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# Keeping the Rabble in Line

Noam Chomsky

Interviews  
with David Barsamian

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**DB** *And that was your "stomping grounds." What about letters? How many letters of yours have they printed?*

Occasionally, when something appeared there which was an outlandish slander and lie about me, I've written back to them. Usually they don't publish the letters. Sometimes I was angry enough that I contacted friends who were able to put enough pressure on so they would run a letter of response.

**DB** *I haven't seen one in years.*

Sometimes they just refuse. In the *Times Book Review* there were a bunch of vicious lies about me and the Khmer Rouge. I wrote back a short letter responding, and they just refused to publish it. I got annoyed and wrote back and I actually got a response, saying, we published a different letter that we thought was better.

**DB** *David Frum just can't stop lavishing praise upon you. He says, "Your views are exactly like the stuff peddled by Lyndon LaRouche and the Christic Institute." You had an incident involving the Larouchies that you've mentioned in several talks.*

It went as far as death threats. I had been following them pretty closely, partly because I knew some of the kids involved. They were children of personal friends. It grew out of the Columbia strike in 1968. Originally it was the National Caucus of Labor Committees. It was a Marxist group of serious young

people who were going to live in working-class areas and organize people. You could like it or dislike it. It was perfectly rational. This guy Lyndon LaRouche, who had some other name then, was the guru. At first he looked like some sort of standard ex-Trotskyite. After a while you could see what was happening. These are hard things to do. You're giving up your life, your career, the only world you live in is your surroundings. He gradually began to introduce slightly crazy themes into the ideology. You could see him do it little by little. At each point everyone in the group, nineteen-year-old kids, had to make a decision: Am I going to go along with this or am I going to give up my life? A lot of people went along. After a while they were off in outer space. The positions were so insane you couldn't even talk about it.

They then got quite violent. They started something called Operation Mop-Up. They were going to take the hegemony of the left by going into some movement meeting with baseball bats and beating everyone over the head. At first nobody knew what to do about it. After a while they figured, OK, we'll come back with bigger baseball bats. The next thing they started was what amounted to an extortion racket against parents. A lot of the kids had middle-class parents. The idea was to go back to your parents and tell them that unless they sold the store and gave it to LaRouche, they were enemies of the human race, objective fascists, and you were never going to have anything to do with them again.

This went on for a while. I started getting approached at talks I was giving. Some old couple would come up. I remember once a couple came up, a guy who had a little grocery store somewhere. He

told me this was what his kids were saying, what did I think he ought to do? Usually I didn't answer. This once I said, if you want me to tell you the truth, I'll tell you the truth. I told him what I thought. About a week later I got a message signed Labor Committee Intelligence Service: our Intelligence Service has learned that you're spreading rumors about the party. You have one week to clear yourself of these charges. I threw it into the waste basket. Shortly after their newspaper started coming out with crazed attacks. The funniest one was a pamphlet they put out for the Bicentennial, July 4, 1976. It was called "Terrorist Commanders." It had on the front a picture of me and Marc Raskin. It was quite amusing. It was about how the two of us run the KGB and the CIA and the PLO and the Queen of England and whoever else was in their conspiracy at the time. They said we were planning to put atom bombs in major U.S. cities at the time of the Bicentennial. I got it in August, a month after. Usually these end-of-the-world people, when it doesn't happen they have some reason. But they were still predicting it a month after it didn't happen. That was put on the windshield of my car with a death threat scribbled on it. I won't go into the details of what happened next. I didn't hear from them for a while. Since then it's similar things.

**DB** *Anyone who comes to visit your office at MIT will see a very large black and white photograph of Bertrand Russell in the hallway next to your door. What's the story behind that photograph?*

He's one of the very few people that I actually admire. I did have a big photograph of him. The office

was vandalized during the Vietnam War years. A sauerkraut bomber. One of the things that was destroyed was that picture. Somebody succeeded in putting up another one.

**DB** *So does Russell exemplify the responsibility of intellectuals?*

Nobody is a hero, but he had a lot of very good characteristics and did a lot of things that I admire.

**DB** *You do endless rounds of interviews, and I certainly inflict a fair share of them on you, how do you keep awake, much less sustain interest? What constitutes a good interview? What engages you? The questions are interminable, and usually the same.*

They're not always quite the same. And I have to rethink things anyway. These are very important and interesting topics, and as long as people are interested in them, I'm going to keep talking about them.

**DB** *You can stay awake?*

Most of the time.

**DB** *Thank you.*