

The Empire and Ourselves

Noam Chomsky

April 9, 1986

Contents

Looking Ourselves in the Face in the Mirror of Our Dominions	4
Kennedy’s Paradigm: Better a Trujillo Than a Castro	6
A Pattern for the Region	7
The Death Squads: Legacy of Kennedy’s Alliance for Progress	8
Popular Organizations and State Terror in El Salvador	9
Two Elections: El Salvador and Nicaragua	10
Why Reagan Hates Nicaragua: “The Threat of a Good Example”	11
From the Question Period: Nicaragua and the Russians	12
“Retaliation” in North Africa	14

LET ME BEGIN by asking a question. Why are we having this meeting about Central America today and not, say, ten years ago? Was it, for example, that ten years ago democracy was flourishing in Central America and the population was so happy, free, prosperous and well fed? Well, obviously not. Ten years ago they were living under brutal military dictatorships. We were directly responsible for what was happening to them then, exactly as we are now. But order reigned and profits flowed, and therefore there was no interest here.

Or let's ask a second question. Why are we meeting about Central America and not, say, about the Caribbean? Is it that nothing is happening there? Yes, things are happening there. Take Haiti, for example. Haiti is now in the news. It has been in the news for the last couple months, but about a year ago it wasn't, although interesting and important things were happening. For example, the Haitian legislature passed a law unanimously which read as follows, and I am quoting from it: "Every political party must recognize in its statutes the President for Life as the supreme arbiter of the nation."

The new electoral law excluded the Christian Democrats, and it stated that the state can suspend any political party without reason. This was ratified by 99.98 % of the vote. There was indeed a reaction in the United States. The American ambassador described the new law on political parties as "an encouraging step forward."

The Administration then certified to Congress that democratic development was proceeding, and that allowed them to release \$50 million in military and economic aid. The economic aid primarily aided Baby Doc; it went straight into his bank accounts. The United States at that point was pursuing what the House Foreign Affairs Committee called the basic principle of U.S. policy, namely, to maintain friendly relations with Duvalier's noncommunist government.

Haiti is a country of about six million people in which four thousand families have 80% of the wealth, 87% of the children suffer from malnutrition, there's 82% illiteracy, 60% of the population have an annual per capita income of \$60. There torture, state terror and slave labor conditions are the common lot. But that's perfectly okay. No concern here.

By December of last year things began to change. There was turbulence, demonstrations, killings. And at that point the United States began to show some concern about what was happening. Here is the way it was described in the Wall Street Journal: "The White House concluded that the regime was unraveling. U.S. analysts learned that ruling inner circles had lost faith in Duvalier. As a result, U.S. officials, including Secretary of State George Shultz, began openly calling for a "democratic process in Haiti."

Well, that's an interesting comment. The cynicism is quite extraordinary. Of course it wouldn't be noticed in a highly indoctrinated society like ours. But the point is that before, everything was quite satisfactory while now we suddenly needed a democratic process. The same cynicism was illustrated in our behavior in the Philippines about the same time, also evoking great self-congratulation and much awe about our general magnificence.

Now there is an official explanation for the lack of attention when order reigns and profits flow, One version of that was given by Jean Kirkpatrick, the chief sadist-in-residence of the Reagan Administration, in the article that propelled her to fame and into the Administration in 1979. She had the following to say:

Because the miseries of traditional life are familiar, they are bearable to ordinary people who, growing up in the society, learn to cope and therefore accept the fact that wealth, power, status and other resources favor an affluent few while traditional

autocrats maintain the masses in misery. So therefore our lack of concern is quite proper; indeed, quite decent and moral because the lower orders feel no pain.

That, incidentally, is quite a classic view of imperial power. In Central America, however, by the late 1970s, problems were brewing. What was happening was that the pack animals forgot that the miseries of traditional life are quite bearable in luxury apartments in Washington, and they tried to overcome them. That was a threat to order and profits in Nicaragua, in El Salvador, and Guatemala. So therefore there was great concern here and much sudden rhetoric about the need for democracy; an increased U.S. involvement; and meetings like this one which don't take place when U.S. interests are not threatened. All of that teaches us something about ourselves.

Looking Ourselves in the Face in the Mirror of Our Dominions

If you want to learn something about the nature of the Soviet Union, what kind of a government it is and what kind of a society they run, one of the best things to do is look at Eastern Europe. That tells you what they do when they have a chance, when something is under their control.

Central America and the Caribbean have been in the iron grip of the United States for a century and therefore they tell us a lot about ourselves. What you find if you look is one of the world's worst horror chambers. There's starvation, slave labor, torture, massacre by U.S. clients. Virtually every effort to bring about some constructive change has led to a new dose of U.S. violence.

It's an illuminating picture if we want to learn. As an example of how little we want to learn, you might take a look at last Sunday's "New York Times Magazine" where there's a cover article by James Lemoyne. He has the following to say:

Virtually every study of the region, including the Kissinger Commission Report, has concluded that the revolutions of Central America primarily have been caused by decades of poverty, bloody repression, and frustrated efforts at bringing about political reform.

Well, that's true. Virtually every study has concluded that. But why? What has caused the decades of poverty and bloody repression? That question is unanswered. His article goes on to talk about the Soviet Union and Cuba and Bulgaria and North Korea and the PLO—all sorts of countries who are involved in the region and causing all sorts of turmoil and problems.

But there is one country that is mysteriously missing from the discussion—namely, the major one, the one that has the responsibility for the tragedy and for the turmoil, and that is a revealing example of the cynicism and the quite astonishing moral cowardice of the American elites. And in this it is very much like every official study of the region and a great many of the unofficial ones.

A couple of months ago the Council on Hemispheric Affairs published its annual human rights report for Latin America. It selected, as the worst governments in Latin America for 1985, El Salvador and Guatemala, the only two governments in Central America "that abducted, killed, and tortured political opponents on a systematic and widespread basis." This, incidentally, is the sixth successive year that they obtained that honor, and in that period they have succeeded in

killing, those two governments, roughly a hundred and fifty thousand people, and causing several millions of refugees.

There was, in fact, one other contender for first place in the Council on Hemispheric Affairs report; namely, the Contras—what even their supporters call an American proxy army, that is attacking Nicaragua from its Honduran, and in part Costa Rican, bases. There are also thousands of civilians murdered, tortured, and mutilated by them. They carry out no other noteworthy military operations. The only reason they don't achieve first place is that they don't have quite the strength to do it.

Now these atrocities are not the ordinary garden variety kinds of murders. In El Salvador it means, for example, elite American-trained battalions going through a town, destroying, and leaving behind them women hanging by their feet with their breasts cut off and their facial skin peeled back, bleeding to death.

It means in Nicaragua, for example, the Contras going into a town, shooting it up, killing people, taking a fourteen-year-old girl, raping her, slitting her throat, cutting her head off and putting it on a pole to intimidate the rest of the population. To pick one example. That one from an American priest who has been working there for many years. One example from a list a mile long compiled by human rights organizations, barely noted here and quickly forgotten.

It's rather interesting that American reporters in Nicaragua are remarkably incapable of discovering any of these facts, though every investigating group that goes down quickly comes up with a gory and grisly series of them.

In Guatemala it means, for example, troops going into a village, collecting the population in the central town building, taking out the men and beheading them, raping and then killing the women, taking out the children and smashing them to pieces against rocks in a nearby river. These are the kinds of things that we are talking about. This is a record that bears comparison to Pol Pot, both in scale and in character.

It's also notable that we are talking about three close U.S. allies, in fact clients, which have been supported by the United States throughout. With one exception. In the case of Guatemala, Congress put some restrictions on the Executive limiting its capacity to participate in genocide to the extent that it wanted, and therefore it was necessary to call upon other client states to help. First were Argentine neo-Nazis, but that was lost with the unfortunate return to democracy in Argentina; and since, primarily Israel, which has lent itself with great enthusiasm to the cause.

To that record we may add Nicaragua, where in 1978 and 1979, in the last days of Somoza, about fifty thousand more people were killed. Contrary to many lies, the Carter Administration supported that massacre to the very end. It's very much like the Haiti and Philippines case.

When it was clear that Somoza could no longer be maintained, the Carter Administration tried to retain control of the country by the National Guard, which the U.S. had installed in the first place and had trained and maintained ever since. And when even that didn't work, the United States shortly after began organizing the National Guard again, outside Nicaragua, to attack the country, now as a proxy army. Well, all of this also teaches us something about ourselves if we care to learn.

Kennedy's Paradigm: Better a Trujillo Than a Castro

What is the reason for this very systematic behavior? And, indeed, it is quite systematic. There is an official answer to that, or kind of answer. The answer was perhaps given in its clearest form by John F. Kennedy. He said that we would be in favor of decent democratic regimes, as he put it, but, and then comes a rather big but: if there is a danger of a Castro we will always support a Trujillo.

Well, what do those terms mean? What did he mean by a Castro? It is important to understand that he did not mean a Communist or a Russian ally, but rather the category of Castro is vastly broader. As for Trujillo, we know what he meant by that. Trujillo was the murderous and brutal dictator of the Dominican Republic who was installed with U.S. support and who tortured, murdered, and robbed for thirty-five years with American support until we finally turned against him because his robbery began to extend to U.S. corporations and their local clients.

In fact the Dominican Republic serves as a kind of illuminating case study to answer what I think is the crucial question: what Kennedy and the other planners mean when they say we have to avoid the danger of a Castro. The first Marine landing on the Dominican Republic was in the year 1800, so there's a long history.

I won't run through the nineteenth century but the most serious interventions began under Woodrow Wilson. Woodrow Wilson, as you all learn in school, was the great apostle of self-determination and he celebrated this doctrine, among other things, by invading the Dominican Republic and Haiti. In the Dominican Republic his warriors fought for six years to suppress the "damn Dagoes" as Theodore Roosevelt had described them. This was a vicious counterinsurgency campaign that has essentially disappeared from American history. The first major scholarly study of it just appeared in 1984, by Bruce Calder, University of Texas Press. Calder, in keeping with the conventions of American scholarship, regards this as a kind of an odd exception, an inexplicable departure from our path of righteousness. But he does describe what happened and I'll give you some of his description.

He says that Wilson intervened in the Dominican Republic in 1916 to block constitutional government and insure complete U.S. economic and military control. The behavior of the Marines, he says, was brutish by Dominican standards. They murdered, destroyed villages, they tortured, they created concentration camps which served as a slave labor supply for the sugar corporations. The end result was that the sugar companies, overwhelmingly American, owned about a quarter of the agricultural land while the population sank into misery and starvation.

Now, of course, all of this was done in self-defense. Everything we always do is in self-defense. But who were we defending ourselves against? Well it started in 1916 so we couldn't be defending ourselves against the Bolsheviks. So it turned out that we were defending ourselves against the Huns. There didn't happen to be any Huns there but that didn't matter.

When the Marines left, they placed the country in the hands of a National Guard trained by the United States. Trujillo quickly emerged and he became the dictator, one of the most rapacious and brutal of the many dictators that we've established under similar conditions throughout the region of our control.

Well, everything was okay for thirty or thirty-five years. Trujillo was praised in the United States as a forward-looking leader; for example, after he massacred fifteen or twenty thousand Haitians in one month in 1937 and carried out other similar actions against his own population. However, by the late 1950s this love affair was beginning to turn sour. Trujillo owned at that

time about 70 to 80% of the economy, which means that the proper owners, mainly American-based corporations, were being pushed out. The CIA was authorized, or instructed, to carry out an assassination plot. Whether they did it or not, somebody did. He was assassinated.

At that point there was a democratic election, in 1962. Juan Bosch was elected. Juan Bosch was a Kennedy liberal. His policies were essentially those professed by John F. Kennedy. Kennedy immediately committed himself to undermine and destroy him. U.S. aid was stopped. The United States blocked the removal of Trujilloist officers. The U.S. military maintained their close contact with them. It was quite obvious that there would be a military coup given this U.S. insistence on maintaining the Trujilloist military system.

Bosch fought corruption, he defended civil liberties, he stopped police repression. He began programs to educate peasants and workers for true democratic participation. He actually succeeded under awful conditions in initiating an economic revival. It was plain that we had to “let him go,” as Ambassador Martin said, and so we did. There was a military coup, quickly recognized by the United States. Well, at that point an economic decline set in, corruption increased, the repression increased—and all of this was fine. No objections.

That incident helps us get some understanding of the meaning of the term “Castro.” Juan Bosch was one of those Castros who we have to oppose in favor of a Trujillo. Juan Bosch was not a Communist, he was a liberal democrat. He tried to institute a capitalist democracy, and that was intolerable to Big Brother.

Well, that’s not the end of the story. In 1965 there was a constitutionalist military coup, attempting to return the Dominican Republic to constitutionalist rule to reinstate the legally elected president, Juan Bosch. Twenty-three thousand Marines were sent, who fought against the Constitutional forces. And then they stood by while the Dominican military, whom they had rescued, carried out a substantial slaughter of civilians. They stood by because the official line was that it would violate U.S. neutrality for them to intervene at that point. So, the threat of democracy was averted and the traditional order was restored.

The result this time was more serious. It was death squads, torture, mass starvation, the flight of about 20% of the population to the United States, and outstanding opportunities for U.S. investors who bought up pretty much the rest of the country—Gulf and Western being one, among others.

A Pattern for the Region

In El Salvador in 1932 there was a huge massacre they called “the Mantanza.” The first Mantanza; the second one being the one that’s going on now. Some ten to thirty thousand peasants were murdered in a few weeks. The United States Navy was standing off-shore at the time but, as the Chief of Naval Operations testified before Congress, it was not necessary to intervene because he said the situation was well in hand. So we just watched.

Turning to Nicaragua, the first major U.S. military intervention in Nicaragua was in 1854. That’s a hundred and thirty years ago, a little over that. At that time the U.S. Navy burned down a town to avenge an alleged insult to an American millionaire, Cornelius Vanderbilt. Through a good part of the first half of this century the country was under Marine rule. That left the National Guard under Somoza, and we maintained it until the very end.

In Guatemala there had been one interval in the traditional history of brutal military dictatorships, 1944–1954, when there was a democratic, capitalist regime. It was initiated by Arevalo

who was modeling himself on Roosevelt's New Deal and immediately aroused bitter American enmity. In 1954 that experiment was overthrown by a CIA coup. That initiated thirty years of military dictatorship in a state which probably resembles Nazi Germany more closely than any other in the contemporary world over this period.

In 1963 it looked as if there might be a danger of a democratic election. When they thought that Arevalo was going to be allowed back into the country and that might have meant a democratic election, Kennedy supported a military coup to forestall that. This act initiated a really huge massacre, maybe ten thousand people or so were killed in the late 1960s.

At that point there was direct U.S. support. U.S. Green Berets were involved. According to the Vice President of Guatemala, U.S. planes, based in Panama, were carrying out napalm raids. Things were then quiet for a little while but in the late '70s it got serious again and since that time, maybe since about 1978, current estimates are that about a hundred thousand people were killed, with U.S. support throughout.

I should say that among the other lies that you read constantly one is that under the Carter Administration military aid to these Guatemalan Himmlers was terminated. That's false. In fact, U.S. military aid continued just barely below its normal level right through this time.

Under Reagan, support for what at that point even the conservative Guatemalan bishops were calling genocide, became absolutely euphoric. The worst of these monsters, Rios Montt, who was in charge, for example, during the incident that I mentioned before. Reagan described him as a man totally committed to democracy who is getting a bum rap by human rights groups.

The Death Squads: Legacy of Kennedy's Alliance for Progress

Now this apparatus of repression and murder and death squads and torture, that was an essential component of John F. Kennedy's Alliance for Progress. And that's worth understanding. In 1962 the Kennedy Administration made a decision which in terms of its consequences is one of the most important in recent history, barely known here. They effectively switched the mission of the Latin American military from hemispheric defense to internal security. Internal security means war against their own population. And that's what happened as in country after country national security states were established modeled on the Nazis, often using Nazi war criminals who we had spirited out of Germany and settled in Latin America. People like Klaus Barbie. It ended up being what a commission headed by Sol Linowitz called "a plague of repression without parallel in the history of the continent." In El Salvador the Kennedy Administration established the basic structure of the death squads, the intelligence apparatus which was then put to work.

The Alliance for Progress, which is much lauded here as another exhibition of our benevolence, was a totally cynical operation. The Alliance for Progress was initiated in order to stop "the virus of Castro from spreading contagion throughout the region"—that's very common, typical terminology. It did favor a certain kind of economic development, geared to export crops for the benefit of U.S.-based agribusiness and fertilizer and pesticide companies.

During that period there was statistical growth. So, for example, in all of the Central American countries under the Alliance for Progress and as a result of its programs, beef production increased. But, at the same time, in every single one of these countries, beef consumption decreased. The reason was that croplands that had been used for subsistence crops for the population was being eliminated in favor of grazing lands for wealthy ranchers tied to American agribusiness

who were producing beef for export. In fact, throughout this period while there was statistical growth, there was also increased misery and increased starvation.

Now that kind of economic development carries a corollary. That kind of economic development does inevitably arouse dissidents and that requires an apparatus of repression to still it. In this precise and clear respect the death squads, for which the basic structures were established by the Kennedy Administration, are part and parcel of the Alliance for Progress and an essential component of it. In fact, the death squads are the only lasting element of that system apart from the enrichment of U.S. agribusiness and related corporations.

Popular Organizations and State Terror in El Salvador

Let us examine that legacy in the recent history of El Salvador. In the 1970s some things were happening. There were elections in 1972 and 1977. The 1972 election was won by Duarte and Ungo. It was stolen by the military. Duarte was captured and tortured. He was finally released and came to the United States. Nobody even wanted to talk to him. In fact, in Congress there were exactly two people, apparently, Edward Kennedy and Tom Harkin, who were willing even to talk to him.

That reveals with utter clarity the absolute loathing of American elites for democracy as long as order is being maintained, as long as profits are flowing. It also reveals with absolute clarity the utter cynicism of the contemporary pretense of concern for democracy. It's a very thin cover for state terrorism.

The same thing happened in 1977, again arousing very little interest or concern here: repression, torture, starvation, the normal aspects of the American semi-colonies continued, so everything was essentially fine.

There were, however, two problems. The first problem was what was going on in Nicaragua. In 1979 Somoza was overthrown and that was serious because Nicaragua had been the major base for the projection of American power in the region. It was a base for the successful overthrow of Guatemalan democracy in 1954, for the Bay of Pigs attack on Cuba in 1961, for the Dominican Republic invasion in 1965, and also even for the overturning of the election in El Salvador in 1972, when Nicaraguan troops intervened.

This base was now lost. There was a second, even more immediate, concern in El Salvador itself. And that was that in the 1970s, what they called popular organizations were beginning to develop. Many of them were church-based, beginning with Bible study groups, turning to self-help groups, peasant associations, teachers unions, and so on.

That really was a danger sign, because it meant that there really was a threat of meaningful democracy. That is, not what we call democracy, which is a system that allows a population every once in a while to choose between selected business and landowner groups who share control of the state between them, while the military makes sure that nobody is causing any trouble. That's what we call democracy.

But the Salvadoran popular movement could have been an effective and meaningful democracy which would have given people the actual opportunity to participate in a democratic process. Something which we don't have here, incidentally, and which we certainly are not going to tolerate in a colony like El Salvador. Something had to be done about that, and, in fact, it was.

In February 1980 Archbishop Romero sent a letter to Carter. “The aid,” he wrote to Carter, “will surely increase injustice here and sharpen the repression that has been unleashed against the people’s organizations fighting to defend their most fundamental human rights.”

Romero had seized upon what was, in fact, the essence of U.S. policy, namely, to destroy the popular organizations, so Carter naturally sent the aid with a message to Congress, saying that the aid was “to help the army’s key role in reforms.” That’s one that would have made Orwell gasp.

At that point the obvious consequences followed. A few weeks later the Archbishop was assassinated. In May the war against the peasants was unleashed in full violence. This was done under the guise of land reform, incidentally. A state of siege was established which remains until today. We hear a lot of complaints here about the Nicaraguan state of siege, initiated just last October!

The peasants were the main victims of the Carter-Duarte war in 1980–10,000 or so. In June the University was destroyed; the army moved in, killed a lot of people, burned the library, destroyed equipment, and so on. In November the political opposition was simply massacred by the security forces.

Meanwhile the media were destroyed. We don’t believe in censorship in the United States, as you know, and we have become quite irate when a country under attack by the United States censors a newspaper that is openly subsidized by the country that is attacking it and has expressed support for the attack launched against their country. Of course we would never do anything of that kind if we were under attack from some unimaginable superpower, from Mars or somewhere. If a newspaper here was supporting the attacker and the editor was expressing support for the attack we certainly wouldn’t have any censorship under those circumstances.

In fact that is true. Because anyone even remotely connected to the newspaper would either have been killed or put in concentration camps—as you may recall was done here under much less onerous circumstances, here in California, when it was found useful to steal land from domestic Japanese. And that was at a time when the United States itself was not under attack. American colonies had been attacked, not the United States itself.

Anyway, we are very irate about censorship. We don’t believe in censorship. What we believe in is what is lauded in El Salvador, where there has been no censorship. It is perfectly true that there has been no censorship. The reason is there is no media. The editor of one journal was found decapitated, after torture, in a ditch. The editor of another journal fled after assassination attempts. The church radio stations were blown up. So now you don’t have any censorship. Everything’s fine.

Two Elections: El Salvador and Nicaragua

After a sufficient dose of terror, what we like to call free elections were carried out in El Salvador. In the words of a British parliamentary human rights delegation which observed them, the elections were carried out “in an atmosphere of terror and despair, macabre rumor and grisly reality.” Well, the American press hailed this triumph of democracy exactly as Pravda does under comparable circumstances.

That same parliamentary British human rights group observed the recent Nicaraguan elections, which it found “fair and honest.” This was the same report given by numerous observers in

Nicaragua, one of which was an Irish parliamentary delegation including representatives from two conservative parties. Their report was full of praise for the elections. The American professional Latin American Studies Association described the elections as “among the best held in Latin America.” But none of this was reported in the American press. The elections didn’t take place. There were no elections in Nicaragua.

So you constantly read that one of the crimes of the Sandinistas is that they didn’t allow elections. And therefore unless they allow elections we have to do this mad, horrible thing to them. Meanwhile, in El Salvador, where the elections were carried out in an atmosphere of “terror and despair, macabre rumor and grisly reality,” that’s fine. In fact, it’s a great triumph.

The person who translated the plea of Archbishop Romero into English was a leading Central American Jesuit priest. He was originally Guatemalan, but he fled from the American-backed death squads in Guatemala to El Salvador, where he then was forced to flee from the American-backed death squads in El Salvador to Nicaragua.

I was honored to be his guest a couple of weeks ago. He’s part of the quite wonderful exile community that is in Nicaragua. People such as Christian Democrats who have escaped the death squads in El Salvador. The Guatemalan Human Rights Group, which of course can’t function in Guatemala. And many others who fled from the various U.S. torture chambers to the one place in Central America where a decent person can live with some dignity and hope. Although “we” are going to take care of that!

Why Reagan Hates Nicaragua: “The Threat of a Good Example”

In January 1981 Reagan was sworn in as President. The massacres in El Salvador escalated, in sadism and scale. Direct U.S. participation increased. The U.S. Air Force, flying from Honduran bases, coordinates air strikes against Salvadoran villages. Night attacks, much more accurate attacks given the U.S. participation, have increased the kill rate among defenseless villagers and fleeing peasants. These horrors continue.

The reaction to them here is interesting. They have led to a mounting applause in the United States as the terror has seemed to be achieving some results. And in fact it is a success. It has very largely succeeded in destroying the popular organizations, as it was intended to do. The threat of democracy has been overcome. Correspondingly there has been great awe and high regard for our achievement there. It is one of the most sordid episodes in American history.

American rhetoric throughout this period is very noble and elevated. But the reality that it obscures is something rather different. The official enemy is what president Kennedy called the “monolithic and ruthless conspiracy that is attempting to thwart our benevolence.” The “monolithic and ruthless conspiracy” was renamed “the Evil Empire” by the Kennedy clone Ronald Reagan. The real enemy has always been the indigenous population. And the principle under which we have defended ourselves from indigenous populations throughout the world has been our freedom to rob and exploit.

If we cannot destroy such elements by force, as we typically try to do, then the next best thing is to drive them into the hands of the Russians so we can then provide a retrospective justification for the violence and terror that we launch against them for quite different reasons.

This very familiar story is being re-lived in Nicaragua today. The United States is not concerned by the useless tanks in the streets of Managua, nor is it concerned by the censorship of a journal

that is supported by the aggressor and supports the aggression. What it is concerned about is the early success, and quite substantial success, of social reforms—thankfully aborted, thanks to the Contra war.

This is well understood by independent agencies that work in Nicaragua. Oxfam America reports that among the four countries in which it has worked in Central America for the last twenty years or so, “only in Nicaragua has substantial effort been made to address inequities in land ownership and to extend health, educational, and agricultural services to poor peasant families.”

But the Contra war has slowed the pace of social reform and it has compounded the hunger in the northern countryside exactly as intended, and it has compelled Oxfam to convert its development aid to a war relief, which is a great success for American policy.

The title of one Oxfam report on Nicaragua, incidentally, is “The Threat of a Good Example.” That explains the reason for the American attack against Nicaragua. The reasons that are offered by Washington are too ridiculous to merit rebuttal among sane people.

Julia Preston in the “Boston Globe”, a month or so ago, says that “few U.S. officials now believe the Contras can drive out the Sandinistas soon. Administration officials say they are content to see the Contras debilitate the Sandinistas by forcing them to divert scarce resources towards the war and away from social programs.”

The cruelty and savagery of that policy is impossible to discuss, as I can’t find words to describe the cynicism of the fact that it is reported without arousing any concern here. The point is, the United States will not tolerate any constructive development in its own domain, any developments that will harm the interests of the elites who run this place, and hence we are going to destroy them if they happen anywhere else. Throughout, the real concern is the threat of a good example.

Now, there is no reason at all for us to allow this horror story to continue. In a country as free as this one, there is a great deal that can be done to reverse this course. It basically requires two things.

The first thing is that it requires a certain amount of honesty. Enough honesty to learn who we are and what we do in the world and what we’ve been doing for a long, long time. Secondly, it requires a certain degree of courage and commitment, namely to devote ourselves to changing a world of terror and suffering that we have helped to create and now maintain. (Applause)

From the Question Period: Nicaragua and the Russians

Q: Professor Chomsky, with due respect to your erudition, your lecture to me came across as somewhat one-sided. We cannot fail to recall that the United States was the largest donor to independent Zimbabwe whose leader is an avowed Marxist. We also should not overlook the fact that the United States has given substantial aid to Tanzania whose leader has also been an avowed socialist and practices socialist policies. Also, the other major point which I think needed some emphasis is that Russia and its allies, which play a substantial military role in places like Cuba and Central America, are the antithesis of democracy insofar as the political process goes. We need not deny the economic improvements that have taken place in the respective countries. But I do think that these countries are not lovers of democracy and that there is some basis for the cur-

rent Administration's policies being predicated on concern for Russian and Communist intervention as well.

Chomsky: Okay, just to save time let me keep to Central America and put aside the African case. If we were to look at the African case we would discover that the aid is being given in the same manner and for the same purposes. That is, to prevent meaningful social reform and to insure that the countries will be penetrable by U.S.-based institutions.

There is no question at all that the Soviet Union is the antithesis of democracy, plainly. But does that mean that the United States has a right for a concern over Russian military aid to Nicaragua? That's the crucial thing. That mistakes totally what is going on.

The United States is pleading, is working with almost fanatical determination, to try to get Nicaragua to rely solely on Russian aid. That's the purpose of the America attack.

We are sending a military force to attack a country and at the same time are cutting off every source of aid to them. So, for example, France was sending military aid to Nicaragua but we put pressure on France to stop—we want the Soviet Union to support them. Not only have we cut off every kind of military aid, but we have also cut off every other kind of aid.

Let's take an actual look at the figures. In May 1985 when the U.S. imposed the embargo on Nicaragua, total Nicaraguan trade with the Soviet Bloc countries was about 20%. That's roughly the same as U.S. trade with the Soviet Bloc countries, a little less in fact. And much less than European and general Third World trade. Now the figure is much higher. A big surprise. We cut off our trade and we've put pressure on client states to cut off trade, including most of Europe. And we've cut off support from the international lending institutions.

So big surprise, the country that we are attacking turns to the one country that is willing to give them aid, the Soviet Union. And then we have the hypocrisy to accuse them of taking Soviet aid and of claiming that this is a reason for concern on our part.

There's only one thing more to say about that. And that is, why are we doing this? Why did we do it in the case of Cuba? Why did we do it in the case of Vietnam? Why do we always do it? The answer is quite obvious. Because that allows people to ask questions like the one you've asked.

That allows the newcasters on TV to get up and make breathless comments about the Soviet Bloc arms used by these Communists after we've sent an army to attack them and cut off every other supply of arms. In fact, as I said, it gives retrospective justification for the attack that we are carrying out against them for entirely different reasons. Namely, because they are the threat of a good example.

Having said this, let me take a look at your question from another point of view. Suppose that, contrary to fact, Nicaragua had wanted to have primarily Soviet aid, which it did not. We want them to be a Soviet client so we can have a justification to destroy them. But suppose they had wanted Soviet aid. Then they would be very much like Denmark. Denmark gets its military support from us. Now suppose that the Soviet Union took a position like yours: What right does Denmark have to get aid from the United States? We've got to send an army to attack Denmark and destroy it and torture people and murder them because, look, they're getting aid from the United States, our great enemy. How would we react to that?

We take it for granted that these countries are our domains. They are not allowed to do anything that we don't tell them to do. And if they decide to be pluralistic, no, we kill them. And if they would decide to be as dependent on the Soviet Union as Denmark is on us, well, then,

obviously we kill them. And that's taken for granted. That again is a sign of the lawlessness and thuggery of mainstream American culture.

You know, if the Soviet Union said, Look, we've got to contain Denmark by sending an army to attack it—how would we react? Well, that's the way we ought to react to ourselves.

“Retaliation” in North Africa

Q: Could you please comment on the recent Israeli and U.S. acts of aggression in North Africa against specifically Tunisia and Libya and how this will affect the struggle for Palestinian justice?

Chomsky: Well these are important cases. Let's take Tunisia first. Israel, with U.S. complicity, obviously, sent bombers to attack Tunis where they killed fifty-five Palestinians and twenty Tunisians. Nobody who was attacked had anything to do with the action to which this was allegedly a retaliation. Tunis was attacked because it was defenseless. That's typical, incidentally. You attack people who are defenseless. You want to make sure you don't attack ones who can fight back.

The attack that it was supposedly in retaliation for was in Larnaca, Cyprus, where three Israelis had been murdered. The murderers had been caught and were facing trial. Israeli intelligence and American intelligence conceded that nobody in Tunis had anything to do with it. They said it was organized in Syria. But, of course, if you attack Syria you're in trouble. They have a missile defense system and the Russians might do something and so on. Tunis is defenseless so it is easy to attack.

The United States government officially applauded them for carrying out this attack and said it was a legitimate response to terrorism. Then, after the world reaction to that, the United States backed off a little. It abstained on the Security Council resolution denouncing what the Security Council unanimously, except for the United States, called an act of aggression. And then the U.S. government was criticized here for being anti-Semitic for abstaining on that resolution. That again tells you something about American culture.

I mentioned that the U.S. government was obviously involved in this raid. That's certain. The Israeli planes came right across the Mediterranean. They were refueled in flight. The U.S. government's official position is that they were unable to detect them.

This is the most sophisticated surveillance system in the world and they were unable to detect planes that were even being refueled on the way. If that's really true, anybody who believes that tale ought to be calling for a congressional investigation of the total incompetence of the American military, which plainly leaves the country completely open to attack by anybody. You may believe that story, but no sane person will. In fact, part of our complicity in the attack was that we didn't even inform the Tunisians that the killers were on their way.

This morning's "L.A. Times", just to take another example, has a story about international terrorism, the great scourge of the modern age. They quote as authorities representatives of several of the leading terrorist states, the United States and Israel in particular. And they talk about all the horrible terrorist acts that have taken place. They don't mention this one. The Tunis attack does not count. That is because that was, in our terms, a legitimate response to terrorism and therefore it's okay.

What was it a response to? Let's admit what is absurd, that the attack on Tunis was a retaliation for the Larnaca killings, which were certainly terrorism. But why were the Larnaca killings carried out? Was it just crazy Arabs? No, they claimed it was retaliation. And in fact in that case the claim is a little more plausible than the Israeli one.

They claimed it was retaliation for the hijacking of ships. Now Israel freely hijacks ships in the Mediterranean that are in transit between Cyprus and Lebanon. And it captures people on them. It's been doing this certainly since 1976. It quite freely and openly takes the ships into Israeli ports and does anything it wants to the people. Captures them and puts them in jail. Back in 1976 it was sending them to its Christian allies in Lebanon, who killed them.

Now the hijacking of ships is considered a crime when it's done by the wrong people. You know we get all upset about it. But this hijacking is considered quite okay because it's done by an American client state, which inherits the right of terrorism from us, and therefore the acts that they carry out are not terrorism.

I don't say we can condone the murders in Larnaca. But they had a reason that they gave. They claimed that these yachts in Cyprus were being used for surveillance that was sending information for the ship hijackers. Well I don't know if that is true or not. But that was an act of retaliation. However, that's not the way we look at it. It's our side that retaliates and their side who are terrorists.

If you've read "The City of God" by St. Augustine, you may recall that he describes a case where Alexander of Macedon captured a pirate. And he asks him, How dare you disturb the seas with your crimes? And the pirate responds, How dare you disturb the world with your crimes? The pirate says, I have a small boat so I'm a thief, you have a navy so you are an emperor and not a thief. St. Augustine says that was "an elegant and accurate response." And it is. If you have a navy and you disturb the world you're not a terrorist. But if you're small and you have a little boat, you're a terrorist. That's essentially the criterion.

We could go back, you know, stage after stage after stage, and we'll find plenty of terrorism. Most of it being carried out on our side in the Middle East with direct American responsibility. That's, incidentally, by an overwhelming margin in numbers killed, in preemptive strikes, and so on. Just overwhelmingly.

Let's talk about Libya. That's again the same story. Why did we attack Libya? [Chomsky is referring here to the first attack on Libyan ships. The U.S. bombed Libya a few days later—ed.]

Well, Libya plays a very special role in American policy. We regularly attack Libya because it is easy. The Reagan Administration has to maintain war fever. Has to maintain confrontation. And the reasons for that have to do with its domestic policies. The major domestic policies of the Reagan Administration were to effect a substantial transfer of resources from the poor to the rich. To provide a huge state subsidy to the system of advanced technology.

The ratio of state spending to GNP has risen faster under the Reagan Administration than since World War II. The way you force the public to invest in high-technology industry, the way you arrange the system of public subsidy for private profit, is through the military system. Every time it's felt necessary to force the public to invest in high technology, what you do is say, the Russians are coming and we've got to have a big military system and lots of missiles. And accidentally you are able to build the next generation of computers with public funds.

The beneficiaries are not military industry primarily, it's just high-technology industry. Associated with that is increased intervention throughout the world. So you've got to get the public scared and that means you have to have confrontations and war fevers.

Theoretically the enemy is supposed to be the Soviet Union. But it's tricky to get involved with them. They can fight back. So it's best not to have confrontations with them. That might blow up the world. It's best to find somebody you can attack who can't fight back. Well, Libya is made to order. I mean, you know, to talk about a confrontation between Libya and the United States is—I won't even talk about it. It's only in a country as brainwashed as this that one could even talk about the topic.

Furthermore, Khadafi is very easy to hate. He is a terrorist. In fact, Libya has killed dozens, according to Amnesty International. The last Amnesty International figure was, I forget the exact number, maybe 20 or some number of Libyan dissidents throughout the world, and that sure is terrorism. If you look you'll notice that Amnesty International was able to list them and give their names.

In the case of our client states, like, say, El Salvador and Guatemala, they can't list them. There isn't enough paper to list them. Besides they don't know their names because they run to a hundred and fifty thousand or something. But undoubtedly Libya is a terrorist state. Even if it's a kind of retail terrorism by our standards. (Laughter and applause.)

Anyhow, it is involved in terrorism and Khadafi is easy to hate. So therefore it is very easy to set up confrontations with Khadafi, and also cheap. We've done it repeatedly. We've done it about four or five times in the last four years. Every time that it is necessary to strike manly, heroic poses we invent something like a Libyan invasion of the Sudan across six hundred miles of desert and we're going to stop them by a manly show of resolve. George Shultz can get up and strike heroic poses on television.

Some of the cases are so ludicrous you can barely believe them. There was the story in 1981 that Libyan hit men were roaming the streets of Washington to assassinate our leader. They put tanks around the White House. It requires an extraordinarily brainwashed country not to have collapsed in ridicule over that story.

The ultimate end of that story was that the U.S. transmitted throughout the world a list of the hit men. They didn't want to identify them here, but there was a secret list circulated. And in England it surfaced. It leaked to the press and it was published. And it turned out that the list of Libyan hit men was Lebanese Shiites, including the leader of the Lebanese religious community, who I think is about eighty. To compound the idiocy, these people are fanatically anti-Libyan because Libya probably killed their major religious figure. Anyway, the American press was loyal enough not to report any of that.

Now take a look at that incident. It tells you something else about the lawlessness and thuggery of the current Administration; in fact, of all of elite opinion. If you look at the confrontation with Libya you'll notice that what everybody discusses is the U.S. right to send ships, as granted by the law of the sea.

There are two points to notice about that. One thing is that Libya didn't attack our ships. So therefore any question that may be raised about the law of the sea is totally irrelevant. Libya attacked our planes. So what's involved is the right of hostile aircraft to intrude.

Now the United States has a position on that. There is no law about that. States take unilateral positions. And the United States has a position. We have what we call an "11 air identification zone" under which we claim the right to shoot down hostile aircraft within a two-hundred mile range of our shores. Now it's kind of hard for us to claim that other countries don't have the same right if we claim that right.

Our planes had intruded with obviously hostile intent well within a two-hundred mile limit. So by our standards Libya had a right to shoot them down. We then committed an illegal act by retaliating against Libyan ships. Now all of this is suppressed in the discussion and people talk learnedly about the law of the sea and twelve mile limits, which is totally irrelevant to what happened. This was simply an act of international lawlessness on the part of the United States. That's point number one. By our own standards.

Point number two, suppose that some confrontation had taken place on the sea, which it didn't until we attacked Libyan ships. Well, suppose you and your neighbor have an argument over whether some plot in your backyard belongs to him or belongs to you. There are two ways of dealing with that. One way is to take a gun and shoot him. The other way is to go to the courts. Now that is the difference between the Mafia and law-abiding citizens. And exactly the same is true in this situation.

If there is a dispute over the Gulf of Sidra there is a way to deal with it. There's the World Court, for example. That's the way to deal with it. Now there is plainly no urgency. You know, nothing turns on whether ships can sail there tomorrow or two years from now.

But for a lawless, violent state you don't use legal means. What you do is shoot your way through. That's exactly what we did. We did it because we needed a confrontation and we want to elicit terrorism so that we can then scream about terrorism. And it was very well-timed, long planned, and it's not the first time. It's the fourth or fifth time. That's what the Libya thing is about, and there'll be more like Libya.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Noam Chomsky
The Empire and Ourselves
April 9, 1986

Retrieved on 8th June 2021 from chomsky.info
From *A Solidarity Pamphlet*, April 9, 1986

theanarchistlibrary.org