



Middle East Research and Information Project:
Critical Coverage of the Middle East Since 1971



Thought Control in the US

The Media and the "Peace Process"

Noam Chomsky *In: 143 (November/December 1986)*

From a comparative perspective, the United States is unusual if not unique in the lack of restraints on freedom of expression. It is also unusual in the range and effectiveness of the methods employed to restrain freedom of thought. The two phenomena are related. Liberal democratic theorists have long noted that in a society where the voice of the people is heard, elite groups must insure that that voice says the right things. The less the state is able to employ violence in defense of the interests of elite groups that effectively dominate it, the more it becomes necessary to devise techniques of "manufacture of consent," in the words of Walter Lippmann over 60 years ago. Harold Lasswell wrote in the *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* in 1933 that we must not succumb to "democratic dogmatisms about men being the best judges of their own interests." We must find ways to ensure that they endorse the decisions made by their far-sighted leaders, a lesson learned long ago by dominant elites, the rise of the public relations industry being a notable illustration. Where obedience is guaranteed by violence, rulers may tend towards a "behaviorist" conception: it is enough that people obey; what they think does not matter too much. Where the state lacks means of coercion, it is important to control what people think.

“Historical Engineering”

The problem arises whenever state policy is indefensible, and becomes serious to the extent that the issues are serious. There is no doubt about the seriousness of the issues regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict. It is commonly — and correctly — judged the most likely “tinder box” that will set off a terminal nuclear war, as regional conflict engages the superpowers. This has come quite close in the past and will again. Furthermore, US policy contributes materially to maintaining the state of military confrontation, and is based on racist assumptions that would not be tolerated if stated openly. There is also a marked divergence between popular attitudes, generally supportive of a Palestinian state when the question is raised in polls, and state policy, which explicitly bars this option, though the divergence is of little moment as long as the politically active and articulate elements of the population are properly indoctrinated. To assure this outcome, it is necessary to conduct what American historians called “historical engineering” when they lent their talents to the Wilson Administration during World War I, one of the early exercises of organized “manufacture of consent.”

One way of doing this is to devise an appropriate form of Newspeak in which crucial terms have a technical sense divorced from their ordinary meanings. Consider, for example, the term “peace process.” In its technical sense, as used in the mass media and scholarship generally in the United States, it refers to peace proposals advanced by the US government. It is thus true by definition that the United States is committed to peace. Right-thinking people hope that Jordan will join the peace process — that is, will accept US dictates. The Big Question is whether the PLO will agree to join the peace process, or can be granted admission to this august ceremony. A headline in the *New York Times* (Bernard Gwertzman, June 2, 1985) reads: “Are the Palestinians Ready to Seek Peace?” In the normal sense of the term “peace,” the answer is of course “Yes.” Everyone seeks peace, on their own terms. Hitler, for example, surely sought peace in 1939, on his terms. But in the system of thought control, the question means something else: Are the Palestinians ready to accept US terms for peace? These terms happen to deny them the right of national self-determination, but unwillingness to

accept this consequence demonstrates that the Palestinians do not seek peace, as defined in conventional Newspeak.

Note that it is unnecessary for the *New York Times* to ask whether the United States or Israel is “ready to seek peace.” For the US, this is true by definition, and the conventions of what is called “responsible journalism” (another Orwellism) entail that this must also be true for a client state.

Gwertzman asserts further that the PLO has always rejected “any talk of negotiated peace with Israel.” That is false, but it is true in the world constructed by the Newspaper of Record, which along with other “responsible journals” has either suppressed the relevant facts or dispatched them to Orwell’s useful memory hole.

Of course, there are Arab peace proposals, including PLO proposals, but they are not part of the “peace process.” Thus, in a review of “Two Decades of Seeking Peace in the Middle East” (March 17, 1985), the *Times*’ Jerusalem correspondent Thomas Friedman excludes the major Arab (and PLO) peace proposals. No Israeli proposals are listed because no serious ones have been advanced, a fact not discussed for obvious reasons.

Rejectionists

What is the character of the official “peace process” and the Arab proposals that are excluded from it? Before answering this question, we must clarify “rejectionism.” In its Orwellian usage, this term refers to the position of Arabs who deny the right of national self-determination to Israeli Jews, or who refuse to accept Israel’s “right to exist,” a novel and ingenious concept designed to bar Palestinians from the “peace process” by demonstrating the “extremism” of those who refuse to concede the justice of what they see as the robbery of their homeland, and who insist upon the traditional view that while states are recognized within the international order, their “right to exist” is not.

There are elements in the Arab world to which the term “rejectionism” applies: Libya, the minority Rejection Front of the PLO, and others. But it should be observed that in official Newspeak, the term is used in a strictly racist sense. The reason is obvious. There are two groups that claim the right of national self-determination in the former Palestine: the indigenous

population, who were always a large majority before the establishment of the State of Israel, and the Jewish settlers who largely displaced them, at times with considerable violence. Presumably, the indigenous population have rights comparable to those of the Jewish immigrants (some might argue that this does not go far enough, but I put that issue to the side). If so, then the term "rejectionism" should be used to refer to denial of the right of national self-determination to one or the other of the competing national groups. But the term cannot be used in its non-racist sense within the US doctrinal system, or it will be seen at once that the US and Israel lead the rejectionist camp, an intolerable insight into the real world.

So: what is the "peace process?"

The official "peace process" is explicitly rejectionist. The rejectionism of the US and both major political groupings in Israel is so extreme that Palestinians are not even to be permitted to select their own representatives for eventual negotiations about their fate. Is there a non-rejectionist peace proposal on the agenda? In the US doctrinal system, the answer is of course "No" by definition. In the real world, matters are different. The basic terms of this proposal are familiar, reflecting a broad international consensus: it includes a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip alongside of Israel and the principle that "it is essential to ensure the security and sovereignty of all states of the region including those of Israel."

The quoted words are those of Leonid Brezhnev in an address to the Soviet Communist Party Congress of February 1981, expressing the standard Soviet position. Brezhnev's speech was excerpted in the New York Times with these crucial segments omitted. Cuts in a Reagan post-summit statement in *Pravda* evoked much righteous indignation. In April 1981, Brezhnev's statement was unanimously endorsed by the PLO, but the fact was not reported in the *Times*. Official doctrine holds that the Soviet Union, as always, is concerned only to cause trouble and block peace, and thus supports Arab rejectionism and extremism. The media dutifully fulfill their assigned role.

One might cite other examples. In October 1977, a joint Carter-Brezhnev statement called for the "termination of the state of war and establishment

of normal peaceful relations” between Israel and its neighbors. This was endorsed by the PLO, and withdrawn by Carter after a furious reaction by Israel and its American lobby. In January 1976, Jordan, Syria and Egypt submitted a proposal for a two-state settlement to the Security Council of the United Nations in accord with the international consensus. This was endorsed by the PLO; according to Israel’s President Chaim Herzog (then UN ambassador), the PLO “prepared” it. The US vetoed it. Israel’s reaction was to bomb Lebanon (without a pretense of “retaliation,” except against the United Nations), killing over 50 people, and to announce that Israel would enter into no dealings with any Palestinians on any political issue. This was the dovish labor government headed by Yitzhak Rabin. In his memoirs, Rabin identifies two forms of “extremism”: that of the Begin government, and the proposal of “the Palestinian extremists (basically the PLO),” namely, “to create a sovereign Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.” Only pure rejectionism departs from “extremism,” a position shared by American commentators.

Extremists

We note incidentally another pair of Newspeak concepts: “extremist” and “moderate,” the latter referring to those who accept the position of the US, the former to those who do not. The American position is thus by definition moderate, as is that of the Israeli Labor coalition (generally), since its rhetoric tends to conform to that of the US. Rabin conforms to approved practice in his use of the term “extremist.” Similarly, in a suitably anguished review of “extremism” and its victory in this struggle, Thomas Friedman includes under this rubric those who advocate a nonracist settlement in accord with the international consensus, while the “moderates” are those who lead the rejectionist camp and are responsible for the large majority of terrorist operations (*NYT*, October 7, 1984). He deplores the success of the “extremists” in “exploiting the media,” a conclusion that is quite accurate, as his own reporting from Israel demonstrates when we use terms in their non-Orwellian sense. It is, incidentally, a staple of the ideological system that the media are highly critical of Israel and the US and are far too forthcoming in their tolerance of Arab extremists. The fact that such

statements can even be made without evoking ridicule is one sign of the extraordinary successes of the system of indoctrination.

Returning to the “extremists,” in April-May 1984, Yasir Arafat issued a series of statements calling for negotiations leading to mutual recognition. The national press refused to publish the facts; the *Times* even banned letters referring to them.

These and many other examples illustrate that there are non-rejectionist proposals that are widely supported, but they are not part of the peace process because the United States opposes them. The examples cited are thus excluded from the *Times* review of “Two Decades of Seeking Peace,” and from the journalistic and even scholarly literature fairly generally.

There are other incidents that do not qualify as part of the peace process. Thus, the *Times* review does not mention Anwar Sadat’s offer of a full peace treaty on the internationally recognized borders — in accord with official US rhetoric at the time — in February 1971, rejected by Israel with US backing.

Note that this proposal was rejectionist in that it offered nothing to the Palestinians. In his memoirs, Henry Kissinger explains his policy at that time: “Until some Arab state showed a willingness to separate from the Soviets, or the Soviets were prepared to dissociate from the maximum Arab program, we had no reason to modify our policy” of “stalemate.” The USSR was extremist, in the technical sense, supporting what happened to be official (though not operative) US policy. Kissinger was of course right in pointing out that such Arab states as Saudi Arabia refused to “separate from the Soviets,” though he did not observe, and is probably unaware, that this would have been a logical impossibility, since they did not have and never had diplomatic relations with the USSR. The impressive discipline of the US media and scholarship is revealed by the fact that these astonishing statements escape comment, just as no responsible commentator would express the truth that Kissinger’s ignorance and insistence on military confrontation was the primary factor that led to the 1973 war.

Sadat’s proposal has been expunged from the historical record. The official story is that Sadat was a typical Arab thug, interested only in killing Jews, though he saw the error of his ways after his failed attempt to destroy

Israel in 1973. Under the kindly tutelage of Kissinger and Carter, he became a man of peace. Thus in its two-page obituary after Sadat's assassination, the *Times* not only suppresses the actual facts but explicitly denies them, stating that until his 1977 trip to Jerusalem Sadat was unwilling "to accept Israel's existence as a sovereign state" (Eric Pace, *NYT*, October 7, 1981). *Newsweek* refused even to print a letter correcting outright falsehoods on this matter by their columnist George Will, though the research department privately conceded the facts. The practice is standard.

The terms "terrorism" and "retaliation" also have a special sense in US Newspeak. "Terrorism" refers to terrorist acts by Arabs, not Israel or the US. In reviewing 1985, "the year of terror," the media cited the murder of three Israelis in Larnaca on September 25 and the October 7 hijacking of the *Achille Lauro*, but not the Israeli bombing near Tunis on October 1, killing 55 Palestinians and 20 Tunisians according to the graphic report from the scene by Israeli journalist Amnon Kapeliouk. The killing of Tunisians was regarded as regrettable; Palestinians are fair game. No American journal sought to identify the victims. None discovered, for example, that one was Mahmud al-Mughrabi, one of the informants for the important London *Sunday Times* investigation of torture in Israel and who had then escaped the harsh West Bank repression. Indeed, such a discovery would have been meaningless, since the investigation had been rejected for publication by the national press.

The Tunis bombing was considered "legitimate" retaliation for the Larnaca killings, while the hijacking in retaliation was pure terrorism. The Larnaca killings were unpremeditated murder, since the claim of the killers (barely noted) that the killings were in retaliation for Israeli piracy and kidnappings on the high seas must be absurd, given that by definition such terms cannot apply to actions by a US client (rarely reported), which can only be legitimate retaliation or preemption, whatever the facts.

When Israeli planes carried out a "surgical bombing" in the Beqa' Valley in Lebanon in January 1984 with 400 casualties (100 killed) including 150 children in a bombed out schoolhouse, the facts were reported, but do not enter the annals of terrorism or atrocity. Had the story been reversed, we would be hearing about a resurgence of Nazism. Israeli terror attacks in

Lebanon from the early 1970s were only rarely noted, and then dispatched to the memory hole. What remains in memory is the trauma of the people of northern Galilee, subjected to terrible Katyusha bombardment, particularly in July 1981, when six Jews and some 450 Arabs were killed in an exchange initiated when Israel (once again) broke the cease-fire, bombing Lebanon, finally bombing civilian concentrations in Beirut and elsewhere. The facts were reported at the time but are now gone from history, which records only the torment of the Galilee, which elicited Israel's June 1982 invasion of Lebanon (the "liberation" of Lebanon, as it was termed by the *Times*) to protect its population. Also gone from the journalistic record is the fact that the border had been quiet for 11 months apart from Israeli provocation designed to elicit a PLO response as an excuse for the planned invasion.

In general, Israeli piracy, hostage-taking or terrorist attacks on defenseless villages do not form part of the record of "the evil scourge of terrorism," to adopt the phraseology of two of the world's leading terrorist commanders, Ronald Reagan and Shimon Peres, when they met to contemplate the matter shortly after the Tunis bombings. When Thomas Friedman reviews the historical record of Middle East terrorism, he describes the 1948-56 period "as the era of counter-terrorism — through retaliation," including one "retaliation" by Israel's Unit 101 which "became highly controversial, involving civilian casualties" (December 4, 1984). The reference is presumably to the slaughter of some 70 people at Qibya in 1953 in "retaliation" for terrorist acts with which they had not the slightest connection, and it is only "controversial." Earlier acts of Unit 101, such as the murder of 20 people at the al-Bureij refugee camp and the expulsion of thousands of Bedouins from the demilitarized zones, are apparently not even controversial.

In contrast, the PLO operation at Ma'alot in 1974, (where 22 members of an Israeli paramilitary youth group were killed in an exchange of fire during a rescue attempt after Moshe Dayan refused to negotiate with the terrorists who demanded the release of prisoners held by Israel) is recalled with horror as revealing the true face of the PLO, proof that it cannot be a partner in the "peace process." Israeli bombings in Lebanon in preceding weeks which killed hundreds, part of Israel's scorched earth campaign, do

not even reach the level of “controversial,” and are unknown. Similarly, an Israeli bombing near Tripoli, north of Beirut, in June 1984 which killed 15 Lebanese fishermen and boy scouts at a scout camp (with barely a pretext) is not an atrocity, or even “controversial.” In November-December 1983, Israel bombed near Tripoli, sinking freighters, strafing refugee camps, hitting a hospital and other “guerrilla positions,” with the explicit intent of holding the civilian population hostage to ensure the release of Israeli prisoners captured in the course of Israel’s aggression in Lebanon. It was reported — barely — and quickly forgotten. Neither these, nor numerous other similar examples, stand alongside Ma’alot as part of the history of barbaric terrorism. The suggestion that there might be certain symmetry both in rights and in terrorist practice is dismissed with outrage in the mainstream as barely disguised anti-Semitism.

The record of deceit concerning terrorism is so extensive that it cannot even be sampled here. The relevant point is that a proper history and appropriate form of Newspeak have been contrived in which terrorism is the province of Palestinians, while Israelis carry out “retaliation,” sometimes in legitimate “preemption,” occasionally reacting with regrettable harshness, as any state would do under such circumstances. Given that Israel is a loyal and very useful client state, willing to undertake such tasks as support for genocide in Guatemala when the US Administration is limited by Congress in its capacity to join as fully as it would have liked, it becomes true, irrespective of the facts, that Israel is “a country that cares for human life” (*Washington Post*, June 30, 1985), whose “high moral purpose” (*Time*, October 11, 1982) must be the object of never-ending awe and acclaim, while the Palestinians are the very epitome of extremism, terrorism and barbarity.

Literal censorship barely exists in the United States, but thought control is a flourishing industry, indeed an indispensable one in a society based on the principle of elite decision, public endorsement or passivity.

Editors’ Note: This article first appeared in *Index on Censorship* (London), July/August 1986 and is reprinted here by permission. A revised version appears in a new collection of essays by Noam Chomsky, *Pirates and*

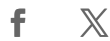
Emperors: International Terrorism in the Real World (New York: Claremont Research and Publications, 1986).

How to cite this article:

Noam Chomsky "Thought Control in the US," *Middle East Report* 143 (November/December 1986).

For 50 years, MERIP has published critical analysis of Middle Eastern politics, history, and social justice not available in other publications. Our articles have debunked pernicious myths, exposed the human costs of war and conflict, and highlighted the suppression of basic human rights. After many years behind a paywall, our content is now open-access and free to anyone, anywhere in the world. Your donation ensures that MERIP can continue to remain an invaluable resource for everyone.

Donate



© Middle East Research and Information Project

Cancel