

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Mirror Crack'd

Noam Chomsky

September 2002

Noam Chomsky
Mirror Crack'd
September 2002

Retrieved on 2nd July 2021 from chomsky.info
Published in *Outlook India*.

theanarchistlibrary.org

It is widely argued that the September 11 terrorist attacks have changed the world dramatically, that nothing will be the same as the world enters into an “age of terror” — the title of a collection of academic essays by Yale University scholars and others, which regards the anthrax attack as even more ominous.

There is no doubt that the 9/11 atrocities were an event of historic importance, not — regrettably — because of their scale, but because of the choice of innocent victims. It had been recognised for some time that with new technology, the industrial powers would probably lose their virtual monopoly of violence, retaining only an enormous preponderance.

No one could have anticipated the specific way in which the expectations were fulfilled, but they were. For the first time in modern history, Europe and its offshoots were subjected, on home soil, to the kind of atrocity that they routinely have carried out elsewhere. The history should be too familiar to review, and though the West may choose to disregard it, the victims do not. The sharp break in the traditional pattern surely qualifies 9/11 as a historic event, and the repercussions are sure to be significant.

Several crucial questions arose at once: who is responsible? What are the reasons? What is the proper reaction? What are the longer-term consequences?

To begin with, it was assumed, plausibly, that the guilty parties were Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaeda network. No one knows more about them than the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency], which, together with its counterparts among US allies, recruited radical Islamists from many countries and organised them into a military and terrorist force, not to help Afghans resist Russian aggression, which would have been a legitimate objective, but for normal reasons of state, with grim consequences for Afghans after the mujahideen took control. US intelligence has surely been following the other exploits of these networks closely ever since they assassinated President Anwar Sadat of Egypt 20 years ago, and more intensively since the attempt to blow up the World Trade Center and many other targets in a highly ambitious terrorist operation in 1993.

Nevertheless, despite what must be the most intensive international intelligence investigation in history, evidence about the perpetrators of 9/11 has been hard to find. Eight months after the bombing, FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] director Robert Mueller, testifying to Congress, could say only that US intelligence now “believes” the plot was hatched in Afghanistan, though planned and implemented elsewhere. And long after the source of the anthrax attack was localised to US government weapons laboratories, it has still not been identified. These are indications of how hard it may be to counter acts of terror targeting the rich and powerful in the future. Nevertheless, despite the thin evidence, the initial conclusion about 9/11 is presumably correct.

Next, the question: what are the reasons? On this, scholarship is virtually unanimous in taking the terrorists at their word, which matches their deeds for the past 20 years: their goal, in their terms, is to drive the infidels from Muslim lands,

to overthrow the corrupt governments they impose and sustain, and to institute an extremist version of Islam.

More significant, at least for those who hope to reduce the likelihood of further crimes of a similar nature, are the background conditions from which the terrorist organisations arose, and that provide a mass reservoir of sympathetic understanding for at least parts of their message, even among those who despise and fear them.

In George Bush's plaintive words, "Why do they hate us?" The question is not new, and answers are not hard to find. Forty-five years ago, President Dwight D. Eisenhower and his staff discussed what he called the "campaign of hatred against us" in the Arab world, "not by the governments but by the people". The basic reason, the National Security Council advised, is the recognition that the US supports corrupt and brutal governments that block democracy and development, and does so because of its concern "to protect its interest in Near East oil". The *Wall Street Journal* found much the same when it investigated attitudes of wealthy westernised Muslims after 9/11, feelings now exacerbated by specific US policies with regard to Israel-Palestine and Iraq.

Commentators generally prefer a more comforting answer: their anger is rooted in resentment of our freedom and love of democracy, their cultural failings tracing back many centuries, their inability to take part in the form of "globalisation" (in which they happily participate), and other such deficiencies. More comforting, perhaps, but not wise.

What about proper reaction? The answers are doubtless contentious, but at least the reaction should meet the most elementary moral standards: specifically, if an action is right for us, it is right for others; and if wrong for others, it is wrong for us. Those who reject that standard simply declare that acts are justified by power. One might ask what remains of the flood of commentary on this question (debates about "just war", etc.) if this simple criterion is adopted.

To illustrate with a few uncontroversial cases, 40 years have passed since President John F. Kennedy ordered that “the terrors of the earth” must be visited upon Cuba until their leadership is eliminated, having violated good form by successful resistance to US-run invasion. The terrors were extremely serious, continuing into the 1990s. Twenty years have passed since President Reagan launched a terrorist war against Nicaragua, conducted with barbaric atrocities and vast destruction, leaving tens of thousands dead and the country ruined perhaps beyond recovery — and also leading to condemnation of the US for international terrorism by the World Court and the UN Security Council (in a resolution the US vetoed). But no one believes that Cuba or Nicaragua had the right to set off bombs in Washington or New York or to assassinate US political leaders. And it is all too easy to add many far more severe cases, up to the present.

Accordingly, those who accept elementary moral standards have some work to do to show that the US and Britain were justified in bombing Afghans in order to compel them to turn over people who the US suspected of criminal atrocities, the official war aim, announced by the president as the bombing began; or to overthrow their rulers, the war aim announced several weeks later.

The same moral standard holds of more nuanced proposals about an appropriate response to terrorist atrocities. The respected Anglo-American military historian Michael Howard proposed “a police operation conducted under the auspices of the United Nations... against a criminal conspiracy whose members should be hunted down and brought before an international court, where they would receive a fair trial and, if found guilty, be awarded an appropriate sentence” (*Guardian, Foreign Affairs*). That seems reasonable, though we may ask what the reaction would be to the suggestion that the proposal should be applied universally. That is unthinkable,

US can do if someone steps out of line. The bombing of Serbia was undertaken for similar reasons. Its primary goal was to “ensure NATO’s credibility”, as Blair and Clinton explained — not referring to the credibility of Norway or Italy, but of the US and its prime military client. That is a common theme of statecraft and the literature of international relations; and with some reason, as history amply reveals.

The basic issues of international society seem to me to remain much as they were, but 9/11 surely has induced changes, in some cases, with significant and not very attractive implications.

and if the suggestion were to be made, it would arouse outrage and horror.

Similar questions arise with regard to the “Bush doctrine” of “pre-emptive strike” against suspected threats. It should be noted that the doctrine is not new. High-level planners are mostly holdovers from the Reagan administration, which argued that the bombing of Libya was justified under the UN Charter as “self-defence against future attack”. Clinton planners advised “pre-emptive response” (including nuclear first strike). And the doctrine has earlier precedents. Nevertheless, the bold assertion of such a right is novel, and there is no secret as to whom the threat is addressed. The government and commentators are stressing loud and clear that they intend to apply the doctrine to Iraq. The elementary standard of universality, therefore, would appear to justify Iraqi pre-emptive terror against the US. Of course, no one accepts this conclusion.

Again, if we are willing to adopt elementary moral principles, obvious questions arise, and must be faced by those who advocate or tolerate the selective version of the doctrine of “pre-emptive response” that grants the right to those powerful enough to exercise it with little concern for what the world may think. And the burden of proof is not light, as is always true when the threat or use of violence is advocated or tolerated.

There is, of course, an easy counter to such simple arguments: WE are good, and THEY are evil. That useful principle trumps virtually any argument. Analysis of commentary and much of scholarship reveals that its roots commonly lie in that crucial principle, which is not argued but asserted. Occasionally, but rarely, some irritating creatures attempt to confront the core principle with the record of recent and contemporary history. We learn more about prevailing cultural norms by observing the reaction, and the interesting array of barriers erected to deter any lapse into this heresy. None of this, of course, is an invention of contemporary power centres and the

dominant intellectual culture. Nonetheless, it merits attention, at least among those who have some interest in understanding where we stand and what may lie ahead.

Let us turn briefly to the question: what are the long-term consequences? In the longer term, I suspect that the crimes of 9/11 will accelerate tendencies that were already under way: the Bush doctrine is an illustration. As was predicted at once, governments throughout the world seized upon 9/11 as a window of opportunity to institute or escalate harsh and repressive programmes. Russia eagerly joined the “coalition against terror” expecting to receive authorisation for its terrible atrocities in Chechnya, and was not disappointed. China happily joined for similar reasons. Turkey was the first country to offer troops for the new phase of the US “war on terror”, in gratitude, as the prime minister explained, for the US contribution to Turkey’s campaign against its miserably-repressed Kurdish population, waged with extreme savagery and relying crucially on a huge flow of US arms. Turkey is highly praised for its achievements in these campaigns of state terror, including some of the worst atrocities of the grisly 1990s, and was rewarded by grant of authority to protect Kabul from terror, funded by the same superpower that provided the military means, and the diplomatic and ideological support, for its recent atrocities. Israel recognised that it would be able to crush Palestinians even more brutally, with even firmer US support. And so on throughout much of the world.

More democratic societies, including the US, instituted measures to impose discipline on the domestic population and to institute unpopular measures under the guise of “combating terror”, exploiting the atmosphere of fear and the demand for “patriotism” — which in practice means: “You shut up and I’ll pursue my own agenda relentlessly.” The Bush administration used the opportunity to advance its assault against most of the population, and future generations, in service to the narrow

corporate interests that dominate the administration to an extent even beyond the norm.

In brief, initial predictions were amply confirmed.

One major outcome is that the US, for the first time, has major military bases in Central Asia. These are important to position US multinationals favourably in the current “great game” to control the considerable resources of the region, but also to complete the encirclement of the world’s major energy resources, in the Gulf region. The US base system targeting the Gulf extends from the Pacific to the Azores, but the closest reliable base before the Afghan war was Diego Garcia. Now that situation is much improved, and forceful intervention, if deemed appropriate, will be greatly facilitated.

The Bush administration perceives the new phase of the “war on terror” (which in many ways replicates the “war on terror” declared by the Reagan administration 20 years earlier) as an opportunity to expand its already overwhelming military advantages over the rest of the world, and to move on to other methods to ensure global dominance. Government thinking was articulated clearly by high officials when Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia visited the US in April to urge the administration to pay more attention to the reaction in the Arab world to its strong support for Israeli terror and repression. He was told, in effect, that the US did not care what he or other Arabs think. As the *New York Times* reported, a high official explained that “if he thought we were strong in Desert Storm, we’re 10 times as strong today. This was to give him some idea what Afghanistan demonstrated about our capabilities”. A senior defence analyst gave a simple gloss: others will “respect us for our toughness and won’t mess with us”. That stand too has many historical precedents, but in the post-9/11 world it gains new force.

We do not have internal documents, but it is reasonable to speculate that such consequences were one primary goal of the bombing of Afghanistan: to warn the world of what the