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Preventive War ‘the Supreme Crime’

Noam Chomsky

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September 2002 was marked by three events of considerable importance, closely related. The most powerful state in history announced a new National Security Strategy asserting that it will maintain global hegemony permanently. Any challenge will be blocked by force, the dimension in which the US reigns supreme. At the same time, the war drums began to beat to mobilize the population for an invasion of Iraq. And the campaign opened for the mid-term congressional elections, which would determine whether the administration would be able to carry forward its radical international and domestic agenda.

The new “imperial grand strategy,” as it was termed at once in the leading establishment journal, presents the US as “a revisionist state seeking to parlay its momentary advantages into a world order in which it runs the show,” a “unipolar world” in which “no state or coalition could ever challenge” it as “global leader, protector, and enforcer.”¹ These policies are fraught with danger even for the US itself, the author warned, joining many others in the foreign policy elite

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¹ John Ikenberry, *Foreign Affairs*, Sept.-Oct. 2002.

What is to be “protected” is US power and the interests it represents, not the world, which vigorously opposed the conception. Within a few months, studies revealed that fear of the United States had reached remarkable heights, along with distrust of the political leadership. An international Gallup poll in December, barely noted in the US, found virtually no support for Washington’s announced plans for a war in Iraq carried out “unilaterally by America and its allies”: in effect, the US-UK “coalition.”

Washington informed the UN that it can be “relevant” by endorsing Washington’s plans, or it can be a debating society. The US has the “sovereign right to take military action,” the administration moderate Colin Powell informed the World Economic Forum, which also strenuously opposed Washington’s war plans: “When we feel strongly about something we will lead,” he informed them, even if no one is following us.²

Bush and Blair underscored their contempt for international law and institutions at their Azores Summit on the eve of the invasion. They issued an ultimatum – not to Iraq, but to the Security Council: capitulate, or we will invade without your meaningless seal of approval. And we will do so whether or not Saddam Hussein and his family leave the country.³ The crucial principle is that the US must effectively rule Iraq.

President Bush declared that the US “has the sovereign authority to use force in assuring its own national security,” threatened by Iraq with or without Saddam, according to the Bush doctrine. Washington will be happy to establish an “Arab façade,” to borrow the term of the British during their day in the sun, while US power is firmly implanted at the heart of the world’s major energy-producing region. Formal democracy will be fine, but only if it is of the submissive kind accepted

² *Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 27, 2003 .

³ Michael Gordon, *New York Times*, March 18, 2003 .

in Washington's "backyard," at least if history and current practice are any guide.

The grand strategy authorizes Washington to carry out "preventive war": *Preventive*, not pre-emptive. Whatever the justifications for pre-emptive war might be, they do not hold for preventive war, particularly as that concept is interpreted by its current enthusiasts: the use of military force to eliminate an invented or imagined threat, so that even the term "preventive" is too charitable. Preventive war is, very simply, the "supreme crime" condemned at Nuremberg.

That was understood by those with some concern for their country. As the US invaded Iraq, historian Arthur Schlesinger wrote that Bush's grand strategy is "alarmingly similar to the policy that imperial Japan employed at Pearl Harbor, on a date which, as an earlier American president said it would, lives in infamy." FDR was right, he added, "but today it is we Americans who live in infamy." It is no surprise that "the global wave of sympathy that engulfed the United States after 9/11 has given way to a global wave of hatred of American arrogance and militarism," and the belief that Bush is "a greater threat to peace than Saddam Hussein."⁴

For the political leadership, mostly recycled from more reactionary sectors of the Reagan-Bush I administrations, "the global wave of hatred" is not a particular problem. They want to be feared, not loved. It is natural for Donald Rumsfeld to quote the words of Chicago gangster Al Capone: "You will get more with a kind word and a gun than with a kind word alone." They understand as well as their establishment critics that their actions increase the risk of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and terror. But that too is not a major problem. Far higher in the scale of priorities are the goals of establishing global hegemony and implementing their domestic agenda: dismantling the progressive achievements that have

⁴ *Los Angeles Times*, March 23, 2003 .

been won by popular struggle over the past century, and institutionalizing these radical changes so that recovering them will be no easy task.

It is not enough for a hegemonic power to declare an official policy. It must establish it as a “new norm of international law” by exemplary action. Distinguished commentators may then explain that law is a flexible living instrument, so that the new norm is now available as a guide to action. It is understood that only those with the guns can establish “norms” and modify international law.

The selected target must meet several conditions. It must be defenseless, important enough to be worth the trouble, and an imminent threat to our survival and ultimate evil. Iraq qualified on all counts. The first two conditions are obvious. For the third, it suffices to repeat the orations of Bush, Blair, and their colleagues: the dictator “is assembling the world’s most dangerous weapons [in order to] dominate, intimidate or attack”; and he “has already used them on whole villages leaving thousands of his own citizens dead, blind or transfigured....If this is not evil then evil has no meaning.”

President Bush’s eloquent denunciation surely rings true. And those who contributed to enhancing evil should certainly not enjoy impunity: among them, the speaker of these lofty words and his current associates, and those who joined them in the years when they were supporting the man of ultimate evil long after he had committed these terrible crimes and after the war with Iraq – because of our duty to help US exporters, the Bush I administration explained. It is impressive to see how easy it is for political leaders, while recounting the monster’s worst crimes, to suppress the crucial words: “with our help, because we don’t care about such matters.” Support shifted to denunciation as soon as their friend committed his first authentic crime: disobeying (or perhaps misunderstanding) orders by invading Kuwait. Punishment was severe – for his subjects. The tyrant escaped unscathed, and was further

Anger at Old Europe has much deeper roots than contempt for democracy. The US has always regarded European unification with some ambivalence. In his “Year of Europe” address 30 years ago, Henry Kissinger advised Europeans to keep to their “regional responsibilities” within the “overall framework of order” managed by the United States.” Europe must not pursue its own independent course, based on its Franco-German industrial and financial heartland. Concerns now extend as well to Northeast Asia, the world’s most dynamic economic region, with ample resources and advanced industrial economies, a potentially integrated region that might also flirt with challenging the overall framework of order, which is to be maintained permanently, by force if necessary, Washington has declared.

larger majority, in most cases. Political commentators ranted about disobedient Old Europe and its psychic maladies, while Congress descended to low comedy.

At the liberal end of the spectrum, Richard Holbrooke stressed “the very important point” that the population of the eight original members of New Europe is larger than that of Old Europe, which proves that France and Germany are “isolated.” So it does, unless we succumb to the radical left heresy that the public might have some role in a democracy. Thomas Friedman urged that France be removed from the permanent members of the Security Council, because it is “in kindergarten,” and “does not play well with others.” It follows that the population of New Europe must still be in nursery school, judging by polls.¹⁴

Turkey was a particularly instructive case. The government resisted heavy pressure to prove its “democratic credentials” by following orders, overruling 95% of its population. Commentators were infuriated by this lesson in democracy, so much so that some even reported Turkey’s crimes against the Kurds in the 1990s, previously a taboo topic because of the crucial US role — though that was still carefully concealed in the lamentations.

The crucial point was expressed by Paul Wolfowitz, who condemned the Turkish military because they “did not play the strong leadership role that we would have expected” and did not intervene to prevent the government from honoring near-unanimous public opinion. Turkey must therefore step up and say “We made a mistake...Let’s figure out how we can be as helpful as possible to the Americans.”¹⁵ Wolfowitz’s stand is particularly informative because he is portrayed as the leading figure in the crusade to democratize the Middle East.

¹⁴ Lee Michael Katz, *National Journal*, Feb. 8, 2003; Friedman, *NYT*, Feb. 9, 2003.

¹⁵ Marc Lacey, *NYT*, May 7/8 2003.

strengthened by the sanctions regime then imposed by his former allies.

Also easy to suppress are the reasons why Washington returned to support for Saddam immediately after the Gulf war, as he crushed rebellions that might have overthrown him. The chief diplomatic correspondent of the *New York Times* explained that “the best of all worlds” for Washington would be “an iron-fisted Iraqi junta without Saddam Hussein,” but since that goal seemed unattainable, we would have to be satisfied with second best. The rebels failed because Washington and its allies held the “strikingly unanimous view [that] whatever the sins of the Iraqi leader, he offered the West and the region a better hope for his country’s stability than did those who have suffered his repression.”⁵ All of this is suppressed in the commentary on the mass graves of the victims of Saddam’s US-authorized paroxysm of terror, now offered as justification for the war on “moral grounds.”⁶ It was all known in 1991, but ignored for reasons of state.

A reluctant domestic population had to be whipped to a proper mood of war fever. From early September, grim warnings were issued about the dire threat Saddam posed to the United States and his links to al-Qaeda, with broad hints that he was involved in the 9–11 attacks. Many of the charges “dangled in front of [the media] failed the laugh test,” the editor of the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* commented, “but the more ridiculous [they were,] the more the media strove to make whole-hearted swallowing of them a test of patriotism.”⁷

The propaganda assault had its effects. Within weeks, a majority of Americans came to regard Saddam Hussein as an imminent threat to the US. Soon almost half believed that Iraq was behind the 9/11 terror. Support for the war correlated with

⁵ Thomas Friedman, *NYT*, June 7, 1991 . Alan Cowell, *NYT*, April 11, 1991 .

⁶ Thomas Friedman, *NYT*, June 4, 2003 .

⁷ Linda Rothstein, editor, *BAS* July 2003.

these beliefs. The propaganda campaign proved just enough to give the administration a bare majority in the mid-term elections, as voters put aside their immediate concerns and huddled under the umbrella of power in fear of the demonic enemy.

The brilliant success of “public diplomacy” was revealed when the President “provided a powerful Reaganesque finale to a six-week war” on the deck of the aircraft carrier *Abraham Lincoln* on May 1. The reference, presumably, is to Reagan’s proud declaration that America was “standing tall” after conquering the nutmeg capital of the world in 1983, preventing the Russians from using it to bomb the US. Reagan’s mimic was free to declare – without concern for skeptical comment at home – that he had won a “victory in a war on terror [by having] removed an ally of Al Qaeda.”⁸ It is immaterial that no credible evidence was provided for the alleged link between Saddam Hussein and his bitter enemy Osama bin Laden and that the charge was dismissed by competent observers. Also immaterial is the only known connection between the victory and terror: the invasion appears to have been a “huge setback in the ‘war on terror,’” by sharply increasing al-Qaeda recruitment, as US official concede.⁹

The *Wall Street Journal* recognized that Bush’s carefully-staged *Abraham Lincoln* extravaganza “marks the beginning of his 2004 re-election campaign,” which the White House hopes “will be built as much as possible around national-security themes.” The electoral campaign will focus on “the *battle* of Iraq, not the war,” chief Republican political strategist Karl Rove explained¹⁰: the war must continue, if only to control the population at home. Before the 2002 elections, he had instructed Party activists to stress security issues, diverting attention from unpopular Republican domestic policies. All of

⁸ Elisabeth Bumiller, *NYT*, May 2, 2003 ; Transcript, same day.

⁹ Jason Burke, London *Sunday Observer*, May 18, 2003 .

¹⁰ Jeanne Cummings and Greg Hite, *WSJ*, May 2, 2003 . Francis Clines, *NYT*, Op-ed, May 10, 2003 ; Rove’s emphasis.

this is second-nature to the recycled Reaganites now in office. That is how they held on to political power during their first tenure in office, regularly pushing the panic button to evade public opposition to the policies that left Reagan the most disliked living President by 1992, ranking alongside Nixon.

Despite its narrow successes, the intensive propaganda campaign left the public unswayed in more fundamental respects. Most continue to prefer UN rather than US leadership in international crises, and by 2–1, prefer that the UN, rather than the United States, should direct reconstruction in Iraq.¹¹

When the occupying army failed to discover WMD, the administration’s stance shifted from “absolute certainty” that Iraq possessed WMD to the position that the accusations were “justified by the discovery of equipment that potentially could be used to produce weapons.”¹² Senior officials suggested a “refinement” in the concept of preventive war that entitles the US to attack “a country that has deadly weapons in mass quantities.” The revision “suggests instead that the administration will act against a hostile regime that has nothing more than the intent and ability to develop [WMD].”¹³ Lowering of the bars for the resort to force is the most significant consequence of the collapse of the proclaimed argument for the invasion.

Perhaps the most spectacular propaganda achievement was the lauding of the president’s “vision” to bring democracy to the Middle East in the midst of an extraordinary display of hatred and contempt for democracy. One illustration was the distinction between Old and New Europe, the former reviled, the latter hailed for its courage. The criterion was sharp: Old Europe consists of governments that took the same position as the vast majority of their populations; the heroes of New Europe followed orders from Crawford Texas, disregarding an even

¹¹ Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA), U. of Maryland, April 18–22.

¹² Dana Milbank, *Washington Post*, June 1, 2003

¹³ Guy Dinmore and James Harding, *Financial Times*, May 3/4, 2003.