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Retrieved on 1st October 2021 from chomsky.info
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Superpower and Failed States

Noam Chomsky

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The selection of issues that should rank high on the agenda of concern for human welfare and rights is, naturally, a subjective matter. But there are a few choices that seem unavoidable, because they bear so directly on the prospects for decent survival. Among them are at least these three: nuclear war, environmental disaster and the fact that the government of the world's leading power is acting in ways that increase the likelihood of these catastrophes.

It is important to stress the “government,” because the population, not surprisingly, does not agree. That brings up a fourth issue that should deeply concern Americans, and the world: the sharp divide between public opinion and public policy, one of the reasons for the fear, which cannot casually be put aside, that “the American ‘system’ as a whole is in real trouble — that it is heading in a direction that spells the end of its historic values (of) equality, liberty and meaningful democracy,” as Gar Alperovitz observes in *America Beyond Capitalism*.

The “system” is coming to have some of the features of failed states, to adopt a currently fashionable notion that is conventionally applied to states regarded as potential threats to our

security (like Iraq) or as needing our intervention to rescue the population from severe internal threats (like Haiti).

The definition of “failed states” is hardly scientific. But they share some primary characteristics. They are unable or unwilling to protect their citizens from violence and perhaps even destruction. They regard themselves as beyond the reach of domestic or international law, hence free to carry out aggression and violence. And if they have democratic forms, they suffer from a serious “democratic deficit” that deprives their formal democratic institutions of real substance. One of the hardest tasks that anyone can undertake, and among the most important, is to look honestly in the mirror. If we allow ourselves to do so, we should have little difficulty in finding the characteristics of “failed states” right at home.

That recognition of reality should be deeply troubling to those who care about their countries and future generations — “countries,” plural, first because of the enormous reach of U.S. power, but also because the problems are not localised in space or time, though there are important variations, of particular significance for US citizens.

The “democratic deficit” was illustrated clearly by the 2004 elections. The results led to exultation in some quarters, despair in others and much concern about a “divided nation.” Colin Powell informed the Press that “President George W. Bush has won a mandate from the American people to continue pursuing his ‘aggressive’ foreign policy.’ That is far from true. It is also very far from what the population believes. After the elections, Gallup asked whether Bush “should emphasise programmes that both parties support,” or whether he “has a mandate to advance the Republican Party’s agenda,” as Powell and others claimed — and 63 per cent chose the former option; 29 per cent the latter.

The elections conferred no mandate for anything, in fact, they barely took place, in any serious sense of the term “election.” History provides ample evidence of Washington’s disre-

for justice and freedom in recent years, leaving a legacy that can easily be carried forward from a higher plane than before.

Opportunities for education and organising abound. As in the past, rights are not likely to be granted by benevolent authorities, or won by intermittent actions — attending a few demonstrations or pushing a lever in the personalised quadrennial extravaganzas that are depicted as “democratic politics.” As always in the past, the tasks require dedicated day-by-day engagement to create — in part re-create — the basis for a functioning democratic culture.

There are many ways to promote democracy at home, carrying it to new dimensions. Opportunities are ample, and failure to grasp them is likely to have ominous repercussions: for the country, for the world and for future generations.

4. Rely on diplomatic and economic measures rather than military ones in confronting the grave threats of terror;
5. Keep to the traditional interpretation of the UN Charter: The use of force is legitimate only when ordered by the Security Council or when the country is under imminent threat of attack, in accord with Article 51;
6. Give up the Security Council veto, and have “a decent respect for the opinion of mankind,” as the Declaration of Independence advises, even if power centres disagree;
7. Cut back sharply on military spending and sharply increase social spending: health, education, renewable energy and so on.

For people who believe in democracy, these are very conservative suggestions: They appear to be the opinions of the majority of the US population, in most cases the overwhelming majority. They are in radical opposition to public policy; in most cases, to a bipartisan consensus.

Another conservative and useful suggestion is that facts, logic and elementary moral principles should matter. Those who take the trouble to adhere to that suggestion will soon be led to abandon a good part of familiar doctrine, though it is surely much easier to repeat self-serving mantras.

And there are other simple truths. They do not answer every problem by any means. But they do carry us some distance toward developing more specific and detailed answers, as is constantly done. More important, they open the way to implement them, opportunities that are readily within our grasp if we can free ourselves from the shackles of doctrine and imposed illusion. Though it is natural for doctrinal systems to seek to induce pessimism, hopelessness and despair, reality is different. There has been substantial progress in the unending question

guard for international laws and norms, reaching new heights today. Granted, there have always been pretexts, but that is true of every state that resorts to force at will.

Throughout the Cold War years, the framework of “defence against Communist aggression” was available to mobilise domestic support for countless interventions abroad. Then at last the communist-menace device began to wear thin. By 1979, “the Soviets were influencing only 6 per cent of the world population and 5 per cent of the world GNP” outside its borders, according to the Centre for Defense Information. The basic picture was becoming harder to evade.

The government also faced domestic problems, notably the civilizing effects of the activism of the 1960s, which had many consequences, among them less willingness to tolerate the resort to violence.

Under President Reagan, the administration sought to deal with the problems by fevered pronouncements about the “evil empire” and its tentacles everywhere about to strangle us. But new devices were needed. The Reaganites declared their worldwide campaign to destroy “the evil scourge of terrorism,” particularly state-backed international terrorism — which Reagan secretary of state George Shultz called a “plague spread by depraved opponents of civilization itself (in a) return to barbarism in the modern age.”

The official list of states sponsoring terrorism, initiated in Congress in 1977, was elevated to a prominent place in policy and propaganda.

In 1994, President Clinton expanded the category of “terrorist states” to include “rogue states.” A few years later another concept was added to the repertoire: “failed states,” from which we must protect ourselves, and which we must help — sometimes by devastating them. Later came President Bush’s “axis of evil” that we must destroy in self-defence, following the will of the Lord as transmitted to his humble servant — meanwhile escalating the threat of terror and nuclear proliferation.

The rhetoric has always raised difficulties, however. The basic problem has been that under any reasonable interpretation of the terms — even official definitions — the categories are unacceptably broad. It takes discipline not to recognise the elements of truth in historian Arno Mayer’s immediate post-9/11 observation that since 1947, “America has been the chief perpetrator of ‘pre-emptive’ state terror” and innumerable other ‘rogue’ actions,” causing immense harm, “always in the name of democracy, liberty and justice.”

After Bush took over, mainstream scholarship no longer just reported world opinion, but began to assert as fact that the US “has assumed many of the very features of the ‘rogue nations’ against which it has ... done battle” (David C. Hendrickson and Robert W. Tucker, *Foreign Affairs*, 2004).

The category of “failed state” was invoked repeatedly by the self-designated “enlightened states” in the 1990s, entitling them to resort to force with the alleged goal of protecting the populations of failed, rogue and terrorist states in a manner that may be “illegal but legitimate” — the phrase used by the Independent Kosovo Commission. As the leading themes of political discourse shifted from “humanitarian intervention” to the re-declared “war on terror” after 9/11, the concept “failed state” was given a broader scope to include states like Iraq that threaten the US with weapons of mass destruction and international terrorism.

Under this broader usage, “failed states” need not be weak — which makes good sense. Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia were hardly weak, but by reasonable standards they merit the designation “failed state” as fully as in history.

The concept gains many dimensions, including failure to provide security for the population, to guarantee rights at home or abroad, or to maintain functioning (not merely formal) democratic institutions. The concept must surely cover “outlaw states” that dismiss with contempt the rules of

international order and its institutions, carefully constructed over many years, initially at U.S. initiative.

The government is choosing policies that typify outlaw states, which severely endangers the population at home and abroad and undermines substantive democracy.

In crucial respects, Washington’s adoption of the characteristics of failed and outlaw states is proudly proclaimed. There is scarcely any effort to conceal “the tension between a world that still wants a fair and sustainable international legal system, and a single superpower that hardly seems to care (that it) ranks with Burma, China, Iraq and North Korea in terms of its adherence to a 17th century, absolutist conception of sovereignty” for itself, while dismissing as old-fashioned tommyrot the sovereignty of others, Michael Byers observes in *War Law: Understanding International Law and Armed Conflict*.

The US is very much like other powerful states. It pursues the strategic and economic interests of dominant sectors of the domestic population, to the accompaniment of impressive rhetorical flourishes about its exceptional dedication to the highest values. That is practically a historical universal, and the reason why sensible people pay scant attention to declarations of noble intent by leaders, or accolades by their followers.

One commonly hears that carping critics complain about what is wrong, but do not present solutions. There is an accurate translation for that charge: “They present solutions, but I don’t like them.”

Here are a few simple suggestions for the US:

1. Accept the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court and the World Court;
2. Sign and carry forward the Kyoto protocols;
3. Let the UN take the lead in international crises;