

DEMASKING U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

Noam Chomsky's Turning the Tide

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In this short book of 253 pages (with 570 footnotes) Noam Chomsky does more than probably anybody else to document in detail the savage aspects of US foreign policy. The subtitle, "U.S. Intervention in Central America and the Struggle for Peace" is in a double sense misleading: the book is about U.S. foreign policy in general, not only in Central America, and there is very little about any struggle for any kind of peace in the book, including how to turn the tide.

I shall not make any effort to summarize the butchery of millions and millions of human beings, either directly by the United States, or indirectly by regimes hardly able to do much harm or good for that matter, had they not been militarily, economically or politically supported by Washington. The cries from the torture chambers, the lonely deaths at the hands of the goons in the death squads, the mass murder committed in Indo-China by endless waves of B52s ultimately point back to a center of ultimate power. For the student of international affairs in this part of the twentieth century, used to putting together pieces of news scattered around in newspapers and journals, this book has the tremendous advantage of providing a summary. The ugly face of the U.S. comes out with stark contours. I am convinced that it is possible to remain an unflinching supporter of Washington after having read this book, just as it was possible to remain a member of a Moscow-true communist party after Hungary 1956 and Czechoslovakia 1968, not to mention after Solzhenitsyn's Gulag. But most decent people either left or changed the sense of the communist party, e.g., towards Euro-communism (actually Latin-communism). Most decent people will have difficulties being identified with Washington after having read this book. The way of resolving that dilemma is easily taken: by not reading the book.

Chomsky's book does for the US empire in general, and reaganism in particular, what Solzhenitsyn did for the Soviet empire and stalinism. It is not a compliment to the mainstream of US international relations studies, "IR" as they call it, that this (and his other books on US foreign policy) are written by a linguist, although a very special one, gifted up to the extreme of any distribution of talent including an incredible energy as a scholar. When the history of the US social science establishment in this period is written, my guess is that Chomsky will stand out, not the political science characters he occasionally quotes, comparing their more or less imaginative apologies with reality.

However, it is at this point that some critical remarks are warranted. The atrocities are well documented, from genocide of the indigenous peoples in North America to the death squads in El Salvador (one of Chomsky's points is actually that the Washington support for the contras in Nicaragua is more like a cover action to deflect attention away from the neighboring country). Why does all of this happen? Where does it come from, this violent streak in US policy towards other races and peoples?

Chomsky's explanation is spelt out in chapter 2: the "fifth freedom," the freedom to rob and to exploit. Corporate greed, in other words, and the greed of the corporations working for the military in particular, with an obvious vested interest in conflict, even war. "When the Fifth Freedom is threatened in its domains, the US regularly resorts to subversion, terror or direct aggression to restore it, declaring the target of these actions a Russian client and acting to make this acquired truth a reality" (pp. 50-51). I think it would be hard to argue with this statement as one of many factors in the general

loom constituting the foreign policy of a giant. But I might like to point to another factor, in my view equally important, less materialist and profit seeking, more idealist and mission seeking. America as a nation not like the others, a Chosen People inhabiting a Promised Land, second to none but the Almighty, bound by a covenant to be God-like, acquiring such characteristics as omniscience and omnipotence, needed to set things straight in this wicked world. A nation under God, surrounded by not always reliable allies, the industrial democracies; in turn surrounded by a periphery of countries with “complementary economies,” meaning countries delivering the raw materials for those industrial democracies; in turn surrounded by countries, peoples, individuals that are simply EVIL, a motley crowd of Russians and communists, Turks and Moslem fanatics (not Libyans, Syrians, Iranians) and terrorists hired by one or both of the former two.

The task of the US is to contain, perhaps even stamp out Evil through acts of daring violence. And, to save the periphery countries from a fate worse than death, to fall into the Evil perimeter of the world; this may call for some “destabilization.” And, to prevent the Center countries from becoming periphery countries, this may call for some Marshall aid or other stabilization measures. A giant task indeed. The sociologist Robert Bellah (University of California at Berkeley) touches on this in his excellent The Broken Covenant (with God, that is) – pointing out that just like for the Mt Sinai covenant drawn up by Moses, between the Jews in diaspora and Yahweh, there are conditions, there are commandments to be obeyed. “Thou shalt not covet,” “Thou shalt not kill” – Chomsky points out in painstaking and painful (for any Westerner) detail how much these rules are broken.

Chomsky has the facts and Bellah a theory – again, where are the US political scientists?

The freedom to exploit and to rob on the one hand, and the God-given mission to fight evil on the other? No, the two approaches do not exclude each other. If contemporary reaganism is based on a combination of corporate greed and right wing populism, then a double-track theory is needed; “both-and” in other words. Chomsky’s “fifth freedom” does not look good on paper, but the missionary compulsion provides legitimation. Of course, if the Evil forces in addition are against “the use of property to make more property,” a more polite formula than “to rob and to exploit,” then greed and crusade combine happily against communism.

I would go for both approaches in an effort to understand the giant to the North, as the US is known in the rest of the hemisphere. However, it is difficult to see that poor Moslems really stand in the way of corporate greed, easy to see the fight of the hyphenated Judeo-Christian complex (and hyphenated Israel-America) as a continuation of the anti-Moslem crusades seven, nine centuries ago. Moreover, what if socialism brings 90% of the population into a market for consumer goods from abroad, as opposed to 10% for consumers’ goods – would that not be an argument for tolerating socialism for some time? If US action is irrational, does not that lead to a search for the root of that irrationality – and that might be in the Chosen People complex rather than in corporate greed? And, does that not, in turn, lead to an “honest inquiry” (p. 253) not only into the US structure but also the US culture – and perhaps particularly their interplay? Emphasizing the word “interplay,” not substituting for vulgar materialism vulgar idealism.

Well, the reader will draw his own conclusions, but he will not be left untouched. Hopefully, the reader will not stoop to the knee-jerk level of “the Soviet Union is at least equally bad” or “do not all big countries do this sort of thing?” What Chomsky does is an invitation to realism, to knowing the facts, before we start theorizing about the Western superpower.