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POLICY FORUM:
In Response to September 11

SEPTEMBER 11: CHOICES AND PROSPECTS

Noam Chomsky

**Editorial Note: The following is an edited version of an interview of Noam Chomsky by radio B92, Belgrade on September 18, 2001. Each section is in response to specific questions, which were posed by the interviewer who selected the topics to be discussed.*

Origins

In examining the attacks on the U.S. on September 11, we must first identify the perpetrators of the crimes. It is generally assumed, plausibly, that their origin is the Middle East region, and that the attacks probably trace back to the Osama Bin Laden network, a widespread and complex organization, doubtless inspired by Bin Laden but not necessarily acting under his control. Let us assume that this is true. A sensible person would try to ascertain Bin Laden's views, and the sentiments of the large reservoir of supporters of much of what he says throughout the region. About all of this, we have a great deal of information.

Bin Laden has been interviewed extensively over the years by highly reliable Middle East specialists, notably the most eminent correspondent in the region, Robert Fisk, reporting for the London *Independent*, who has intimate knowledge of the entire region and direct experience over decades. A Saudi Arabian millionaire, Bin Laden became a militant Islamic leader in the war to drive the Russians out of Afghanistan. He was one of the many religious fundamentalist extremists recruited, armed and financed by the CIA and their allies in Pakistani intelligence, and elsewhere, to cause maximal harm to the Russians—quite possibly delaying their withdrawal, some analysts suspect—though whether he personally happened to have direct contact with the CIA is unclear, and not particularly important.

Not surprisingly, the CIA preferred the most fanatic and cruel fighters they could mobilize. According to Simon Jenkins, a regional expert for the *London Times*, the end result was to “destroy a moderate regime and create a fanatical one, from groups recklessly financed by the Americans”. These “Afghanis” as they are called (many, like Bin Laden, not from Afghanistan) carried out terror operations across the border in Russia, but they terminated these after Russia withdrew. Their war was not against Russia, which they despise, but against the Russian occupation and Russia's crimes against Muslims.

The “Afghanis” did not terminate their activities, however. They joined Bosnian Muslim forces in the Balkan Wars; the U.S. did not object, just as it tolerated Iranian support for them, for complex reasons that we need not pursue here, apart from noting that concern for the grim fate of the Bosnians was not prominent among them. The “Afghanis” are also fighting the Russians in Chechnya, and, quite possibly, are involved in carrying out terrorist attacks in Moscow and elsewhere in

places where, as they see it, Muslims are under attack. Bin Laden and his “Afghanis” turned against the U.S. in 1990 when they established permanent bases in Saudi Arabia—from his point of view, a counterpart to the Russian occupation of Afghanistan, but far more significant because of Saudi Arabia’s special status as the guardian of the holiest shrines.

Bin Laden is also bitterly opposed to the corrupt and repressive regimes of the region, which he regards as “un-Islamic”, including the Saudi Arabian regime, the most extreme Islamic fundamentalist regime in the world, apart from the Taliban, and a close U.S. ally since its origin. Bin Laden despises the U.S. for its support of these regimes. Like others in the region, he is also outraged by long-standing U.S. support for Israel’s brutal military occupation, now in its 35th year: Washington’s decisive diplomatic, military and economic intervention in support of the killings, the harsh and destructive siege over many years, the daily humiliation to which Palestinians are subjected, the expanding settlements designed to break the occupied territories into Bantustan-like cantons and take control of the resources, the gross violation of the Geneva Conventions, and other actions that are recognized as crimes throughout most of the world, apart from the U.S. which has prime responsibility for them.

And like others, he contrasts Washington’s dedicated support for these crimes with the decade-long U.S.-British assault against the civilian population of Iraq, which has devastated the society and caused hundreds of thousands of deaths while strengthening Saddam Hussein—who was a favored friend and ally of the U.S. and Britain right through his worst atrocities, including the gassing of the Kurds, as people of the region also remember well, even if Westerners prefer to forget the facts.

These sentiments are very widely shared. *The Wall Street Journal* (September 14, 2001) published a survey of opinions of wealthy and privileged Muslims in the Gulf region (bankers, professionals and businessmen with close links to the U.S.). They expressed much the same views: resentment of the U.S. policies of supporting Israeli crimes and blocking the international consensus on a diplomatic settlement for many years while devastating Iraqi civilian society, supporting harsh and repressive anti-democratic regimes throughout the region, and imposing barriers against economic development by “propping up oppressive regimes”. Among the great majority of people suffering deep poverty and oppression, similar sentiments are far more bitter, and are the sources of the fury and despair that is part of the background for such atrocities as suicide bombings, as commonly understood by those who are interested in the facts.

The U.S. and much of the West prefer a more comforting story. To quote the lead analysis in the *New York Times* (September 16, 2001), the perpetrators acted out of “hatred for the values cherished in the West as freedom, tolerance, prosperity, religious pluralism and universal suffrage”. U.S. actions are irrelevant, and therefore need not even be mentioned (Serge Schmemmann). This is a convenient picture, and the general stance is not unfamiliar in intellectual history; in fact, it is close to the norm. It happens to be completely at variance with everything we know, but has all the merits of self-adulation and uncritical support for power.

It is also widely recognized that Bin Laden and others like him are praying for “a great assault on Muslim states”, which cause “fanatics to flock to his cause” (Jenkins, and many others). That too is familiar. The escalating cycle of violence is typically welcomed by the harshest and most brutal elements on both sides, a fact evident enough from the recent history of the Balkans, to cite only one of many cases.

American Inner Policy and Self Perception

As U.S. policy has been officially announced, the world is being offered a “stark choice”: join us or “face the certain prospect of death and destruction” (R.W. Apple, *New York Times*, September 14, 2001). Congress has authorized the use of force against any individuals or countries the President determines to be involved in the attacks, a doctrine that every supporter of the measure regards as ultra-criminal. That is easily demonstrated. Simply ask how the same people would have reacted if Nicaragua had adopted this doctrine after the U.S. had rejected the orders of the World Court to terminate its “unlawful use of force” against Nicaragua and had vetoed a Security Council resolution calling on all states to observe international law. And that terrorist attack was far more severe and destructive even than this atrocity.

As for how these matters are perceived here, that is far more complex. One should bear in mind that the media and the intellectual elites generally have their particular agendas. Furthermore, the answer to this question is, in significant measure, a matter of decision: as in many other cases, with sufficient dedication and energy, efforts to stimulate fanaticism, blind hatred and submission to authority can be reversed. We all know that very well.

American Policy Abroad

The initial response was to call for intensifying the policies that led to the fury and resentment that provides the background from which terrorist attacks arise and sometimes gain sympathy, and to pursue more intensively the agenda of the most hard line elements of the leadership: increased militarization, domestic regimentation, and attack on social programs. That is all to be expected. Again, terror attacks and the escalating cycle of violence they often engender tend to reinforce the authority and prestige of the most harsh and repressive elements of a society. But there is nothing inevitable about submission to this course.

Prospect: Fear

Every sane person should be afraid of the likely reaction—the one that has already been announced, the one that probably answers Bin Laden’s prayers. It is highly likely to escalate the cycle of violence, in the familiar way, but in this case on a far greater scale. The U.S. has already demanded that Pakistan terminate the food and other supplies that are keeping at least some of the starving and suffering people of Afghanistan alive. [To quote the exact words on September 16, 2001, the

New York Times reported that “Washington has also demanded [from Pakistan] a cutoff of fuel supplies...and the elimination of truck convoys that provide much of the food and other supplies to Afghanistan’s civilian population”.]

If that demand is implemented, unknown numbers of people who have not the remotest connection to terrorism will die, possibly millions. Let me repeat: the U.S. has demanded that Pakistan kill possibly millions of people who are themselves victims of the Taliban. This has nothing to do even with revenge. It is at a far lower moral level even than that. The significance is heightened by the fact that this is mentioned in passing, with no comment, and probably will hardly be noticed. We can learn a great deal about the moral level of the reigning intellectual culture of the West by observing the reaction to this demand. I think we can be reasonably confident that if the American population had the slightest idea of what is being done in their name, they would be utterly appalled. It would be instructive to seek historical precedents.

If Pakistan does not agree to this and other U.S. demands, it may come under direct attack as well—with unknown consequences. If Pakistan does submit to U.S. demands, it is not impossible that the government will be overthrown by forces much like the Taliban—who in this case will have nuclear weapons. That could have an effect throughout the region, including the oil producing states. At this point we are considering the possibility of a war that may destroy much of human society.

Even without pursuing such possibilities, the likelihood is that a massive attack on Afghans will have pretty much the effect that most analysts expect: it will enlist great numbers of others to support of Bin Laden, as he hopes. Even if he is killed, it will make little difference. His voice will be heard on cassettes that are distributed throughout the Islamic world, and he is likely to be revered as a martyr, inspiring others. It is worth bearing in mind that one suicide bombing—a truck driven into an U.S. military base—drove the world’s major military force out Lebanon 20 years ago. The opportunities for such attacks are endless. And suicide attacks are very hard to prevent.

Reflection: Will the World Be the Same?

The horrendous terrorist attacks on Tuesday are something quite new in world affairs, not in their scale and character, but in the target. For the U.S., this is the first time since the War of 1812 that its national territory has been under attack, even under threat. Its colonies have been attacked, but not the national territory itself. During these years the U.S. virtually exterminated the indigenous population, conquered half of Mexico, intervened violently in the surrounding region, conquered Hawaii and the Philippines (killing hundreds of thousands of Filipinos), and in the past half century particularly, extended its resort to force throughout much of the world. The number of victims is colossal. For the first time, the guns have been directed the other way. The same is true, even more dramatically, of Europe. Europe has suffered murderous destruction, but from internal wars, meanwhile conquering much of the world with extreme brutality. It has not been under attack by its victims outside, with rare exceptions (the IRA in England, for

example). It is therefore natural that NATO should rally to the support of the U.S.; hundreds of years of imperial violence have an enormous impact on the intellectual and moral culture.

It is correct to say that this is a novel event in world history, not because of the scale of the atrocity, regrettably, but because of the target. How the West chooses to react is a matter of supreme importance. If the rich and powerful choose to keep to their traditions of hundreds of years and resort to extreme violence, they will contribute to the escalation of a cycle of violence, in a familiar dynamic, with long-term consequences that could be awesome. Of course, that is by no means inevitable. An aroused public within the more free and democratic societies can direct policies towards a much more humane and honorable course.