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Reshaping History

Noam Chomsky

November 18–24, 2004

“Since the issue of Palestinian national rights in a Palestinian state reached the agenda of diplomacy in the mid-1970s, ‘the prime obstacle to its realization’, unambiguously, has been the United States government, with the Times staking a claim to be second on the list..”

The fundamental principle is that “we are good” — “we” being the state we serve — and what “we” do is dedicated to the highest principles, though there may be errors in practice. In a typical illustration, according to the retrospective version at the left-liberal extreme, the properly reshaped Vietnam War began with “blundering efforts to do good” but by 1969 had become a “disaster” (Anthony Lewis) — by 1969, after the business world had turned against the war as too costly and 70 per cent of the public regarded it as “fundamentally wrong and immoral”, not “a mistake”; by 1969, seven years after Kennedy’s attack on South Vietnam began, two years after the most respected Vietnam specialist and military historian Bernard Fall warned that “Vietnam as a cultural and historic entity... is threatened with extinction...[as]... the countryside

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literally dies under the blows of the largest military machine ever unleashed on an area of this size”; by 1969, the time of some of the most vicious state terrorist operations of one of the major crimes of the late 20th century, of which Swift Boats in the deep South, already devastated by saturation bombing, chemical warfare and mass murder operations, were the least of the atrocities underway. But the reshaped history prevails. Serious expert panels ponder the reasons for “America’s Vietnam Obsession” during the 2004 elections, when the Vietnam War was never even mentioned — the actual one, that is, not the image reconstructed for history.

The fundamental principle has corollaries. The first is that clients are basically good, though less so than “we”. To the extent that they conform to US demands, they are “healthy pragmatists”. Another is that enemies are very bad; how bad depends on how intensively “we” are attacking them or planning to do so. Their status can shift very quickly, in conformity with these guidelines. Thus the current administration and their immediate mentors were quite appreciative of Saddam Hussein and helpful to him while he was just gassing Kurds, torturing dissidents and smashing a Shia rebellion that might have overthrown him in 1991, because of his contribution to “stability” — a code word for “our” domination — and his usefulness for US exporters, as frankly declared. But the same crimes became the proof of his ultimate evil when the appropriate time came for “us,” proudly bearing the banner of Good, to invade Iraq and install what will be called a “democracy” if it obeys orders and contributes to “stability”.

The principles are simple, and easy to remember for those seeking a career in respectable circles. The remarkable consistency of their application has been extensively documented. That is expected in totalitarian states and military dictatorships, but is a far more instructive phenomenon in free societies, where one cannot seriously plead fear in extenuation.

The NYT published one major op-ed on the Arafat death, by Israeli historian Benny Morris. The essay deserves close analysis, but I'll put that aside here, and keep to just his first comment, which captures the tone: Arafat is a deceiver, Morris says, who speaks about peace and ending the occupation but really wants to "redeem Palestine". This demonstrates Arafat's irredeemable savage nature.

Here Morris is revealing his contempt not only for Arabs (which is profound) but also for the readers of the NYT. He apparently assumes that they will not notice that he is borrowing the terrible phrase from Zionist ideology. Its core principle for over a century has been to "redeem The Land", a principle that lies behind what Morris recognises to be a central concept of the Zionist movement: "transfer" of the indigenous population, that is, expulsion, to "redeem The Land" for its true owners. There seems to be no need to spell out the conclusions.

Morris is identified as an Israeli academic, author of the recent book *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited*. That is correct. He has also done the most extensive work on the Israeli archives, demonstrating in considerable detail the savagery of the 1948-9 Israeli operations that led to "transfer" of the large majority of the population from what became Israel, including the part of the UN-designated Palestine state that Israel took over, dividing it about 50-50 with its Jordanian partner. Morris is critical of the atrocities and "ethnic cleansing" (in more precise translation, "ethnic purification"): namely, it did not go far enough. Ben-Gurion's great error, Morris feels, perhaps a "fatal mistake", was not to have "cleaned the whole country — the whole Land of Israel, as far as the Jordan River".

To Israel's credit, his stand on this matter has been bitterly condemned. In Israel. In the US he is the appropriate choice for the major commentary on his reviled enemy.

The death of Arafat provides another in the immense list of case studies. I'll keep to *The New York Times* (NYT), the most important newspaper in the world, and *The Boston Globe*, perhaps more than others the local newspaper of the liberal educated elite.

The front-page NYT think-piece (12 November) begins by depicting Arafat as "both the symbol of the Palestinian's hope for a viable, independent state and the prime obstacle to its realization". It goes on to explain that he never was able to reach the heights of President Anwar Sadat of Egypt; Sadat " [won] back the Sinai through a peace treaty with Israel" because he was able to "reach out to Israelis and address their fears and hopes" (quoting Shlomo Avineri, Israeli philosopher and former government official, in the follow-up, 13 November).

One can think of more serious obstacles to the realisation of a Palestinian state, but they are excluded by the guiding principles, as is the truth about Sadat — which Avineri at least surely knows. Let's remind ourselves of a few.

Since the issue of Palestinian national rights in a Palestinian state reached the agenda of diplomacy in the mid-1970s, "the prime obstacle to its realization", unambiguously, has been the US government, with the NYT staking a claim to be second on the list. That has been clear ever since January 1976, when Syria introduced a resolution to the UN Security Council calling for a two-state settlement. The resolution incorporated the crucial wording of UN 242 — the basic document, all agree. It accorded to Israel the rights of any state in the international system, alongside of a Palestinian state in the territories Israel had conquered in 1967. The resolution was vetoed by the US. It was supported by the leading Arab states. Arafat's PLO condemned "the tyranny of the veto". There were some abstentions on technicalities.

By then, a two-state settlement in these terms had become a very broad international consensus, blocked only by the US (and rejected by Israel). So matters continued, not only in

the Security Council but also in the General Assembly, which passed similar resolutions regularly by votes like 150–2 (with the US sometimes picking up another client state). The US also blocked similar initiatives from Europe and the Arab states.

Meanwhile the NYT refused — the word is accurate — to publish the fact that through the 1980s, Arafat was calling for negotiations which Israel rejected. The Israeli mainstream press would run headlines about Arafat’s call for direct negotiations with Israel, rejected by Shimon Peres on the basis of his doctrine that Arafat’s PLO “cannot be a partner to negotiations”. And shortly after, NYT Pulitzer-prize winning Jerusalem correspondent Thomas Friedman, who could certainly read the Hebrew press, would write articles lamenting the distress of Israeli peace forces because of “the absence of any negotiating partner”, while Peres deplors the lack of a “peace movement among the Arab people [such as] we have among the Jewish people”, and explains again that there can be no PLO participation in negotiations “as long as it is remaining a shooting organisation and refuses to negotiate”. All of this shortly after yet another Arafat offer to negotiate that the NYT refused to report, and almost three years after the Israeli government’s rejection of Arafat’s offer for negotiations leading to mutual recognition. Peres, meanwhile, is described as a “healthy pragmatist”, by virtue of the guidelines.

Matters did change somewhat in the 1990s, when the Clinton administration declared all UN resolutions “obsolete and anachronistic”, and crafted its own form of rejectionism. The US remains alone in blocking a diplomatic settlement. A recent important example was the presentation of the Geneva Accords in December 2002, supported by the usual very broad international consensus, with the usual exception: “The United States conspicuously was not among the governments sending a message of support,” the NYT reported in a dismissive article (2 December 2002).

perhaps 20,000 Palestinians and Lebanese, thanks to US vetoes of Security Council resolutions calling for ceasefire and withdrawal. The Sabra-Chatilla massacre was a footnote at the end. The goal that was stated very clearly by the highest political and military echelons, and by Israeli scholarship and analysis, was to put an end to the increasingly irritating Arafat initiatives towards diplomatic settlement and to secure Israel’s control over the occupied territories.

Similar reversals of well-documented facts appear throughout the commentary on Arafat’s death, and have been so conventional for many years in US media and journals that one can hardly blame the reporters for repeating them — though minimal inquiry suffices to reveal the truth.

Minor elements of the commentaries are also instructive. Thus the Times think-piece tells us that Arafat’s likely successors — the “moderates” preferred by Washington — have some problems: they lack “street credibility”. That is the conventional phrase for public opinion in the Arab world, as when we are informed about the “Arab street”. If a Western political figure has little public support, we do not say he lacks “street credibility”, and there are no reports on the British or American “street”. The phrase is reserved for the lower orders, unreflectively. They are not people, but creatures who inhabit “streets”. We may also add that the most popular political leader on the “Palestinian street”, Marwan Barghouti, was safely locked away by Israel, permanently. And that George Bush demonstrated his passion for democracy by joining his friend Sharon — the “man of peace” — in driving the one democratically elected leader in the Arab world to virtual prison, while backing Mahmoud Abbas, who, the US conceded, lacked “street credibility”. All of this might tell us something about what the liberal press calls Bush’s “messianic vision” to bring democracy to the Middle East, but only if facts and logic were to matter.

Zedong in China to Fidel Castro in Cuba to Saddam Hussein in Iraq — who arose from anti-colonial movements that swept the globe following World War II.”

The statement is interesting from several points of view. The linkage reveals, once again, the obligatory visceral hatred of Castro. There have been shifting pretexts as circumstances changed, but no information to question the conclusions of US intelligence in the early days of Washington’s terrorist attacks and economic warfare against Cuba: the basic problem is his “successful defiance” of US policies going back to the Monroe Doctrine. But there is an element of truth in the portrayal of Arafat in the *Globe* think-piece, as there would have been in a front-page report during the imperial ceremonies for the semi-divine Reagan, describing him as one of the iconic group of mass murderers — from Hitler to Idi Amin to Peres — who slaughtered with abandon and with strong support from media and intellectuals. Those who do not comprehend the analogy have some history to learn.

Continuing, the *Globe* report, recounting Arafat’s crimes, tells us that he gained control of the south of Lebanon and “used it to launch a stream of attacks on Israel, which responded by invading Lebanon [in June 1982]. Israel’s stated goal was to drive the Palestinians back from the border region, but, under the command of then-general and defense minister Sharon, its forces drove all the way to Beirut, where Sharon allowed his Christian militia allies to commit a notorious massacre of Palestinians in the Sabra and Chatilla refugee camp and drove Mr. Arafat and the Palestinian leadership into exile in Tunis.”

Turning to unacceptable history, during the year prior to the Israeli invasion the PLO adhered to a US-brokered peace arrangement, while Israel conducted many murderous attacks in south Lebanon in an effort to elicit some Palestinian reaction that could be used as a pretext for the planned invasion. When none materialised, they invented a pretext and invaded, killing

This is only a small fragment of a diplomatic record that is so consistent, and so dramatically clear, that it is impossible to miss — unless one keeps rigidly to the history shaped by those who own it.

Let’s turn to the second example: Sadat’s reaching out to Israelis and thereby gaining the Sinai in 1979, a lesson to the bad Arafat. Turning to unacceptable history, in February 1971 Sadat offered a full peace treaty to Israel, in accord with then-official US policy — specifically, Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai — with scarcely even a gesture to Palestinian rights. Jordan followed with similar offers. Israel recognised that it could have full peace, but Golda Meir’s Labour government chose to reject the offers in favour of expansion, then into the northeast Sinai, where Israel was driving thousands of Bedouins into the desert and destroying their villages, mosques, cemeteries, homes, in order to establish the all-Jewish city of Yamit.

The crucial question, as always, was how the US would react. Kissinger prevailed in an internal debate, and the US adopted his policy of “stalemate”: no negotiations, only force. The US continued to reject — more accurately, ignore — Sadat’s efforts to pursue a diplomatic course, backing Israel’s rejectionism and expansion. That stance led to the 1973 War, which was a very close call for Israel and possibly the world; the US called a nuclear alert. By then even Kissinger understood that Egypt could not be dismissed as a basket case, and he began his “shuttle diplomacy”, leading to the Camp David meetings at which the US and Israel accepted Sadat’s 1971 offer — but now with far harsher terms, from the US-Israeli point of view. By then the international consensus had come to recognise Palestinian national rights, and, accordingly, Sadat called for a Palestinian state, anathema to the US-Israel.

In the official history reshaped by its owners, and repeated by media think-pieces, these events are a “diplomatic triumph” for the US and a proof that if Arabs were only able to join us in preferring peace and diplomacy that could achieve their aims.

In actual history, the triumph was a catastrophe, and the events demonstrated that the US was willing only to accede to violence. The US rejection of diplomacy led to a terrible and very dangerous war and many years of suffering, with bitter effects to this day.

In his memoirs, General Shlomo Gazit, military commander of the occupied territories from 1967–1974, observes that by refusing to consider proposals advanced by the military and intelligence for some form of self-rule in the territories or even limited political activity, and by insisting on “substantial border changes”, the Labour government supported by Washington bears significant responsibility for the later rise of the fanatic Gush Emunim settler movement and the Palestinian resistance that developed many years later in the first Intifada, after years of brutality and state terror, and steady takeover of valuable Palestinian lands and resources.

The lengthy obituary of Arafat by Times Middle East specialist Judith Miller (11 November) proceeds in the same vein as the front-page think-piece. According to her version, “Until 1988, [Arafat] repeatedly rejected recognition of Israel, insisting on armed struggle and terror campaigns. He opted for diplomacy only after his embrace of President Saddam Hussein of Iraq during the Persian Gulf war in 1991.”

Miller does give an accurate rendition of official history. In actual history Arafat repeatedly offered negotiations leading to mutual recognition, while Israel — in particular the dovish “pragmatists” — flatly refused, backed by Washington. In 1989, the Israeli coalition government (Shamir-Peres) affirmed the political consensus in its peace plan. The first principle was that there can be no “additional Palestinian state” between Jordan and Israel — Jordan already being a “Palestinian state”. The second was that the fate of the territories will be settled “in accordance with the basic guidelines of the [Israeli] government”. The Israeli plan was accepted without qualification by the US, and became “the Baker Plan” (December 1989). Exactly con-

specific details he meticulously records verbatim (maybe with a hidden tape recorder) to the very general conclusions presented as authoritative but without credible evidence. It is of some interest that this is reviewed as if it could be considered an authoritative account. In general, the book is next to worthless, except as giving the perceptions of one of the actors. It is hard to imagine that a journalist cannot be aware of that.

Not worthless, however, is crucial evidence that escapes notice. For example, the assessment of Israeli intelligence during these years: among them Amos Malka, head of Israeli military intelligence; General Ami Ayalon, who headed the General Security Services (Shin Bet); Matti Steinberg, special advisor on Palestinian affairs to the head of the Shin Bet; and Colonel Ephraim Lavie, the research division official responsible for the Palestinian arena. As Malka presents the consensus, “The assumption was that Arafat prefers a diplomatic process, that he will do all he can to see it through, and that only when he comes to a dead end in the process will he turn to a path of violence. But this violence is aimed at getting him out of a dead end, to set international pressure in motion and to get the extra mile.” Malka also charges that these high-level assessments were falsified as they were transmitted to the political leadership and beyond. US reporters could easily discover them from readily accessible sources, in English.

There is little point continuing with Miller’s version, or Ross. Let’s turn to The Boston Globe, at the liberal extreme. Its editors (12 November) adhere to the same fundamental principle as the NYT (probably near universal; it would be interesting to search for exceptions). The editors do recognise that the failure to achieve a Palestinian state “cannot be blamed solely on Arafat. Israel’s leaders... played their part...” The decisive role of the US is unmentionable, unthinkable.

The Globe also ran a front-page think-piece on 11 November. In its first paragraph we learn that Arafat was “one of the iconic group of charismatic, authoritarian leaders — from Mao

But I doubt that it has ever been mentioned here in the mainstream.

Miller's NYT version of these events is based on a highly-praised book by Clinton's Middle East envoy and negotiator Dennis Ross. As any journalist must be aware, any such source is highly suspect, if only because of its origins. And even a casual reading would suffice to demonstrate that Ross's account is wholly unreliable. Its 800 pages consist mostly of adulation of Clinton (and his own efforts), based on almost nothing verifiable; rather, on "quotations" of what he claims to have said and heard from participants, identified by first names if they are "good guys". There is scarcely a word on what everyone knows to have been the core issue all along, back to 1971 in fact: the programmes of settlements and infrastructure development in the territories, relying on the economic, military, and diplomatic support of the US, Clinton quite clearly included. Ross handles his Taba problem simply: by terminating the book immediately before they began (which also allows him to omit Clinton's evaluation, just quoted, a few days later). Thus he is able to avoid the fact that his primary conclusions were instantly refuted.

Abdul-Shafi is mentioned in Ross's book once, in passing. Naturally, his friend Shlomo ben-Ami's perception of the Oslo process is ignored, as are all significant elements of the interim agreements and Camp David. There is no mention of the flat refusal of his heroes, Rabin and Peres — rather, "Yitzhak" and "Shimon" — even to consider a Palestinian state. In fact, the first mention of the possibility in Israel appears to be during the government of the "bad guy", the far-right Binyamin Netanyahu. His minister of information, asked about a Palestinian state, responded that Palestinians could call the cantons being left to them "a state" if they liked — or "fried chicken".

This is only for starters. Ross's view is so lacking in independent support and so radically selective that one has to take with a heavy grain of salt anything that he claims, from the

trary to Miller's account and the official story, it was only after the Gulf War that Washington was willing to consider negotiations, recognising that it was now in a position to impose its own solution unilaterally.

The US convened the Madrid conference (with Russian participation as a fig leaf). That did indeed lead to negotiations, with an authentic Palestinian delegation, led by Haidar Abdul-Shafi, an honest nationalist who is probably the most respected leader in the occupied territories. But the negotiations deadlocked because Abdul-Shafi rejected Israel's insistence, backed by Washington, on continuing to take over valuable parts of the territories with settlement and infrastructure programs — all illegal, as recognised even by the US Justice, the one dissenter, in the recent World Court decision condemning the Israeli wall dividing the West Bank. The "Tunis Palestinians", led by Arafat, undercut the Palestinian negotiators and made a separate deal, the "Oslo Accords", celebrated with much fanfare on the White House lawn in September 2003.

It was evident at once that it was a sell-out. The sole document — the Declaration of Principles — declared that the final outcome was to be based solely on UN 242 in 1967, excluding the core issue of diplomacy since the mid-1970s: Palestinian national rights and a two-state settlement. UN 242 defines the final outcome because it says nothing about Palestinian rights; excluded are the UN resolutions that recognise the rights of Palestinians alongside those of Israel, in accord with the international consensus that has been blocked by the US since it took shape in the mid-1970s. The wording of the agreements made it clear that they were a mandate for continued Israeli settlement programs, as the Israeli leadership (Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres) took no pains to conceal. For that reason, Abdul-Shafi refused even to attend the ceremonies. Arafat's role was to be Israel's policeman in the territories, as Rabin made very clear. As long as he fulfilled this task, he was a "pragmatist", approved by the US and Israel with no concern

for corruption, violence, and repression. It was only after he could no longer keep the population under control while Israel took over more of their lands and resources that he became an arch-villain, blocking the path to peace: the usual transition.

So matters proceeded through the 1990s. The goals of the Israeli doves were explained in 1998 in an academic study by Shlomo ben-Ami, soon to become Barak's chief negotiator at Camp David: the "Oslo peace process" was to lead to a "permanent neocolonial dependency" in the occupied territories, with some form of local autonomy. Meanwhile Israeli settlement and integration of the territories proceeded steadily with full US support. It reached its highest peak in the final year of Clinton's term (and Barak's), thus undermining the hopes of a diplomatic settlement.

Returning to Miller, she keeps to the official version that in "November 1988, after considerable American prodding, the PLO accepted the United Nations resolution that called for recognition of Israel and a renunciation of terrorism". The actual history is that by November 1988, Washington was becoming an object of international ridicule for its refusal to "see" that Arafat was calling for a diplomatic settlement. In this context, the Reagan administration reluctantly agreed to admit the glaringly obvious truth, and had to turn to other means to undercut diplomacy. The US entered into low-level negotiations with the PLO, but as Prime Minister Rabin assured Peace Now leaders in 1989, these were meaningless, intended only to give Israel more time for "harsh military and economic pressure" so that "In the end, they will be broken," and will accept Israel's terms.

Miller carries the story on in the same vein, leading to the standard denouement: at Camp David, Arafat "walked away" from the magnanimous Clinton-Barak offer of peace, and even afterwards refused to join Barak in accepting Clinton's December 2000 "parameters", thus proving conclusively that he insists

on violence, a depressing truth with which the peace-loving states, the US and Israel, must somehow come to terms.

Turning to actual history, the Camp David proposals divided the West Bank into virtually separated cantons, and could not possibly be accepted by any Palestinian leader. That is evident from a look at the maps that were easily available, but not in the NYT, or apparently anywhere in the US mainstream, perhaps for that reason. After the collapse of these negotiations, Clinton recognised that Arafat's reservations made sense, as demonstrated by the famous "parameters", which, though vague, went much further towards a possible settlement — thus undermining the official story, but that's only logic, therefore as unacceptable as history. Clinton gave his own version of the reaction to his "parameters" in a talk to the Israeli Policy Forum on 7 January 2001: "Both Prime Minister Barak and Chairman Arafat have now accepted these parameters as the basis for further efforts. Both have expressed some reservations."

One can learn this from such obscure sources as the prestigious Harvard-MIT journal *International Security* (Fall 2003), along with the conclusion that "the Palestinian narrative of the 2000–01 peace talks is significantly more accurate than the Israeli narrative" — the US-NYT "narrative".

After that, high-level Israeli-Palestinian negotiators proceeded to take the Clinton parameters as "the basis for further efforts," and addressed their "reservations" at meetings in Taba through January. These produced a tentative agreement, meeting some of the Palestinian concerns — and thus again undermining the official story. Problems remained, but the Taba agreements went much further towards a possible settlement than anything that had preceded. The negotiations were called off by Barak, so their possible outcome is unknown. A detailed report by EU envoy Miguel Moratinos was accepted as accurate by both sides, and prominently reported in Israel.