

Linguist, dissident, breathtakingly knowledgeable political analyst

NOAM CHOMSKY

"Our society is not really based on public participation in decision making in any significant sense. Rather, it is a system of elite decision and periodic public ratification. Certainly people would like to think there's somebody up there who knows what he's doing But also, it is an important feature of the ideological system to impose on people the feeling that they really are incompetent to deal with these complex and important issues: They'd better leave it to the captain That means you have to establish the pretense that the participants of that elite know what they are doing and have the kind of understanding and access to information that is just denied the rest of us. So that we poor slobbs ought to just watch, not interfere."

MARX. LENIN. SHAKESPEARE. Aristotle. The Bible. Plato. Freud. *Chomsky*. Hegel. Cicero.

MIT linguist and political analyst Noam Chomsky ranked as the most quoted living thinker, according to a 1980-1992 tabulation of sources in the Arts and Humanities Citation Index. He also comes out on top among current intellectuals in a survey of the Social Sciences Citation Index done by the MIT library. 1

Chomsky's intellectual output and influence are so vast, reports Michael Albert, editorial writer and columnist for *Z Magazine*, that when Albert visited Poland in 1980, people he met thought two scholars named Noam Chomsky were at work in America—one in linguistics and one in politics. 2

So why is it that we rarely hear from him on television, op-ed pages, or any other mainstream source of news and opinion? We don't even hear *of* him. Chomsky stands out not only as America's most quoted intellectual but also as our leading political dissident. What he says so boldly challenges conventional thinking about America's role in the world that it's far safer for mainstream TV producers and newspaper editors to ignore him than to answer him. 3

Chomsky turned the linguistics field upside down with his revolutionary theory that human language skills are innate, not learned. We are all born with an ability for language, he says, which is then shaped by the sounds we hear as toddlers to become English, or Finnish, or

which is then shaped by the sounds we hear as toddlers to become English, or Finnish, or Kurdish. His theory helps explain why you can immediately understand sentences (like this one, for example) that you've never encountered before. Chomsky's work also suggests that humans have a natural instinct for creative expression. His impact on the field is so immense that the years prior to the publication of his 1957 book, *Syntactic Structures*, are looked upon by some linguists as B.C.—Before Chomsky. 4

In the 1960s, outraged by the Vietnam war, Chomsky began to broaden his study to include foreign policy. He blasted the usual liberal line that Vietnam was a tragic mistake committed by well-meaning but misguided policy makers. In Chomsky's view, the war amounted to a U.S. invasion of South Vietnam, done not in a spirit of democratic idealism but out of naked self-interest. Our politicians and business chiefs, Chomsky says, feel entitled to use military force anywhere in the world to protect their perceived interests—whether it's oil supplies, cheap labor, or simple revenge. 5

Chomsky became one of the most prominent opponents of the war, making the case for why we should withdraw in the pages of the *New York Review of Books* and *The Boston Globe* as well as earning a slot on Richard Nixon's enemies list. But when the war wound down, Chomsky did not. He continued to condemn U.S. actions in the Middle East, Latin America, and the Caribbean, as well as the propaganda system in place at home to justify them. And it was at this point that Chomsky disappeared from mainstream public debate. His political books went unreviewed and his articles were accepted only by small 6

Page 89

alternative publications, an odd fate for a man who is quoted almost as often as Freud.

But Chomsky has risen to the challenge of being a dissident. Now in his seventies, he continues to write at least one book each year on foreign policy (in addition to his steady load of linguistics research) and undertake lecture itineraries that might hobble someone half his age. Chomsky's lectures are not lightweight affairs and he usually fields questions from the audience until university or church hall janitors plead with him to stop so they can go home. His breadth of knowledge is breathtaking; he can speak at length about the political economy of London journalism in the 1960s and then detail the history of Indonesia's brutal attack on East Timor. Despite charges from critics on the right and center that he's grown increasingly caustic, Chomsky has gained a large and loyal following, especially among young people, whose 7

enthusiastic attendance at his lectures belies stereotypes about the political apathy of Generation X.

In assessing the state of American democracy today, Chomsky goes back to the 1930s, when "the United States more or less joined most of the advanced industrial societies in providing some kinds of rights for working people," he says. "There was real fury about this in the business community." 8

Business, especially the labor-intensive manufacturing sector, counterattacked New Deal reforms with a massive propaganda campaign that hit its stride in the 1950s. "It targeted everything," he says, "the entertainment industry, the media, the churches, recreation programs, there was just nothing left. They were quite clear about what they were doing—fighting the everlasting battle for the minds of men and seeking to indoctrinate people with the capitalist story. By the end of the 1950s, unions had been severely weakened, the media had been very 9

much weakened."

Then along came the protests and social reforms of the 1960s, and the business sector grew "concerned over what was called the crisis of democracy. The crisis was that democracy was beginning to function." Another corporate counterattack on workers' rights and social programs was launched in the 1970s and, aided by economic changes like the globalization of the economy and the spiraling increase in speculative capital, it has continued to the present. 10

"This is a long-term process," Chomsky says. "It basically never changes. The United States is more of a business-run society than others. The United States is extremely weak in health care, in day care, in

Page 90

allowing parental leave. Right across the board, the United States has very weak social support systems. They have been declining sharply for the usual ideological reasons. Business is very class-conscious, so they are always fighting a class war. People just won't face the fact that the society is run by private tyrannies." 11

But the lessons of history aren't all grim. "In the 1920s, it also looked as though the business victory was total," he says. "Labor was practically destroyed." Then came the 1930s, the rise of labor unions, and the social reforms that Chomsky feels Americans must now fight vigorously to save. 12

How do we do that? "The answer is to rebuild civil society," Chomsky replies. "American society is now remarkably atomized. Political organizations have collapsed." 13

"People here," he adds, "should do what they did in the Haitian slums, where it was possible to construct grassroots organizations that enabled the democratic system to function. They forged a very lively and vibrant civil society. To talk about bringing democracy to Haiti is a joke. We should look there and find out how it worked. It works when people get organized and are willing to work together and have a sense of solidarity and are willing to put aside their own immediate personal issues for a broader concern. 14

"As far as the left is concerned," he continues, "I think we should listen to what the right is saying. One of the major congressional initiatives has been what they call 'defunding' the left." And guess who that is: Catholic Charities, because of priests and nuns working in poor communities, and the American Association of Retired People, because it had a small program to help elderly people get jobs. "That's the left," Chomsky says. "In fact, anyone who's trying to do anything for human beings is the left. Well, that's sort of right when you think about it." 15

Chomsky's been an ardent student of political affairs since his boyhood, when he used to take the train from his home in Philadelphia to New York City, where an uncle ran a newsstand. He would hang out there all day, reading current affairs magazines and listening to his uncle and customers talk politics, until it was time to grab the last train home. Although it was never his formal field, he stayed atop political developments around the world even while he was launching his academic career and raising three children in suburban Lexington, Massachusetts. 16

He and his wife, Carol Schatz Chomsky, stopped entertaining at home years ago so their dining room could become a repository for the files, books, and clippings he combs through in researching his own

Page 91

books. Although his schedule is booked years in advance for speeches and guest professorships, he is a legendarily generous correspondent: He stays in touch with hundreds of people, writes lengthy replies to short thank-you notes, and congratulates new mothers and fathers by sending parenting tips gleaned from his own experience. For years, he and Carol took care of grandchildren on Saturday nights to give their own kids a break. 17

How does one man do so much intellectual work and at the same time stand as an exemplary friend and father? An iron constitution and steel-trap mind help, but Chomsky's secret is a long break each summer to garden and relax at a vacation home on Cape Cod. A few weeks of digging around in the sandy soil and feeling the ocean breezes, he says, recharges him for another round of duty as America's leading dissident. 18

Taken from: *Visionaries ; People and Ideas to Change Your Life*, Eds. Jay Walljasper, Jon Spayde, and Eds. of Utne Reader, New Society Publishers, British Columbia, 2001.