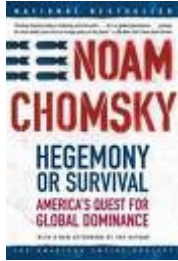


REVIEW OF CHOMSKY'S HEGEMONY OR SURVIVAL

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Wednesday, 04 October 2006



Hegemony or Survival reminds me of another book by Chomsky that I read in 1960, my first year of graduate school in linguistics. *Syntactic Structures* had been published the year before, and it was setting off a revolution in the study of language, for Chomsky had shown linguists how to describe language from a radically different point of view.

Now President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela has recommended this more recent book by Chomsky. Reading it has conjured up for me some of the spirit of the revolution that happened in linguistics, as well as in the rest of the world, throughout the sixties.

A couple of years ago my son Aaron gave me *Hegemony or Survival* for Christmas; it had just come out. I read it with interest at that time. As always in Chomsky's political writing, there is a solid underpinning of well documented facts to support what he says. But the real value of the book is the way he analyzes the objectives, methods, and activities of the United States in terms that are realistic, frank, and completely different from the ones we find in politicians' speeches, in the media, and in history books.

He shows how those who have ruled the United States have followed an "imperial grand strategy" which is coming to its culmination in an attempt to permanently dominate the planet using war and other methods of deadly coercion. Using the words of the rulers themselves, Chomsky demonstrates how they consciously and deliberately carry out brutal atrocities and yet manage to obfuscate and confuse the public and even themselves, so that their actions are portrayed as noble, or (when blatantly disastrous) at least well intentioned. He describes the "intentional ignorance" that makes this possible.

In cool, objective language Chomsky analyses the extent to which the ruling elite engage in profoundly criminal behavior to achieve their ends: deception, murder, genocide, ecocide, and more. The bitter irony in the words used to "sell" these activities to the public becomes clear when put in the context of a realistic description of what those words actually refer to.

The ultimate theme of the book is that following the logic of their imperial strategy, our rulers are willing to risk the extinction of life on the planet in their relentless and uncontrollable drive for hegemony. The only countervailing force that Chomsky sees that might be able to stop them is what he calls the planet's "second superpower": world public opinion, acting through peoples' movements and developing bonds of international solidarity. He concludes, "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," in the words that animate the World Social Forum, challenging the reigning ideological system and seeking to create constructive alternatives of thought, action, and institutions."

When I first read this book, two years ago, it was a bit discouraging. Of course I agreed with what Chomsky was saying, but the "lunatic doctrinal framework" is so massive that it cannot be effectively challenged with slogans and sound bites. It would take a thorough, penetrating analysis like this to adequately expose the ideological system our rulers use to mask their arrogance and greed. But apart from a few already convinced leftists like me, the book seemed destined for obscurity.

How different it is to reread the book this time! Now as I read I am aware that Chavez's recommendation has turned this book into a worldwide best seller. Many of the diplomats who laughed appreciatively at Chavez's joke about the devil and heartily applauded his speech have gone back home, and they are reading the book he recommended. And there are thousands more of us, all around the world, reading along with them.

Back in the sixties, a book by Chomsky profoundly changed the way linguists thought and talked about language. This time the stakes are higher: the way we think, talk, and act about the American Empire. Can another book by Chomsky help change that?

Jericho, Vermont, October 3, 2006

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