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From Central America to Iraq

Noam Chomsky

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ONE moral truism that should not provoke controversy is the principle of universality: We should apply to ourselves the same standards we apply to others – in fact, more stringent ones. Commonly, if states have the power to do so with impunity, they disdain moral truisms, because those states set the rules.

That's our right if we declare ourselves uniquely exempt from the principle of universality. And so we do, constantly. Every day brings new illustrations.

Just last month, for example, John Negroponte went to Baghdad as US ambassador to Iraq, heading the world's largest diplomatic mission, with the task of handing over sovereignty to Iraqis to fulfil Bush's 'messianic mission' to graft democracy to the Middle East and the world, or so we are solemnly informed.

But nobody should overlook the ominous precedent: Negroponte learned his trade as US ambassador to Honduras in the 1980s, during the Reaganite phase of many of the incumbents in Washington, when the first war on terror was declared in Central America and the Middle East.

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In April, Carla Anne Robbins of The Wall Street Journal wrote about Negroponte's Iraq appointment under the heading Modern Proconsul. In Honduras, Negroponte was known as 'the proconsul', a title given to powerful administrators in colonial times." There, he presided over the second largest embassy in Latin America, with the largest CIA station in the world at that time – and not because Honduras was a centrepiece of world power.

Robbins observed that Negroponte has been criticised by human-rights activists for "covering up abuses by the Honduran military" – a euphemism for large-scale state terror – "to ensure the flow of US aid" to this vital country, which was "the base for President Reagan's covert war against Nicaragua's Sandinista government."

The covert war was launched after the Sandinista revolution took control in Nicaragua. Washington's professed fear was that a second Cuba might develop in this Central American nation. In Honduras, proconsul Negroponte's task was to supervise the bases where a terrorist mercenary army – the Contras – was trained, armed and sent to overthrow the Sandinistas.

In 1984, Nicaragua responded in a way appropriate to a law-abiding state by taking its case against the United States to the World Court in the Hague. The court ordered the United States to terminate the 'unlawful use of force' – in lay terms, international terrorism – against Nicaragua and to pay substantial reparations. But Washington ignored the court, then vetoed two UN Security Council resolutions affirming the judgment and calling on all states to observe international law.

US State Department legal adviser Abraham Sofaer explained the rationale. Since most of the world cannot be "counted on to share our view", we must "reserve to ourselves the power to determine" how we will act and which matters fall "essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of the United States, as determined by the United States" – in this case the actions in Nicaragua that the court condemned.

Washington's disregard of the court decree and its arrogance towards the international community are perhaps relevant to the current situation in Iraq. The campaign in Nicaragua left a dependent democracy, at an incalculable cost. Civilian deaths have been estimated at tens of thousands – proportionately, a death toll “significantly higher than the number of US persons killed in the US Civil War and all the wars of the 20th century combined,” writes Thomas Carothers, a leading historian of the democratisation of Latin America.

Carothers writes from the perspective of an insider as well as a scholar, having served in Reagan's State Department during the ‘democracy enhancement’ programmes in Central America. The Reagan-era programmes were ‘sincere’ though a ‘failure’, according to Carothers, because Washington would tolerate only “limited, top-down forms of democratic change that did not risk upsetting the traditional structures of power with which the United States has long been allied.”

This is a familiar historical refrain in the pursuit of visions of democracy, which Iraqis apparently comprehend, even if we choose not to. Today, Nicaragua is the second-poorest country in the hemisphere (above Haiti, another main target of US intervention during the 20th century). About 60 per cent of Nicaraguan children under age two are afflicted with anaemia from severe malnutrition – only one grim indication of what is hailed as a victory for democracy.

The Bush administration claims to want to bring democracy to Iraq, using the same experienced official as in Central America. During Negroponte's confirmation hearings, the international terrorist campaign in Nicaragua received passing mention but is considered of no particular significance, thanks, presumably, to the exemption of our glorious selves from the principle of universality.

Several days after Negroponte's appointment, Honduras withdrew its small contingent of forces from Iraq. That might have been a coincidence. Or maybe the Hondurans remember

something from the time when Negroponte was there that we prefer to forget.