



**BECAUSE WE SAY SO**

**NOAM CHOMSKY**

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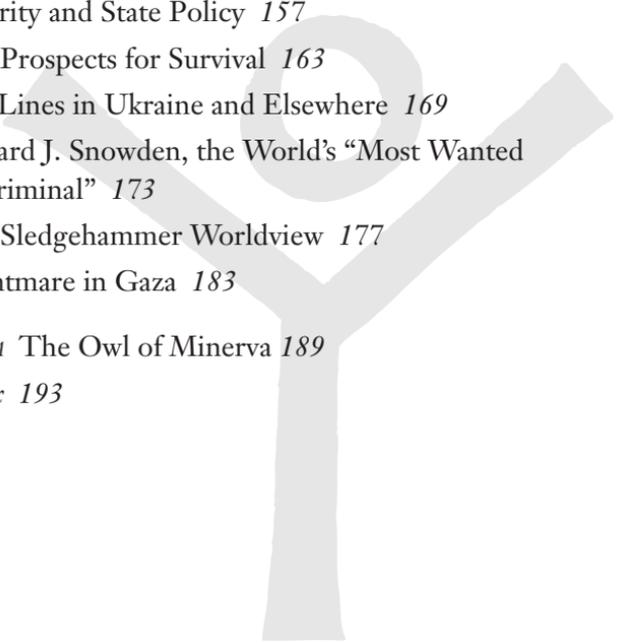
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# City Lights

# NOAM CHOMSKY AND THE PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL IN TURBULENT TIMES

By Henry A. Giroux

World-renowned academic Noam Chomsky is best known not only for his pioneering work in linguistics but also for his ongoing work as a public intellectual, in which he addresses numerous important social issues that include and often connect oppressive foreign and domestic policies—a fact well illustrated throughout this important collection of his recent political columns, *BECAUSE WE SAY SO*.

Chomsky's role intellectually, educationally and politically is more relevant now than ever given the need for a display of civic courage, theoretical rigor, and willingness to translate oppression and suffering into public concerns. Moreover, he provides a model for young people and others to understand the importance of using ideas and knowledge to intervene in civic, political and cultural life making it clear that democracy has to be struggled over, if it is going to survive.

Chomsky's political interventions have been historically specific while continually building on the power relations he has engaged critically. For instance, his initial ideas about the responsibility of intellectuals cannot be separated from his early criticisms of the Vietnam War and the complicity of intellectuals in brokering and legitimating that horrendous act of military intervention.<sup>1</sup> Yet, while it might appear difficult to compare his 1988 book, *MANUFACTURING CONSENT*, coauthored with Edward S. Herman, with his 2002 bestseller, *9/11*, what all of his texts share is a luminous theoretical, political and forensic analysis of the functioning of the current global power structure, new and old modes of oppressive authority, and the ways in which neoliberal economic and social policies have produced more savage forms of global domina-

tion and corporate sovereignty. That uncompromising analysis is present on every page of *BECAUSE WE SAY SO*.

Each column in this book confirms that Chomsky does not subscribe to a one-dimensional notion of power that one often finds among many on the left. He keenly understands that power is multifaceted, operating through a number of material and symbolic registers, and he is particularly astute in pointing out that power also has a pedagogical function and must include a historical understanding of the public relations industry and of existing and emerging cultural apparatuses, and that central to matters of power, agency and the radical imagination are modes of persuasion, the shaping of identities, and the molding of desire.

Chomsky incessantly exposes the gap between the reality and the promise of a radical democracy, particularly in the United States, though he often provides detailed analysis of how the deformation of democracy works in a number of countries that hide their diverse modes of oppression behind the false claims of democratization. Chomsky has attempted to both refigure the promise of democracy and develop new ways to theorize agency and the social imagination outside of the neoliberal focus on individualization, privatization and the assumption that the only value that matters is exchange value. Unlike many intellectuals who are trapped in the discourse of academic silos and a sclerotic professionalism, he writes and speaks from the perspective of what might be called contingent totalities. In so doing, he connects a wide variety of issues as part of a larger understanding of the diverse and specific economic, social and political forces that shape people's lives at particular historical conjunctures. He is one of the few North American theorists who embrace modes of solidarity and collective struggle less as an afterthought than as central to what it means to connect the civic, social and ethical as the

foundation for global resistance movements. Implicit to his role as a public intellectual are the questions of what a real democracy should look like, how its ideals and practices are subverted, and what forces are necessary to bring it into being. These are the questions at the heart of his thinking, his talks and the commentaries in this book.

For Chomsky, crises are viewed as overlapping, merging into each other in ways that often go unrecognized. In fact, Chomsky often brings together in his work issues such as terrorism, corporate power, American exceptionalism and other major concerns so as to provide maps that enable his readers to refigure the landscape of political, cultural and social life in ways that offer up new connections and the possibility for fresh modes of theorizing potential resistance.

He has also written about the possibility of political and economic alternatives, offering a fresh language for a collective sense of agency and resistance, a new understanding of the commons, and a rewriting of the relations between the political and the up-to-date institutions of culture, finance and capital. And yet he does not provide recipes but speaks to emerging modes of imaginative resistance always set within the boundaries of specific historical conjunctures. His work is especially important in understanding the necessity of public intellectuals in times of tyranny, cruelty, financial savagery and increasing authoritarianism. His work should be required reading for all academics, students and the wider public. That he is one of the most cited intellectuals in the world strongly suggest that his audience is general, diverse and widespread, inhabiting many different sites, public spheres and locations.

Chomsky is fiercely critical of fashionable conservative and liberal attempts to divorce intellectual activities from politics and is quite frank in his notion that education both in and out of institutional schooling should be involved in the

practice of freedom and not just the pursuit of truth. He has strongly argued that educators, artists, journalists and other intellectuals have a responsibility to provide students and the wider public the knowledge and skills they need to be able to learn how to think rigorously, to be self-reflective and to develop the capacity to govern rather than be governed. But for Chomsky it is not enough to learn how to think critically. Engaged intellectuals must also develop an ethical imagination and sense of social responsibility necessary to make power accountable and to deepen the possibilities for everyone to live dignified lives infused with freedom, liberty, decency, care and justice.

On higher education, Chomsky has been arguing since the 1960s that in a healthy society, universities must press the claims for economic and social justice and that any education that matters must be not merely critical but also subversive. Chomsky has been unflinching in his belief that education should disturb the peace and engage in the production of knowledge that is critical of the status quo, particularly in a time of legitimized violence. He has also been clear, as were his late political counterparts, Pierre Bourdieu and Edward Said, in asserting that intellectuals had to make their voices accessible to a wider public and be heard in all of those spheres of public life in which there is an ongoing struggle over knowledge, values, power, identity, agency and the social imagination.

Capitalism may have found an honored place for many of its anti-public intellectuals, but it certainly has no room for the likes of Chomsky. Conservatives and liberals, along with an army of unyielding neoliberal advocates, have virtually refused to include him in the many discussions and publications on social issues that work their way into the various registers of the dominant media. In many ways, Chomsky's role as an intellectual and activist is a prototype of what may be called

an American radical tradition. Despite this, Chomsky appears to be an exile in his own country by virtue of his constant dissent, the shock of his acts of translation, and his displays of fierce courage. Evidence of this is in your hands. The commentaries presented in this book are a collection of columns penned between 2011 and 2014, distributed to the international press by the New York Times Syndicate, and widely published in newspapers abroad. Few, if any, are published on the op-ed pages of American papers, and U.S. military censors even banned distribution of an earlier collection of his commentaries, *INTERVENTIONS*.<sup>2</sup>

As an engaged academic, Chomsky publicly argues against regimes of domination organized for the production of violence, and social and civil death. The force of his presence—his relentless speaking schedule and torrent of writing—offers up the possibility of dangerous memories, alternative ways of imagining society and the future, and the necessity of public criticism as one important element of individual and collective resistance. And yet Chomsky's role as a public intellectual, given the huge audiences that he attracts when he lectures as well as his large reading public, suggests that there is no politics that matters without a sense of connecting meaningfully with others. Politics becomes emancipatory when it takes seriously that, as Stuart Hall has noted, "People have to invest something of themselves, something that they recognize is of them or speaks to their condition, and without that moment of recognition . . . politics will go on, but you won't have a political movement without that moment of identification."<sup>3</sup> Chomsky clearly connects with a need among the public for those intellectuals willing to make power visible, to offer an alternative understanding of the world, and to point to the hopes of a future that does not imitate the scurrilous present.

Chomsky has been relentless in reminding society that power takes many forms and that the production of ignorance is not merely about the crisis of test scores or a natural state of affairs, but about how ignorance is often produced in the service of power. According to Chomsky, ignorance is a pedagogical formation that is used to stifle thinking and promotes a form of anti-politics, which undermines matters of judgment and thoughtfulness central to politics. At the same time, it is a crucial factor not just in producing consent but also in squelching dissent. For Chomsky, ignorance is a political weapon that benefits the powerful, not a general condition rooted in some inexplicable human condition.

In one of his many examples throughout the book, he points to the efforts of the financial elite and their marketing machines to atomize people so they will be complicit in the destruction of the commons. Drawing on his expansive understanding of history, Chomsky cites the political economist Thorstein Veblen's emphasis on "fabricating wants" in order to not only manufacture ignorance but also define consumption as the major force in shaping their needs. For Chomsky, historical memory and individual and social agency are under attack, and this is as much a pedagogical as a political issue.

One of Chomsky's most insistent themes focuses on how state power functions in various forms as a mode of terrorism inflicting violence, misery and hardship, often as a function of class warfare and American global imperialism, and how people are often complicit with such acts of barbarism.

At the same time, Chomsky is also an ardent defender of the impoverished, those communities considered disposable, the excluded, and those marginalized by class, race, gender and other ideologies and structural relations considered dangerous to tyrants both at home and abroad. Yet there is no

privileged, singularly oppressed group in Chomsky's work. He is capacious in making visible and interrogating oppression in its multiple forms, regardless of where it exists. Yet while Chomsky has his critics, ranging from notables such as Sheldon Wolin and Martha Nussbaum to a host of less informed interlocutors, he rarely shies away from a reasoned debate, often elevating such exchanges to a new level of understanding and, in some cases, embarrassment for his opponents. Some of his more illustrious and infamous debaters have included Michel Foucault, William Buckley Jr., John Silber, Christopher Hitchens, Alan Dershowitz and Slavoj Žižek. At the same time, he has refused, in spite of the occasional and most hateful and insipid of attacks, to mimic such tactics in responding to his less civil denigrators.<sup>4</sup> Some of Chomsky's detractors have accused him of being too strident, not being theoretical enough, or, more recently, not understanding the true nature of ideology. These criticisms seem empty and baseless and appear irrelevant, considering the encouraging impact Chomsky's work has had on younger generations, including many in the Occupy movement and other international resistance networks.

It is important to note that I am not suggesting that Chomsky is somehow an iconic figure who inhabits an intellectual version of celebrity culture. On the contrary, he deplors such a role and is an enormously humble and self-effacing human being. What I am suggesting is that the models for political leadership and civic responsibility put forth in American society for young people and others to learn from, are largely drawn from the ranks of a criminal, if not egregiously anti-democratic, class of elite financiers and the rich. Chomsky offers a crucial, though often unacknowledged, standard for how to be engaged with the world such that issues of commitment and courage are tied to considerations of

justice and struggle, not merely to the accumulation of capital, regardless of the social costs.

His decisive influence on a range of fields has not only opened up new modes of inquiry but also gives gravitas to the political impulse that underscores such contributions. The point here is neither to idolize nor to demonize Chomsky—the two modalities that often mark reactions to his work. Rather, the issue is to articulate the ways in which Chomsky as a public intellectual gives meaning to the disposition and characteristics that need to be in place for such critical work: a historical consciousness, civic courage, sacrifice, incisiveness, thoughtfulness, rigor, compassion, political interventions, the willingness to be a moral witness and the ability to listen to others.

As a public intellectual, Chomsky speaks to all people to use their talents and resources to promote public values, defend the common good and connect education to social change. He strongly rejects the notion that educators are merely servants of the state and that students are nothing more than consumers in training. The role of educators and academics as public intellectuals has a long history in Chomsky's work and is inextricably connected to defending the university as a public good and democratic public sphere. Chomsky made this clear in a talk he gave at the Modern Language Association in 2000 when he insisted that:

Universities face a constant struggle to maintain their integrity, and their fundamental social role in a healthy society, in the face of external pressures. The problems are heightened with the expansion of private power in every domain, in the course of the state-corporate social engineering projects of the past several decades. . . . To defend their integrity

and proper commitments is an honorable and difficult task in itself, but our sights should be set higher than that. Particularly in the societies that are more privileged, many choices are available, including fundamental institutional change, if that is the right way to proceed, and surely including scholarship that contributes to, and draws from, the never-ending popular struggles for freedom and justice.<sup>5</sup>

Higher education is under attack not because it is failing, but because it is a potentially democratic public sphere. As such, conservatives and neoliberals often see it as a dangerous institution that reminds them of the rebellious legacy of the 1960s, when universities were the center of struggles over free speech, anti-racist and feminist pedagogies, and the anti-war movement. Higher education has become a target for right-wing ideologues and the corporate elite because it is capable of teaching students how to think critically, and it offers the promise of new modes of solidarity to students outside of the exchange value proffered by neoliberal instrumentalism and the reduction of education to forms of training.

In a wide-ranging and brilliant essay on higher education in this book, Chomsky not only lays out the reasons why public education is under attack, but also provides a critical reading of those historical forces such as the Trilateral Commission and the Powell memorandum of 1971, which made quite clear that the purpose of education was to “indoctrinate the young.” He then points to the various measures used by the financial elite and the right wing, extending from defunding the university and imposing a corporate business model on it to disempowering faculty, destroying unions and eliminating tenure for the vast majority to disciplining students by burdening them with overwhelming debt. For Chomsky, any

crisis can only be understood if it is situated in its historical genealogy. A lesson too often forgotten in an age in which speed overtakes any attention to public memory and insightful contemplation.

Chomsky extends the democratic legacy of higher education by insisting that universities and faculty should press the claims for economic and social justice. He also argues more specifically that while higher education should be revered for its commitment to disinterested truth and reason, it also has a crucial role to play in its opposition to the permanent warfare state, the war on the poor, the squelching of dissent by the surveillance state, the increasing violence waged against students, and the rise of an authoritarian state engaged in targeted assassination, drone warfare and the destruction of the environment. Part of that role is to create an informed and reflective democratic citizenry engaged in the struggle for social justice and equality. Standing for truth is only one role the university can assume, and it is not enough. It must also fulfill its role of being attentive to the needs of young people by safeguarding their interests while educating them to exercise their capacities to fulfill their social, political, economic and ethical responsibilities to others, to broader publics and to the wider global social order. As Chomsky reminds us, caring about other people is a dangerous idea in America today and signals the ongoing drift of the United States from a struggling democracy to an increasingly consolidated authoritarian state.<sup>6</sup>

Chomsky is not content to focus on the perpetrators of global crime and the new forms of authoritarianism that they are consolidating across the globe; he also focuses on “the unpeople” who are now considered disposable, those who have been written out of the discourse of what he considers a tortured democracy, as a force for collective resistance capable of employing new modes of agency and struggle. Whether he

is talking about war, education, militarization or the media, there is always in his work a sense of commitment, civic courage and a call for resistance that is breathtaking and moving. His interventions are always political, and yet he manages to avoid the easy mantle of dogmatism or the kind of humiliating clownish performance we see among some alleged leftist intellectuals. Like C. Wright Mills, he has revived the sociological imagination, connecting the totality and the historically specific, a broader passion for the promise of democracy and a complex rendering of the historical narratives of those who are often marginalized and excluded. There is also a refusal to shield the powerful from moral and political critique. Chomsky has become a signpost for an emerging generation of intellectuals who are not only willing to defend the institutions, public spheres and formative cultures that make democracy possible, but also address those anti-democratic forces working diligently to dismantle the conditions that make an aspiring democracy meaningful.

We live at a time when the growing catastrophes that face Americans and the rest of the globe are increasingly matched by the accumulation of power by the rich and financial elite. Their fear of democracy is now strengthened by the financial, political and corporate elite's intensive efforts to normalize their own power and silence those who hold them accountable. For many, we live in a time of utter despair. But resistance is not only possible, it may be more necessary now than at any other time in America's past, given the current dismantling of civil rights and democratic institutions, and the war on women, labor unions and the poor—all accompanied by the rise of a neoliberal regime that views democracy as an excess, if not dangerous, and an obstacle to implementing its ideological and political goals.

Brimming from each page of this book is what Noam

Chomsky has been telling us for over 50 years: Resistance demands a combination of hope, vision, courage and a willingness to make power accountable, all the while connecting with the desires, aspirations and dreams of those whose suffering is both structurally imposed and thus preventable. He has also reminded us again and again through numerous historical examples that public memory contains the flashpoints for remembering that such struggles are always collective and never merely a matter of individual resistance. Movements bring change, and solidarity is key. As Archon Fung points out, Chomsky's role as a public intellectual makes clear the importance of making power visible, holding authority accountable, and engaging in rigorous critique. His work also suggests that in addition to rigorous criticism, public intellectuals can also help to "shape the democratic character of public policy," work with "popular movements and organizations in their efforts to advance justice and democracy," and while refusing to succumb to reformist practices, "join citizens—and sometimes government—to construct a world that is more just and democratic."<sup>7</sup>

He may be one of the few public intellectuals left of an older generation who offers a rare glimpse into what it means to widen the scope of the meaning of political and intellectual inquiry—an intellectual who rethinks in a critical fashion the educative nature of politics within the changed and totalizing conditions of a neoliberal global assault on all vestiges of democracy. He not only trades in ideas that defy scholastic disciplines and intellectual boundaries, he also makes clear that it is crucial to hold ideas accountable for the practices they legitimate and produce, while at the same time refusing to limit critical ideas to simply modes of critique. In this instance, ideas not only challenge the normalizing discourses and representations of commonsense and the power inequi-

ties they legitimate, but also open up the possibilities inherent in a discourse that moves beyond the given and points to new ways of thinking and acting about freedom, civic courage, social responsibility and justice from the standpoint of radical democratic ideals.

*BECAUSE WE SAY SO* may be one of the most insightful collections of Chomsky's work yet published. Throughout his commentaries, he demonstrates that it is not only democracy and human decency that are at risk, but survival itself. In doing so, Chomsky makes clear that the urgency of the times demands understanding and action, critique and hope. This is a book that should and must be read, given the dire times in which we live. For Chomsky, history is open and the time has come to reclaim the promise of a democracy in which justice, liberty, equality and the common good still matter.

# City Lights

## Notes

- 1 See, for example, Noam Chomsky, “The Responsibility of Intellectuals,” *NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS* (February 13, 1967). See also an updated version of this essay in Noam Chomsky, “The Responsibility of Intellectuals, Redux: Using Privilege to Challenge the State,” *BOSTON REVIEW* (September 1, 2011).
- 2 “Chomsky book banned at Guantánamo,” *SEATTLE TIMES*, October 13, 2009. <http://o.staging.seattletimes.com/nation-world/chomsky-book-banned-at-guantnamo/>
- 3 Stuart Hall and Les Back, “In Conversation: At Home and Not at Home,” *CULTURAL STUDIES*, Vol. 23, No. 4, (July 2009), pp. 680–681.
- 4 Over the course of his career, a number of false claims have been attributed to Chomsky, including the absurd notion published in the *NEW YORK TIMES HIGHER EDUCATION SUPPLEMENT* that he was an apologist for the Pol Pot regime, and on another occasion, the damaging charge that he was anti-Semitic, given his defense of freedom of speech, including that of the French historian Robert Faurisson, an alleged Holocaust denier. Chomsky’s long-standing critique of totalitarianism in all its forms seems to have been forgotten in these cases.
- 5 Noam Chomsky, “Paths Taken, Tasks Ahead,” *PROFESSION* (2000), p. 38.
- 6 See, for instance, Noam Chomsky, “America Hates Its Poor,” *OCCUPY: REFLECTIONS ON CLASS WAR, REBELLION AND SOLIDARITY* (Westfield, NJ: Zuccotti Park Press, Second Edition, 2013).
- 7 Archon Fung, “The Constructive Responsibility of Intellectuals,” *BOSTON REVIEW*, (September 9, 2011).

City  
Lights

## MARCHING OFF THE CLIFF

*December 5, 2011*

A task of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, now under way in Durban, South Africa, is to extend earlier policy decisions that were limited in scope and only partially implemented.

These decisions trace back to the U.N. Convention of 1992 and the Kyoto Protocol of 1997, which the U.S. refused to join. The Kyoto Protocol's first commitment period ends in 2012. A fairly general pre-conference mood was captured by a *NEW YORK TIMES* headline: "Urgent Issues but Low Expectations."

As the delegates meet in Durban, a report on newly updated digests of polls by the Council on Foreign Relations and the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) reveals that "publics around the world and in the United States say their government should give global warming a higher priority and strongly support multilateral action to address it."

Most U.S. citizens agree, though PIPA clarifies that the percentage "has been declining over the last few years, so that American concern is significantly lower than the global average—70 percent as compared to 84 percent."

"Americans do not perceive that there is a scientific consensus on the need for urgent action on climate change. . . . A large majority think that they will be personally affected by climate change eventually, but only a minority thinks that they are being affected now, contrary to views in most other countries. Americans tend to underestimate the level of concern among other Americans."

These attitudes aren't accidental. In 2009 the energy industries, backed by business lobbies, launched major cam-

paigns that cast doubt on the near-unanimous consensus of scientists on the severity of the threat of human-induced global warming.

The consensus is only “near-unanimous” because it doesn’t include the many experts who feel that climate-change warnings don’t go far enough, and the marginal group that deny the threat’s validity altogether.

The standard “he says/she says” coverage of the issue keeps to what is called “balance”: the overwhelming majority of scientists on one side, the denialists on the other. The scientists who issue the more dire warnings are largely ignored.

One effect is that scarcely one-third of the U.S. population believes that there is a scientific consensus on the threat of global warming—far less than the global average, and radically inconsistent with the facts.

It’s no secret that the U.S. government is lagging on climate issues. “Publics around the world in recent years have largely disapproved of how the United States is handling the problem of climate change,” according to PIPA. “In general, the United States has been most widely seen as the country having the most negative effect on the world’s environment, followed by China. Germany has received the best ratings.”

To gain perspective on what’s happening in the world, it’s sometimes useful to adopt the stance of intelligent extraterrestrial observers viewing the strange doings on Earth. They would be watching in wonder as the richest and most powerful country in world history now leads the lemmings cheerfully off the cliff.

Last month, the International Energy Agency (IEA), which was formed on the initiative of U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in 1974, issued its latest report on rapidly increasing carbon emissions from fossil fuel use.

The IEA estimated that if the world continues on its

present course, the “carbon budget” will be exhausted by 2017. The budget is the quantity of emissions that can keep global warming at the 2 degrees Celsius level considered the limit of safety.

IEA chief economist Fatih Birol said, “The door is closing . . . if we don’t change direction now on how we use energy, we will end up beyond what scientists tell us is the minimum (for safety). The door will be closed forever.”

Also last month, the U.S. Department of Energy reported the emissions figures for 2010. Emissions “jumped by the biggest amount on record,” the Associated Press reported, meaning that “levels of greenhouse gases are higher than the worst-case scenario” anticipated by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 2007.

John Reilly, co-director of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s (MIT) program on climate change, told the Associated Press that scientists have generally found the IPCC predictions to be too conservative—unlike the fringe of denialists who gain public attention. Reilly reported that the IPCC’s worst-case scenario was about in the middle of the MIT scientists’ estimates of likely outcomes.

As these ominous reports were released, the *FINANCIAL TIMES* devoted a full page to the optimistic expectations that the U.S. might become energy-independent for a century with new technology for extracting North American fossil fuels.

Though projections are uncertain, the *FINANCIAL TIMES* reports, the U.S. might “leapfrog Saudi Arabia and Russia to become the world’s largest producer of liquid hydrocarbons, counting both crude oil and lighter natural gas liquids.”

In this happy event, the U.S. could expect to retain its global hegemony. Beyond some remarks about local ecological impact, the *FINANCIAL TIMES* said nothing about what kind

of a world would emerge from these exciting prospects. Energy is to burn; the global environment be damned.

Just about every government is taking at least halting steps to do something about the likely impending catastrophe. The U.S. is leading the way—backward. The Republican-dominated U.S. House of Representatives is now dismantling environmental measures introduced by Richard Nixon, in many respects the last liberal president.

This reactionary behavior is one of many indications of the crisis of U.S. democracy in the past generation. The gap between public opinion and public policy has grown to a chasm on central issues of current policy debate such as the deficit and jobs. However, thanks to the propaganda offensive, the gap is less than what it should be on the most serious issue on the international agenda today—arguably in history.

The hypothetical extraterrestrial observers can be pardoned if they conclude that we seem to be infected by some kind of lethal insanity.

# City Lights

## RECOGNIZING THE “UNPEOPLE”

*January 5, 2012*

On June 15, three months after the NATO bombing of Libya began, the African Union (A.U.) presented to the U.N. Security Council the African position on the attack—in reality, bombing by their traditional imperial aggressors: France and Britain, joined by the United States, which initially coordinated the assault, and marginally some other nations.

It should be recalled that there were two interventions. The first, under U.N. Security Council Resolution 1973, adopted on March 17, 2011, called for a no-fly zone, a cease-fire and measures to protect civilians. After a few moments, that intervention was cast aside as the imperial triumvirate joined the rebel army, serving as its air force.

At the outset of the bombing, the African Union called for efforts at diplomacy and negotiations to try to head off a likely humanitarian catastrophe in Libya. Within the month, the A.U. was joined by the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and others, including the major regional NATO power Turkey.

In fact, the triumvirate was quite isolated in its attacks—undertaken to eliminate the mercurial tyrant whom they had supported when it was advantageous. The hope was for a regime likelier to be amenable to Western demands for control over Libya’s rich resources and, perhaps, to offer an African base for the U.S. Africa command (AFRICOM), so far confined to Stuttgart.

No one can know whether the relatively peaceful efforts called for in U.N. Resolution 1973, and backed by most of the world, might have succeeded in averting the terrible loss of life and the destruction that followed in Libya.

On June 15, the African Union informed the Security

Council that “ignoring the A.U. for three months and going on with the bombings of the sacred land of Africa has been high-handed, arrogant and provocative.” The African Union went on to present a plan for negotiations and policing within Libya by A.U. forces, along with other measures of reconciliation—to no avail.

The African Union call to the Security Council also laid out the background for their concerns: “Sovereignty has been a tool of emancipation of the peoples of Africa who are beginning to chart transformational paths for most of the African countries after centuries of predation by the slave trade, colonialism and neocolonialism. Careless assaults on the sovereignty of African countries are, therefore, tantamount to inflicting fresh wounds on the destiny of the African peoples.”

The African appeal can be found in the Indian journal *FRONTLINE*, but was mostly unheard in the West. That comes as no surprise: Africans are “unpeople,” to adapt George Orwell’s term for those unfit to enter history.

On March 12, the Arab League gained the status of people by supporting U.N. Resolution 1973. But approval soon faded when the League withheld support for the subsequent Western bombardment of Libya.

And on April 10, the Arab League reverted to unpeople by calling on the U.N. also to impose a no-fly zone over Gaza and to lift the Israeli siege, virtually ignored.

That too makes good sense. Palestinians are prototypical unpeople, as we see regularly. Consider the November/December issue of *FOREIGN AFFAIRS*, which opened with two articles on the Israel-Palestine conflict.

One, written by Israeli officials Yosef Kuperwasser and Shalom Lipner, blamed the continuing conflict on the Pales-

tinians for refusing to recognize Israel as a Jewish state (keeping to the diplomatic norm: States are recognized, but not privileged sectors within them).

The second, by American scholar Ronald R. Krebs, attributes the problem to the Israeli occupation; the article is subtitled: “How the Occupation Is Destroying the Nation.” Which nation? Israel, of course, harmed by having its boot on the necks of unpeople.

Another illustration: In October, headlines trumpeted the release of Gilad Shalit, the Israeli soldier who had been captured by Hamas. The article in the *NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE* was devoted to his family’s suffering. Shalit was freed in exchange for hundreds of unpeople, about whom we learned little, apart from sober debate as to whether their release might harm Israel.

We also learned nothing about the hundreds of other detainees held in Israeli prisons for long periods without charge.

Among the unmentioned prisoners are the brothers Osama and Mustafa Abu Muamar, civilians kidnapped by Israeli forces that raided Gaza City on June 24, 2006—the day before Shalit was captured. The brothers were then “disappeared” into Israel’s prison system.

Whatever one thinks of capturing a soldier from an attacking army, kidnapping civilians is plainly a far more serious crime—unless, of course, they are mere unpeople.

To be sure, these crimes do not compare with many others, among them the mounting attacks on Israel’s Bedouin citizens, who live in southern Israel’s Negev.

They are again being expelled under a new program designed to destroy dozens of Bedouin villages to which they had been driven earlier. For benign reasons, of course. The Israeli cabinet explained that ten Jewish settlements would be

founded there “to attract a new population to the Negev”—that is, to replace unpeople with legitimate people. Who could object to that?

The strange breed of unpeople can be found everywhere, including the United States: in the prisons that are an international scandal, the food kitchens, the decaying slums.

But examples are misleading. The world’s population as a whole teeters on the edge of a black hole.

We have daily reminders, even from very small incidents—for instance, last month, when Republicans in the U.S. House of Representatives barred a virtually costless reorganization to investigate the causes of the weather extremes of 2011 and to provide better forecasts.

Republicans feared that it might be an opening wedge for “propaganda” on global warming, a nonproblem according to the catechism recited by the candidates for the nomination of what years ago used to be an authentic political party.

Poor sad species.

# City Lights

## ANNIVERSARIES FROM “UNHISTORY”

*February 4, 2012*

George Orwell coined the useful term “unperson” for creatures denied personhood because they don’t abide by state doctrine. We may add the term “unhistory” to refer to the fate of unpersons, expunged from history on similar grounds.

The unhistory of unpersons is illuminated by the fate of anniversaries. Important ones are usually commemorated, with due solemnity when appropriate: Pearl Harbor, for example. Some are not, and we can learn a lot about ourselves by extricating them from unhistory.

Right now we are failing to commemorate an event of great human significance: the 50th anniversary of President Kennedy’s decision to launch the direct invasion of South Vietnam, soon to become the most extreme crime of aggression since World War II.

Kennedy ordered the U.S. Air Force to bomb South Vietnam (by February 1962, hundreds of missions had flown); authorized chemical warfare to destroy food crops so as to starve the rebellious population into submission; and set in motion the programs that ultimately drove millions of villagers into urban slums and virtual concentration camps, or “Strategic Hamlets.” There the villagers would be “protected” from the indigenous guerrillas whom, as the administration knew, they were willingly supporting.

Official efforts at justifying the attacks were slim, and mostly fantasy.

Typical was the president’s impassioned address to the American Newspaper Publishers Association on April 27, 1961, where he warned that “we are opposed around the world by a monolithic and ruthless conspiracy that relies primarily on covert means for expanding its sphere of influence.”

At the United Nations on September 25, 1961, Kennedy said that if this conspiracy achieved its ends in Laos and Vietnam, “the gates will be opened wide.”

The short-term effects were reported by the highly respected Indochina specialist and military historian Bernard Fall—no dove, but one of those who cared about the people of the tormented countries.

In early 1965 he estimated that about 66,000 South Vietnamese had been killed between 1957 and 1961, and another 89,000 between 1961 and April 1965, mostly victims of the U.S. client regime or “the crushing weight of American armor, napalm, jet bombers and finally vomiting gases.”

The decisions were kept in the shadows, as are the shocking consequences that persist. To mention just one illustration: *SCORCHED EARTH*, by Fred Wilcox, the first serious study of the horrifying and continuing impact of chemical warfare on the Vietnamese, appeared a few months ago—and is likely to join other works of unhistory. The core of history is what happened. The core of unhistory is to “disappear” what happened.

By 1967, opposition to the crimes in South Vietnam had reached a substantial scale. Hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops were rampaging through South Vietnam, and heavily populated areas were subjected to intense bombing. The invasion had spread to the rest of Indochina.

The consequences had become so horrendous that Bernard Fall forecast that “Vietnam as a cultural and historic entity . . . is threatened with extinction . . . [as] . . . the countryside literally dies under the blows of the largest military machine ever unleashed on an area of this size.”

When the war ended eight devastating years later, mainstream opinion was divided between those who called it a “noble cause” that could have been won with more dedica-

tion; and at the opposite extreme, the critics, to whom it was "a mistake" that proved too costly.

Still to come was the bombing of the remote peasant society of northern Laos, executed with such magnitude that victims lived in caves for years to try to survive; and shortly afterward the bombing of rural Cambodia, which surpassed the level of all Allied bombing in the Pacific theater during World War II.

In 1970 U.S. National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger had ordered "a massive bombing campaign in Cambodia. Anything that flies on anything that moves"—a call for genocide of a kind rarely found in the archival record.

Laos and Cambodia were "secret wars," in that reporting was scanty and the facts are still little-known to either the general public or even educated elites, who nonetheless can recite by heart every real or alleged crime of official enemies.

Another chapter in the overflowing annals of unhistory.

In three years we may—or may not—commemorate another event of great contemporary relevance: the 900th anniversary of the Magna Carta.

This document is the foundation for what historian Margaret E. McGuiness, referring to the Nuremberg Trials, hailed as a "particularly American brand of legalism: punishment only for those who could be proved to be guilty through a fair trial with a panoply of procedural protections."

The Great Charter declares that "no free man" shall be deprived of rights "except by the lawful judgment of his peers and by the law of the land." The principles were later broadened to apply to men generally. They crossed the Atlantic and entered into the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights, which declared that no "person" can be deprived of rights without due process and a speedy trial.

The founders of course did not intend the term "per-

son” to actually apply to *all* persons. Native Americans were not persons. Neither were those who were enslaved. Women were scarcely persons. However, let us keep to the core notion of presumption of innocence, which has been cast into the oblivion of unhistory.

A further step in undermining the principles of the Magna Carta was taken when President Obama signed the National Defense Authorization Act, which codifies Bush-Obama practice of indefinite detention without trial under military custody.

Such treatment is now mandatory in the case of those accused of aiding enemy forces during the “war on terror,” or optional if those accused are American citizens.

The scope is illustrated by the first Guantánamo case to come to trial under President Obama: that of Omar Khadr, a former child soldier accused of the heinous crime of trying to defend his Afghan village when it was attacked by U.S. forces. Captured at age 15, Khadr was imprisoned for eight years in Bagram and Guantánamo, then brought to a military court in October 2010, where he was given the choice of pleading not guilty and staying in Guantánamo forever, or pleading guilty and serving only eight more years. Khadr chose the latter.

Many other examples illuminate the concept of “terrorist.” One is Nelson Mandela, only removed from the terrorist list in 2008. Another was Saddam Hussein. In 1982 Iraq was removed from the list of terrorist-supporting states so that the Reagan administration could provide Hussein with aid after he invaded Iran.

Accusation is capricious, without review or recourse, and commonly reflecting policy goals—in Mandela’s case, to justify President Reagan’s support for the apartheid state’s crimes in defending itself against one of the world’s “more notorious terrorist groups”: Mandela’s African National Congress.

All better consigned to unhistory.