

# Transcript of Seminar Five

Feb. 2, 2000

## Discussion with Noam Chomsky

*Introduction by David Rieff:*

Just to fill you on the background, we have heard a number of different views over the course of this seminar. The one view, I think there have been views represented that have been skeptical of the link between human rights and military intervention and indeed a lot of very impassioned talk from the representatives of humanitarian agencies, above all from the ICRC, wishing to separate as much as possible military intervention from any notion of humanitarian action, and pleading, even though not necessarily opposing the [interventions in] Kosovo and East Timor, pleading for a separation and against a kind of conflation amongst these. What we have not heard and you have obviously represented in your writing is a critique of this idea itself. I think it's fair to say that most of the people including myself who have spoken [in this seminar], have tended to view these interventions in a relatively positive way, whatever our reservations about either the kind of cognitive confusion and in the mendaciousness that the term "humanitarian intervention" probably brings with it. But I think you are the first person to speak to us who really, I think, views, for example, the war in Kosovo or the prospect of an intervention, say, in the DRC with opposition.

*Noam Chomsky:*

Actually, on humanitarian intervention in general, I guess my view is not unlike the view that was attributed to Gandhi, accurately or not, when he was supposedly asked what he thought about western civilization. He is supposed to have said that he thought it would be a good idea. Similarly, humanitarian intervention would be a good idea, in principle. There is a question however, whether the category exists, and that's a question of fact, not of ideology and doctrine.

In order to determine whether it exists, we first have to decide what we are talking about. The term is used pretty broadly. I think the appropriate way to use it is to restrict it to cases where there is at least a threat and possible use of force, so to exclude, for example, relatively straightforward famine relief. In the post 1945 period, the usage should also exclude, if such existed, Security Council-mandated action, say, to reverse aggression, which might be a good idea, but would not be humanitarian intervention. So, to take a case that is on the front pages this morning, if the Security Council were to do something to implement its March 1978 orders to Israel to withdraw immediately and unconditionally from southern Lebanon, that would not be humanitarian intervention. Or to take the case of East Timor, which is the topic I was asked to talk about, if the Security Council had done something to implement its December 1975 orders to Indonesia to withdraw immediately and unconditionally after the invasion of East Timor, that would have been perhaps a forceful act, maybe a chapter 7 act, but it would not have been a humanitarian intervention.

So what we are left with in the category of humanitarian intervention is actions taken not under Security Council authorization and involving at least the threat of force. And there I think it is fair to ask whether the category exists, and it's a factual question. If you look at the case books of international law, like Sohn and Buergenthal, they have to work very hard to find any genuine examples of humanitarian intervention. The few that they cite, for example the French Intervention in the Levant in 1860, quickly collapse when we look more closely at what happened.

When I speak of humanitarian intervention, I mean, of course, with humanitarian intent. There are military interventions that happen to have humanitarian consequences, but that

alone does not qualify them as humanitarian intervention. During the UN period, the last half-century, the two major cases of this sort, I guess, are the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1979 which threw out Pol Pot and truly had humanitarian consequences, but not humanitarian intent; and the Indian invasion of East Pakistan, Bangladesh, which terminated huge atrocities. Again, India had other interests, but there were humanitarian consequences.

For those who are interested in the facts of so-called "humanitarian intervention" rather than just the doctrine, it's worthwhile to pay some attention to the great power responses to the few cases of forceful intervention that have had very significant beneficial humanitarian consequences. In the case of the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia to remove Pol Pot, the US government and media and general opinion bitterly condemned it, and Vietnam was immediately punished by very severe sanctions for the crime of kicking out Pol Pot. The US then supported a Chinese invasion to teach the Vietnamese a lesson and the US gave Democratic Kampuchea (the Khmer Rouge-based coalition) diplomatic support at the UN and also material support. In the case of India, the US practically went to war to because of India's crime. Again, there was a China connection -- Kissinger was apparently concerned that the Indian invasion was going to undermine some nice photo ops for his then-secret trip to China to restore relations.

So in the two major cases that I know of in which military intervention had very favorable and humane consequences, the US was bitterly opposed and acted to punish the transgressors. Notice there was a China connection in each case, which is relevant to East Timor, a fact worth discussing if there is time.

There is also another category: interventions that have declared humanitarian intent -- that is, where those who use force declare that they are doing it for humanitarian purposes. That category is probably universal or close to universal -- it's hard to find an example in history when the use of force was not accompanied by uplifting humanitarian rhetoric. The best academic study that I know of recently about humanitarian intervention, by Sean Murphy, cites a number of cases of alleged "humanitarian intervention" between the Kellogg-Briand Pact in 1928 and the UN Charter. The main examples he gives of "humanitarian intervention" are the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia and Hitler's takeover of the Sudetenland, all accompanied by very impressive rhetoric about liberating the masses from their oppressors - from the Chinese bandits, and the Russians, and ending slavery, and ending ethnic conflict, etc. It's not worth going through that but again, it is kind of interesting to look at the Western reaction, which was ambivalent. It is commonly described as appeasement, which is in fact very misleading because it doesn't get to the heart of what the actual reaction was. For example in the case of Japan, US ambassador Joseph Grew ridiculed the idea that Japan was a great oppressor and the Chinese were the "downtrodden victims." In fact, in 1939, his only real criticism of Japan's action in China was that US interests weren't being protected. And that was also Secretary of State Cordell Hull's position, again in 1939. He said that the US could establish a modus vivendi with Japan if they would recognize US interests in China. And so it continued up to Pearl Harbor. In the case of Mussolini, the State Department hailed his "magnificent achievements" in Ethiopia, and his "astonishing contributions" to the welfare of the masses in Italy itself. FDR in 1939 wrote internally that the efforts of the man he had called 'that admirable Italian gentleman' were corrupted by Hitler but otherwise they were okay. As for Hitler and Sudetenland, again the records are ambivalent. A.A. Berle, who was one of Roosevelt's chief advisers, after the Sudeten takeover said that it was "not alarming," and that it was "probably necessary" for the Austrian Empire to be reconstituted under German rule. The State Department -- again internally - was more supportive. They described Hitler as a moderate who stands, in 1937, between extremes of right and left and they said that Hitler must win or else the masses now supported by the disillusioned middle classes might turn to the left and that would be a tragedy. Notice there was no concern about Russian aggression at that time.

That's not untypical. In fact, the case I was asked to discuss, East Timor, is a case in point.

Suharto, who took power in 1965 in a military coup, is certainly one of the major killers in the latter part of the last century. When he took power in 1965 he presided over, literally, a Rwanda-style slaughter. Within about four months, between half a million and a million people were slaughtered, mostly landless peasants. The only mass-based political party was wiped out and the country was opened up to western plunder. The reaction in the United States was quite interesting. The euphoria was so extreme that it was uncontrollable. Public pronouncements and descriptions in the press were ecstatic about this marvelous event. And so it remained. The support for his invasion of East Timor ten years later was kind of reflexive. He was such a wonderful guy, how could we oppose him? Meanwhile, he'd been compiling one of the worst human rights records in the world, internally. In the case of East Timor, it was probably the worst massacre relative to population since the Holocaust, all with US support and an increasing flow of arms. And he remained a very admired friend right until the mid-90s. When he came to Washington in October 1995 the Clinton administration described him as 'our kind of guy.' And that's pretty typical. The same was true of Saddam Hussein through the period of his worst atrocities. The US turned against him later after he disobeyed orders, but not when he was gassing Kurds and torturing dissidents and so on. And in fact it's pretty normal.

The case of East Timor is very illuminating. So let's take the invasion. Suharto invaded in December 1975. We know a lot from leaked Australian diplomatic traffic, mostly in the late 1970s. That made it very clear what was happening. The US knew very well that the invasion was coming, as did Australia, and supported it. When the invasion took place, it was shortly, a couple of hours, in fact, after Kissinger and Ford had left Jakarta. The Indonesians politely refrained from invading while they were there. They used US arms, about 90% of their arms were from the United States. They were used illegally, but with authorization. The arms were formally restricted to self-defense. There was an official embargo, but it was a fraud. It turned out quickly that during the period of the embargo, the US increased the flow of arms to Indonesia, including counter-insurgency equipment. At the UN, the Security Council did unanimously order Indonesia to withdraw immediately and unconditionally, but in vain. The US undermined it and explained why. Ambassador Moynihan came out with his memoirs about three years later, in '78, and describes what happened. He said -- and this is almost a quote - the State Department wanted things to turn out as they did. I was given the responsibility of rendering the UN ineffective, utterly ineffective, in anything that it might do. And I carried this out with not inconsiderable success. He was quite proud of it. And then he goes on describing the success. He writes that within the next few months about 60,000 people were killed and then the issue sort of disappeared from the press -- which is true, so it must've been successful. And that's the end of the story. 60,000 people were killed; Moynihan points out that that's approximately the proportion of the Russian population killed by the Nazis during the Second World War. Having taken pride in that accomplishment, he moves on to the next topic.

The war went on. By 1977-8 Indonesia was actually running short of arms, so the Carter administration accelerated the flow of arms, which essentially consummated the massacres. The number of 200,000 killed, which we hear now, was provided by the Church at that time. But the State Department denied it, Indonesia denied it, the press denied it -- or refused to cover it. In fact in 1978, the peak of the massacres, the coverage dropped to zero in the mainstream press. And that's part of the whole thing that we're talking about. And so it continued through the 80s -- I won't go into the details -- and throughout the whole period, not only these atrocities, but massacres inside Indonesia and a horrible record of torture, Suharto remained "our kind of guy."

What happened then? Suharto remained "our kind of guy" until 1997. In 1997 he made his first errors. He lost control, in the context of the economic crisis, and he began to drag his feet on a very harsh IMF plan that was extremely harmful to the population and caused a lot of disruption. So at that point he was abandoned, which is quite standard. I mean, look over the record -- as long as a killer and torturer does his job, there is no problem. If he becomes disobedient or loses control, he's out. That is how the record goes. Noriega and

Saddam Hussein, Ceausescu, Mobutu -- it goes on and on. And Suharto was typical. So by the end of 1997, early 1998, he was no longer our man. In May 1998 he received a phone call from Madeleine Albright, who informed him that the time had come for a "democratic transition" in Indonesia. Four hours later he resigned and handed power over to his Vice President B.J. Habibie. That's not cause and effect, I don't mean to suggest that, but it does kind of symbolize the actual relations.

Habibie, to everyone's surprise, began to take a somewhat independent stand. Within a month or two, by about July I guess, he had proposed that East Timor might have a special status. The Foreign Minister Ali Alatas expanded on this later. In January 1999 Habibie did make this startling announcement -- in effect, the proposal that there be a referendum. He didn't say what it meant, but the implication was that if the East Timorese chose independence, Indonesia would consider relinquishing the territory.

Throughout all this period, I want to stress again, the atrocities were continuing on a large scale and the reason for it traces back to Washington and London. They could have called it off at anytime they wanted. The power was always there to terminate it simply by withdrawing participation and authorization. But these are "our kind of guys," so why do it? In January 1999, while Habibie was moving towards a referendum, there was a parallel direction -- the military was carrying out a parallel program. The military is armed and trained by the United States and Britain primarily, also Australia. Right through 1998 the Clinton administration was arming and training not only the Indonesian military, but also the worst and most murderous elements within it -- the Kopassus commandos, the special forces. This was a secret program called "Iron Balance", reported internationally a couple of months ago but still not reported in the United States, except on the dissident margins. These commandos are notorious for their atrocities and terror. There's plenty of material about them in Australia and in Indonesia scholarship and elsewhere. It's no secret. By November 1998 they were beginning to infiltrate into East Timor. Several hundred Kopassus commandos came in along with about 5,000 new recruits, West Timorese and other Indonesians, who tried to pass themselves off as East Timorese. That's the core of the so-called militias, the paramilitary organizations, run by TNI (the Indonesian army), primarily the Kopassus units, armed and trained by the United States.

And their plan was clear. Their plan was to make sure that no independence moves took place. This was surely well known to western intelligence -- again, there have been plenty of Australian leaks and others. The terror started in February 1999 with small scale killings. Within a couple of months it had gotten more severe. By April there were major massacres. On April 6, in one massacre in Liquica, 50 or 60 people who had fled to a church were murdered by TNI-organized militias. And then it continued. On August 6, the East Timorese Church, which has been a reliable source of information over the years, estimated that the number of people killed just in the early part of 1999 was about 3,000 to 5,000. The major East Timor British historian, known for his scholarly work on East Timor, John Taylor, in his recent book estimates that by the August 30 referendum about 5,000 to 6,000 had been killed. Just as a standard of comparison, according to NATO, in the year prior to the NATO bombing in Kosovo, the number of people killed was about 2,000 on all sides, in the course of a large-scale civil war in which foreign-based guerrillas (called "terrorists" by Washington) at one point in 1998 had taken over about a third of the territory. There was nothing remotely similar in East Timor. The victims were civilians murdered by the army and paramilitaries.

The US and Britain continued to arm and support the Indonesian military right through this period, no back off. The official US position was "it's their responsibility, the Indonesian government's responsibility, and we're not going to take it away from them." Notice that there is no claim to sovereignty. Indonesia has no sovereign claims to East Timor any more than Nazi Germany had in occupied Europe. The only claim to sovereignty is that the US authorized the aggression and occupation. That is the claim to sovereignty. The US, however, insisted, as did Britain, that the nonexistent claim to sovereignty be scrupulously honored. And again, it's a kind of interesting comparison to the first months of 1999 when

there was a good deal of ridicule of this outdated notion of sovereignty and how the self-declared "enlightened states" must abandon outdated concepts of sovereignty and pursue their own new "modern notions of justice," which they themselves fashion.

And here, for reasons of their own, the NATO powers insist on Serbian sovereignty over Kosovo. Strange. Where they decide to infringe on sovereignty, it's outdated and uninteresting and to be ridiculed, and where there's no sovereignty at all, it has to be honored scrupulously, even if the atrocities are worse -- and far more important, we're responsible, because we are participating in them and could have terminated them. At any point, we could have terminated them simply by withdrawing participation and authorization. No need for sanctions, no need for military intervention, no need for bombing, nothing. Just tell them the game is over and stop participating. Certainly, since the economic crisis, but probably going all the way back, that would have been enough to end it, but Washington and London didn't want to do that.

Well, that brings us up to the August 30 referendum. By the time of the referendum, it is important to bear in mind, there had been major atrocities. According to what information we have, probably considerably worse than Kosovo before the bombing. US-British support continued. August 30 was the referendum, and to everyone's surprise -- certainly mine, and I've been involved in this for almost 25 years -- there was an enormous turnout, virtually the entire population, despite the intimidation, terror and killing. And almost 80 percent voted for independence. At that point the next phase of atrocities begun, all known in advance, there had been plenty of evidence about it in advance. If you were reading the Australian press, you could have expected it. There is also other evidence, the documents and statements by Indonesian military leaders -- it couldn't have been a secret to Western intelligence. The Indonesian army sharply extended the ethnic cleansing operations they had been conducting for the past half year. About half of the population was driven up to the hills, another couple of hundred thousand driven into West Timor, some probably scattered around Indonesia. According to the UN, about 85% of the population were driven out -- 750,000 people -- and most of the country destroyed.

The US continued to maintain the same position. On September 8 -- almost two weeks after the referendum, when all of this had already happened -- the official US position was "it's their responsibility and we're not going to take it away from them." It's their responsibility even though there is no sovereignty. And the reasons were explained. In the Christian Science Monitor and Financial Times, correspondent Sander Thoenes, who was later murdered by Indonesian soldiers or paramilitaries, quoted a high western diplomat in Jakarta who put the matter frankly: "Indonesia matters, East Timor does not matter". In the New York Times, two Times Asia specialists, on September 9, explained: look, the Clinton administration has made the calculation that it is important to maintain friendly relations with Indonesia, a rich country with rich resources and 200 million people. And in comparison, East Timor, an impoverished territory with 800,000 people, is just not important. And that is true.

Richard Butler, the distinguished Australian diplomat, informed the Australians, who were upset about this, that they simply did not understand. The US had made clear to him and others that US actions there would be determined by US interest purely. It's not a matter of humanitarian concern or anything else. These are our atrocities, we fund them, we arm them, we helped to implement them, so it's clear we are not going to do anything about them. In the rhetoric of Washington, which was very elegant, it was said that "we don't have any dog in this race," so we don't care how it turns out. But by mid-September that changed, and the line was: "Yes, we do have a dog in this race, a big dog, and its name is Australia." Australians were furious. There was a lot of popular opposition and anger in Australia about what was going on, and the Australian government was compelled to take some kind of action, and to try to draw in the US, which refused. Finally, by mid-September, Clinton did make some mild gestures. And that was enough to turn the generals around. Within a few days, they reversed course 180 degrees, illustrating the latent power which had always been there, and pulled out. At that point, the UN

peacekeeping Force, Australian basically, entered, on September 20.

And here I think it makes sense to talk about humanitarian intent, maybe one of the few examples in history. There was a dispatch of military forces with humanitarian intent, at least on the part of the Australian population, and hence indirectly the Australian government. But it's not a humanitarian intervention, not by any reasonable standards. For one thing there was no sovereignty; it was formally a Portuguese-administered territory, under UN jurisdiction. The UN peacekeeping mission waited until the Indonesian generals had agreed to leave, after the atrocities had been consummated, and they had then been told by the Clinton administration that the game is over, and then quickly left. It was the right thing to do, but it is not humanitarian intervention; it doesn't fall under that category. In fact it does not fall under the category of intervention at all.

What's happened since is also very revealing, so let's take a look at it. Let me stress that this may be the modern example that comes closest to humanitarian intervention, even though it doesn't fit into this category. It is therefore important to look at this case, not only because of its intrinsic significance and causes, but because of its bearing on the general topic we are considering. What's happened since? Well, the US has refused, at latest report -- there is so little coverage that it is extremely hard to know -- so far the US is apparently refusing to fund it. In fact in November Clinton urged that the small UN peacekeeping force be reduced. Japan offered funding, Portugal offered some, the US offered essentially nothing. The US ought to not only fund it but ought to pay enormous reparations because this massive slaughter and destruction is to a significant extent a US responsibility, from the first days and right through mid-September 1999.

What about Great Britain, the next highest military supporter of Indonesia, ever since 1978, when the atrocities really peaked? In 1978, everyone wanted to join in. So Britain came in and started selling arms and equipment to the Indonesian military. The new Labor government was sending Hawk jets, counterinsurgency jets, to Indonesia as late as September 23 --that's three days after the UN Peacekeeping Force entered, two weeks after the EU finally called an arms embargo and long after it had been revealed that Indonesia was flying them over East Timor as part of its intimidation campaign. They had been used to intimidate the population for years -- and worse.

At that point there were about 400,000 people starving up in the mountains. There were no US air drops. There were no air drops to starving refugees, and interestingly, no call for it. I couldn't find a word anywhere saying "Hey, these people have been driven to the mountains and are starving to death because of actions of forces we've been arming and training. How about dropping some food to them?" Well, Australia dropped some food, but not the US airforce. There are still about 150,000 people in West Timor and who knows how many elsewhere, being held under terrible conditions, described regularly by the Australian press and by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and so on. The US is doing nothing to get them released. There are a few statements, but meaningless ones. In fact it's the only place in the world, according to the UNHCR, where they don't have entry into the camps. The US could end that as soon as it wanted to.

Every effort is being made to ensure that no one will know what happened. No forensic experts were sent, except for the few who came with the Australians, with the UN mission. For months the UN has been pleading for forensic experts to figure out what happened. It is not like Kosovo, where the place was swarming with hundreds, maybe thousands of experts immediately to find any evidence they could to provide retrospective justification for the bombing, by a curious logic, I might add. East Timor is quite different. Here you don't want the evidence. The last reports I've heard were that forensic experts might come in January. But that is four months after the UN forces came and crucially after the onset of the rainy season. As every analyst in the region and elsewhere was pointing out, once the rainy season comes, it will probably destroy what was left of the evidence. Ok, so no, we'll never really find out what happened.

But what about a tribunal? Here, again, it is interesting to compare it to Kosovo. In May 1999 the US and Britain expedited an unusual, in fact unique, tribunal in Kosovo, providing

it with secret intelligence information, which they had never done before, because they needed an indictment. In this case it is quite different. A UN inquiry was delayed. When finally a UN mission called for an international tribunal, that came to a quick end. Washington's position remained as before: it is their responsibility, remember, and we're not going to take it away from them, so there has to be an Indonesian inquiry, not a UN inquiry. Furthermore, you can be confident that the US and Britain are not going to provide it with secret intelligence, which is crucial because they have the information about the Indonesian plans and the Indonesian military. Possibly Australian intelligence would be provided, but even that is questionable. The inquiry will very likely be restricted to post-August 30 -- that is the interpretation in the US press reports. And that is quite important. What happened after August 30 is a great atrocity, but what happened before this time is also a major atrocity. Recall that according to the Church figures, in the first six months of 1999 may be 3-5,000 people were killed, including major massacres, lots of them. But there is likely to be no inquiry into that. And certainly no inquiry into what happened in the preceding years back to 1975. Such an inquiry would go the wrong way. It would have to attribute responsibility where it belongs, and the powerful are never subjected to inquiry -- that's a kind of operative rule of international law. So the thing has to be carefully crafted so that it's post-August 30, in which case the US responsibility is quite significant, but minor in comparison with what happened before.

Again, this may be the recent case which comes closest to being an authentic case of humanitarian intervention, though with significant qualifications. So to get back to the beginning, what about the general concept and category of humanitarian intervention? Well, as I said, I think it would be a good idea. The question is, is there such a phenomenon? Is it possible, can we expect that with the existing power structure, distribution of power in the world, there will be humanitarian intervention? There is nothing new about the question, of course. The idea of humanitarian intervention goes back to the days of the Concert of Europe a century ago - in the 19th Century there was lots of talk about civilizing missions and interventions that would do good things. The US intervened in the Philippines to "uplift and christianize" the backward people, killing a couple of hundred thousand of them and destroying the place. The same thing happened in Haiti, the same thing happened with other countries. We cannot disregard the historical record and talk about an ideal world. It makes sense to work towards a better world, but it doesn't make any sense to have illusions about what the real world is.