

Excerpted from Noam Chomsky (2006). Failed States: The Abuse of Power and the Assault on Democracy. New York: Metropolitan Books, pp. 251–63.

Afterward

...Declarations of noble intent by systems of power are rarely complete fabrication, and the same is true in [the United States today]. Under some conditions, forms of democracy are indeed acceptable. Abroad, as the leading scholar-advocate of “democracy promotion” concludes, we find a “strong line of continuity”: democracy is acceptable *if and only if* it is consistent with strategic and economic interests (Thomas Carothers)...

The basic dilemma facing policy makers is sometimes candidly recognized at the dovish liberal extreme of the spectrum, for example, by Robert Pastor, President Carter’s national security advisor for Latin America. He explained why the administration had to support the murderous and corrupt Somoza regime in Nicaragua, and, when that proved impossible, to try at least to maintain the U.S.-trained National Guard even as it was massacring the population “with a brutality a nation usually reserves for its enemy,” killing some forty thousand people. The reason was the familiar one: “The United States did not want to control Nicaragua or the other nations of the region, but it also did not want developments to get out of control. It wanted Nicaraguans to act independently, *except* when doing so would affect U.S. interests adversely.”¹

Similar dilemmas faced Bush administration planners after their invasion of Iraq. They want Iraqis “to act independently, *except* when doing so would affect U.S. interests adversely.” Iraq must therefore be sovereign and democratic, but within limits. It must somehow be constructed as an obedient client state, much in the manner of the traditional order in Central America. At a general level, the pattern is familiar, reaching to the opposite extreme of institutional structures. The Kremlin was able to maintain satellites that were run by domestic political and military forces, with the iron fist poised. Germany was able to do much the same in occupied Europe even while it was at war, as did fascist Japan in Manchuria (its Manchukuo). Fascist Italy achieved similar results in North Africa while carrying out virtual genocide that in no way harmed its favorable image in the West and possibly inspired Hitler. Traditional imperial and neocolonial systems illustrate many variations on similar themes.²

...The situation could get worse. Iran might give up on hopes that Europe could become independent of the United States, and turn eastward. Highly relevant background is discussed by Selig Harrison, a leading specialist on these topics. “The nuclear negotiations between Iran and the European Union were based on a bargain that the EU, held back by the US, has failed to honour,” Harrison observes. The bargain was that Iran would suspend uranium enrichment, and the EU would undertake security guarantees. The language of the joint declaration was “unambiguous. ‘A mutually acceptable agreement,’ it said, would not only provide ‘objective

¹ Robert Pastor, *Condemned to Repetition: The United States and Nicaragua* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), his emphasis.

² Ali Abdullatif Ahmida, *Forgotten Voice: Power and Agency in Colonial and Postcolonial Libya* (London: Routledge, 2005).

guarantees' that Iran's nuclear programme is 'exclusively for peaceful purposes' but would 'equally provide firm commitments on security issues.' ”³

The phrase “security issues” is a thinly veiled reference to the threats by the United States and Israel to bomb Iran, and preparations to do so... Washington's unwillingness to allow regional security issues to be considered is nothing new. It has also arisen repeatedly in the confrontation with Iraq. In the background is the matter of Israeli nuclear weapons, a topic that Washington bars from international consideration. Beyond that lurks what Harrison rightly describes as “the central problem facing the global nonproliferation regime”: the failure of the nuclear states to live up to their NPT obligation “to phase out their own nuclear weapons”—and, in Washington's case, formal rejection of the obligation.⁴

Unlike Europe, China refuses to be intimidated by Washington, a primary reason for the growing fear of China on the part of U.S. planners. Much of Iran's oil already goes to China, and China is providing Iran with weapons, presumably considered a deterrent to U.S. threats. Still more uncomfortable for Washington is the fact that “the Sino-Saudi relationship has developed dramatically,” including Chinese military aid to Saudi Arabia and gas exploration rights for China. By 2005, Saudi Arabia provided about 17 percent of China's oil imports. Chinese and Saudi oil companies have signed deals for drilling and construction of a huge refinery (with Exxon Mobil as a partner). A January 2006 visit by Saudi King Abdullah to Beijing was expected to lead to a Sino-Saudi memorandum of understanding calling for “increased cooperation and investment between the two countries in oil, natural gas, and minerals.”⁵

Indian analyst Aijaz Ahmad observes that Iran could “emerge as the virtual lynchpin in the making, over the next decade or so, of what China and Russia have come to regard as an absolutely indispensable Asian Energy Security Grid, for breaking Western control of the world's energy supplies and securing the great industrial revolution of Asia.” South Korea and southeast Asian countries are likely to join, possibly Japan as well. A crucial question is how India will react. It rejected U.S. pressures to withdraw from an oil pipeline deal with Iran. On the other hand, India joined the United States and the EU in voting for an anti-Iranian resolution at the IAEA, joining also in their hypocrisy, since India rejects the NPT regime to which Iran, so far, appears to be largely conforming. Ahmad reports that India may have secretly reversed its stand under Iranian threats to terminate a \$20 billion gas deal. Washington later warned India that its “nuclear deal with the US could be ditched” if India did not go along with U.S. demands, eliciting a sharp rejoinder from the Indian foreign ministry and an evasive tempering of the warning by the U.S. embassy.⁶

India too has options. It may choose to be a U.S. client, or it may prefer to join a more independent Asian bloc that is taking shape, with growing ties to Middle East oil producers. In a series of informative commentaries, the deputy editor of the *Hindu* observes that “if the 21st

³ Selig Harrison, *Financial Times*, January 18, 2006.

⁴ See p. 77 in the present work and *Hegemony or Survival* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2003), 157–58.

⁵ Anthony Bubalo, *Financial Times*, October 6, 2005. Shai Oster, *Wall Street Journal*, January 23, 2006.

⁶ Aijaz Ahmad, *Frontline* (India), October 8, 2005. Katrin Bennhold, *International Herald Tribune*, October 5, 2004. Also Victor Mallet and Guy Dinmore, *Financial Times*, March 17, 2005. Daniel Dombey et al., *Financial Times*, January 26, 2006. David Sanger and Elaine Sciolino, *New York Times*, January 27, 2006.

century is to be an 'Asian century,' Asia's passivity in the energy sector has to end." Though it "hosts the world's largest producers and fastest growing consumers of energy," Asia still relies "on institutions, trading frameworks and armed forces from outside the region in order to trade with itself," a debilitating heritage from the imperial era. The key is India-China cooperation. In 2005, he points out, India and China "managed to confound analysts around the world by turning their much-vaunted rivalry for the acquisition of oil and gas assets in third countries into a nascent partnership that could alter the basic dynamics of the global energy market." A January 2006 agreement signed in Beijing "cleared the way for India and China to collaborate not only in technology but also in hydrocarbon exploration and production, a partnership that eventually could alter fundamental equations in the world's oil and natural gas sector." At a meeting in New Delhi of Asian energy producers and consumers a few months earlier, India had "unveiled an ambitious \$22.4 billion pan-Asian gas grid and oil security pipeline system" extending throughout all of Asia, from Siberian fields through Central Asia and to the Middle East energy giants, also integrating the consumer states. Furthermore, Asian countries "hold more than two trillion dollars worth of foreign reserves," overwhelmingly denominated in dollars, though prudence suggests diversification. A first step, already being contemplated, is an Asian oil market trading in euros. The impact on the international financial system and the balance of global power could be significant. The United States "sees India as the weakest link in the emerging Asian chain," he continues, and is "trying actively to divert New Delhi away from the task of creating new regional architecture by dangling the nuclear carrot and the promise of world power status in alliance with itself." If the Asian project is to succeed, he warns, "India will have to resist these allurements." Similar questions arise with regard to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization formed in 2001 as a Russia-China-based counterweight to the expansion of U.S. power into former Soviet central Asia, now evolving "rapidly toward a regional security bloc [that] could soon induct new members such as India, Pakistan, and Iran," longtime Moscow correspondent Fred Weir reports, perhaps becoming a "Eurasian military confederacy to rival NATO."⁷

The prospect that Europe and Asia might move toward greater independence has seriously troubled U.S. planners since World War II, and concerns have significantly increased as the tripolar order has continued to evolve, along with new south-south interactions and rapidly growing EU engagement with China.⁸

U.S. intelligence has projected that the United States, while controlling Middle East oil for the traditional reasons, will itself rely mainly on more stable Atlantic Basin resources (West Africa, Western Hemisphere). Control of Middle East oil is now far from a sure thing, and these expectations are also threatened by developments in the Western Hemisphere, accelerated by Bush administration policies that have left the United States remarkably isolated in the global arena. The Bush administration has even succeeded in alienating Canada, an impressive feat. Canada's relations with the United States are more "strained and combative" than ever before as a result of Washington's rejection of NAFTA decisions favoring Canada, Joel Brinkley reports.

⁷ Siddharth Varadarajan, *Hindu*, January 24, 2006; *Hindu*, January 25, 2006; *International Herald Tribune*, January 25, 2006. Fred Weir, *Christian Science Monitor*, October 26, 2005. See "Declaration of Heads of Member-States of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation" (China, Russian Federation, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan), July 5, 2005, Astana, Kazakhstan; *World Affairs* (New Delhi), Autumn 2005.

⁸ For background see *Hegemony or Survival*, chap. 6.

“Partly as a result, Canada is working hard to build up its relationship with China [and] some officials are saying Canada may shift a significant portion of its trade, particularly oil, from the United States to China.” Canada’s minister of natural resources said that within a few years one-quarter of the oil that Canada now sends to the United States may go to China instead. In a further blow to Washington’s energy policies, the leading oil exporter in the hemisphere, Venezuela, has forged probably the closest relations with China of any Latin American country, and is planning to sell increasing amounts of oil to China as part of its effort to reduce dependence on the openly hostile U.S. government. Latin America as a whole is increasing trade and other relations with China, with some setbacks, but likely expansion, in particular for raw materials exporters like Brazil and Chile.⁹

... Though Central America was largely disciplined by Reaganite violence and terror, the rest of the hemisphere is falling out of [U.S.] control, particularly from Venezuela to Argentina, which was the poster child of the IMF and the Treasury Department until its economy collapsed under the policies they imposed. Much of the region has left-center governments. The indigenous populations have become much more active and influential, particularly in Bolivia and Ecuador, both major energy producers, where they either want oil and gas to be domestically controlled or, in some cases, oppose production altogether. Many indigenous people apparently do not see any reason why their lives, societies, and cultures should be disrupted or destroyed so that New Yorkers can sit in SUVs in traffic gridlock. Some are even calling for an “Indian nation” in South America. Meanwhile the economic integration that is under way is reversing patterns that trace back to the Spanish conquests, with Latin American elites and economies linked to the imperial powers but not to one another. Along with growing south-south interaction on a broader scale, these developments are strongly influenced by popular organizations that are coming together in the unprecedented international global justice movements, ludicrously called “anti-globalization” because they favor globalization that privileges the interests of people, not investors and financial institutions. For many reasons, the system of U.S. global dominance is fragile, even apart from the damage inflicted by Bush planners.

One consequence is that the Bush administration’s pursuit of the traditional policies of deterring democracy faces new obstacles. It is no longer as easy as before to resort to military coups and international terrorism to overthrow democratically elected governments, as Bush planners learned ruefully in 2002 in Venezuela. The “strong line of continuity” must be pursued in other ways, for the most part. In Iraq, as we have seen, mass nonviolent resistance compelled Washington and London to permit the elections they had sought to evade. The subsequent effort to subvert the elections by providing substantial advantages to the administration’s favorite candidate, and expelling the independent media, also failed. Washington faces further problems. The Iraqi labor movement is making considerable progress despite the opposition of the occupation authorities. The situation is rather like Europe and Japan after World War II, when a primary goal of the United States and United Kingdom was to

⁹ NIC, *Global Trends*. Joel Brinkley, *New York Times*, October 25, 2005. Dan Molinski, AP, October 24, 2005. Bush policies have even alienated Australians, traditionally supportive of the United States. A 2005 survey found that a majority regarded “the external threat posed by both US foreign policy and Islamic extremism” as primary and equivalent concerns, compared with one-third concerned about China. Only 58 percent “viewed the US positively, compared with 94 per cent for New Zealand, 86 per cent for Britain, 84 per cent for Japan, and 69 per cent for China.” Half favored a free trade agreement with China, only a third with the United States. Tom Allard and Louise Williams, *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 29, 2005.

undermine independent labor movements—as at home, for similar reasons: organized labor contributes in essential ways to functioning democracy with popular engagement. Many of the measures adopted at that time—withholding food, supporting fascist police—are no longer available...

The problem of elections arose in Palestine much in the way it did in Iraq. As already discussed, the Bush administration refused to permit elections until the death of Yasser Arafat, aware that the wrong man would win. After his death, the administration agreed to permit elections, expecting the victory of its favored Palestinian Authority candidates. To promote this outcome, Washington resorted to much the same modes of subversion as in Iraq, and often before. Washington used USAID as an “invisible conduit” in an effort to “increase the popularity of the Palestinian Authority on the eve of crucial elections in which the governing party faces a serious challenge from the radical Islamic group Hamas,” spending almost \$2 million “on dozens of quick projects before elections this week to bolster the governing Fattah faction’s image with voters.” In the United States, or any Western country, even a hint of such foreign interference would destroy a candidate, but deeply rooted imperial mentality legitimates such routine measures elsewhere. However, the attempt to subvert the elections again resoundingly failed.¹⁰

The U.S. and Israeli governments now have to adjust to dealing somehow with a radical Islamic party that approaches their traditional rejectionist stance, though not entirely, at least if Hamas really does mean to agree to an indefinite truce on the international border as its leaders state. The United States and Israel, in contrast, insist that Israel must take over substantial parts of the West Bank (and the forgotten Golan Heights). Hamas’s refusal to accept Israel’s “right to exist” mirrors the refusal of Washington and Jerusalem to accept Palestine’s “right to exist”—a concept unknown in international affairs; Mexico accepts the existence of the United States but not its abstract “right to exist” on almost half of Mexico, acquired by conquest. Hamas’s formal commitment to “destroy Israel” places it on a par with the United States and Israel, which vowed formally that there could be no “additional Palestinian state” (in addition to Jordan) until they relaxed their extreme rejectionist stand partially in the past few years, in the manner already reviewed. Although Hamas has not said so, it would come as no great surprise if Hamas were to agree that Jews may remain in scattered areas in the present Israel, while Palestine constructs huge settlement and infrastructure projects to take over the valuable land and resources, effectively breaking Israel up into unviable cantons, virtually separated from one another and from some small part of Jerusalem where Jews would also be allowed to remain. And they might agree to call the fragments “a state.” If such proposals were made, we would—rightly—regard them as virtually a reversion to Nazism, a fact that might elicit some thoughts. If such proposals were made, Hamas’s position would be essentially like that of the United States and Israel for the past five years, after they came to tolerate some impoverished form of “statehood.” It is fair to describe Hamas as radical, extremist, and violent, and as a serious threat to peace and a just political settlement. But the organization is hardly alone in this stance.

Elsewhere traditional means of undermining democracy have succeeded. In Haiti, the Bush administration’s favorite “democracy-building group, the International Republican Institute,”

¹⁰ [n. 16 in the original] Scott Wilson and Glenn Kessler, *Washington Post*, January 22, 2006. Steven Erlanger, *New York Times*, January 23, 2006.

worked assiduously to promote the opposition to President Aristide, helped by the withholding of desperately needed aid on grounds that were dubious at best. When it seemed that Aristide would probably win any genuine election, Washington and the opposition chose to withdraw, a standard device to discredit elections that are going to come out the wrong way: Nicaragua in 1984 and Venezuela in December 2005 are examples that should be familiar. Then followed a military coup, expulsion of the president, and a reign of terror and violence vastly exceeding anything under the elected government.¹¹

The persistence of the strong line of continuity to the present again reveals that the United States is very much like other powerful states. It pursues the strategic and economic interests of dominant sectors of the domestic population, to the accompaniment of rhetorical flourishes about its dedication to the highest values. That is practically a historical universal, and the reason why sensible people pay scant attention to declarations of noble intent by leaders, or accolades by their followers.

One commonly hears that carping critics complain about what is wrong, but do not present solutions. There is an accurate translation for that charge: “They present solutions, but I don’t like them.” In addition to the proposals that should be familiar about dealing with the crises that reach to the level of survival, a few simple suggestions for the United States have already been mentioned: (1) accept the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court and the World Court; (2) sign and carry forward the Kyoto protocols; (3) let the UN take the lead in international crises; (4) rely on diplomatic and economic measures rather than military ones in confronting terror; (5) keep to the traditional interpretation of the UN Charter; (6) give up the Security Council veto and have “a decent respect for the opinion of mankind,” as the Declaration of Independence advises, even if power centers disagree; (7) cut back sharply on military spending and sharply increase social spending. For people who believe in democracy, these are very conservative suggestions: they appear to be the opinions of the majority of the U.S. population, in most cases the overwhelming majority. They are in radical opposition to public policy. To be sure, we cannot be very confident about the state of public opinion on such matters because of another feature of the democratic deficit: the topics scarcely enter into public discussion and the basic facts are little known. In a highly atomized society, the public is therefore largely deprived of the opportunity to form considered opinions.

Another conservative suggestion is that facts, logic, and elementary moral principles should matter. Those who take the trouble to adhere to that suggestion will soon be led to abandon a good part of familiar doctrine, though it is surely much easier to repeat self-serving mantras. Such simple truths carry us some distance toward developing more specific and detailed answers. More important, they open the way to implement them, opportunities that are readily within our grasp if we can free ourselves from the shackles of doctrine and imposed illusion.

Though it is natural for doctrinal systems to seek to induce pessimism, hopelessness, and despair, reality is different. There has been substantial progress in the unending quest for justice and freedom in recent years, leaving a legacy that can be carried forward from a higher plane than before. Opportunities for education and organizing abound. As in the past, rights are not likely to

¹¹ [n. 17 in the original] Walt Bogdanich and Jenny Nordberg, *New York Times*, January 29, 2006. See references of chap. 4, note 14, and 154 in the present work. Gregory Wilpert, Znet commentary, December 2005.

be granted by benevolent authorities, or won by intermittent actions—attending a few demonstrations or pushing a lever in the personalized quadrennial extravaganzas that are depicted as “democratic politics.” As always in the past, the tasks require dedicated day-by-day engagement to create—in part re-create—the basis for a functioning democratic culture in which the public plays some role in determining policies, not only in the political arena, from which it is largely excluded, but also in the crucial economic arena, from which it is excluded in principle. There are many ways to promote democracy at home, carrying it to new dimensions. Opportunities are ample, and failure to grasp them is likely to have ominous repercussions: for the country, for the world, and for future generations.