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Noam Chomsky Has Been Proved Right About U.S. Foreign Policy

Stephen M. Walt ⋮ 13-16 minutes ⋮ 11/15/2024

For more than half a century, Noam Chomsky has been arguably the world's most persistent, uncompromising, and intellectually respected critic of contemporary U.S. foreign policy. In a steady stream of books, articles, interviews, and speeches, he has repeatedly sought to expose Washington's costly and inhumane approach to the rest of the world, an approach he believes has harmed millions and is contrary to the United States' professed values. As co-author Nathan J. Robinson writes in the preface, *The Myth of American Idealism* was written to "draw insights from across [Chomsky's] body of work into a single volume that could introduce people to his central critiques of U.S. foreign policy." It accomplishes that task admirably.

As the title suggests, the central target of the book is the claim that U.S. foreign policy is guided by the lofty ideals of democracy, freedom, the rule of law, human rights, etc. For those who subscribe to this view, the damage the United States has sometimes inflicted on other countries was the unintended and much regretted result of actions taken for noble purposes and with the best of intentions. Americans are constantly reminded by their leaders that they are an "indispensable nation" and "the greatest force for freedom the world has ever known," and assured that moral principles will be at the "center of U.S. foreign policy." Such self-congratulatory justifications are then endlessly echoed by a chorus of politicians and establishment intellectuals.

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For Chomsky and Robinson, these claims are nonsense. Not only did the young American republic fulfill its Manifest Destiny by waging a genocidal campaign against the indigenous population, but it has since backed a bevy of brutal dictatorships, intervened to thwart democratic processes in many countries, and waged or backed wars that killed millions of people in Indochina, Latin America, and the Middle East, all while falsely claiming to be defending freedom, democracy, human rights, and other cherished ideals. U.S. officials are quick to condemn others when they violate international law, but they refuse to join the International Criminal Court, the Law of the Sea Treaty, and many other global conventions. Nor do they hesitate to violate the United Nations Charter themselves, as U.S. President Bill Clinton did when he went to war against Serbia in 1999 or as President George W. Bush did when he invaded Iraq in 2003. Even when undeniably evil acts are exposed—such as the My Lai massacre, the abuses at Abu Ghraib prison, and the CIA's torture program—it is low-level personnel who get punished while the architects of these policies remain respected members of the establishment.

The record of hypocrisy recounted by Chomsky and Robinson is sobering and convincing. No open-minded reader could absorb this book and continue to believe the pious rationales that U.S. leaders invoke to justify their bare-knuckled actions.

Left: U.S. Army personnel hold a forward battle position near the Iraq-Kuwait border on March 19, 2003. Scott Nelson/Getty Images Right: A banner of former U.S. President Bill Clinton in Pristina, Kosovo, on March 24, 2009. Armend Nimani/AFP via Getty Images

The book is less persuasive, however, when it tries to explain why U.S. officials act this way. Chomsky and Robinson argue that the "the public's role in decision-making is limited" and that "foreign policy is designed and implemented by small groups who derive their power from domestic sources." In their view, U.S. foreign policy is largely the servant of corporate interests—the military-industrial complex, energy companies, and "major corporations, banks, investment firms, … and policy-oriented intellectuals who do the bidding of those who own and manage the private empires that govern most aspects of our lives."

The importance of special interests is beyond question, as is the broader public's limited role, but the picture is more complicated than they suggest. For starters, when corporate profits and national security interests clash, the former often lose out. For example, when Dick Cheney ran Halliburton, an oil-services company in the 1990s, he complained about the "sanction-happy" foreign policy that prevented the company from making money in Iran. Other U.S. oil companies would have liked to invest there, as well, but U.S. sanctions remained firmly in place. Similarly, tech companies like Apple oppose recent U.S. efforts to limit China's access to advanced technologies because these restrictions threaten their bottom line. The restrictions might indeed be misguided, but the point is that corporate interests do not always call the tune.

Chomsky and Robinson also acknowledge that other great powers acted in much the same way that the United States has, and these states also invented elaborate moral justifications—the "white man's burden," *la mission civilisatrice*, the need to protect socialism—to whitewash their atrocious conduct. Given that this behavior preceded the emergence of modern corporate capitalism (let alone the military-industrial complex), it suggests that these policies have more to do with the logic of great power competition than the specific demands of the corporate United States. And if noncapitalist powers acted in similar ways, then something else is encouraging states to jettison their values to gain an edge on rivals, or to prevent them from gaining a similar edge themselves. For realists, that something else is the fear of what might happen if other states became stronger and decided to use their power in harmful ways.

Their portrait of the people who implement these policies will also strike some readers as simplistic. In their telling, U.S. officials are supremely cynical: They understand they are doing bad things for purely selfish reasons and don't care much about the consequences for others. But many of them undoubtedly believe that what they are doing is both good for the United States and the world, and that the conduct of foreign policy inevitably involves painful trade-offs. They might be deluding themselves, but other thoughtful critics of U.S. foreign policy—such as Hans Morgenthau—readily acknowledged the impossibility of preserving one's moral purity in the realm of politics. Chomsky and Robinson say very little about the potential costs or negative consequences of the policies they prefer—in their world, the trade-off between what is moral and what might be advantageous largely disappears.

The Myth of American Idealism raises two further puzzles, but only one is addressed in any detail. The first puzzle is: Why do Americans tolerate policies that are costly, often unsuccessful, and morally horrendous? Ordinary citizens could benefit in countless ways from the trillions of dollars that have been lavished on an overstuffed military or squandered in unnecessary and failed wars, yet voters continue to choose politicians who give them more of the same. How come?

Their answer, which is generally persuasive, is twofold. First, ordinary citizens lack the political mechanisms to shape policy, in part because a supine U.S. Congress has allowed presidents to usurp its constitutional authority over declarations of war and to cloak all manner of dubious actions under a deep veil of secrecy. Second, government institutions work overtime to "manufacture consent" by classifying information, prosecuting leakers, lying to the public, and refusing to be held accountable even when things go wrong or malfeasance is exposed. Their efforts are aided by a generally compliant media, which repeats government talking points uncritically and only rarely questions the official narrative.

Noam Chomsky wearing a blue button down shirt, at center. Palestinian flags and signs are around him in a crowd of people.

Chomsky attends a protest with pro-Palestinian activists in Gaza on Oct. 20, 2012. Mahmud Hams/AFP via Getty Images

Having written about these phenomena myself, I found their portrait of how the foreign-policy establishment purveys and defends its world view to be broadly accurate. That said, it is not obvious that greater public awareness would lead to better U.S. policies. Chomsky and Robinson believe that if more Americans understood what their government was doing, they would raise their voices and demand change. I would like to think so, but it is possible that a better-informed public would favor a foreign policy that was even more selfish, shortsighted, and immoral, especially if they believed that Chomsky and Robinson's prescriptions would require them to make

costly or painful adjustments. Former U.S. President Donald Trump has never expressed the slightest commitment to any ideal other than naked self-interest, yet he commands the loyalty of more than half the U.S. electorate.

One might also question whether the traditional elite's ability to manufacture consent is waning as news sources multiply and mainstream media is increasingly mistrusted. For that matter, is the problem the manufacture of consent or the specific policies for which public consent has been obtained in the past? If people like Elon Musk, Peter Thiel, or Jeff Bezos emerge as the core of a new elite, they are likely to favor a less interventionist foreign policy that is closer (though hardly identical) to what Chomsky and Robinson would like to see. If that were to occur, would Chomsky and Robinson still decry this new elite's ability to manufacture consent for policies they might support?

The second puzzle—which is not addressed in any detail—concerns the rest of the world. If U.S. foreign policy "endangers the world" (as the subtitle of this book proclaims), why aren't more states trying to stop it? Washington faces several serious adversaries at present, but it still has a lot of genuine and enthusiastic allies. Some of its partners might be opportunistic, or perhaps intimidated by the United States' vast power, but not every pro-American leader is a tame dupe or a self-interested *comprador*. Global surveys still show a surprising degree of support and admiration for the United States, even though the populations of some areas (such as the Middle East) are deeply and justifiably angered by what the country is doing. The United States' global image has also exhibited striking resilience in the past: It plummeted while George W. Bush was president and recovered sharply as soon as voters elected Barack Obama.

In many parts of the world, the concern is not the oppressive nature of U.S. power but rather the possibility that its power will be withdrawn. Chomsky and Robinson are correct that the United States has done many bad things over the past century, but it must have been done a few things right, as well. The positive aspects of U.S. foreign policy get short shrift in this book, and that omission is its greatest limitation.

Despite these reservations, *The Myth of American Idealism* is a valuable work that provides an able introduction to Chomsky's thinking. Indeed, if I were asked whether a student would learn more about U.S. foreign policy by reading this book or by reading a collection of the essays that current and former U.S. officials occasionally write in journals such as *Foreign Affairs* or the *Atlantic*, Chomsky and Robinson would win hands down.

I wouldn't have written that last sentence when I began my career 40 years ago. I've been paying attention, however, and my thinking has evolved as the evidence has piled up. It is regrettable but revealing that a perspective on U.S. foreign policy once confined to the margins of left-wing discourse in the United States is now more credible than the shopworn platitudes that many senior U.S. officials rely on to defend their actions.