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The Iraq War and Contempt for Democracy

Noam Chomsky

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Establishment critics of the war on Iraq restricted their comments regarding the attack to the administration arguments they took to be seriously intended: disarmament, deterrence, and links to terrorism.

They scarcely made reference to liberation, democratization of the Middle East, and other matters that would render irrelevant the weapons inspections and indeed everything that took place at the Security Council or within governmental domains.

The reason, perhaps, is that they recognized that lofty rhetoric is the obligatory accompaniment of virtually any resort to force and therefore carries no information. The rhetoric is doubly hard to take seriously in the light of the display of contempt for democracy that accompanied it, not to speak of the past record and current practices.

Critics are also aware that nothing has been heard from the present incumbents — with their alleged concern for Iraqi democracy — to indicate that they have any regrets for their previous support for Saddam Hussein (or others like him, still continuing) nor have they shown any signs of contrition

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for having helped him develop weapons of mass destruction (WMD) when he really was a serious danger.

Nor has the current leadership explained when, or why, they abandoned their 1991 view that “the best of all worlds” would be “an iron-fisted Iraqi junta without Saddam Hussein” that would rule as Saddam did but not make the error of judgment in August 1990 that ruined Saddam’s record.

At the time, the incumbents’ British allies were in the opposition and therefore more free than the Thatcherites to speak out against Saddam’s British-backed crimes. Their names are noteworthy by their absence from the parliamentary record of protests against these crimes, including Tony Blair, Jack Straw, Geoff Hoon, and other leading figures of New Labour.

In December 2002, Jack Straw, then foreign minister, released a dossier of Saddam’s crimes. It was drawn almost entirely from the period of firm US-UK support, a fact overlooked with the usual display of moral integrity. The timing and quality of the dossier raised many questions, but those aside, Straw failed to provide an explanation for his very recent conversion to skepticism about Saddam Hussein’s good character and behavior.

When Straw was home secretary in 2001, an Iraqi who fled to England after detention and torture requested asylum. Straw denied his request. The Home Office explained that Straw “is aware that Iraq, and in particular the Iraqi security forces, would only convict and sentence a person in the courts with the provision of proper jurisdiction,” so that “you could expect to receive a fair trial under an independent and properly constituted judiciary.”

Straw’s conversion must, then, have been rather similar to President Clinton’s discovery, sometime between September 8 and 11, 1999, that Indonesia had done some unpleasant things in East Timor in the past twenty-five years when it enjoyed decisive support from the US and Britain.

Attitudes toward democracy were revealed with unusual clarity during the mobilization for war in the fall of 2002, as it became necessary to deal somehow with the overwhelming popular opposition.

Within the “coalition of the willing,” the US public was at least partially controlled by the propaganda campaign unleashed in September. In Britain, the population was split roughly fifty-fifty on the war, but the government maintained the stance of “junior partner” it had accepted reluctantly after World War II and had kept to even in the face of the contemptuous dismissal of British concerns by US leaders at moments when the country’s very survival was at stake.

Outside the two full members of the coalition, problems were more serious. In the two major European countries, Germany and France, the official government stands corresponded to the views of the large majority of their populations, which unequivocally opposed the war. That led to bitter condemnation by Washington and many commentators.

Donald Rumsfeld dismissed the offending nations as just the “Old Europe,” of no concern because of their reluctance to toe Washington’s line. The “New Europe” is symbolized by Italy, whose prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi, was visiting the White House. It was, evidently, unproblematic that public opinion in Italy was overwhelmingly opposed to the war.

The governments of Old and New Europe were distinguished by a simple criterion: a government joined Old Europe in its iniquity if and only if it took the same position as the vast majority of its population and refused to follow orders from Washington.

Recall that the self-appointed rulers of the world — Bush, Powell, and the rest — had declared forthrightly that they intended to carry out their war whether or not the United Nations (UN) or anyone else “catches up” and “becomes relevant.” Old Europe, mired in irrelevance, did not catch up. Neither did New Europe, at least if people are part of their countries.

Poll results available from Gallup International, as well as local sources for most of Europe, West and East, showed that support for a war carried out “unilaterally by America and its allies” did not rise above 11 percent in any country. Support for a war if mandated by the UN ranged from 13 percent (Spain) to 51 percent (Netherlands).

Particularly interesting are the eight countries whose leaders declared themselves to be the New Europe, to much acclaim for their courage and integrity. Their declaration took the form of a statement calling on the Security Council to ensure “full compliance with its resolutions,” without specifying the means.

Their announcement threatened “to isolate the Germans and French,” the press reported triumphantly, though the positions of New and Old Europe were in fact scarcely different. To ensure that Germany and France would be “isolated,” they were not invited to sign the bold pronouncement of New Europe — apparently for fear that they would do so, it was later quietly indicated.

The standard interpretation is that the exciting and promising New Europe stood behind Washington, thus demonstrating that “many Europeans supported the United States’ view, even if France and Germany did not.”

Who were these “many Europeans”? Checking polls, we find that in New Europe, opposition to “the United States’ view” was for the most part even higher than in France and Germany, particularly in Italy and Spain, which were singled out for praise for their leadership of New Europe.

Happily for Washington, former communist countries too joined New Europe. Within them, support for the “United States’ view,” as defined by Powell — namely, war by the “coalition of the willing” without UN authorization — ranged from 4 percent (Macedonia) to 11 percent (Romania).

Support for a war even with a UN mandate was also very low. Latvia’s former foreign minister explained that we have

to “salute and shout, ‘Yes sir.’ ... We have to please America no matter what the cost.”

In brief, in journals that regard democracy as a significant value, headlines would have read that Old Europe in fact included the vast majority of Europeans, East and West, while New Europe consisted of a few leaders who chose to line up (ambiguously) with Washington, disregarding the overwhelming opinion of their own populations.

But actual reporting was mostly scattered and oblique, depicting opposition to the war as a marketing problem for Washington.

Toward the liberal end of the spectrum, Richard Holbrooke stressed the “very important point [that] if you add up the population of [the eight countries of the original New Europe], it was larger than the population of those countries not signing the letter.” True enough, though something is omitted: the populations were overwhelmingly opposed to the war, mostly even more so than in those countries dismissed as Old Europe.

At the other extreme of the spectrum, the editors of the Wall Street Journal applauded the statement of the eight original signers for “exposing as fraudulent the conventional wisdom that France and Germany speak for all of Europe, and that all of Europe is now anti-American.”

The eight honorable New European leaders showed that “the views of the Continent’s pro-American majority weren’t being heard,” apart from the editorial pages of the Journal, now vindicated. The editors blasted the media to their “left” — a rather substantial segment — which “peddled as true” the ridiculous idea that France and Germany spoke for Europe, when they were clearly a pitiful minority, and peddled these lies “because they served the political purposes of those, both in Europe and America, who oppose President Bush on Iraq.”

This conclusion does hold if we exclude Europeans from Europe, rejecting the radical left doctrine that people have some kind of role in democratic societies.