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[HOME PAGE](#) | [UCY.AC.CY](#) | [REGISTRATION](#) | [CONTACT](#) |



[Home Page - Articles/Speeches -](#)

[Print](#)

THIRD ANNUAL LECTURE IN MEMORY OF DINOS LEVENTIS

17.05.2006

Professor Noam Chomsky: Imminent crises: social, political, ethical

Home Page

[Press Releases](#)

[Articles/Speeches](#)

[2006](#)

[May](#)

[2005](#)

[2004](#)

[Events](#)

[Publications](#)

[Fundraising](#)

[List of experts](#)

[Daily Press](#)

[Photographs](#)

[Videos](#)

[Contact](#)

I would like to say a few words about some imminent crises, and what can be done about them: 5 crises, to be more precise. Two of them should be at the top of everyone's agenda of concern, because human survival is at stake. Two others are by far at the peak of popular concern, so polls reveal. The fifth is a crisis of the dominant moral and intellectual culture. It is scarcely discussed at all, but I think it is at the root of the other four, and should be of particular concern to people like us – people who are called "intellectuals," a term that means that we enjoy sufficient privilege and resources to have ample opportunities, and may choose to use these opportunities to enter into the public arena in one or another fashion.

The two crises that literally threaten human survival are nuclear war and environmental catastrophe. The former is extremely serious, and extensively discussed, but primarily within narrow professional circles. Their conclusions are dire. In the journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, prominent strategic analysts warn that Washington's "transformation of the military," vastly expanding offensive capacity and militarizing space, carries "an appreciable risk of ultimate doom" – and they call for a coalition of peace-loving states to counter Washington's aggressive militarism – led by China! We have come to a pretty pass when such thoughts are expressed at the heart of the establishment. Former defense secretary Robert McNamara sees the likelihood of "Apocalypse soon" if these policies are pursued. Senator Sam Nunn, a highly respected conservative who has been in the forefront of efforts to prevent nuclear war, warns of "an Armageddon of our own making" unless serious steps are taken to reverse the current course. Many others agree. The threats are well understood, and are being consciously enhanced; the Iraq invasion is only the most glaring example. Not of course because that outcome is desired by the political leadership, but because survival of the species does not rank high among their priorities; or the priorities of the general intellectual community, judging by the attention devoted to these matters.

Former NATO planner Michael MccGwire, writing in Britain's leading journal of international affairs, joins others in outlining the reasons why under current policies, "a nuclear exchange is ultimately inevitable." Comparing the two crises that literally threaten survival, MccGwire has this to say: "By comparison with global warming, the cost of eliminating nuclear weapons would be small. But the catastrophic results of global nuclear war would greatly exceed those of progressive climate change, because the effects would be instantaneous and could not be mitigated. The irony of the situation is that it is in our power to *eliminate* the threat of global nuclear war, but climate change cannot be evaded."

He is right on both counts. Means to end the threat of nuclear war are known, and the required steps are even a binding legal obligation, but the only force that can compel states to undertake that obligation is an aroused public. And though climate change cannot be evaded, we can make its effects much worse – and perhaps catastrophic even within the

next few generations -- by failing to deal with it appropriately now.

With these pathetically inadequate observations about the very real risk to decent survival of the species, let's turn to the two crises that are the peak of current concern: Iraq and Iran. The crises are severe, and could easily escalate. There are also opportunities to mitigate them, but they will not be pursued unless they are openly and frankly discussed, and I think they are not – which leads to the fifth crisis, within the intellectual and moral culture of the privileged.

It is hardly a secret that Iraq and Iran are of great concern to the West because they are at the heart of the world's major energy reserves, recognized by Washington 60 years ago to be a "stupendous source of strategic power," the "strategically most important area of the world," and "one of the greatest material prizes in world history. Naturally, Washington was dedicated to control this stupendous prize, in large part because such control provides "critical leverage" against industrial rivals, European and Asian, in the terminology of planners. Zbigniew Brzezinski in this case, referring to gains from a successful occupation of Iraq, echoing thoughts of George Kennan in the early post-World War II years, when he recommended that control over Middle East oil would provide the US with "veto power" over rivals. As elsewhere, the primary threat to such control has been indigenous nationalism, which might pursue an independent course. For years, the pretext was that the threat was Russia, but that was a routine reflex all over the world and rarely stands up to scrutiny. In this case we need hardly consider it, since it has been officially abandoned. When the Berlin Wall fell, and the Soviet pretext was no longer useful, the Bush #1 administration released a new National Security Strategy, explaining that everything would go on as before but for new reasons – pretexts, to be more accurate. The huge military system is no longer meant to contain Russia, but has to be expanded because of the "technological sophistication of third world powers." And the US must maintain its intervention forces aimed at the Middle East, where "the threat to our interests...could not be laid at the Kremlin's door," contrary to decades of fabrication. As is normal, all of this passed without comment – another illustration of the fifth crisis.

Policies towards the Eastern Mediterranean evolved within the same framework. Planners have regarded the region as part of the system of control of Middle East petroleum and its distribution to the industrial world. Turkey has provided major military bases for operations directed to the Gulf region, and is serving that purpose right now. That is why such fury was aroused in the US government and media when the Turkish government followed the will of 95% of the population and refused to play its assigned role in the invasion of Iraq – a demonstration of the sincerity of Washington's devotion to democracy which, as is conventional, did not sully the reverence for the "messianic mission" declared by the leader. US intervention in Greece in 1947 was motivated in large part by concern over "the possible loss of the petroleum resources of the Middle East" if the revolt against the right-wing government imposed by British military force was not crushed – I am quoting the CIA -- and those concerns persisted right through Washington's support for the only restoration of fascism in Europe, in 1967. Greece remained within the Near East section of the State Department until the US-backed fascist regime was overthrown in 1974. Cyprus was a major British military and intelligence base, used for the overthrow of the parliamentary government of Iran in 1953, the Suez invasion in 1956, and US-UK military actions in response to the 1958 coup in Iraq, the first break in their control over this stupendous source of strategic power. As British Prime Minister Anthony Eden put it, without Cyprus, Britain would have "no certain facilities to protect our oil," with dire consequences at home. Our oil, which happens to be in someone else's country. Again the stand is routine. A few years earlier, George Kennan had urged that "the protection of our resources" must be a major concern, and since the main threat is indigenous, we must realize that "the final answer might be an unpleasant one," namely, "police repression by the local government." Kennan as you know was at the extreme liberal humanist end of the planning spectrum, soon removed in favor of harsher figures.

In recent years the system of military bases and regional gendarmes has extended far more widely, particularly in the last few years, with

essentially the same goals. Crete is a major US air and military base, used for current and perhaps imminent military attacks.

In the torrent of discussion about the problem of Iraq, the most crucial questions, such as these, are systematically evaded. The same was true throughout the wars in Indochina, and still is today, in commentary and even scholarship. In the Iraq case, the issues are much more far-reaching. Basic US war aims in Vietnam could be achieved merely by violence. In the terminology of planners, Vietnam was a "contagious example" of independent development that could "infect others," leading to erosion of US domination of the region and maybe even loss of Japan. The solution was to destroy the virus and to "inoculate" the region by imposing brutal tyrannies. That was effectively achieved, with extraordinary savagery that does not register in Western intellectual culture and consciousness. But nothing like that is possible in Iraq. Analogies are commonly drawn between the two cases, but only by keeping to the approved doctrinal framework of benign intentions undermined by mistakes, rather in the manner of the Soviet press during the invasion of Afghanistan – another illustration of the fifth crisis.

Putting aside doctrinal blinders, what should be done in Iraq? Before answering, we should be clear about some basic principles. The major principle is that an invader has no rights, only responsibilities. The first responsibility is to pay reparations. The second responsibility is to follow the will of the victims.

The responsibility to pay reparations to Iraqis goes far beyond the crime of aggression and its terrible aftermath. The US and Britain have been torturing the population of Iraq for a long time. Recent history alone – and that is far from all -- includes their support for Saddam Hussein during his worst crimes and after the end of the war with Iran, then again after the Gulf War of 1991, when the conquerors effectively authorized Saddam to crush the Shiite rebellion that might have overthrown him, for reasons that were frankly explained: the NY Times reported that there was a "strikingly unanimous view" among the US and its allies Britain and Saudi Arabia that "whatever the sins of the Iraqi leader, he offered the West and the region a better hope for his country's stability than did those who have suffered his repression"; the term "stability" is a code word for "following orders." An unthinkable option -- then and now -- is that Iraqis should rule Iraq independently of the US. Then followed the murderous sanctions regime imposed by the US and Britain, which killed 100s of 1000s of people and devastated Iraqi civilian society, strengthened the tyrant and forced the population to rely on him for survival, and probably saved him from the fate of other vicious tyrants, some quite comparable to Saddam, who were overthrown from within despite strong support from the US and UK to the end of their bloody rule. All of those actions, and much more, call for reparations, on a massive scale, and complicity in crimes extends to other great powers as well. But the deep moral/intellectual crisis of Western society prevents any thought of such topics as these.

The second responsibility of invaders is to obey the will of the population. British and US polls provide sufficient evidence about that. The most recent polls found that 87% of Iraqis want a "concrete timeline for US withdrawal," up from 76% a year earlier. If the polls really mean Iraqis, as the reports in the press say, that would imply that virtually the entire population of Arab Iraq, where the US and British army are deployed, want a firm timetable for withdrawal. I doubt that one would have found comparable figures in occupied Europe under the Nazis, or Eastern Europe under Russian rule.

Bush-Blair and associates declare, however, that there can be no timetable for withdrawal. That stand in part reflects the natural dislike for democracy among the powerful. But rejection of the popular will in Iraq goes far beyond that. Simply consider the policies that are likely to be pursued by an independent and more or less democratic Iraq. Iraqis may have no love for Iran, but they would doubtless prefer friendly relations with their powerful neighbor. The Shi'ite majority has ties to Iran and has been moving to strengthen them. Furthermore, even limited sovereignty in Iraq has encouraged efforts by the harshly repressed Shi'ite population right across the border in Saudi Arabia to gain basic rights and perhaps autonomy. That is where most of Saudi oil happens to

be. Such developments might lead to a loose Shi'ite alliance controlling the world's major energy resources and independent of Washington, the ultimate nightmare for planners – except that it might get worse: the alliance might strengthen its economic and possibly military ties with China. The US can intimidate Europe: when Washington shakes its fist, leading European business enterprises pull out of Iran. But China refuses to be intimidated. They have a 4000-year history of contempt for the barbarians. That is the basic reason for Washington's strategic concerns with regard to China: not that it is a military threat, but that it poses the threat of independence, unacceptable for small countries like Cuba or Vietnam, and certainly so for the heartland of the most dynamic economic region in the world, the country that has just surpassed Japan in possession of the world's major financial reserves and at current growth rates will match the scale of the US economy in a decade, using the correct measures.

In brief, some measure of sovereignty and democracy in Iraq could easily lead to the collapse of one of the highest foreign policy objectives of the US since World War II: control of the world's major energy resources. The desperate US-UK efforts to prevent authentic sovereignty and democracy are readily understandable.

The lively debate about exit strategies means very little unless such realities as these are confronted. They are ignored, in accord with a leading principle of intellectual life: what Hans Morgenthau, the founder of modern international relations theory, described as our "conformist subservience to those in power." That sets narrow bounds for debate. When the Russians invade Afghanistan, or Saddam invades Kuwait, no one has any hesitation in condemning it as criminal aggression, and attributing to them rational strategic-economic objectives, such as access to Middle East energy resources. When the US and UK invade Iraq, such issues are off the table. The goals were noble, if misguided, and the term "aggression" is unspeakable. That is common practice: Vietnam is another striking case: even 45 years after the Kennedy administration directly and brutally attacked South Vietnam, the word "aggression" cannot be spoken. With the most marginal exceptions, debate is narrowly confined to the spectrum bounded by the hawks, for whom the war was a "noble cause" that could have been won with sufficient will, and the doves, for whom it began with "blundering efforts to do good" though by 1969 it had become clear "that the intervention had been a disastrous mistake," that the US "was in a position where it could not impose a solution except at a price too costly to itself." I am quoting Anthony Lewis in the New York Times, at the dissident extreme of commentary. Of some interest is the fact that in that same year, 1969, 70% of the American population regarded the war as "not a mistake" but "fundamentally wrong and immoral," apparently unable to adopt the proper stance of conformist subservience to power.

We return here to the fifth crisis. One of its salient features is: rejection of the most elementary of moral principles: the principle of universality, which holds that we apply to ourselves the same standards we apply to others, if not more stringent ones. Thanks to the firm rejection of that principle, it cannot be that we commit aggression, declared at Nuremberg to be the "supreme international crime, differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole" – all the evil in the tortured land of Iraq that flowed from the US-UK invasion. But that cannot enter into debate – unlike the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, Saddam's invasion of Kuwait, and other crimes of enemies, easily characterized as criminal aggression, war crimes.

It is not that the concept of "aggression" is ill-defined. Quite the contrary, it was defined clearly enough by US Justice Jackson, Chief of Counsel for the Prosecution at Nuremberg, in terms that apply unequivocally to the invasions of Vietnam and Iraq, Afghanistan and Kuwait, and many others. Justice Jackson also eloquently affirmed the principle of universality. In sentencing Nazi war criminals to death, he stated that "If certain acts of violation of treaties are crimes, they are crimes whether the United States does them or whether Germany does them, and we are not prepared to lay down a rule of criminal conduct against others which we would not be willing to have invoked against us....We must never forget that the record on which we judge these

defendants is the record on which history will judge us tomorrow. To pass these defendants a poisoned chalice is to put it to our own lips as well." But the moral and intellectual crisis of the educated classes in the West places such thoughts under a strict ban; not by law, or by state power, but by conformist subservience to power.

Let us turn next to Iran and its nuclear programs, and consider a few facts that should be in the forefront of debate but are scarcely to be found. To begin, until 1979 Washington strongly supported these programs. During those years, of course, Iran was ruled by the brutal tyrant installed by the US-UK military coup that overthrew the Iranian parliamentary government. Today, the standard claim is that Iran has no need for nuclear power. Henry Kissinger explained that "For an oil producer such as Iran, nuclear energy is a wasteful use of resources," so they must be developing nuclear weapons. As Secretary of State 30 years ago, Kissinger held that "introduction of nuclear power will both provide for the growing needs of Iran's economy and free remaining oil reserves for export or conversion to petrochemicals," and the US acted to assist the Shah's efforts, untroubled by his horrendous human rights record and conquests. The most enthusiastic advocates of an Iranian nuclear power program were Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, joined by Paul Wolfowitz and other top Bush administration planners. US universities were arranging to train Iranian nuclear engineers, doubtless with Washington's approval, if not initiative; my own university, for example, despite overwhelming student opposition. Today the Cheney-Rumsfeld regime has made it clear that not even the slightest step towards developing nuclear energy will be tolerated.

The Iranian nuclear programs, as far as is known, fall within its rights under Article IV of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, which grants non-nuclear states the right to produce fuel for nuclear energy. The Bush administration argues, however, that Article IV should be strengthened, and I think that makes sense. When the NPT came into force in 1970, there was a considerable gap between producing fuel for energy and for nuclear weapons. But with contemporary technology, the gap has been narrowed. However, any such revision of Article IV would have to ensure "unimpeded access" for nonmilitary use, in accord with the initial bargain. A reasonable proposal was put forth by Mohammed ElBaradei, head of the International Atomic Energy Agency: that all production and processing of weapon-usable material be placed under international control, accompanied, "above all, by an assurance that legitimate would-be users could get their supplies." That should be the first step, he proposed, towards fully implementing the 1993 UN resolution calling for a Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty (FISSBAN), which bans production of fissile materials by states. Elbaradei's proposal, regrettably, was dead in the water. The US political leadership, surely in its current stance, would never accept an international authority. Elbaradei's proposal has been accepted by only one state, to my knowledge: Iran, last February. That suggests one way to resolve the current crisis – in fact, a far more serious crisis: continued production of fissile materials by individual states is likely to doom humanity to destruction.

Washington also strenuously opposes the FISSBAN treaty, regarded by specialists as "the most fundamental nuclear arms proposal." Despite US opposition, in November 2004 the UN Disarmament Committee voted in favor of a verifiable FISSBAN. The vote was 147 to 1, with 2 abstentions: Israel, which is reflexive, and Britain, which is more interesting. The British ambassador explained that Britain supported the treaty, but could not vote for this version, because it "divided the international community" – divided it 147 to 1.

We gain some insight into the ranking of survival of the species among the priorities of the leadership of the hegemonic power and its spear-carrier. As usual, the vote was not reported, and all of this is unknown, apart from activists and dissidents, and specialists on arms control. More evidence about the fifth crisis.

In 2004, the European Union and Iran reached an agreement on nuclear issues: Iran agreed to temporarily suspend its legal activities of Uranium enrichment, and the EU agreed to provide Iran with "firm commitments on security issues." As everyone understands, the phrase "security issues" refers to the very credible US-Israeli threats and preparations to attack

Iran. These are no small matter for a country that has been tortured for 50 years without a break by the global superpower, which now occupies the countries on Iran's borders, not to speak of the client state that is the regional superpower, even apart from its hundreds of nuclear weapons.

Iran lived up to its side of the bargain, but the EU, under US pressure, abandoned its commitments. Iran finally abandoned the bargain as well. The preferred version in the West is that Iran broke the agreement, proving that it is a serious threat to world order.

In May 2003, Iran had offered to discuss security matters with the US, which refused, preferring to follow the same course it did with North Korea. On taking office in January 2001, the administration withdrew the 'no hostile intent' condition of earlier agreements and proceeded to issue serious threats, while also abandoning promises to provide fuel oil and nuclear reactor. In reaction, North Korea returned to developing nuclear weapons, the roots of another current crisis. All predictable, and predicted.

There are ways to mitigate and probably end these crises. The first is to call off the threats that are virtually urging Iran (and North Korea) to develop nuclear weapons. One of Israel's leading military historians, Martin van Creveld, wrote that if Iran is not developing nuclear weapons, then they are "crazy," immediately after Washington demonstrated that it will attack anyone it likes as long as they are known to be defenseless. So the first step towards ending the crisis would be to call off the threats that are likely to lead potential targets to develop a deterrent – nuclear weapons or terror, the only viable options they have.

A second step would be to join with other efforts to reintegrate Iran into the global economy. A third step would be to join the rest of the world in accepting the FISSBAN treaty, and to join Iran in accepting ElBaradei's proposal, or something similar – and I repeat that the issue here extends far beyond Iran, and reaches the level of human survival, quite literally. A fourth step would be to live up to Article VI of the NPT, which obligates the nuclear states to take "good faith" efforts to eliminate nuclear weapons, a binding legal obligation, as the World Court determined. None of the nuclear states has lived up to that obligation, but the US is far in the lead in violating it – again, a very serious threat to human survival. Even steps in these directions would mitigate the upcoming crisis with Iran. Above all, it is important to heed the words of Mohammed Elbaradei: "There is no military solution to this situation. It is inconceivable. The only durable solution is a negotiated solution." And it is within reach, though not until barriers on discussion of crucial issues are overcome.

Let us return to the principle of universality, perhaps the most elementary of moral principles, and the foundation of any version of just war theory that can possibly taken seriously. Justice Jackson's remarks, which I cited above, are one critically important affirmation of the principle – rejected, with virtual unanimity, in our intellectual culture. There are other important affirmations of the principle that suffer the same fate. One critical case has to do with the basic problem of world order: the justification for the use of force in international affairs. The modern regime of world order is based on the UN Charter, which bans the threat or use of force unless authorized by the Security Council or in self-defense against armed attack until the Security Council acts. The phrase "armed attack" is conventionally interpreted in terms of Daniel Webster's principle, which extends it to cases where "the necessity for action is instant, overwhelming, and leaving no choice of means, and no moment of deliberation." Any other resort to force is a war crime, in fact the "supreme international crime." In 2004, a High Level UN panel was convened to consider the adequacy of these provisions in today's world, including leading Western figures, among others former US National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft and the distinguished Australian diplomat Gareth Evans, head of the International Crisis Group. The Panel concluded that the restrictions on the rule of force in the Charter should be neither rewritten nor reinterpreted. Its conclusions were reaffirmed at the UN Global Summit last September. Neither the review panel nor the Summit granted any new "right of intervention" to individual states or regional alliances, whether under humanitarian or other professed grounds, nor established any "responsibility to protect," contrary to what

was widely alleged in commentary.

The High Level Panel added that "For those impatient with [reaffirming the Charter], the answer must be that, in a world full of perceived potential threats, the risk to the global order and the norm of nonintervention on which it continues to be based is simply too great for the legality of unilateral preventive action, as distinct from collectively endorsed action, to be accepted. Allowing one to so act is to allow all."

In endorsing the elementary moral principle of universality, the Panel surely had in mind prevailing intellectual opinion in the West. The end of the last millennium must have been one of the low points in the generally dismal history of intellectuals. In the US and Europe, respected voices reveled in the "normative revolution" underway, as US foreign policy had entered into a "noble phase" with a "saintly glow." For the first time in history a state was dedicated to "principles and values," acting from "altruism" alone. At last the "enlightened states" would undertake their "responsibility to protect" the suffering everywhere, led by the "idealistic New World bent on ending inhumanity." I am quoting only from the left-liberal end of the deluge in the US and Europe, including the most respected voices. The illustrations offered collapse under the slightest examination, and during those years, the idealistic New World and its European allies were conducting some of the most horrendous atrocities of those ugly years, all suppressed with impressive efficiency. But none of that matters in a disciplined intellectual culture.

Of the major crises that confront the human species, perhaps the most severe is the crisis of the moral and intellectual culture among elite sectors of the most powerful states. There are others who commit worse crimes, and it is convenient to focus on them, not those for which we are responsible and can therefore easily bring to an end. Furthermore, Western power alone can deal constructively with the two Middle East crises that are the current chief concern in Western state practice and doctrine, and the two vastly more serious crises that literally threaten human survival, imminently.

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