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Tomgram: Noam Chomsky, Why It's "Legal" When the U.S. Does It

By Noam Chomsky

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Credit the Arab Spring and what's followed in the Greater Middle East to many things, but don't overlook American "unilateralism." After all, if you want to see destabilization at work, there's nothing like having a heavily armed crew dreaming about eternal global empires stomp through your neighborhood, and it's clear enough now that whatever was let loose early in the twenty-first century won't end soon.

If, from Tunisia and Egypt to Syria and Libya, the Arab Spring was a series of popular uprisings, it was also a series of unravelings. Two decades late, the Cold War system of great power control in the Middle East, in which the U.S. was the dominant partner and the Soviet Union the lesser one, is finally disintegrating. The abattoir that is now Syria could be considered the Russian contribution to the present chaos; Egypt, with its besieged fundamentalist president, its irate soccer fans in the streets of its Suez-Canal-bordering cities, and its army chief talking about a possible "collapse" of the state, should be considered part of the far greater and more devastating American contribution. (Along with Israel, Egypt was one of the three pillars of the American system in the region; the other, still standing in all its fundamentalist glory, its vast oil reserves pumping away, remains Saudi Arabia.)

In any case, when you see what's happening these days, first thank the American unilateralists of the 1990s, our own financial *ihadis*. They dreamed of organizing a planet subservient to American financial power and ended up, in 2008, blowing a hole in it instead. A decade later came George W. Bush and his neocon followers, dreaming of doing the same thing in military terms, with similarly disastrous results. If the neoliberals helped create the 1% world of Middle Eastern oppression that a young Tunisian with a lighter set afire, Bush's visionary militarists, with their catastrophic invasion and occupation of Iraq, did even greater damage. They punched a hole directly in the oil heartlands of the planet and set what they already liked to call "the arc of instability" -- little did they know -- aflame. Between them, they drove us through what, in 2004, Amr Moussa, then head of the Arab League, called "the gates of hell," imagining they were the gates to an imperial paradise.

Now, from Pakistan and Yemen to Mali and Niger, Washington's drones, special ops, and cyber warriors are now blindly pushing that process of destabilization forward, even as they further undermine American power in the region. This post-Arab Spring world and the state of U.S. power are the subjects that TomDispatch regular Noam Chomsky takes up in the following excerpt adapted from his wide-ranging new interview book with David Barsamian, *Power Systems: Conversations on Global Democratic Uprisings and the New Challenges to U.S. Empire*. (It's another Chomsky must-read.) *Tom*

The Paranoia of the Superrich and Superpowerful

Washington's Dilemma on a "Lost" Planet

By Noam Chomsky

[This piece is adapted from "Uprisings," a chapter in *Power Systems: Conversations on Global Democratic Uprisings and the New Challenges to U.S. Empire*, Noam Chomsky's new interview book with David Barsamian (with thanks to the publisher, Metropolitan Books). The questions are Barsamian's, the answers Chomsky's.]

Does the United States still have the same level of control over the energy resources of the Middle East as it once had?

The major energy-producing countries are still firmly under the control of the Western-backed dictatorships. So, actually, the progress made by the Arab Spring is limited, but it's not insignificant. The Western-controlled dictatorial system is eroding. In fact, it's been eroding for some time. So, for example, if you go back 50 years, the energy resources -- the main concern of U.S. planners -- have been mostly nationalized. There are constantly attempts to reverse that, but they have not succeeded.

Take the U.S. invasion of Iraq, for example. To everyone except a dedicated ideologue, it was pretty obvious that we invaded Iraq not because of our love of democracy but because it's maybe the second- or third-largest source of oil in the world, and is right in

the middle of the major energy-producing region. You're not supposed to say this. It's considered a conspiracy theory.

The United States was seriously defeated in Iraq by Iraqi nationalism -- mostly by nonviolent resistance. The United States could kill the insurgents, but they couldn't deal with half a million people demonstrating in the streets. Step by step, Iraq was able to dismantle the controls put in place by the occupying forces. By November 2007, it was becoming pretty clear that it was going to be very hard to reach U.S. goals. And at that point, interestingly, those goals were explicitly stated. So in November 2007 the Bush II administration came out with an official declaration about what any future arrangement with Iraq would have to be. It had two major requirements: one, that the United States must be free to carry out combat operations from its military bases, which it will retain; and two, "encouraging the flow of foreign investments to Iraq, especially American investments." In January 2008, Bush made this clear in one of his signing statements. A couple of months later, in the face of Iraqi resistance, the United States had to give that up. Control of Iraq is now disappearing before their eyes.

Iraq was an attempt to reinstitute by force something like the old system of control, but it was beaten back. In general, I think, U.S. policies remain constant, going back to the Second World War. But the capacity to implement them is declining.

Declining because of economic weakness?

Partly because the world is just becoming more diverse. It has more diverse power centers. At the end of the Second World War, the United States was absolutely at the peak of its power. It had half the world's wealth and every one of its competitors was seriously damaged or destroyed. It had a position of unimaginable security and developed plans to essentially run the world -- not unrealistically at the time.

This was called "Grand Area" planning?

Yes. Right after the Second World War, George Kennan, head of the U.S. State Department policy planning staff, and others sketched out the details, and then they were implemented. What's happening now in the Middle East and North Africa, to an extent, and in South America substantially goes all the way back to the late 1940s. The first major successful resistance to U.S. hegemony was in 1949. That's when an event took place, which, interestingly, is called "the loss of China." It's a very interesting phrase, never challenged. There was a lot of discussion about who is responsible for the loss of China. It became a huge domestic issue. But it's a very interesting phrase. You can only lose something if you own it. It was just taken for granted: we possess China -- and if they move toward independence, we've lost China. Later came concerns about "the loss of Latin America," "the loss of the Middle East," "the loss of" certain countries, all based on the premise that we own the world and anything that weakens our control is a loss to us and we wonder how to recover it.

Today, if you read, say, foreign policy journals or, in a farcical form, listen to the Republican debates, they're asking, "How do we prevent further losses?"

On the other hand, the capacity to preserve control has sharply declined. By 1970, the world was already what was called tripolar economically, with a U.S.-based North American industrial center, a German-based European center, roughly comparable in size, and a Japan-based East Asian center, which was then the most dynamic growth region in the world. Since then, the global economic order has become much more diverse. So it's harder to carry out our policies, but the underlying principles have not changed much.

Take the Clinton doctrine. The Clinton doctrine was that the United States is entitled to resort to unilateral force to ensure "uninhibited access to key markets, energy supplies, and strategic resources." That goes beyond anything that George W. Bush said. But it was quiet and it wasn't arrogant and abrasive, so it didn't cause much of an uproar. The belief in that entitlement continues right to the present. It's also part of the intellectual culture.

Right after the assassination of Osama bin Laden, amid all the cheers and applause, there were a few critical comments questioning the legality of the act. Centuries ago, there used to be something called presumption of innocence. If you apprehend a suspect, he's a suspect until proven guilty. He should be brought to trial. It's a core part of American law. You can trace it back to Magna Carta. So there were a couple of voices saying maybe we shouldn't throw out the whole basis of Anglo-American law. That led to a lot of very angry and infuriated reactions, but the most interesting ones were, as usual, on the left liberal end of the spectrum. Matthew Yglesias, a well-known and highly respected left liberal commentator, wrote an article in which he ridiculed these views. He said they're "amazingly naive," silly. Then he expressed the reason. He said that "one of the main functions of the international institutional order is precisely to legitimate the use of deadly military force by western powers." Of course, he didn't mean Norway. He meant the United States. So the principle on which the international system is based is that the United States is entitled to use force at will. To talk about the United States violating international law or something like that is amazingly naive, completely silly. Incidentally, I was the target of those remarks, and I'm happy to confess my guilt. I do think that Magna Carta and international law are worth paying some attention to.

I merely mention that to illustrate that in the intellectual culture, even at what's called the left liberal end of the political spectrum, the core principles haven't changed very much. But the capacity to implement them has been sharply reduced. That's why you get all this talk about American decline. Take a look at the year-end issue of *Foreign Affairs*, the main establishment journal. Its big front-page cover asks, in bold face, "Is America Over?" It's a standard complaint of those who believe they should have everything. If you believe you should have everything and anything gets away from you, it's a tragedy, the world is collapsing. So is America over? A long time ago we "lost" China, we've lost Southeast Asia, we've lost South America. Maybe we'll lose the Middle East and North

African countries. Is America over? It's a kind of paranoia, but it's the paranoia of the superrich and the superpowerful. If you don't have everything, it's a disaster.

The New York Times describes the “defining policy quandary of the Arab Spring: how to square contradictory American impulses that include support for democratic change, a desire for stability, and wariness of Islamists who have become a potent political force.” The Times identifies three U.S. goals. What do you make of them?

Two of them are accurate. The United States is in favor of stability. But you have to remember what stability means. Stability means conformity to U.S. orders. So, for example, one of the charges against Iran, the big foreign policy threat, is that it is destabilizing Iraq and Afghanistan. How? By trying to expand its influence into neighboring countries. On the other hand, we “stabilize” countries when we invade them and destroy them.

I've occasionally quoted one of my favorite illustrations of this, which is from a well-known, very good liberal foreign policy analyst, James Chace, a former editor of *Foreign Affairs*. Writing about the overthrow of the Salvador Allende regime and the imposition of the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet in 1973, he said that we had to “destabilize” Chile in the interests of “stability.” That's not perceived to be a contradiction -- and it isn't. We had to destroy the parliamentary system in order to gain stability, meaning that they do what we say. So yes, we are in favor of stability in this technical sense.

Concern about political Islam is just like concern about any independent development. Anything that's independent you have to have concern about because it might undermine you. In fact, it's a little ironic, because traditionally the United States and Britain have by and large strongly supported radical Islamic fundamentalism, not political Islam, as a force to block secular nationalism, the real concern. So, for example, Saudi Arabia is the most extreme fundamentalist state in the world, a radical Islamic state. It has a missionary zeal, is spreading radical Islam to Pakistan, funding terror. But it's the bastion of U.S. and British policy. They've consistently supported it against the threat of secular nationalism from Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt and Abd al-Karim Qasim's Iraq, among many others. But they don't like political Islam because it might become independent.

The first of the three points, our yearning for democracy, that's about on the level of Joseph Stalin talking about the Russian commitment to freedom, democracy, and liberty for the world. It's the kind of statement you laugh about when you hear it from commissars or Iranian clerics, but you nod politely and maybe even with awe when you hear it from their Western counterparts.

If you look at the record, the yearning for democracy is a bad joke. That's even recognized by leading scholars, though they don't put it this way. One of the major scholars on so-called democracy promotion is Thomas Carothers, who is pretty conservative and highly regarded -- a neo-Reaganite, not a flaming liberal. He worked in Reagan's State Department and has several books reviewing the course of democracy promotion, which he takes very seriously. He says, yes, this is a deep-seated American

ideal, but it has a funny history. The history is that every U.S. administration is “schizophrenic.” They support democracy only if it conforms to certain strategic and economic interests. He describes this as a strange pathology, as if the United States needed psychiatric treatment or something. Of course, there’s another interpretation, but one that can’t come to mind if you’re a well-educated, properly behaved intellectual.

Within several months of the toppling of [President Hosni] Mubarak in Egypt, he was in the dock facing criminal charges and prosecution. It’s inconceivable that U.S. leaders will ever be held to account for their crimes in Iraq or beyond. Is that going to change anytime soon?

That’s basically the Yglesias principle: the very foundation of the international order is that the United States has the right to use violence at will. So how can you charge anybody?

And no one else has that right.

Of course not. Well, maybe our clients do. If Israel invades Lebanon and kills a thousand people and destroys half the country, okay, that’s all right. It’s interesting. Barack Obama was a senator before he was president. He didn’t do much as a senator, but he did a couple of things, including one he was particularly proud of. In fact, if you looked at his website before the primaries, he highlighted the fact that, during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 2006, he cosponsored a Senate resolution demanding that the United States do nothing to impede Israel’s military actions until they had achieved their objectives and censuring Iran and Syria because they were supporting resistance to Israel’s destruction of southern Lebanon, incidentally, for the fifth time in 25 years. So they inherit the right. Other clients do, too.

But the rights really reside in Washington. That’s what it means to own the world. It’s like the air you breathe. You can’t question it. The main founder of contemporary IR [international relations] theory, Hans Morgenthau, was really quite a decent person, one of the very few political scientists and international affairs specialists to criticize the Vietnam War on moral, not tactical, grounds. Very rare. He wrote a book called *The Purpose of American Politics*. You already know what’s coming. Other countries don’t have purposes. The purpose of America, on the other hand, is “transcendent”: to bring freedom and justice to the rest of the world. But he’s a good scholar, like Carothers. So he went through the record. He said, when you study the record, it looks as if the United States hasn’t lived up to its transcendent purpose. But then he says, to criticize our transcendent purpose “is to fall into the error of atheism, which denies the validity of religion on similar grounds” -- which is a good comparison. It’s a deeply entrenched religious belief. It’s so deep that it’s going to be hard to disentangle it. And if anyone questions that, it leads to near hysteria and often to charges of anti-Americanism or “hating America” -- interesting concepts that don’t exist in democratic societies, only in totalitarian societies and here, where they’re just taken for granted.