

Brian Tomasik

AP Public Policy

6 April 2005

Book Review #1

Noam Chomsky's 2003 bestseller, *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance* (301 pages), challenges not only the second Iraq war but a number of US military operations undertaken over the course of the last hundred years. Chomsky's depiction of the foreign-policy establishment parallels that of C. Wright Mills, while his faith in the ability of citizens to make informed decisions on public policy runs contrary to the more elitist views of James Madison and Walter Lippmann. Chomsky's proposition that the possible consequences of an action, rather than the actual outcome, determine the wisdom of the decision is quite convincing, but his overly simplistic statements of US hegemony versus the rest of the world are not.

The central argument of *Hegemony or Survival* is that the second Bush administration's invasion of Iraq was hardly a radical new direction in American foreign policy; to the contrary, the US—whether under the leadership of Republicans or Democrats—has engaged in preemptive aggression for more than a century, such as in its invasion of Russia in 1918 (71) and its “Operation Mongoose” against Cuba in 1961 (83). Adducing intervention in Nicaragua (96), Vietnam (100), Panama (107), and a number of other countries, Chomsky declares the US to be the world's foremost perpetrator of state terrorism. Having established this context, Chomsky goes on to assail the Iraq war as being provocative of further Islamic terrorism and WMD development (121-123), while asserting that removal of economic sanctions against Iraq might have been a more

effective way to topple Saddam Hussein (249). Finally, Chomsky warns of the dangers posed by American dismissal of nonproliferation treaties and development of advanced space weapons—which, he claims, threaten the survival of human civilization as we know it (228-235).

The terrorist policies of the US government are, according to Chomsky, orchestrated by the “elite sectors” of society (5). “Controlling the general population has always been a dominant concern of power and privilege” (5), and this goal has been achieved “in part through measures to discipline the institutions responsible for ‘the indoctrination of the young’—schools, universities, churches, and the like [...]” (7). Such rhetoric exhibits extraordinary similarity to the vision presented by C. Wright Mills in his 1956 classic *The Power Elite*. Mills, like Chomsky, believed that the public is kept in its place by schools, churches, and the family, while national and foreign policy is controlled by a small group of corporate, military, and political leaders. Through this “iron triangle,” Mills explained, economic and political institutions become one and the same, a claim that Chomsky echoes in quoting John Dewey: “[Politics is] the shadow cast on society by big business” (15).

Chomsky’s criticism of elite control is predicated on a belief that the general public should participate in power. He condemns Wilsonian idealism for its notion “that government [should be] in the hands of ‘the good, though but a few,’” and he refers contemptuously to Alexander Hamilton’s description of the masses as a “‘great beast’” (5). Chomsky sardonically notes the contradiction between the Bush administration’s desire for democracy in Iraq and its anger at the countries of “Old Europe” for following the wishes of the vast majority of its population (131-133)—indicating Chomsky’s belief

that governments should act in accordance with public opinion. This position stands in contrast to that of Walter Lippmann, who suggested in his 1925 book *The Phantom Public* that common people are generally too uninformed and uninterested to take part in governmental affairs and that men of stature should be the ones to make decisions on their behalf. The same view was echoed by James Madison in *Federalist 10*, which argued in favor of a large republic partially on the basis that it would give power to the most refined members of society and preclude the evils of majority rule.

Several of Chomsky's points throughout *Hegemony or Survival* derive from an intriguing truism: “[A]ctions are evaluated in terms of the range of likely consequences.[...] The actual consequences of an action may be highly significant, but they do not bear on the moral evaluation of the action” (187). For example, Chomsky explains, Khrushchev's decision to set up missiles in Cuba was not made right by the fact that nuclear war did not result (187). This logic makes sense: if someone offered me the chance of winning \$1 when a flipped coin came up heads and of losing \$1,000 when it came up tails, accepting the offer would be a bad decision—even if the coin did happen to come up heads—because the outcome was uncertain at the time when the decision was made. On this basis, Chomsky points out, one should not scoff at those who warned that invading Iraq might provoke Saddam into using WMDs simply because that possibility did not actually happen. Similarly, it was not wrong to heed legitimate warnings that the US invasion of Afghanistan might increase the number of Afghans ““at grave risk of starvation”” from 5 million to 7.5 million (129) simply because that possibility did not materialize. Of course we can be glad, in retrospect, that the worst-case scenarios were avoided, but that does not change the wisdom of the decision itself.

Another of Chomsky's major themes is less defensible. In view of the vast public opposition to the Iraq war, particularly outside of the US, Chomsky concurs with a statement from the *New York Times* that ““there may still be two superpowers on the planet: the United States [government] and world public opinion”” (4). This dualistic attitude is continued in Chomsky's conclusion: “One can discern two trajectories in current history: one aiming toward hegemony, acting rationally within a lunatic doctrinal framework as it threatens survival; the other dedicated to the belief that ‘another world is possible’ [...]” (236). Such statements can create the perception that Chomsky believes everything the US does is wrong and everything the rest of the world does is right—a thesis easily refuted by consideration of the positive elements of American foreign policy (for example, creation of the United Nations, implementation of the Marshall Plan, participation in mutual disarmament) and the atrocities committed by many of the America's former and current enemies (such as massacres in China, Cuba, and Iraq). This extreme view is not what Chomsky actually meant; he probably expected that his readers would be intelligent enough to fill in the omitted details. His book was not supposed to be a balanced depiction of the crimes committed on all sides but, rather, a collection of rarely discussed events in American foreign policy that were intended to challenge the reader's prevailing assumptions. Unfortunately, Chomsky's occasional black-and-white statements may lead readers to conclude that the author is foolishly simplistic.

Nevertheless, *Hegemony or Survival* is still an effective book. With thoroughly documented evidence, Chomsky argues persuasively against both the Iraq war and a number of prior instances of American aggression. Chomsky's views of the foreign-

policy elite and control of the population draw many similarities with the theory of C. Wright Mills, while his belief that public opinion should determine policy contrasts with the more elitist sentiments of James Madison and Walter Lippmann. Though some of the language used in *Hegemony or Survival* may seem to indicate an overly simplistic worldview, the depth of Chomsky's arguments—such as his assertion that the wisdom of decisions is determined by the range of possible consequences and not the actual outcome—strongly indicates otherwise.