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A Modest Proposal

Noam Chomsky

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The dedicated efforts of the Bush administration to take control of Iraq — by war, military coup, or some other means — have elicited various analyses of the guiding motives. Offering one interpretation, Anatol Lieven of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace observes that these plans conform to “the classic modern strategy of an endangered right-wing oligarchy, which is to divert mass discontent into nationalism,” inspired by fear of enemies about to destroy us. That strategy is of critical importance if the “radical nationalists” setting policy in Washington hope to advance their announced plan for “unilateral world domination through absolute military superiority,” while conducting a major assault against the interests of the large majority of the domestic population. Lieven doubtless speaks for many when he describes the US as “a menace to itself and to mankind,” on its present course.

As history shows, it is all too easy for unscrupulous leaders to terrify the public. And that is the natural method to divert attention from the fact that tax cuts for the rich and other devices are undermining prospects for a decent life for the middle class and the poor, and for future generations. Economist Paul Krugman reported that “literally before the dust had settled” over the World Trade Cen-

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ter ruins, influential Republicans signaled that they were “determined to use terrorism as an excuse to pursue a radical right-wing agenda.” He and others have been documenting how they have pursued this agenda relentlessly since. The strategy has proven highly effective for the congressional elections. And when the presidential campaign begins, Republican strategists surely do not want people to be asking questions about their pensions, jobs, health care, and other such matters. Rather, they should be praising their heroic leader for rescuing them from imminent destruction by a foe of colossal power, and marching on to confront the next powerful force bent on our destruction.

These ideas are particularly natural for the recycled Reaganites who hold influential positions in the current administration, and are replaying a familiar script: drive the country into deficit so as to be able to undermine social programs, declare a “war on terror” (as they did in 1981) and conjure up one devil after another to frighten the population into obedience: Libyan hit-men prowling in Washington to assassinate the brave cowboy surrounded by tanks in the White House; Sandinistas only two-days march from Texas as they pursue their plans to conquer the hemisphere following the script of *Mein Kampf*; Arab terrorists seeking to kill Americans everywhere while Qaddafi plans to “expel America from the world,” the cowboy wailed; Hispanic narcotraffickers seeking to destroy the youth (but stopped just in time by Bush #1, kidnapped in “Operation Just Cause” and tried in Florida for crimes mostly committed on the CIA payroll); and on, and on.

More generally, the September 11 terrorist atrocities provided an opportunity and pretext to implement long-standing plans to take control of Iraq’s immense oil wealth, a central component of the Persian Gulf resources that the State Department, in 1945, described as “a stupendous source of strategic power, and one of the greatest material prizes in world history” (referring specifically to Saudi Arabia, but the intent is more general). US intelligence predicts that these will be of even greater significance in the years

else, perhaps Jordan. The war against Iran may well already be underway. A good part of the Israeli air force is based in Turkey, and is reported to be flying along the Iranian border from US bases there. Plans for partition of Iran are being developed, perhaps pursued, according to US specialist sources. Lieven and others suggest that the radical nationalists have similar plans extending as far as China, and may go on for decades “until a mixture of terrorism and the unbearable social, political and environmental costs of US economic domination put paid to the present order of the world.”

It is not only much of the world that regards them as a menace. The same is true of highly-regarded strategic analysts and Middle East specialists here, like Anthony Cordesman, who is about as “hardline” as they come within sane sectors. According to Israel’s leading diplomatic correspondent, Akiva Eldar, Cordesman has warned that Washington should “make it clear that its commitment to Israel does not involve a commitment to its sillier armchair strategists and more vocally irresponsible hardliners,” referring not so obliquely to Perle and Feith, who are close to power centers in Washington.

On returning to Israel from meetings with high level Pentagon figures, the respected strategic analyst Ehud Sprintzak commented that “We are talking about a revolutionary group, with a totally different approach to the Arab world and the threats coming from it. One can summarize their approach in one sentence: they think that the Arab world is a world of retards who only understand the language of force.” That is an understatement, as the recent reaction to Germany’s minor disobedience revealed.

The modest proposal of an Iranian liberation is indeed insane, but not without merit. It is far more reasonable than the plans actually being implemented, or to be more accurate, it would be more reasonable if the professed goals had any relation to the real ones. As for the actual motives, the alternative reviewed at the outset has a great deal of plausibility.

government. As for the Kurds, if they seek any real autonomy that is likely to spark a Turkish invasion. In the light of Washington's decisive contribution to massive Turkish atrocities against the Kurds in the 1990s, some of the worst of that grisly decade, the argument for a US role in this regard are rather weak, to put it mildly.

There will be no problem in gaining access to Iraqi oil, just as US companies could easily exploit Iranian energy resources right now, if Washington would permit it.

Without proceeding, the proposal seems to offer many advantages over those that are actually discussed. What then is the fly in the ointment? There are several basic problems.

First, the US will not be able to use the "stupendous source of strategic power" as a lever of world domination, and will have to share the great "material prize" with others, beyond what the leadership would prefer. Second, the "classic modern strategy of an endangered right-wing oligarchy" would be foiled. The domestic problems of the Bush administration would remain unresolved: the population would be freed from fear and could pay attention to what is being done to them. And finally, the plans for "unilateral world domination" would suffer a serious blow.

As Lieven correctly notes, the "radical nationalists" in Washington have very close links with Israeli ultra-nationalists. In the 1990s, Richard Perle and Douglas Feith were even writing position papers for Benjamin Netanyahu, who outflanks Ariel Sharon on the extremist right. The usually reliable Israel press has been reporting their connections and plans for some time. These include far-reaching plans for reconstructing the Middle East along lines resembling the former Ottoman empire, but now with the US and its offshore military base in Israel in charge, cooperating with Turkey: what the Egyptian press has described as "the axis of evil," US-Israel-Turkey. According to some reported plans, a Hashemite monarchy might extend from Jordan to parts of Iraq and Saudi Arabia, and the Palestinians could then be "transferred" somewhere

ahead. The issue has never been access. The same intelligence analyses anticipate that the US will rely on more secure Atlantic Basin supplies. The same was true after World War II. The US moved quickly to gain control over Gulf resources, but not for its own use; North America was the major producer for decades afterwards, and since then Venezuela has generally been the leading exporter to the US. What matters is control over the "material prize," which funnels enormous wealth to the US in many ways, and the "stupendous source of strategic power," which translates into a lever of "unilateral world domination."

A different interpretation is that the administration believes exactly what it says: Iraq has suddenly become a threat to our very existence and to its neighbors. We must ensure that Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and the means for producing them are utterly destroyed, and the monster himself eliminated. And quickly. A war in Iraq should optimally be waged during the winter, and winter 2003-4 will be too late. By then the mushroom cloud that National Security Adviser Rice predicts may have already consumed us.

Let us assume that this interpretation is correct. If the regional powers fear Washington more than Saddam, as they apparently do, that reveals their limited grasp of reality. It is only an accident that by next winter the presidential campaign will be underway. And other doubts can somehow also be put aside. How then can we achieve these announced goals?

Many plans have been discussed, but one simple one seems to have been ignored — perhaps because it is regarded as insane. The judgment is correct, but it is instructive to ask why.

The modest proposal is to encourage Iran to invade Iraq, providing them with the necessary logistic and military support, from a safe distance (missiles, bombs, bases, etc.). The proposal has many advantages over those now being considered.

First, Saddam will be overthrown, in fact torn to shreds along with anyone close to him. Any trace of WMD will be eliminated,

not only now but for successor regimes, along with means for producing them, a great boon for disarmament generally. Iran has far stronger motivation to achieve this end than the Bush circles.

Second, there will be few if any American casualties. Or Israeli casualties. Scud attacks on Israel would not deter the liberation of Iraq by Israel's prime enemy.

True, many Iraqis and Iranians will die. But that can hardly be a concern. The Bush circles – as noted, mostly recycled Reaganites – strongly supported Saddam when he attacked Iran, quite oblivious to the enormous human cost, either then or under the subsequent sanctions regime. Saddam is likely to use chemical weapons, but that too can hardly be a concern. The current leadership firmly backed the “Beast of Baghdad” when he used chemical weapons against Iran in the Reagan years, and when he used gas against “his own people”: Kurds, who were his own people in the sense in which Cherokees were Andrew Jackson's people. The current Washington planners continued to support the Beast after he had committed by far his worst crimes, even providing him with means to develop WMD, nuclear and biological, right up to the invasion of Kuwait, fulfilling “our duty to support U.S. exporters,” as they explained (John Kelly, Assistant Secretary of State with responsibility for the Middle East, early 1990). England joined happily. Bush #1 and Cheney also effectively authorized Saddam's slaughter of Shi'ites in March 1991, in the interests of “stability,” as was soberly explained. They withdrew their support for his attack on the Kurds only under great international and domestic pressure. So surely the human costs cannot be a concern.

The Cold War had no relevance; Russia joined the good guys in supporting Saddam. Nor was the Iran war the determinative factor, as demonstrated by their continued support for Saddam well after the war ended.

Third, the UN will be no problem. It will be unnecessary to explain to the world that the UN is relevant when it follows orders, otherwise not. In the words of a high administration official after

Congress authorized the use of military force, “we don't need the Security Council. So if the Security Council wants to stay relevant, then it has to give us similar authority.” If anyone objects to the liberation of Iraq, the US can always use the veto to allow it to proceed.

Fourth, Iran surely has far better credentials for the task than Washington. Unlike the Bush administration, Iran has no record of support for the murderous Saddam and his programs of WMD. Rather, they were the primary victims of the Iraqi attack backed by the US and Britain (among others). It can be objected, correctly, that we cannot trust the Iranian leadership, but surely that is even more true of those who continued to aid Saddam well after his worst crimes. Furthermore, we will be spared the embarrassment of professing blind faith in our leaders in the manner that we justly ridicule in totalitarian states. There will be no need for a tacit appeal to a miraculous religious conversion – for which there is not a trace of evidence, even the minimal decency of conceding past crimes. And we will not have to descend to advocating an invasion because the leadership in Washington have a special “responsibility” to compensate for their past crimes, for which they show no regret, an argument that has quite intriguing consequences when generalized.

Fifth, the liberation will be greeted with enthusiasm by much of the population, far more so than if Americans invade. People will be cheering on the streets of Basra and Karbala, and we can join Iranian journalists in hailing the nobility and just cause of the liberators.

Sixth, Iran can move towards instituting “democracy,” again with credentials no worse than those of Washington, as a look at history will quickly reveal. Washington's contributions to democracy in the region are well-known, and Iranian reformers will have some advantages in pursuing the task, if only because the majority of the population is Shi'ite, and Iran would have fewer problems than the US in granting them some say in a successor