

The anti-American case

C. M. Woodhouse

NOAM CHOMSKY

Towards a New Cold War: Essays on the Current Crisis and How We Got There

498pp. Sinclair Browne. £12.95 (paperback, £5.95).
0 86300 019 3

The Americans have a talent for self-criticism which they no doubt inherited from the British. Noam Chomsky's new book is a striking example. In any other country such a forthright and sustained diatribe against national policy by a prominent academic would be nearly unthinkable. A French professor would not have written such a book about his government's foreign policy; a Russian could not have done so except at the price of enforced exile or committal to a psychiatric hospital.

Towards a New Cold War could be called, in the literal sense, an unbalanced book because it presents only the case against successive American governments over the past thirty-five years. But Chomsky's real aim is to restore a balance. Without completely neglecting the anti-Soviet case, he argues that it has been exaggerated and wrongly taken for granted. The contrary case has been accepted by default, at least in the West. "I need not dwell on the performance of (the) Red bureaucracy," he says. So he does not. But he has severe words for "the flood of lies" which has covered up US foreign policy.

Ever since Walter Lippmann gave the Cold War its name in 1947, it has been seen as a barely disguised system of aggression by Stalin and his successors. Donald McLachlan defined it in *Defence in the Cold War* (1950) as "the policy of making mischief by all methods short of war - that is to say, short of war involving the Soviet Union in open hostilities". Both writers saw Europe as the primary area of conflict. But the "new" Cold War has more complex origins and a wider scope. For Chomsky, the Americans are just as guilty as the Russians. The targets are world-wide. Neither side has avoided committing its own armed forces. And there is also an enemy within (such as Professor Chomsky).

The structure of Chomsky's book does not accurately reflect the symmetry of involvement which he

asserts. Criticisms of Soviet activities occur on perhaps a dozen scattered pages; bad marks for US policy occupy more than 450 (counting a hundred pages of notes and afterthoughts); but the total of good marks for US policy is zero. Chomsky's assumption is that the justification of that policy has been sufficiently (though dishonestly) undertaken already by what he calls, borrowing the term from Sir Isaiah Berlin, "the secular priesthood", which is the western equivalent of the Soviet intelligentsia. Some of his most interesting passages are devoted to explaining why, in a free country, the secular priesthood suppresses embarrassing facts and persistently defends the indefensible.

His case against successive US governments is built up from a series of articles published over the past ten years. Three are concerned mainly with Vietnam, four with the Middle East, two with East Timor, and the introduction mainly with Latin America as the most recent area of criticism. Several reviews of books are also included, among them one of Henry Kissinger's "ridiculous memoirs". Europe is little mentioned, except in so far as Britain, France and West Germany are seen as American satellites.

The only European country which appears as a target of the Cold War is Greece. Since Greece gives occasion for an attack on British as well as American policy, it may be taken as a useful example of Chomsky's method and style. Thus:

The first major US intervention in defense of freedom was in Greece, when Britain, which invaded and conquered Greece after the Nazis had withdrawn, could no longer maintain its position there in 1946-47 after its success in undermining the anti-Nazi resistance and restoring royalist elements and Nazi collaborators to state power, setting off a wave of violence and persecution that finally evoked armed resistance.

It might be thought risky to combine irony ("defence of freedom") with factual statements ("invaded and conquered") in a single sentence, especially when the purported facts are as crude as the irony. "Invasion" normally implies opposition, armed or passive, but Chomsky would have difficulty in naming a single Greek who opposed the return of British forces to Greece at the end of the German occupation.

Similarly, when he speaks of "the inability of the British to repress popular forces in Greece", the word "popular" seems to imply some degree of numerical preponderance. But it would be a bold statistician who claimed to know the exact balance of popular support for either side in the civil war of 1946-49. Probably the majority fluctuated with the tide of battle. Still, Chomsky is a professor of linguistics, so presumably he knows, like Humpty Dumpty, how to show words which is to be master.

The whole collection of articles is written in a similar spirit. A review of such a bitter polemic cannot help betraying a personal view, so let me say without reserve that I agree with many of Chomsky's judgments, particularly on the subject of Kissinger. But there are many disappointing features of his book, apart from the extravagant language. Some of it has been outdated by events: for example, the Shah of Iran is still an active villain in the present tense, which cannot be satisfactorily adjusted by long addenda in the notes. There is also no indication of a positive policy which Chomsky would approve, with the single exception of a short passage advocating a federal solution of the Israeli-Arab conflict over Palestine.

It is difficult to avoid the suspicion that even if the US government had pursued exactly the opposite policies to those which Chomsky criticizes - if it had backed the Greek left instead of the Greek right, Musaddiq instead of the Shah, Ho Chi Minh instead of Diem and his successors, the

Palestinians instead of the Israelis, and so on - eventually he would have found it all wrong.

To take the most up-to-date instance, he blames President Reagan for supplying arms to the military government of Argentina. Would he now approve the US government's support for Britain over the Falkland Islands? On past form, probably not; but if he did, it would be the first act of US foreign policy that he had approved for a great many years.

There is another sense in which US governments could have pursued an opposite policy to that which they actually pursued. This would be isolationism, which seems to be the logical if unexpressed conclusion of Chomsky's reasoning. For merely to have backed B against A instead of A against B, whether in South-East Asia, the Middle East or Latin America, would almost certainly have resulted sooner or later in the same disappointment in reverse, and the same condemnation from Professor Chomsky.

He sees foreign policy essentially in moral terms. He rejects the pragmatism of George Kennan as well as the ruthless opportunism of Henry Kissinger. He has no patience with those who sought to persuade the US government to extricate itself from Vietnam merely on the grounds that its policy had no hope of success. He does not accept that Israel's anti-Palestinian policies or the Indonesian campaign against the Timorese must be

supported by the USA on grounds of *raison d'état*. The last US President who tried to act on similarly moralistic principles was Woodrow Wilson, and the outcome was twenty years of isolationism. Carter tried to follow Wilson's example, but was quickly overwhelmed by events. The auguries are not encouraging for the kind of foreign policy which Chomsky might approve.

Experience suggests, whether one attributes it to human nature or historical inevitability, that a purely moralistic foreign policy is in practice generally self-defeating. This is no more than an application of Lord Acton's famous dictum about power, which combines the theories of historical inevitability and human nature. A short step of a few years takes the oppressed of today, who command our moral sympathy, to become the oppressors of to-morrow. Chomsky actually makes this point forcibly in the case of the Israelis, whose governments he criticizes as bitterly as his own. The Palestinians, he points out, now play the part of the pre-Israel Jews; the Zionists seem to him little better than Nazis.

Surprisingly, he does not recognize that the same reasoning could have applied to the left-wing guerrillas in Greece, the Islamic nationalists of Iran, the Viet Minh, the Sandinistas, the Fretilin, the PLO, the IRA *et hoc genus omne*. His heart is in the right place, but it too readily carries away his head. It will annoy him to be told that he could have made a better case with less fervour, but it has to be said.