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American Power Under Challenge

By Tom Engelhardt
May 8, 2016

The other day I pulled a tattered copy of *The Chomsky Reader* off a bookshelf of mine. Leafing through some of the Vietnam-era essays collected in that 1987 paperback brought to life a young Tom Engelhardt who, in the mid-to-late 1960s, was undergoing a startling transition: from dreaming of serving his government to opposing it. Noam Chomsky's writings played a role in that transformation. I stopped at his chilling 1970 essay "After Pinkville," which I remember reading when it came out. ("Pinkville," connoting communist influence, was the military slang for the village where the infamous My Lai massacre took place.) It was not the first Chomsky essay I had read. That honor may go to "The Responsibility of Intellectuals," which he wrote in 1966. ("It is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth and to expose lies. This, at least, may seem enough of a truism to pass without comment. Not so, however. For the modern intellectual, it is not at all obvious.")

"After Pinkville" still remains vividly in my consciousness from that long-gone moment when a growing sense of horror about a distant American war that came to feel ever closer and more brutal swept me into antiwar activism. Its first sentences still cut to the heart of things: "It is important to understand that the massacre of the rural population of Vietnam and their forced evacuation is not an accidental by-product of the war. Rather it is of the very essence of American strategy." Before he was done, Chomsky would put the massacre of almost 500 Vietnamese men, women, and children into the grim context of the larger crimes of the time: "It is perhaps remarkable that none of this appears to occasion much concern [in the U.S.]. It is only

the acts of a company of half-crazed GIs that are regarded as a scandal, a disgrace to America. It will, indeed, be a still greater national scandal – if we assume that possible – if they alone are subjected to criminal prosecution, but not those who have created and accepted the long-term atrocity to which they contributed one detail – merely a few hundred more murdered Vietnamese."

So many decades later, something still seems painfully familiar in all of this. Thanks in part to the nature of our media moment, we remain riveted by acts of horror committed against Europeans and Americans. Yet "concern" over what the U.S. has done in our distant war zones – from the killing of civilians at weddings, funerals, and memorial services to the evisceration of a hospital, to kidnappings, torture, and even the killing of prisoners, to drone strikes so "surgical" and "precise" that hundreds below died even though only a relatively few individuals were officially targeted – seems largely missing in action. Unlike the Vietnam era, in the present moment, lacking the powerful antiwar movement of the Vietnam era, "none of this," to quote Chomsky, "appears to occasion much concern." Indeed.

There are, however, exceptions to this statement and let me mention one of them. A half-century later, Noam Chomsky is still writing with the same chilling eloquence about the updated war-on-terror version of this American nightmare. His "concern" has not lagged, something that can't be missed in his new book, *Who Rules the World?*, which focuses on, among other things, what in the Vietnam-era might have been called "the arrogance of power." At a moment when the Vietnam bomber of choice, the B-52, is being sent back into action in the war against the Islamic State, he, too, is back in action. And so here is the first part of an overview essay from his new book on American power and the world. (Expect part 2 on Tuesday.) ~ *Tom*

American Power Under Challenge

By Noam Chomsky

This piece, the first of two parts, is excerpted from Noam Chomsky's new book, Who Rules the World? *(Metropolitan Books). Part 2 will be posted on Wednesday.*

When we ask "Who rules the world?" we commonly adopt the standard convention that the actors in world affairs are states, primarily the great powers, and we consider their decisions and the relations among them. That is not wrong. But we would do well to keep in mind that this level of abstraction can also be highly misleading.

States of course have complex internal structures, and the choices and decisions of the political leadership are heavily influenced by internal concentrations of power, while the general population is often marginalized. That is true even for the more democratic societies, and obviously for others. We cannot gain a realistic understanding of who rules the world while ignoring the "masters of mankind," as Adam Smith called them: in his day, the merchants and manufacturers of England; in ours, multinational conglomerates, huge financial institutions, retail empires, and the like. Still following Smith, it is also wise to attend to the "vile maxim" to which the "masters of mankind" are dedicated: "All for ourselves and nothing for other people"

– a doctrine known otherwise as bitter and incessant class war, often one-sided, much to the detriment of the people of the home country and the world.

In the contemporary global order, the institutions of the masters hold enormous power, not only in the international arena but also within their home states, on which they rely to protect their power and to provide economic support by a wide variety of means. When we consider the role of the masters of mankind, we turn to such state policy priorities of the moment as the Trans-Pacific Partnership, one of the investor-rights agreements mislabeled "free-trade agreements" in propaganda and commentary. They are negotiated in secret, apart from the hundreds of corporate lawyers and lobbyists writing the crucial details. The intention is to have them adopted in good Stalinist style with "fast track" procedures designed to block discussion and allow only the choice of yes or no (hence yes). The designers regularly do quite well, not surprisingly. People are incidental, with the consequences one might anticipate.

The Second Superpower

The neoliberal programs of the past generation have concentrated wealth and power in far fewer hands while undermining functioning democracy, but they have aroused opposition as well, most prominently in Latin America but also in the centers of global power. The European Union (EU), one of the more promising developments of the post-World War II period, has been tottering because of the harsh effect of the policies of austerity during recession, condemned even by the economists of the International Monetary Fund (if not the IMF's political actors). Democracy has been undermined as decision making shifted to the Brussels bureaucracy, with the northern banks casting their shadow over their proceedings.

Mainstream parties have been rapidly losing members to left and to right. The executive director of the Paris-based research group EuropaNova attributes the general disenchantment to "a mood of angry impotence as the real power to shape events largely shifted from national political leaders [who, in principle at least, are subject to democratic politics] to the market, the institutions of the European Union and corporations," quite in accord with neoliberal doctrine. Very similar processes are under way in the United States, for somewhat similar reasons, a matter of significance and concern not just for the country but, because of U.S. power, for the world.

The rising opposition to the neoliberal assault highlights another crucial aspect of the standard convention: it sets aside the public, which often fails to accept the approved role of "spectators" (rather than "participants") assigned to it in liberal democratic theory. Such disobedience has always been of concern to the dominant classes. Just keeping to American history, George Washington regarded the common people who formed the militias that he was to command as "an exceedingly dirty and nasty people [evincing] an unaccountable kind of stupidity in the lower class of these people."

In *Violent Politics*, his masterful review of insurgencies from "the American insurgency" to contemporary Afghanistan and Iraq, William Polk concludes that General Washington "was so anxious to sideline [the fighters he despised] that he came close to losing the Revolution." Indeed, he "might have actually done so" had France not massively intervened and "saved the

Revolution," which until then had been won by guerrillas – whom we would now call "terrorists" – while Washington's British-style army "was defeated time after time and almost lost the war."

A common feature of successful insurgencies, Polk records, is that once popular support dissolves after victory, the leadership suppresses the "dirty and nasty people" who actually won the war with guerrilla tactics and terror, for fear that they might challenge class privilege. The elites' contempt for "the lower class of these people" has taken various forms throughout the years. In recent times one expression of this contempt is the call for passivity and obedience ("moderation in democracy") by liberal internationalists reacting to the dangerous democratizing effects of the popular movements of the 1960s.

Sometimes states do choose to follow public opinion, eliciting much fury in centers of power. One dramatic case was in 2003, when the Bush administration called on Turkey to join its invasion of Iraq. Ninety-five percent of Turks opposed that course of action and, to the amazement and horror of Washington, the Turkish government adhered to their views. Turkey was bitterly condemned for this departure from responsible behavior. Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, designated by the press as the "idealist-in-chief" of the administration, berated the Turkish military for permitting the malfeasance of the government and demanded an apology. Unperturbed by these and innumerable other illustrations of our fabled "yearning for democracy," respectable commentary continued to laud President George W. Bush for his dedication to "democracy promotion," or sometimes criticized him for his naïveté in thinking that an outside power could impose its democratic yearnings on others.

The Turkish public was not alone. Global opposition to U.S.-UK aggression was overwhelming. Support for Washington's war plans scarcely reached 10% almost anywhere, according to international polls. Opposition sparked huge worldwide protests, in the United States as well, probably the first time in history that imperial aggression was strongly protested even before it was officially launched. On the front page of the *New York Times*, journalist Patrick Tyler reported that "there may still be two superpowers on the planet: the United States and world public opinion."

Unprecedented protest in the United States was a manifestation of the opposition to aggression that began decades earlier in the condemnation of the U.S. wars in Indochina, reaching a scale that was substantial and influential, even if far too late. By 1967, when the antiwar movement was becoming a significant force, military historian and Vietnam specialist Bernard Fall warned that "Vietnam as a cultural and historic entity… is threatened with extinction… [as] the countryside literally dies under the blows of the largest military machine ever unleashed on an area of this size."

But the antiwar movement did become a force that could not be ignored. Nor could it be ignored when Ronald Reagan came into office determined to launch an assault on Central America. His administration mimicked closely the steps John F. Kennedy had taken 20 years earlier in launching the war against South Vietnam, but had to back off because of the kind of vigorous public protest that had been lacking in the early 1960s. The assault was awful enough. The victims have yet to recover. But what happened to South Vietnam and later all of Indochina,

where “the second superpower” imposed its impediments only much later in the conflict, was incomparably worse.

It is often argued that the enormous public opposition to the invasion of Iraq had no effect. That seems incorrect to me. Again, the invasion was horrifying enough, and its aftermath is utterly grotesque. Nevertheless, it could have been far worse. Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and the rest of Bush’s top officials could never even contemplate the sort of measures that President Kennedy and President Lyndon Johnson adopted 40 years earlier largely without protest.

Western Power Under Pressure

There is far more to say, of course, about the factors in determining state policy that are put to the side when we adopt the standard convention that states are the actors in international affairs. But with such nontrivial caveats as these, let us nevertheless adopt the convention, at least as a first approximation to reality. Then the question of who rules the world leads at once to such concerns as China’s rise to power and its challenge to the United States and “world order,” the new cold war simmering in eastern Europe, the Global War on Terror, American hegemony and American decline, and a range of similar considerations.

The challenges faced by Western power at the outset of 2016 are usefully summarized within the conventional framework by Gideon Rachman, chief foreign-affairs columnist for the London *Financial Times*. He begins by reviewing the Western picture of world order: “Ever since the end of the Cold War, the overwhelming power of the U.S. military has been the central fact of international politics.” This is particularly crucial in three regions: East Asia, where “the U.S. Navy has become used to treating the Pacific as an ‘American lake’”; Europe, where NATO – meaning the United States, which “accounts for a staggering three-quarters of NATO’s military spending” – “guarantees the territorial integrity of its member states”; and the Middle East, where giant U.S. naval and air bases “exist to reassure friends and to intimidate rivals.”

The problem of world order today, Rachman continues, is that “these security orders are now under challenge in all three regions” because of Russian intervention in Ukraine and Syria, and because of China turning its nearby seas from an American lake to “clearly contested water.” The fundamental question of international relations, then, is whether the United States should “accept that other major powers should have some kind of zone of influence in their neighborhoods.” Rachman thinks it should, for reasons of “diffusion of economic power around the world – combined with simple common sense.”

There are, to be sure, ways of looking at the world from different standpoints. But let us keep to these three regions, surely critically important ones.

The Challenges Today: East Asia

Beginning with the “American lake,” some eyebrows might be raised over the report in mid-December 2015 that “an American B-52 bomber on a routine mission over the South China Sea unintentionally flew within two nautical miles of an artificial island built by China, senior

defense officials said, exacerbating a hotly divisive issue for Washington and Beijing." Those familiar with the grim record of the 70 years of the nuclear weapons era will be all too aware that this is the kind of incident that has often come perilously close to igniting terminal nuclear war. One need not be a supporter of China's provocative and aggressive actions in the South China Sea to notice that the incident did not involve a Chinese nuclear-capable bomber in the Caribbean, or off the coast of California, where China has no pretensions of establishing a "Chinese lake." Luckily for the world.

Chinese leaders understand very well that their country's maritime trade routes are ringed with hostile powers from Japan through the Malacca Straits and beyond, backed by overwhelming U.S. military force. Accordingly, China is proceeding to expand westward with extensive investments and careful moves toward integration. In part, these developments are within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which includes the Central Asian states and Russia, and soon India and Pakistan with Iran as one of the observers – a status that was denied to the United States, which was also called on to close all military bases in the region. China is constructing a modernized version of the old silk roads, with the intent not only of integrating the region under Chinese influence, but also of reaching Europe and the Middle Eastern oil-producing regions. It is pouring huge sums into creating an integrated Asian energy and commercial system, with extensive high-speed rail lines and pipelines.

One element of the program is a highway through some of the world's tallest mountains to the new Chinese-developed port of Gwadar in Pakistan, which will protect oil shipments from potential U.S. interference. The program may also, China and Pakistan hope, spur industrial development in Pakistan, which the United States has not undertaken despite massive military aid, and might also provide an incentive for Pakistan to clamp down on domestic terrorism, a serious issue for China in western Xinjiang Province. Gwadar will be part of China's "string of pearls," bases being constructed in the Indian Ocean for commercial purposes but potentially also for military use, with the expectation that China might someday be able to project power as far as the Persian Gulf for the first time in the modern era.

All of these moves remain immune to Washington's overwhelming military power, short of annihilation by nuclear war, which would destroy the United States as well.

In 2015, China also established the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), with itself as the main shareholder. Fifty-six nations participated in the opening in Beijing in June, including U.S. allies Australia, Britain, and others which joined in defiance of Washington's wishes. The United States and Japan were absent. Some analysts believe that the new bank might turn out to be a competitor to the Bretton Woods institutions (the IMF and the World Bank), in which the United States holds veto power. There are also some expectations that the SCO might eventually become a counterpart to NATO.

The Challenges Today: Eastern Europe

Turning to the second region, Eastern Europe, there is a crisis brewing at the NATO-Russian border. It is no small matter. In his illuminating and judicious scholarly study of the region, *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands*, Richard Sakwa writes – all too plausibly – that the

“Russo-Georgian war of August 2008 was in effect the first of the ‘wars to stop NATO enlargement’; the Ukraine crisis of 2014 is the second. It is not clear whether humanity would survive a third.”

The West sees NATO enlargement as benign. Not surprisingly, Russia, along with much of the Global South, has a different opinion, as do some prominent Western voices. George Kennan warned early on that NATO enlargement is a “tragic mistake,” and he was joined by senior American statesmen in an open letter to the White House describing it as a “policy error of historic proportions.”

The present crisis has its origins in 1991, with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. There were then two contrasting visions of a new security system and political economy in Eurasia. In Sakwa’s words, one vision was of a “‘Wider Europe,’ with the EU at its heart but increasingly coterminous with the Euro-Atlantic security and political community; and on the other side there [was] the idea of ‘Greater Europe,’ a vision of a continental Europe, stretching from Lisbon to Vladivostok, that has multiple centers, including Brussels, Moscow and Ankara, but with a common purpose in overcoming the divisions that have traditionally plagued the continent.”

Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev was the major proponent of Greater Europe, a concept that also had European roots in Gaullism and other initiatives. However, as Russia collapsed under the devastating market reforms of the 1990s, the vision faded, only to be renewed as Russia began to recover and seek a place on the world stage under Vladimir Putin who, along with his associate Dmitry Medvedev, has repeatedly “called for the geopolitical unification of all of ‘Greater Europe’ from Lisbon to Vladivostok, to create a genuine ‘strategic partnership.’”

These initiatives were “greeted with polite contempt,” Sakwa writes, regarded as “little more than a cover for the establishment of a ‘Greater Russia’ by stealth” and an effort to “drive a wedge” between North America and Western Europe. Such concerns trace back to earlier Cold War fears that Europe might become a “third force” independent of both the great and minor superpowers and moving toward closer links to the latter (as can be seen in Willy Brandt’s *Ostpolitik* and other initiatives).

The Western response to Russia’s collapse was triumphalist. It was hailed as signaling “the end of history,” the final victory of Western capitalist democracy, almost as if Russia were being instructed to revert to its pre-World War I status as a virtual economic colony of the West. NATO enlargement began at once, in violation of verbal assurances to Gorbachev that NATO forces would not move “one inch to the east” after he agreed that a unified Germany could become a NATO member – a remarkable concession, in the light of history. That discussion kept to East Germany. The possibility that NATO might expand *beyond* Germany was not discussed with Gorbachev, even if privately considered.

Soon, NATO did begin to move beyond, right to the borders of Russia. The general mission of NATO was officially changed to a mandate to protect “crucial infrastructure” of the global energy system, sea lanes and pipelines, giving it a global area of operations. Furthermore, under a crucial Western revision of the now widely heralded doctrine of “responsibility to protect,”

sharply different from the official U.N. version, NATO may now also serve as an intervention force under U.S. command.

Of particular concern to Russia are plans to expand NATO to Ukraine. These plans were articulated explicitly at the Bucharest NATO summit of April 2008, when Georgia and Ukraine were promised eventual membership in NATO. The wording was unambiguous: "NATO welcomes Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO." With the "Orange Revolution" victory of pro-Western candidates in Ukraine in 2004, State Department representative Daniel Fried rushed there and "emphasized U.S. support for Ukraine's NATO and Euro-Atlantic aspirations," as a WikiLeaks report revealed.

Russia's concerns are easily understandable. They are outlined by international relations scholar John Mearsheimer in the leading U.S. establishment journal, *Foreign Affairs*. He writes that "the taproot of the current crisis [over Ukraine] is NATO expansion and Washington's commitment to move Ukraine out of Moscow's orbit and integrate it into the West," which Putin viewed as "a direct threat to Russia's core interests."

"Who can blame him?" Mearsheimer asks, pointing out that "Washington may not like Moscow's position, but it should understand the logic behind it." That should not be too difficult. After all, as everyone knows, "The United States does not tolerate distant great powers deploying military forces anywhere in the Western hemisphere, much less on its borders."

In fact, the U.S. stand is far stronger. It does not tolerate what is officially called "successful defiance" of the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, which declared (but could not yet implement) U.S. control of the hemisphere. And a small country that carries out such successful defiance may be subjected to "the terrors of the earth" and a crushing embargo – as happened to Cuba. We need not ask how the United States would have reacted had the countries of Latin America joined the Warsaw Pact, with plans for Mexico and Canada to join as well. The merest hint of the first tentative steps in that direction would have been "terminated with extreme prejudice," to adopt CIA lingo.

As in the case of China, one does not have to regard Putin's moves and motives favorably to understand the logic behind them, nor to grasp the importance of understanding that logic instead of issuing imprecations against it. As in the case of China, a great deal is at stake, reaching as far – literally – as questions of survival.

The Challenges Today: The Islamic World

Let us turn to the third region of major concern, the (largely) Islamic world, also the scene of the Global War on Terror (GWOT) that George W. Bush declared in 2001 after the 9/11 terrorist attack. To be more accurate, *re*-declared. The GWOT was declared by the Reagan administration when it took office, with fevered rhetoric about a "plague spread by depraved opponents of civilization itself" (as Reagan put it) and a "return to barbarism in the modern age" (the words of George Shultz, his secretary of state). The original GWOT has been quietly removed from history. It very quickly turned into a murderous and destructive terrorist war afflicting Central

America, southern Africa, and the Middle East, with grim repercussions to the present, even leading to condemnation of the United States by the World Court (which Washington dismissed). In any event, it is not the right story for history, so it is gone.

The success of the Bush-Obama version of GWOT can readily be evaluated on direct inspection. When the war was declared, the terrorist targets were confined to a small corner of tribal Afghanistan. They were protected by Afghans, who mostly disliked or despised them, under the tribal code of hospitality – which baffled Americans when poor peasants refused "to turn over Osama bin Laden for the, to them, astronomical sum of $25 million."

There are good reasons to believe that a well-constructed police action, or even serious diplomatic negotiations with the Taliban, might have placed those suspected of the 9/11 crimes in American hands for trial and sentencing. But such options were off the table. Instead, the reflexive choice was large-scale violence – not with the goal of overthrowing the Taliban (that came later) but to make clear U.S. contempt for tentative Taliban offers of the possible extradition of bin Laden. How serious these offers were we do not know, since the possibility of exploring them was never entertained. Or perhaps the United States was just intent on "trying to show its muscle, score a victory and scare everyone in the world. They don't care about the suffering of the Afghans or how many people we will lose."

That was the judgment of the highly respected anti-Taliban leader Abdul Haq, one of the many oppositionists who condemned the American bombing campaign launched in October 2001 as "a big setback" for their efforts to overthrow the Taliban from within, a goal they considered within their reach. His judgment is confirmed by Richard A. Clarke, who was chairman of the Counterterrorism Security Group at the White House under President George W. Bush when the plans to attack Afghanistan were made. As Clarke describes the meeting, when informed that the attack would violate international law, "the President yelled in the narrow conference room, 'I don't care what the international lawyers say, we are going to kick some ass.'" The attack was also bitterly opposed by the major aid organizations working in Afghanistan, who warned that millions were on the verge of starvation and that the consequences might be horrendous.

The consequences for poor Afghanistan years later need hardly be reviewed.

The next target of the sledgehammer was Iraq. The U.S.-UK invasion, utterly without credible pretext, is the major crime of the twenty-first century. The invasion led to the death of hundreds of thousands of people in a country where the civilian society had already been devastated by American and British sanctions that were regarded as "genocidal" by the two distinguished international diplomats who administered them, and resigned in protest for this reason. The invasion also generated millions of refugees, largely destroyed the country, and instigated a sectarian conflict that is now tearing apart Iraq and the entire region. It is an astonishing fact about our intellectual and moral culture that in informed and enlightened circles it can be called, blandly, "the liberation of Iraq."

Pentagon and British Ministry of Defense polls found that only 3% of Iraqis regarded the U.S. security role in their neighborhood as legitimate, less than 1% believed that "coalition" (U.S.-UK) forces were good for their security, 80% opposed the presence of coalition forces in the

country, and a majority supported attacks on coalition troops. Afghanistan has been destroyed beyond the possibility of reliable polling, but there are indications that something similar may be true there as well. Particularly in Iraq the United States suffered a severe defeat, abandoning its official war aims, and leaving the country under the influence of the sole victor, Iran.

The sledgehammer was also wielded elsewhere, notably in Libya, where the three traditional imperial powers (Britain, France, and the United States) procured Security Council resolution 1973 and instantly violated it, becoming the air force of the rebels. The effect was to undercut the possibility of a peaceful, negotiated settlement; sharply increase casualties (by at least a factor of 10, according to political scientist Alan Kuperman); leave Libya in ruins, in the hands of warring militias; and, more recently, to provide the Islamic State with a base that it can use to spread terror beyond. Quite sensible diplomatic proposals by the African Union, accepted in principle by Libya's Muammar Qaddafi, were ignored by the imperial triumvirate, as Africa specialist Alex de Waal reviews. A huge flow of weapons and jihadis has spread terror and violence from West Africa (now the champion for terrorist murders) to the Levant, while the NATO attack also sent a flood of refugees from Africa to Europe.

Yet another triumph of "humanitarian intervention," and, as the long and often ghastly record reveals, not an unusual one, going back to its modern origins four centuries ago.