

BOOKS

TOWARDS A NEW COLD WAR: ESSAYS ON THE CURRENT CRISIS AND HOW WE GOT THERE

by Noam Chomsky

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Noam Chomsky's new collection of political essays is itself evidence that the *old* cold war simply continues. The title refers to American foreign policy in the post-Vietnam era, but these essays make it clear that from the author's point of view there really is no post-Vietnam era. The volume thus will not be pleasant reading for those who have been trying to "put Vietnam behind us." Vietnam, in this book, is still a brooding presence, the essential clue to crimes past and the gruesome portent of crimes yet to come. For Chomsky it remains *the* crucial and characteristic expression of American power. He aims to deny us the balm of forgetfulness and the comforts of reinterpretation.

The thirteen essays address five main themes: (1) the subservience of intellectuals to the state; (2) quasi-official attempts to whitewash American crimes in Indochina; (3) American/Israeli responsibility for terror and instability in the Middle East; (4) American complicity in international crimes since Vietnam, e.g., El Salvador and East Timor; and (5) the attempt of recent administrations to return the public to the cold war mentality. Of these themes only the last two are new to the Chomsky canon. Much of the material on the Middle East is dated, perhaps unavoidably. The collection also includes four long book reviews of the more heat than light variety. Chomsky must be forgiven some repetition and dull sparring, however, because his aim is to unmask the myriad apologists of power. The hazard is incident to the enterprise.

Chomsky is not really an analyst of power. His preoccupation with the "mandarins" who serve power has the curious effect of allowing those who actually wield it to escape serious scrutiny. This is not the result of oversight but of the fact that Chomsky

largely takes a particular analysis of power for granted. In broad outline this analysis has long been the common property of the Left, old and new: The state is the agent of private (corporate) interests. Those in power act rationally but covertly to further those interests, indifferent to the common good. The foreign policy of large states is imperialistic, designed to maximize private gain from the defenseless but resource-rich Third World. This predation is limited only by the moral and financial tolerance of the domestic population. Chomsky accepts this analysis without caveat, appending his own vision of the American "propaganda system," in which imperial power is kept domestically solvent by a host of intellectual courtiers and apologists. His work is accusative, a gadfly's attempt to keep his host uncomfortable.

Towards a New Cold War attempts to immunize the reader against the "reconstruction of the imperial ideology," by which Chomsky means the doctrine of America's global responsibility to contain communism. Broad support for this doctrine was squandered in Vietnam, he believes, but Vietnam did not change the personnel and the imperatives that determine imperial policy. The war was "lost" only at home, where protesters temporarily disrupted "the propaganda system." Given the "spectacular achievements" of that system in the past, he argues, it may well be able to restore public support for future forays.

This book is thus only obliquely concerned with the cold war. Chomsky views "the Russian threat," and its Soviet counterpart, "the American threat," as Orwellian devices to frighten the superpower populations into supporting predation. The Third World is his real concern. He offers few indications that the cold war stems from any particular Russian or American charac-

teristics, experiences, or institutions. The ongoing duel of threats and proxy wars is explained by the cynical desire of the world's "haves" to exploit the "have-nots" with domestic impunity. "Freedom" and "socialism" are not issues but reciprocal smokescreens. The chief difference between the antagonists is that the American elite dominates through cunning instead of brute force.

The problem with this kind of skepticism is not its alleged "betrayal" of American ideals (Chomsky is as American as apple pie) but the fact that it does not seem to result in *useful* detachment. Chomsky fails to achieve the stance to which he aspires, outside opposing cold war views. His discussions of American responsibility, for example, seem merely to invert the assumptions of the cold warriors. Where *their* America could do no wrong, *his* can do no right. Little evil seems to happen anywhere that cannot be traced to our doorstep. Doesn't this derive from an illusion of American omnipotence?

Noam Chomsky has long been America's answer to Bertrand Russell, our leading example of the scientist as moralist. No public advocate of recent memory so clearly exhibits both the strengths and weaknesses of the type. Clear and forceful, painstaking and frank, Chomsky commands attention in each of the "two cultures" of modern learning. Essentially a man of faith, his appeal is always to the facts and to common sense. A man of ferocious conscience, he proves that the complacent citadels along the Charles can still thunder forth Jeremiads against a sinful nation in the best abolitionist tradition.

Yet, like most scientists who turn to political analysis, Chomsky cannot help seeming to promise greater precision and predictability than the subject will tolerate. Most confusing, however, is his claim that he is not a moralist. Though he punctures the pretensions of social scientists, he shares their chief illusion: Others are partisan, he is objective; other views serve passion and interest, his own follow the colorless logic of the facts. These claims make sense only if one shares Chomsky's antique faith in the rationality, knowability, and the perfectibility of the human world. In lieu of such faith, one must be content to peer through a glass darkly and seek the mind's rescue in the heart. {WV}