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## 'Hegemony or Survival': The Everything Explainer

HEGEMONY OR SURVIVAL

America's Quest for Global Dominance.

By Noam Chomsky.

278 pp. New York: Metropolitan Books/ Henry Holt & Company. \$22

By SAMANTHA POWER

**S**ince Sept. 11, 2001, Americans have been heard to exclaim -- with varying degrees of shame, bewilderment and indignation -- "Why do they hate us?" The response tends to fall between two extremes. Bush administration officials say, in essence, they hate us for who we are. As President Bush has put it, "They hate progress, and freedom, and choice, and culture, and music, and laughter, and women, and Christians, and Jews and all Muslims who reject their distorted doctrines." At the opposite end stands the M.I.T. professor Noam Chomsky. "Why do they hate us?" Chomsky asks in "Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance." "Because of you and your associates, Mr. Bush, and what you have done."

Revered and reviled, Noam Chomsky is a global phenomenon. Indeed, if book sales are any standard to go by, he may be the most widely read American voice on foreign policy on the planet today. With the United States increasingly suspect around the world -- a recent Gallup poll found that 55 percent of citizens in Britain thought the United States "posed a threat to peace," while a June BBC survey found that 60 percent of Indonesians, 71 percent of Jordanians and even 25 percent of Canadians viewed the United States as a greater threat than Al Qaeda -- the appetite for Chomsky's polemics is only increasing. It is but one testament to America's diminished standing that his most recent book, "9-11," a slight collection of interviews (largely conducted via e-mail), was published in 26 countries and translated into 23 languages, finding its way onto best-seller lists in the United States, Canada, Germany, India, Italy, Japan and New Zealand. And at home, as mainstream dissent dissipated in the wake of 9/11, a new generation of disgruntled critics has turned to Chomsky for guidance.

"Hegemony or Survival" is a raging and often meandering assault on United States foreign policy and the elites who shape it. Drawing upon case after historical case of violent meddling (Iran, Cuba, Vietnam, Nicaragua, Kosovo, etc.), Chomsky argues that the Bush administration's war on terrorism builds upon a long tradition of foreign interventions carried out in the name of "liberation" or "counterterror," of special interests run amok and of disdain for international institutions that dare to challenge American hegemony. "It is only natural," he writes, "that state policy should seek to construct a world system open to U.S. economic penetration and political control, tolerating no rivals or threats."

Chomsky finds the Bush administration new in only two ways: the crassness of its motives is far more transparent, and it is now playing for far higher stakes. "Over the years, tactics have been refined and modified," Chomsky writes, "progressively ratcheting up the means of violence and driving our endangered species closer to the edge of catastrophe." Unless American statesmen

stop ranking hegemony above survival, he says, our 100,000-year-old experiment in human life may well be doomed.

For Chomsky, the world is divided into oppressor and oppressed. America, the prime oppressor, can do no right, while the sins of those categorized as oppressed receive scant mention. Because he deems American foreign policy inherently violent and expansionist, he is unconcerned with the motives behind particular policies, or the ethics of particular individuals in government. And since he considers the United States the leading terrorist state, little distinguishes American air strikes in Serbia undertaken at night with high-precision weaponry from World Trade Center attacks timed to maximize the number of office workers who have just sat down with their morning coffee.

It is inconceivable, in Chomsky's view, that American power could be harnessed for good. Thus, the billions of dollars in foreign aid earmarked each year for disaster relief, schools, famine prevention, AIDS treatment, etc. -- and the interventions in Kosovo and East Timor -- have to be explained away. The Kosovo and Timor operations' prime achievement, he writes, was to establish the norm of resort to force without Security Council authorization. On this both the Kosovars and the Timorese, whose welfare Chomsky has heroically championed over the years, would strongly disagree.

"Survival or Hegemony" is not easy to read. Chomsky's glib and caustic tone is distracting. He relies heavily upon quotations, but rarely identifies the speaker or writer. The endnotes supply more frustration. Bill Clinton's humanitarian rationale for the Kosovo war was ridiculed "by leading military and political analysts" in Israel, we are told, but the citation leads only to an earlier book by Chomsky himself. When he agrees with a claim, Chomsky introduces it with the word "uncontroversially" or credits it to "distinguished authorities." Those who don't share his viewpoint don't simply disagree; they are the "prevailing intellectual culture" or the "educated classes." This is a thinker far too accustomed to preaching to an uncritical choir.

Often he meets official falsehoods with exaggerations of his own. President Clinton, he says, "was flying Al Qaeda and Hezbollah operatives to Bosnia to support the U.S. side in the ongoing wars." And "radical Islamists" have taken over in Kosovo, leading to a "Taliban phenomenon." These are far-fetched claims that he doesn't adequately back up.

But for all that is wrong with "Hegemony or Survival," reading Chomsky today is sobering and instructive for two reasons. First, his critiques have come to influence and reflect mainstream opinion elsewhere in the world; and second, the radicalism of the Bush administration has laid bare many of the structural defects in American foreign policy, defects that Chomsky has long assailed.

Much blood was shed in the last century by United States forces or proxies in the name of righteous ends. Because every state justifies its wars on the grounds of self-defense or altruism, Chomsky is correct that any "profession of noble intent is predictable, and therefore carries no information." He is also right to object to the historical amnesia that American statesmen bring to their dealings with other states. He seethes at the hypocrisy of Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz and Colin Powell, who invoked Saddam Hussein's 1988 gassing attacks in order to help justify the recent war, but who did not see fit to explain why the Reagan administration (which they served as senior officials) doubled its aid to Hussein's regime after learning of the gassings.

Chomsky also denounces the dependence of foreign policy elites on special interests. With African agriculture ravaged by American farm subsidies, with Israeli settlements unchallenged by Washington's elites and with campaign contributors to both parties landing mammoth paybacks in overseas contracts, it is certainly well past time to sound the alarm.

And it is essential to demand, as Chomsky does, that a country with the might of the United States stop being so selective in applying its principles. We will not allow our sovereignty to be infringed by international treaty commitments in the areas of human rights or even arms control, but we demand that others should. We rebuff the complaints of foreigners about the 650 people who remain holed up in Guantanamo kennels, denied access to lawyers and family members, with not even their names released. Yet we expect others to take heed of our protests about due process. We have "official enemies" -- those whose police abuses, arms shipments and electoral thefts we eagerly expose (Zimbabwe, Burma, North Korea, Iran). But the sins of our allies in the war on terror (Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Israel, Pakistan, Russia, Uzbekistan) are met with "intentional ignorance." Although he is typically thin on prescriptions, Chomsky offers "one simple way to reduce the threat of terror: stop participating in it."

Chomsky is wrong to think that individuals within the American government are not thinking seriously about the costs of alliances with repressive regimes; he is also wrong to suggest that it would be easy to get the balance right between liberty and security, or democracy and equality -- or to figure out what the hell to do about Pakistan. But he is right to demand that officials in Washington devote themselves more zealously to strengthening international institutions, curbing arms flows and advancing human rights. "It is easy to dismiss the world as 'irrelevant,' or consumed by 'paranoid anti-Americanism,' " he writes, "but perhaps not wise."

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