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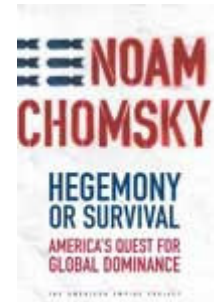
# About.com Contemporary Literature

## First Chapter: "Hegemony or Survival"

by Noam Chomsky

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### Priorities and Prospects

A few years ago, one of the great figures of contemporary biology, Ernst Mayr, published some reflections on the likelihood of success in the search for extraterrestrial intelligence. He considered the prospects very low. His reasoning had to do with the adaptive value of what we call "higher intelligence," meaning the particular human form of intellectual organization. Mayr estimated the number of species since the origin of life at about fifty billion, only one of which "achieved the kind of intelligence needed to establish a civilization." It did so very recently, perhaps 100,000 years ago. It is generally assumed that only one small breeding group survived, of which we are all descendants.

Mayr speculated that the human form of intellectual organization may not be favored by selection. The history of life on Earth, he wrote, refutes the claim that "it is better to be smart than to be stupid," at least judging by biological success: beetles and bacteria, for example, are vastly more successful than humans in terms of survival. He also made the rather somber observation that "the average life expectancy of a species is about 100,000 years."

We are entering a period of human history that may provide an answer to the question of whether it is better to be smart than stupid. The most hopeful prospect is that the question will not be answered: if it receives a definite answer, that answer can only be that humans were a kind of "biological error," using their allotted 100,000 years to destroy themselves and, in the process, much else.

The species has surely developed the capacity to do just that, and a hypothetical extraterrestrial observer might well conclude that humans have demonstrated that capacity throughout their history, dramatically in the past few hundred years, with an assault on the environment that sustains life, on the diversity of more complex organisms, and with cold and calculated savagery, on each other as well.

### Two Superpowers

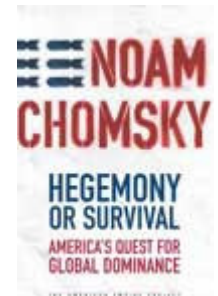
The year 2003 opened with many indications that concerns about human survival are all too realistic. To mention just a few examples, in the early fall of 2002 it was learned that a possibly terminal nuclear war was barely avoided forty years earlier. Immediately after this startling discovery, the Bush administration blocked UN efforts to ban the militarization of space, a serious threat to survival. The administration also terminated international negotiations to prevent biological warfare and moved to ensure the inevitability of an attack on Iraq, despite popular opposition that was without historical precedent.

Aid organizations with extensive experience in Iraq and studies by respected medical organizations warned that the planned invasion might precipitate a humanitarian catastrophe. The warnings were ignored by Washington and evoked little media interest. A high-level US task force concluded that attacks with weapons

of mass destruction (WMD) within the United States are "likely," and would become more so in the event of war with Iraq. Numerous specialists and intelligence agencies issued similar warnings, adding that Washington's belligerence, not only with regard to Iraq, was increasing the long-term threat of international terrorism and proliferation of WMD. These warnings too were dismissed.

In September 2002 the Bush administration announced its National Security Strategy, which declared the right to resort to force to eliminate any perceived challenge to US global hegemony, which is to be permanent. The new grand strategy aroused deep concern worldwide, even within the foreign policy elite at home. Also in September, a propaganda campaign was launched to depict Saddam Hussein as an imminent threat to the United States and to insinuate that he was responsible for the 9-11 atrocities and was planning others. The campaign, timed to the onset of the midterm congressional elections, was highly successful in shifting attitudes. It soon drove American public opinion off the global spectrum and helped the administration achieve electoral aims and establish Iraq as a proper test case for the newly announced doctrine of resort to force at will.

President Bush and his associates also persisted in undermining international efforts to reduce threats to the environment that are recognized to be severe, with pretexts that barely concealed their devotion to narrow sectors of private power. The administration's Climate Change Science Program (CCSP), wrote Science magazine editor Donald Kennedy, is a travesty that "included no recommendations for emission limitation or other forms of mitigation," contenting itself with "voluntary reduction targets, which, even if met, would allow US emission rates to continue to grow at around 14% per decade." The CCSP did not even consider the likelihood, suggested by "a growing body of evidence," that the short-term warming changes it ignores "will trigger an abrupt nonlinear process," producing dramatic temperature changes that could carry extreme risks for the United States, Europe, and other temperate zones. The Bush administration's "contemptuous pass on multilateral engagement with the global warming problem," Kennedy continued, is the "stance that began the long continuing process of eroding its friendships in Europe," leading to "smoldering resentment."



By October 2002 it was becoming hard to ignore the fact that the world was "more concerned about the unbridled use of American power than . . . about the threat posed by Saddam Hussein," and "as intent on limiting the giant's power as . . . in taking away the despot's weapons." World concerns mounted in the months that followed, as the giant made clear its intent to attack Iraq even if the UN inspections it reluctantly tolerated failed to unearth weapons that would provide a pretext. By December, support for Washington's war plans scarcely reached 10 percent almost anywhere outside the US, according to international polls. Two months later, after enormous worldwide protests, the press reported that "there may still be two superpowers on the planet: the United States and world public opinion" ("the United States" here meaning state power, not the public or even elite opinion).

By early 2003, studies revealed that fear of the United States had reached remarkable heights throughout the world, along with distrust of the political leadership. Dismissal of elementary human rights and needs was matched by a display of contempt for democracy for which no parallel comes easily to mind, accompanied by professions of sincere dedication to human rights and democracy. The unfolding events should be deeply disturbing to those who have concerns about the world they are leaving to their grandchildren.

Though Bush planners are at an extreme end of the traditional US policy spectrum, their programs and doctrines have many pre- cursors, both in US history and among earlier aspirants to global power. More ominously, their decisions may not be irrational within the framework of prevailing ideology and the institutions that embody it. There is ample historical precedent for the willingness of leaders to threaten or resort to violence in the face of significant risk of catastrophe. But the stakes are far higher today. The choice

between hegemony and survival has rarely, if ever, been so starkly posed.

Let us try to unravel some of the many strands that enter into this complex tapestry, focusing attention on the world power that The CCSP did not even consider the likelihood, suggested by "a growing body of evidence," that the short-term warming proclaims global hegemony. Its actions and guiding doctrines must be a primary concern for everyone on the planet, particularly, of course, for Americans. Many enjoy unusual advantages and freedom, hence the ability to shape the future, and should face with care the responsibilities that are the immediate corollary of such privilege.

### **Enemy Territory**

Those who want to face their responsibilities with a genuine commitment to democracy and freedom -- even to decent survival -- should recognize the barriers that stand in the way. In violent states these are not concealed. In more democratic societies barriers are more subtle. While methods differ sharply from more brutal to more free societies, the goals are in many ways similar: to ensure that the "great beast," as Alexander Hamilton called the people, does not stray from its proper confines.

Controlling the general population has always been a dominant concern of power and privilege, particularly since the first modern democratic revolution in seventeenth-century England. The self-described "men of best quality" were appalled as a "giddy multitude of beasts in men's shapes" rejected the basic framework of the civil conflict raging in England between king and Parliament, and called for government "by countrymen like ourselves, that know our wants," not by "knights and gentlemen that make us laws, that are chosen for fear and do but oppress us, and do not know the people's sores." The men of best quality recognized that if the people are so "depraved and corrupt" as to "confer places of power and trust upon wicked and undeserving men, they forfeit their power in this behalf unto those that are good, though but a few." Almost three centuries later, Wilsonian idealism, as it is standardly termed, adopted a rather similar stance. Abroad, it is Washington's responsibility to ensure that government is in the hands of "the good, though but a few." At home, it is necessary to safeguard a system of elite decision-making and public ratification -- "polyarchy," in the terminology of political science -- not democracy.

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