

Exposing Western leadership

*Noam Chomsky
interviewed by
Amy Goodman*

*On 30 November 2010,
Democracy Now! in New
York broadcast a live
interview with Noam
Chomsky about what the
leaked State Department
cables reveal, from which
these excerpts are taken.
Presenter Amy Goodman
started by reminding her
audience of the leak of the
Pentagon Papers on
Vietnam, in 1971.*

Amy Goodman: ... *Forty years ago, Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn helped government whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg edit and release the Pentagon Papers, that top-secret internal US history of the Vietnam War ... Before we talk about WikiLeaks, what was your involvement in the Pentagon Papers? I don't think most people know about this.*

Noam Chomsky: Dan and I were friends. Tony Russo also prepared them and helped leak them. I got advance copies from Dan and Tony and there were several people who were releasing them to the press. I was one of them. Then I – along with Howard Zinn, as you mentioned – edited a volume of essays and indexed the papers.

So explain how it worked. I always think this is important – to tell this story – especially for young people. Dan Ellsberg – Pentagon official, top-secret clearance – gets this US involvement in Vietnam history out of his safe, he Xerox's it, and then how did you get your hands on it? He just directly gave it to you?

From Dan Ellsberg and Tony Russo, who had done the Xeroxing and the preparation of the material.

How much did you edit?

Well, we did not modify anything. The papers were not edited. They were in their original form. What Howard Zinn and I did was – they came out in four volumes – we prepared a fifth volume, which was critical essays by many scholars on the papers,

what they mean, the significance and so on. And an index, which is almost indispensable for using them seriously. That's the fifth volume in the Beacon Press series.

So you were then one of the first people to see the Pentagon Papers?

Outside of Dan Ellsberg and Tony Russo, yes. I mean, there were some journalists who may have seen them, I am not sure.

What are your thoughts today? For example, we just played this clip of New York republican congress member Peter King who says WikiLeaks should be declared a foreign terrorist organization.

I think that is outlandish. We should understand – and the Pentagon Papers is another case in point – that one of the major reasons for government secrecy is to protect the government from its own population. In the Pentagon Papers, for example, there was one volume – the negotiations volume – which might have had a bearing on ongoing activities, and Daniel Ellsberg withheld that. That came out a little bit later. If you look at the papers themselves, there are things Americans *should* have known that others did not want them to know. And as far as I can tell, from what I've seen here, pretty much the same is true. In fact, the current leaks are – what I've seen, at least – primarily interesting because of what they tell us about how the diplomatic service works.

The documents' revelations about Iran come just as the Iranian government has agreed to a new round of nuclear talks. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the cables vindicate the Israeli position that Iran poses a nuclear threat. Netanyahu said,

Our region has been hostage to a narrative that is the result of sixty years of propaganda, which paints Israel as the greatest threat. In reality, leaders understand that that view is bankrupt. For the first time in history, there is agreement that Iran is the threat. If leaders start saying openly what they have long been saying behind closed doors, we can make a real breakthrough on the road to peace.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton also discussed Iran at her news conference in Washington. This is what she said:

I think that it should not be a surprise to anyone that Iran is a source of great concern, not only in the United States. What comes through in every meeting

that I have – anywhere in the world – is a concern about Iranian actions and intentions. So, if anything, any of the comments that are being reported on allegedly from the cables confirm the fact that Iran poses a very serious threat in the eyes of many of her neighbours and a serious concern far beyond her region. That is why the international community came together to pass the strongest possible sanctions against Iran. It did not happen because the United States said, ‘Please, do this for us!’ It happened because countries – once they evaluated the evidence concerning Iran’s actions and intentions – reached the same conclusion that the United States reached: that we must do whatever we can to muster the international community to take action to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear weapons state. So if anyone reading the stories about these, uh, alleged cables thinks carefully what they will conclude is that the concern about Iran is well founded, widely shared, and will continue to be at the source of the policy that we pursue with like-minded nations to try to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.

That was Secretary Hillary Clinton yesterday at a news conference. I wanted to get your comment on Clinton, Netanyahu’s comment, and the fact that Abdullah of Saudi Arabia called for the US to attack Iran. Noam Chomsky?

That essentially reinforces what I said before, that the main significance of the cables that are being released so far is what they tell us about Western leadership. So Hillary Clinton and Benjamin Netanyahu surely know of the careful polls of Arab public opinion. The Brookings Institute just a few months ago released extensive polls of what Arabs think about Iran. The results are rather striking. They show the Arab opinion holds that the major threat in the region is Israel – that’s 88%. The second major threat is the United States – that’s 77%. Iran is listed as a threat by 10%.

With regard to nuclear weapons, rather remarkably, a majority – in fact, 57% – say that it would have a positive effect in the region if Iran *had* nuclear weapons. Now, these are not small numbers. 88, 77, say the US and Israel are the major threat. 10 say Iran is the major threat. This may not be reported in the newspapers here – it is in England – but it’s certainly familiar to the Israeli and US governments, and to the ambassadors. But there is not a word about it anywhere. What that reveals is the profound hatred for democracy on the part of our political leadership and the Israeli political leadership. These things aren’t even to be mentioned. This seeps its way all through the diplomatic service. The cables do not have any indication of that.

When they talk about Arabs, they mean the Arab dictators, not the population, which is *overwhelmingly* opposed to the conclusions that the analysts here – Clinton and the media – have drawn. There’s also a minor

problem; that's the major problem. The minor problem is that we don't know from the cables what the Arab leaders think and say. We know what was selected from the range of what they say. So there is a filtering process. We don't know how much it distorts the information. But there is no question that what is a radical distortion is – or, not even a distortion, a *reflection* – of the concern that the dictators are what matter. The population does not matter, even if it's overwhelmingly opposed to US policy.

There are similar things elsewhere, just keeping to this region. One of the most interesting cables was from the US ambassador in Israel to Hillary Clinton, which described the attack on Gaza – which we should call the US/Israeli attack on Gaza – December 2008. It states correctly there had been a truce. It does not add that during the truce – which was really not observed by Israel – Hamas scrupulously observed it; according to the Israeli government, not a single rocket was fired. That's an omission. But then comes a straight lie: it says that in December 2008, Hamas renewed rocket firing and therefore Israel had to attack in self-defence. Now, the ambassador *surely* is aware, there must be somebody in the American Embassy who reads the Israeli press – the mainstream Israeli press – in which case the embassy is *surely* aware that it is exactly the opposite: Hamas was calling for a renewal of the cease-fire. Israel considered the offer and rejected it, preferring to bomb rather than have security. Also omitted is that while Israel never observed the cease-fire – it maintained the siege in violation of the truce agreement – on November 4, the date of the US election 2008, the Israeli army invaded Gaza, killed half a dozen Hamas militants, which did lead to an exchange of fire in which all the casualties, as usual, were Palestinian. Then in December, when the truce officially ended, Hamas called for renewing it. Israel refused, and the US and Israel chose to launch the war. What the embassy reported is a *gross* falsification and a very significant one since it has to do with the justification for the murderous attack, which means either the embassy hasn't a clue to what is going on or else they're lying outright.

And the latest report that just came out – from Oxfam, from Amnesty International, and other groups – about the effects of the siege on Gaza? What's happening right now?

A siege is an act of war. If anyone insists on that, it is Israel. Israel launched two wars – 1956 and 1967 – in part on grounds its access to the outside world was very partially restricted. That very partial siege they considered an act of war and justification for – one of several justifications

– for what they called ‘preventive’ or, if you like, pre-emptive war. So they understand that perfectly well, and the point is correct. The siege is a criminal act, in the first place. The Security Council has called on Israel to lift it, and others have. It’s designed, as Israeli officials have stated, to keep the people of Gaza to minimal level of existence. They do not want to kill them all off because that would not look good in international opinion. As they put it, ‘to keep them on a diet’. This justification began very shortly after the official Israeli withdrawal. There was an election in January 2006; the *only* free election in the Arab world – carefully monitored, recognized to be free – but it had a flaw. The wrong people won. Namely Hamas, which the US did not want and Israel did not want. Instantly, within days, the US and Israel instituted harsh measures to punish the people of Gaza for voting the wrong way in a free election.

The next step was that the US and Israel sought, along with the Palestinian Authority, to try to carry out a military coup in Gaza, to overthrow the elected government. This failed. Hamas beat back the coup attempt. That was July 2007. At that point, the siege got *much* harsher. In between there are many acts of violence, shellings, invasions and so on and so forth. But basically, Israel claims that when the truce was established in summer 2008, Israel’s reason for not observing it and withdrawing the siege was that there was an Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit, who was captured at the border. International commentary regards this as a terrible crime. Well, whatever you think about it, capturing a soldier of an attacking army – and the army was attacking Gaza – capturing a soldier of an attacking army isn’t anywhere *near* the level of the crime of kidnapping civilians. Just one day before the capture of Gilad Shalit at the border, Israeli troops had entered Gaza, kidnapped two civilians – the Muammar Brothers – and spirited them across the border. They’ve disappeared somewhere in Israel’s prison system, which is where hundreds, maybe a thousand or so people are sometimes there for years without charges. There are also secret prisons. We don’t know what happens there.

This alone is a *far* worse crime than the kidnapping of Shalit. In fact, you could argue there was a reason why it was barely covered: Israel has been doing this for years, in fact, decades. Kidnapping, capturing people, hijacking ships, killing people, bringing them to Israel sometimes as hostages for many years. So this is regular practice; Israel can do what it likes. But the reaction here and the rest of the world regarding the Shalit kidnapping – not kidnapping, you don’t *kidnap* soldiers – the *capture* of a soldier as an unspeakable crime, justification for maintaining murders and siege, that’s disgraceful.

Noam, so you have Amnesty International, Oxfam, Save the Children, and eighteen other aid groups calling on Israel to unconditionally lift the blockade of Gaza. And you have in the WikiLeaks release a US diplomatic cable, provided to The Guardian by WikiLeaks, laying out 'National human intelligence collection directive: Asking US personnel to obtain details of travel plans such as routes and vehicles used by Palestinian Authority leaders and Hamas members'. The cable demands 'Biographical, financial, biometric information on key Palestinian Authority and Hamas leaders and representatives to include the Young Guard inside Gaza, the West Bank, and outside,' it says.

That should not come as much of a surprise. Contrary to the image that is portrayed here, the United States is not an honest broker. It is a participant, a *direct* and *crucial* participant, in Israeli crimes, both in the West Bank and in Gaza. The attack in Gaza was a clear case in point: they used American weapons, the US blocked cease-fire efforts, they gave diplomatic support. The same is true of the daily ongoing crimes in the West Bank, and we should not forget that. Actually, in Area C – the area of the West Bank that Israel controls – conditions for Palestinians have been reported by Save The Children to be worse than in Gaza. Again, this all takes place on the basis of crucial, decisive, US military, diplomatic, and economic support; and also ideological support – meaning, distorting the situation, as is done again, dramatically, in the cables.

The siege itself is simply criminal. It is not only blocking desperately needed aid from coming in, it also drives Palestinians away from the border. Gaza is a small place, heavily and densely overcrowded. And Israeli fire and attacks drive Palestinians away from the Arab land on the border, and also drive fishermen in from Gaza into territorial waters. They are compelled by Israeli gunboats – all illegal, of course – to fish right near the shore where fishing is almost impossible because Israel has destroyed the power systems and sewage systems and the contamination is terrible. This is just a stranglehold to punish people for being there and for insisting on voting the wrong way. Israel decided, 'We don't want this anymore. Let's just get rid of them'.

We should also remember that US/Israeli policy since Oslo, since the early 1990s, has been to separate Gaza from the West Bank. That is in straight violation of the Oslo agreements, but it has been carried out systematically, and it has a big effect. It means almost half the Palestinian population would be cut off from any possible political arrangement that would be made. It also means Palestine loses its access to the outside

world. Gaza *should* have and *can* have airports and seaports. Right now, Israel has taken over about 40% of the West Bank. Obama's latest offers have granted even more, and they're certainly planning to take more. What is left is just cantonized. It's what the planner, Ariel Sharon, called Bantustans. And they're in prison, too, as Israel takes over the Jordan Valley and drives Palestinians out. So these are all crimes of a piece.

The Gaza siege is particularly grotesque because of the conditions under which people are forced to live. I mean, if a young person in Gaza, a student in Gaza, let's say, wants to study in a West Bank university, they can't do it. If a person in Gaza needs advanced medical treatment from an East Jerusalem hospital where the treatment is available, they can't go! Medicines are held back. It is a scandalous crime, all around.

What do you think the United States should do in this case?

What the United States should do is very simple: it should join the world. I mean, there are negotiations going on, supposedly. As they are presented here, the standard picture is that the US is an honest broker trying to bring together two recalcitrant opponents – Israel and Palestinian Authority. That's just a charade.

If there were serious negotiations, they would be organized by some neutral party and the US and Israel would be on one side and the world would be on the other side. And that is not an exaggeration. It should not be a secret that there has long been an overwhelming international consensus on a diplomatic, political solution. Everyone knows the basic outlines; some of the details you can argue about. It includes everyone except the United States and Israel. The US has been blocking it for 35 years with occasional departures – brief ones. It includes the Arab League. It includes the Organization of Islamic States, which happens to include Iran. It includes every relevant actor except the United States and Israel, the two rejectionist states. So, if there were to be negotiations that were serious, that's the way they would be organized. The actual negotiations barely reach the level of comedy. The issue that's being debated is a footnote, a *minor* footnote: expansion of settlements. Of course it's illegal. In fact, everything Israel is doing in the West Bank and Gaza is illegal. That hasn't even been controversial since 1967.

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