningless.

The media present a spectrum of opinion, largely reflecting tactical divisions within the state-corporate nexus. True, they are never obedient enough for the commissars. The media were bitterly condemned for undermining public morale during the war in Vietnam, playing into the hands of the imperial aggressors and their local agents from whom the US was courageously defending the people of Vietnam; a Freedom House study provides a dramatic example (see Herman and Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*, chapter 5, 5.2, and appendix 3). For the totalitarian mind, again, no degree of servility is enough.

There are dissidents and other information sources. Foreign radio broadcasts reach virtually no one, but alternative media exist, though without a tiny fraction of the outreach of *samizdat*. Dissidents are bitterly condemned as "anti-American" and "supporters of Communism" as demonstrated by the fact that they condemn the evils of the American system instead of marching in parades denouncing the crimes of official enemies. But they are not severely punished, at least if they are privileged and of the right color. Again, the concept "anti-American" is particularly striking, the very hallmark of a totalitarian mentality.

Let us now turn to the *Times Book Review*, keeping to the reviews, not the books.

The March 15 issue carries Morton Kondracke's review of Paul Hollander's *Anti-Americanism*; the author and reviewer are loyal apologists for atrocities by the US government and its clients. Kondracke applauds this worthy exposure of the crime of anti-Americanism, though he feels Hollander may go too far in citing benefits for the handicapped as an illustration of the leftist deviation of Congress.

"Anti-Americanism" (equivalently "the left," or "Marxists") is defined by the author as "a generally critical disposition toward existing social arrangements," the "cultural belief" that "this is a severely flawed and possibly doomed society, though still a menace to its citizens and humanity." Kondracke agrees that "the left gets more respect and attention in the news media than its ideas merit," and is "strongly influential" in colleges and the church. But all is not lost: "there is not a single Marxist or 'anti-American' major daily newspaper (or even major newspaper columnist) in the country" and the dangerous "mainline churches" are losing membership. Fortunately, those with "a generally critical disposition toward existing social arrangements" are almost entirely barred, though we must keep up our guard in case the heresy finds a tiny outlet.

Kondracke is particularly outraged that even though "the Communist alternative has collapsed," the anti-Americans (by implication, pro-Communists) maintain their "permanently adversarial culture" and continue to "hate their nation." They "have not recanted," even though they have been proven "disastrously wrong" in their wild claims that the Sandinistas and other evil-doers "represented a bright future for mankind" -- or, to replace raving by reality, that the Sandinistas might have offered hope for Nicaraguans. The criminals in this case include the World Bank, Central American Jesuits, the leading figure of Central American democracy, Jose Figueres, a great enthusiast for US corporations and the CIA, indeed, a rather broad range. But that just shows how awesome the anti-American conspiracy is.

Kondracke does not remind us how the anti-Americans were refuted, though his record suggests that he would agree with *Time* magazine's admiring review of the technique that brought about the latest of the "happy series of democratic surprises" as "democracy burst forth" in Nicaragua in February 1990: to "wreck the economy and prosecute a long and deadly proxy war until the exhausted natives overthrow the unwanted government themselves," with a cost to us that is "minimal," leaving the victim "with wrecked bridges, sabotaged power stations, and ruined farms," and thus providing the U.S. candidate with "a winning issue": ending the "impoverishment of the people of Nicaragua." Kondracke's enthusiasm for terrorist violence and illegal economic warfare was no less, and his love of "democracy" is of the same order.

The anti-Americans, Kondracke explains, are driven only by "the pleasure of struggle against the world in which they live." But, he concludes triumphantly, "for all their raving against America, few America-haters ever leave." Love it or leave it, but don't dare to say that its magnificence is flawed. Totalitarian cultures do not often reach such heights.

In the next week's issue (March 22), Caleb Carr reviews a book on the 1862 Sioux Uprising in Minnesota. After the obligatory frothing at the mouth about the evils of PC, Carr explains that the "Minnesota encounter" was "a total war between rival nations for control of a territory both groups were willing to die for." For one nation, "settlement was generally their last hope"; they were "staking not only their fortunes but also their very lives on the hope of building new lives in untried country." For the natives, at least at first, "the terms of the conflict" were "less mortal"; they could, after all, trudge off further West. Carr describes the "encounter" as "less than inspiring," and praises the author for recognizing that both nations were guilty of crimes. Those of the Sioux are outlined in gory detail ("atrocious behavior," "sadism and blood lust," "a particular penchant for torturing infants and children," etc.); the rhetoric differs for the settlers seeking *Lebensraum* (broken treaties, hanging of 38 Sioux, expulsion even of some who were not "guilty" of resistance, etc.) But the difference is only fair, given the asymmetry of need in the "encounter."

The following week, we are treated to a review by Arthur Schlesinger (AS) of John Newman's *JFK and Vietnam*, a review by the leading Kennedy hagiographer of a book of Kennedy hagiography. Both author and reviewer, of course, affect a critical

stance, stressing that the hero may have erred by concealing his noble commitment to "limited war" (wholesale international terrorism), rather than full-scale aggression -- as distinct from the lower-level aggression that JFK launched in 1961-2, another of those unspeakable truths.

AS is full of praise for this "solid contribution," with its "meticulous and exhaustive examination of documents," etc.; an astonishing judgment that merits separate discussion. Newman's thesis that JFK intended to withdraw from Vietnam even without victory is "essentially right" AS believes. He adds that he, AS, had made the same point 30 years ago in his *A Thousand Days*, where he gave JFK's view that "it was a Vietnamese war, and if we converted it into a white man's war, we would lose."

AS does not remind us that LBJ commonly made similar remarks after picking up the mantle: we do not want "our American boys to do the fighting for Asian boys," he proclaimed during the 1964 election campaign. True, this is not quite the same as the JFK-AS version: for LBJ, it was a point of principle, while for JFK-AS, it was sheer expedience, a question of how to win. But that aside, by AS's reasoning, LBJ must have been deeply committed to withdrawal rather than escalation. AS also does not remind us that in his huge history of Camelot, published in 1965 before the war had lost its popularity among elites, there is not a single phrase suggesting that JFK intended to withdraw, which leaves only three possibilities: (1) the historian was keeping it secret; (2) this close JFK confidant didn't know; (3) it wasn't true.

Author and reviewer blame the evil military for thwarting JFK's secret designs. Both cite what AS calls "a hysterical 1962 memorandum" in which the Joint Chiefs predict "that 'the fall of South Vietnam to Communist control would mean the eventual Communist domination of all the Southeast Asian mainland' and that most of Asia would capitulate to what the military still stubbornly called the 'Sino-Soviet Bloc'." "Such hyperbole," AS explains, "confirmed Kennedy's low opinion of the military."

Turning to *A Thousand Days*, we discover that it was JFK's *State Department* that babbled on about the "Sino-Soviet Bloc." The "hyperbole" about South Vietnam is, furthermore, standard fare in internal documents back to the 1940's, based on fear of the potential appeal of Communist success. AS also spares us JFK's thoughts on this matter. In 1956, Senator JFK described Vietnam as "the cornerstone of the Free world in Southeast Asia, the keystone to the arch, the finger in the dike." Burma, Thailand, the Philippines, and India "are among those whose security would be threatened if the red tide of Communism overflowed into Vietnam... Moreover, the independence of Free Vietnam is crucial to the free world in fields other than the military. Her economy is essential to the economy of all of Southeast Asia; and her political liberty is an inspiration to those seek to obtain or maintain their liberty in all parts of Asia -- and indeed the world. The fundamental tenets of this nation's foreign policy, in short, depend in considerable measure upon a strong and free Vietnamese nation" -- that is, the murderous Diem dictatorship, a terror state with minimal domestic support, as generally conceded.

Perhaps JFK changed his tune later. No chance. Until the end he held that "for us to withdraw from that effort would mean a collapse not only of South Vietnam, but Southeast Asia. So we are going to stay there" (May 1963). Withdrawal "only makes it easy for the Communists," who would sweep over Southeast Asia; we must therefore "win the war" (Sept. 1963). Even reduction of aid to the Far East would hand Southeast Asia to the Communists and have "the inevitable effect" of threatening India and perhaps even the Middle East (March 1963). By comparison, the Chiefs sound pretty mild.

To the end, JFK's public position was that our "objective" is to ensure that "the assault from the inside, and which is manipulated from the North, is ended" (Nov. 12, 1963). The internal record hardly differs. Like Newman, AS cites Michael Forrestal and Roger Hilsman as insiders on withdrawal, failing to add that Forrestal explicitly conditioned withdrawal on victory and condemned even pursuit of a "negotiated settlement...between North and South Vietnam" as "folly" (Nov. 13, 1963); while Hilsman, who outlined the October 1963 Taylor-McNamara withdrawal proposal (NSAM 263) in his 1964 book *To Move a Nation*, gave his judgment that without victory, JFK "might well have introduced United States ground forces into South Vietnam -- although I believe he would not have ordered them to take over the war effort."

To guard doctrinal purity, it is not essential to demonstrate that JFK intended to withdraw from Vietnam. Rather, it is important to ensure that debate over the US war be constrained within the dove-hawk spectrum: the permissible choices lie between international terrorism (allegedly JFK) and full-scale aggression (LBJ, the Kennedy advisers who stayed on). And all choices must be sanitized: they are defense against "the assault from the inside" in JFK's words -- in fact, as he knew, the "assault" by indigenous guerrillas against a terrorist client regime that could not survive *political competition*.

If these goals are achieved, the propaganda system will have done its duty.

Sincerely,

Noam Chomsky