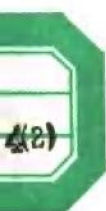


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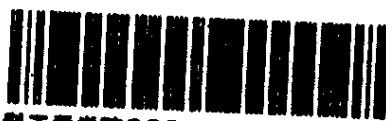
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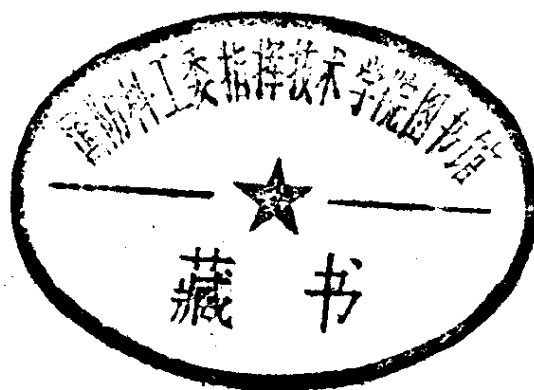


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Lesson Nine

TEXT

Intervention in Vietnam and Central America:

Parallels and Differences

by Noam Chomsky

If you take any two historical events and you ask whether there are similarities and differences, the answer is always going to be both “yes” and “no.” At some sufficiently fine level of detail there will be differences, and at some sufficiently abstract level there will be similarities. The question we want to ask in the two cases we are considering, Central America and Vietnam, is whether the level at which there are similarities is, in fact, a significant one. And I think the answer is that it is.

The level at which there are similarities is the level at which we consider US intervention, its consequences, and, particularly, its sources in domestic institutions. At this level of discussion, I think we find quite substantial similarities. They are essentially the following:

- (1) United States intervention was significant and decisive.
- (2) The effects of intervention were horrifying.
- (3) The roots of this intervention lie in a fixed geopolitical conception that has remained invariant over a long period and that is deeply rooted in US institutions.

What I would like to sketch out, in the brief time I have, is what I think a full inquiry into this topic would reveal. I'll start by talking about the geopolitical conception. And I'd like to stress that, in my opinion, if you don't understand this geopolitical conception, the chances that you'll understand what is happening in the world are relatively slight; whereas if you do understand it, quite a lot of things fall into place, and you could even get a reputation as a good prophet. I will then consider what this geopolitical conception has entailed for Vietnam, and what it means today and in the likely future for Central America.

In the real world, US global planning has always been sophisticated and careful, as you'd expect from a major superpower with a highly centralized and class conscious dominant social group. Their power, in turn, is rooted in their ownership and management of the economy, as is the norm in most societies. During World War II, American planners were well aware that the United States was going to emerge as a world-dominant power, in a position of hegemony that had few historical parallels, and they organized and met in order to deal with this situation.

From 1939 to 1945, extensive studies were conducted by the Council on Foreign Relations and the State Department. One group was called the War-Peace Studies Group, which met for six years and produced extensive geopolitical analyses and plans. The Council on Foreign Relations is essentially the business input to foreign policy planning. These groups also involved every top planner in the State Department, with the exception of the Secretary of State.

The conception that they developed is what they called "Grand Area" planning. The Grand Area was a region that was to be subordinated to the needs of the American economy. As one planner put it, it was to be the region that

is "strategically necessary for world control." The geopolitical analysis held that the Grand Area had to include at least the Western Hemisphere, the Far East, and the former British Empire, which we were then in the process of dismantling and taking over ourselves. This is what is called "anti-imperialism" in American scholarship. The Grand Area was also to include western and southern Europe and the oil-producing regions of the Middle East; in fact, it was to include everything, if that were possible. Detailed plans were laid for particular regions of the Grand Area and also for international institutions that were to organize and police it, essentially in the interests of this subordination to US domestic needs.

Of course, when we talk about the domestic economy, we don't necessarily mean the *people* of the United States; we mean whoever dominates and controls, owns and manages the American economy. In fact, the planners recognized that other arrangements, other forms of organizations, involving much less extensive control over the world would indeed be possible, but only at what from their point of view was the "cost" of internal rearrangements toward a more egalitarian society in the United States, and obviously that is not contemplated.

With respect to the Far East, the plans were roughly as follows: Japan, it was understood, would sooner or later be the industrial heartland of Asia once again. Since Japan is a resource-poor area, it would need Southeast Asia and South Asia for resources and markets. All of this, of course, would be incorporated within the global system dominated by the United States.

With regard to Latin America, the matter was put most plainly by Secretary of War Henry Stimson in May 1945 when he was explaining how we must eliminate and dismantle

regional systems dominated by any other power, particularly the British, while maintaining and extending our own system. He explained with regard to Latin America as follows: "I think that it's not asking too much to have our little region over here which never has bothered anybody."

The basic thinking behind all of this has been explained quite lucidly on a number of occasions. One of the clearest and most lucid accounts of the planning behind this was by George Kennan, who was one of the most thoughtful, humane, and liberal of the planners, and in fact was eliminated from the State Department largely for that reason. Kennan was the head of the State Department policy planning staff in the late 1940s. In the following document, PPS23, February 1948, he outlined the basic thinking:

We have about 50 percent of the world's wealth, but only 6.3 percent of its population.... In this situation, we cannot fail to be the object of envy and resentment. Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity.... We need not deceive ourselves that we can afford today the luxury of altruism and world-benefaction.... We should cease to talk about vague and..., unreal objectives such as human rights, the raising of the living standards, and democratization. The day is not far off when we are going to have to deal in straight power concepts. The less we are then hampered by idealistic slogans, the better.

Now, recall that this is a Top Secret document. The idealistic slogans are, of course, to be constantly trumpeted by scholarship, the schools, the media, and the rest of the ideological system in order to pacify the domestic population. Recall again that this is a view from the dovish, liberal, humane end of the spectrum. But it is lucid and clear.

There are some questions that one can raise about Kennan's formulation, a number of them, but I'll keep to one: whether he is right in suggesting that "human right, the raising of the living standards, and democratization" should be dismissed as irrelevant to US foreign policy. Actually, a review of the historical record suggests a different picture, namely that the United States has often opposed with tremendous ferocity, and even violence, these elements — human right, democratization, and the raising of living standards.

This is particularly the case in Latin America and there are very good reasons for it. The commitment to these doctrines is inconsistent with the use of harsh measures to maintain the disparity, to insure our control over 50 percent of the resources, and our exploitation of the world. In short, what we might call the "First Freedom" (there were Four Freedoms, you remember, but there was one that was left out), the Freedom to Rob, and that's really the only one that counts; the others were mostly for show. And in order to maintain the freedom to rob and exploit, we *do* have to consistently oppose democratization, the raising of living standard, and human rights. And we *do* consistently oppose them; that, of course, is in the real world.

This Top Secret document referred to the Far East, but Kennan applied the same ideas to Latin America in a briefing for Latin American ambassadors in which he explained that one of the main concerns of US policy is the "protection of our raw materials." Who must we protect *our* raw materials from? Well, primarily, the domestic populations, the indigenous population, which may have ideas of their own about raising the living standards, democratization, and human rights. And that's inconsistent with maintaining the disparity. How will we protect our raw materials from the

indigenous population? Well, the answer is the following:

The final answer might be an unpleasant one, but... we should not hesitate before police repression by the local government. This is not shameful, since the Communists are essentially traitors.... It is better to have a strong regime in power than a liberal government if it is indulgent and relaxed and penetrated by Communists.

Well, who are the Communists? "Communists" is a term regularly used in American political theology to refer to people who are committed to the belief that "the government has direct responsibility for the welfare of the people." I'm quoting the words of a 1949 State Department intelligence report which warned about the spread of this grim and evil doctrine, which does, of course, threaten "our raw materials" if we can't abort it somehow.

So it is small wonder, with this kind of background, that John F. Kennedy should say that "governments of the civil-military type of El Salvador are the most effective in containing Communist penetration in Latin America." Kennedy said this at the time when he was organizing the basic structure of the death squads that have massacred tens of thousands of people since (all of this, incidentally, within the framework of the Alliance for Progress, and, in fact, probably the only lasting effect of that program).

In the mid-1950s, these ideas were developed further. For example, one interesting case was an important study by a prestigious study group headed by William Yandell Eliot, who was Williams Professor of Government at Harvard. They were also concerned with what Communism is and how it spreads. They concluded accurately that the primary threat of Communism is the economic transformation of the Communist

powers "in ways which reduce their willingness and ability to complement the industrial economies of the West." That is essentially correct and is a good operational definition of "Communism" in American political discourse. Our government is committed to that view.

If a government is so evil or unwise as to undertake a course of action of this sort, it immediately becomes an enemy. It becomes a part of the "monolithic and ruthless conspiracy" to take over the world, as John F. Kennedy put it. It is postulated that it has been taken over by the Russians if that's the policy that it appears to be committed to.

On these grounds one can predict American foreign policy rather well. So, for example, American policy toward Nicaragua after the 1979 revolution could have been predicted by simply observing that Nicaragua's health and education budget rose rapidly, that an effective land reform program was instituted, and that the infant mortality rate dropped very dramatically, to the point where Nicaragua won an award from the World Health Organization for health achievements (all of this despite horrifying conditions left by the Somoza dictatorship, which we had installed and supported, and continued to support to the very end, despite a lot of nonsense to the contrary that one hears). If a country is devoted to policies like those I've just described, it is obviously an enemy. It is part of the "monolithic and ruthless conspiracy" the Russians are taking it over. And, in fact, it *is* part of a conspiracy. It is part of a conspiracy to take from us what is ours, namely "our raw materials," and a conspiracy to prevent us from "maintaining the disparity," which, of course, must be the fundamental element of our foreign policy.

The people who are committed to these dangerous

heresies, such as using their resources for their own purposes or believing that the government is committed to the welfare of its own people, may not be Soviet clients to begin with and, in fact, quite regularly they're not. In Latin America they are often members, to begin with, of Bible study groups that become self-help groups, of church organizations, peasant organizations, and so on and so forth. But by the time we get through with them, they will be Soviet clients. The reason they will be Soviet clients by the time we get through with them is that they will have nowhere else to turn for any minimal form of protection against the terror and the violence that we regularly unleash against them if they undertake programs of the kind described.

And this *is a net gain* for American policy. One thing you'll notice, if you look over the years, is that the United States quite consistently tries to create enemies (I'm not being sarcastic) if a country *does* escape from its grip. What we want to do is drive the country into being a base for the Russians because that justifies us in carrying out the violent attacks which we *must* carry out, given the geopolitical conception under which we organize and control much of the world. So that's what we do, and then we "defend" ourselves. We engage in self-defense against the Great Satan or the Evil Empire or the "monolithic and ruthless conspiracy."

More generally, the Soviet Union plays the same kind of game within its own narrower domains, and that explains a good bit of the structure of the Cold War.

Aids to Preview

1. Notes

1) Noam Chomsky

Professor of linguistics at MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology). The text is made up of extracts taken from a talk given at Harvard University on March 19, 1985. The edited transcript of the talk appeared in *Monthly Review*, September 1985.

2) Four Freedoms

Freedom of speech and expression; freedom of worship (religion); freedom from want; freedom from fear; enumerated by President F. D. Roosevelt in a speech made on January 6, 1941, just after the US entered World War II.

3) The Alliance for Progress

A scheme worked out in 1961 during the Kennedy Administration to coordinate the economies of the Latin American countries and tie them more closely to the US, with the aim of preventing Communism from advancing in those countries.

4) The World Health Organization (WHO)

One of the specialized agencies of the United Nations. Its headquarters is in Geneva, Switzerland.

2. Proper names

Noam Chomsky

Henry Stimson

George Kennan

John F. Kennedy

William Yandell Eliot

Nicaragua

Somoza

3. True or false?

- 1) Some historical events are similar whereas some are different.
- 2) One similarity between the cases of Vietnam and Central America is that in both cases, United States intervention was both necessary and effective although the effects of intervention were horrifying.
- 3) The responsibility for all American intervention does not merely rest with a few influential individuals who happen to have some wrong ideas about world politics. It goes much deeper than that.
- 4) Foreign policy is determined by those who actually control the economy. This is the case with the United States only because it is a major superpower with a highly centralized and class conscious dominant social group.
- 5) The "Grand Area" concept was developed as a response to the threat from the Russians.
- 6) After the Second World War American scholars used the term "anti-imperialism" to refer to the American effort to squeeze out and replace Britain in what formerly comprised the British Empire.
- 7) In the immediate post-War years, the predominant concern of the US government was to preserve world peace and therefore it laid plans for such world institutions as the United Nations.
- 8) The US government maintains that Latin America should be free from any foreign intervention because it has never done anybody any harm.
- 9) George Kennan was eliminated from the State Department largely for his liberal ideas about American global planning, and therefore his

explanation of the basic thinking does not represent the position of the US government.

- 10) Noam Chomsky believes that US foreign policy is somewhat influenced by the sincere desire for human rights, the raising of living standards and democratization.
- 11) The US government defines Communism as a threat to change the economic system in a country in such a way that it is no longer able and willing to serve the interests of US capital.
- 12) Noam Chomsky thinks that the US government is largely to blame for the Cold War.

4. Explain:

- 1) At some sufficiently fine level of detail there will be differences, and at some sufficiently abstract level there will be similarities.
- 2) The roots of this intervention lie in a fixed geopolitical conception that has remained invariant over a long period and that is deeply rooted in US institutions.
- 3) The Council on Foreign Relations is essentially the business input to foreign policy planning.
- 4) Detailed plans were laid for particular regions of the Grand Area and also for international institutions that were to organize and police it, essentially in the interests of this subordination to US domestic needs.
- 5) In fact, the planners recognized that other arrangements, other forms of organization, involving much less extensive control over the world would indeed be possible, but only at what from their point of view was the "cost" of internal

rearrangements toward a more egalitarian society in the United States, and obviously that is not contemplated.

- 6) The commitment to these doctrines is inconsistent with the use of harsh measures to maintain the disparity....
- 7) And this is a net gain for American policy.

5. Note how these words are formed:

- 1) **geo-** (meaning 'the earth'): geology
(geological, geologist), geography
(geographic), geophysics, geothermal,
geochemistry, geocentric, geomagnetism,
geomorphology;
- 2) **dict** (meaning 'to speak' or 'word'):
predict, diction, dictionary, dictate, dictator,
dictatorship;
- 3) **mono-** (meaning 'one' or 'single'):
monogamy, monolithic, monolog (ue),
monopoly, monosyllabic, monotone,
monotony;
- 4) **resource-poor** (meaning 'poor in
resources'): protein-poor, oil-poor,
starch-rich, pollution-free, duty-free,
acid-resistant, power-hungry, blood-thirsty,
degree-crazy, color-blind, money-conscious,
home-sick, combat-ready;
skin-deep, snow-white, crystal-clear;
snow-covered, defense-oriented,
enemy-occupied, hand-woven, horse-drawn.

6. List all the useful phrases, idioms and collocations in the text.