

# Rogue States



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The Rule of Force in World Affairs

Noam Chomsky



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# Rogues' Gallery: Who Qualifies?

Like many other terms of political discourse, the term “rogue state” has two uses: a propagandistic use, applied to assorted enemies, and a literal use that applies to states that do not regard themselves as bound by international norms. Logic suggests that the most powerful states should tend to fall into the latter category unless internally constrained, an expectation that history confirms.

Though international norms are not rigidly determined, there is a measure of agreement on general guidelines. In the post-World War II period, these norms are partially codified in the UN Charter, International Court of Justice decisions, and various conventions and treaties. The US regards itself as exempt from these conditions, increasingly so since the Cold War ended, leaving US dominance so overwhelming that pretense can be largely dropped. The fact has not gone unnoticed. The newsletter of the American Society of International Law (ASIL) observed in March 1999 that “international law is today probably less highly regarded in our country than at any time” in the century; the editor of its professional journal had warned shortly before of the “alarming exacerbation” of Washington’s dismissal of treaty obligations.<sup>1</sup>

The operative principle was articulated by Dean Acheson in 1963 when he informed the ASIL that the “propriety” of a re-

ponse to a “challenge . . . [to the] . . . power, position, and prestige of the United States . . . is not a legal issue.” International law, he had observed earlier, is useful “to gild our positions with an ethos derived from very general moral principles which have affected legal doctrines.” But the US is not bound by it.<sup>2</sup>

Acheson was referring specifically to the Cuba blockade. Cuba has been one of the main targets of US terror and economic warfare for 40 years, even before the secret decision of March 1960 to overthrow the government. The Cuban threat was identified by Arthur Schlesinger, reporting the conclusions of Kennedy’s Latin American mission to the incoming president: It is “the spread of the Castro idea of taking matters into one’s own hands,” which might stimulate the “poor and underprivileged” elsewhere, who “are now demanding opportunities for a decent living,” Schlesinger later elaborated—the “virus” or “rotten apple” effect, as it is sometimes called. There was a Cold War connection: “The Soviet Union hovers in the wings, flourishing large development loans and presenting itself as the model for achieving modernization in a single generation.”<sup>3</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the US assault became considerably harsher after the USSR disappeared from the scene. The measures have been near-universally condemned: by the UN, the European Union, the Organization of American States (OAS) and its judicial body, the Inter-American Juridical Committee, which ruled unanimously that they violate international law, as did the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. Few doubt that they would also be condemned by the World Trade Organization (WTO), but Washington has made it clear that it would disregard any WTO ruling, keeping to the rogue state principle.

To mention another illustration of contemporary relevance, when Indonesia invaded East Timor in 1975 it was ordered to withdraw at once by the UN Security Council, but to no avail.

The reasons were explained in his 1978 memoirs by UN Ambassador Daniel Patrick Moynihan:

The United States wished things to tum out as they did, and worked to bring this about. The Department of State desired that the United Nations prove utterly ineffective in whatever measures it undertook. This task was given to me, and I carried it forward with no inconsiderable success.<sup>4</sup>

He goes on to report that within two months some 60,000 people had been killed. The numbers reached about 200,000 within a few years, thanks to increasing military support from the US, joined by Britain as atrocities peaked in 1978. Their support continued through 1999, as Kopassus commandoes, armed and trained by the US, organized "Operation Clean Sweep" from January, killing 3,000 to 5,000 people by August, according to credible Church sources, and later expelling 750,000 people—85 percent of the population—and virtually destroying the country. Throughout, the Clinton administration kept to its stand that "it is the responsibility of the government of Indonesia, and we don't want to take it away from them." Under mounting domestic and international (primarily Australian) pressure, Washington finally indicated to the Indonesian generals that the game was over. They quickly reversed course, announcing their withdrawal, an indication of the latent power that had always been available.

US support for Indonesian aggression and slaughter was almost reflexive. The murderous and corrupt General Suharto was "our kind of guy," the Clinton administration explained, as he had been ever since he supervised a Rwanda-style massacre in 1965 that elicited unrestrained euphoria in the US. So he remained, while compiling one of the worst human rights records of the modern era, though he fell from grace in 1997 when he lost control and was dragging his feet on harsh International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity programs. The pattern is familiar: another grand killer, Saddam Hussein, was also supported

through his worst atrocities, changing status only when he disobeyed (or misunderstood) orders. There is a long series of similar illustrations: Trujillo, Mobutu, Marcos, Duvalier, Noriega, and many others. Crimes are not of great consequence; disobedience is.

The 1965 mass murders, mostly of landless peasants, ensured that Indonesia would not be a threat of the Cuban variety—an “infection” that “would sweep westward” through South Asia, as George Kennan had warned in 1948 when he took “the problem of Indonesia” to be the “most crucial” issue in “the struggle with the Kremlin,” which was scarcely visible. The massacre was also taken to be a justification of Washington’s wars in Indochina, which had strengthened the resolve of the generals to cleanse their society.<sup>5</sup>

Rendering the UN “utterly ineffective” has been routine procedure since the organization fell out of control with decolonization. One index is Security Council vetoes, covering a wide range of issues: from the 1960s, the US has been far in the lead, Britain second, France a distant third. General Assembly votes are similar. The more general principle is that if an international organization does not serve the interests that govern US policy, there is little reason to allow it to survive.

The reasons for dismissing international norms were elaborated by the Reagan administration when the World Court was considering Nicaragua’s charges against the US. Secretary of State George Shultz derided those who advocate “utopian, legalistic means like outside mediation, the United Nations, and the World Court, while ignoring the power element of the equation.” State Department legal advisor Abraham Sofaer explained that most of the world cannot “be counted on to share our view,” and the “majority often opposes the United States on important international questions.” Accordingly, we must “reserve to ourselves the power to determine” how we will act and which

matters fall “essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of the United States, as determined by the United States”—in this case, the actions that the Court condemned as the “unlawful use of force” against Nicaragua.<sup>6</sup>

The Court called on Washington to desist and pay substantial reparations, also ruling that all aid to the mercenary forces attacking Nicaragua was military, not humanitarian. Accordingly, the Court was dismissed as a “hostile forum” (*New York Times*) that had discredited itself by condemning the US, which reacted by escalating the war and dismissing the call for reparations. The US then vetoed a UN Security Council resolution calling on all states to observe international law, and voted in virtual isolation against similar General Assembly resolutions. All of this was considered so insignificant that it was barely reported, just as the official reactions have been ignored. Aid was called “humanitarian” until the US victory.<sup>7</sup>

The rogue state doctrine remained in force when the Democrats returned to the White House. President Clinton informed the United Nations in 1993 that the US will act “multilaterally when possible, but unilaterally when necessary,” a position reiterated a year later by UN Ambassador Madeleine Albright and in 1999 by Secretary of Defense William Cohen, who declared that the US is committed to “unilateral use of military power” to defend vital interests, which include “ensuring uninhibited access to key markets, energy supplies, and strategic resources,” and indeed anything that Washington might determine to be within its “domestic jurisdiction.”<sup>8</sup>

The only novelty in these positions is that they are public. In the internal record, they are assumed from the earliest days of the post-war order. The first memorandum of the newly formed National Security Council (NSC 113) called for military support for underground operations in Italy, along with national mobilization in the United States, “in the event the Communists ob-

tain domination of the Italian government by legal means"; subversion of democracy in Italy remained a major project at least into the 1970s.<sup>9</sup>

The record elsewhere is too rich to sample. It includes not only direct aggression, subversion, and terror, but also support for the same practices on the part of client states: for example, regular Israeli attacks on Lebanon that have left tens of thousands dead and have repeatedly driven hundreds of thousands from their homes; and massive ethnic cleansing and other large-scale atrocities conducted by Turkey, within NATO, abetted by a huge flow of arms from the Clinton administration that escalated as atrocities peaked.<sup>10</sup>

The record also includes incitement of atrocities. An illustration is the state that has just replaced Turkey as the leading recipient of US military aid (Israel and Egypt are in a separate category), now that Clinton-backed Turkish terror has succeeded, at least temporarily. The new champion, Colombia, had the worst human rights record in the hemisphere in the '90s, and—conforming to a well-substantiated regularity—US military aid and training are now scheduled to increase sharply.

The US contributions to the Colombian tale of horrors date back to the Kennedy administration. One of the most significant legacies of the Kennedy administration was its 1962 decision to shift the mission of the Latin American military from "hemispheric defense" to "internal security," while providing the means and training to carry out the task. As described by Charles Maechling, who led counterinsurgency and internal defense planning from 1961 to 1966, that historic decision led to a change from toleration "of the rapacity and cruelty of the Latin American military" to "direct complicity" in "the methods of Heinrich Himmler's extermination squads." The aftermath need not be reviewed. The consequences persist even after state terror has achieved its immediate goals. A Jesuit-sponsored conference in

San Salvador in 1994 took particular note of the efficacy of the residual “culture of terror in domesticating the expectations of the majority vis-à-vis alternatives different to those of the powerful,” a powerful force, buttressed with ample historical memory and current evidence.<sup>11</sup>

Much the same has been true in other parts of the “South.” In 1958, President Eisenhower supervised one of the major US clandestine operations in an effort to break up Indonesia, meanwhile dismantling its parliamentary institutions and setting the stage for the massive terror of the next 40 years. At the same time, Washington subverted the first (and last) free election in Laos, supported an attack on Cambodia, undermined the Burmese government, and intensified the terror of its client regime in South Vietnam, escalated to direct US aggression by JFK a few years later. In each case, the long-term effects have been disastrous.<sup>12</sup>

To ensure that its writ is law, a rogue superpower must maintain “credibility”: failure to respect its power carries severe penalties. The concept is invoked regularly in justification of state violence. The regular appeal to “credibility” was the only plausible argument advanced for the preference for war over other means in the case of Kosovo in early 1999; the standard cover phrase was “credibility of NATO,” but no one believed that it was the credibility of Belgium or Italy that had to be established in the minds of potentially disobedient elements—“rogues” in the technical propagandistic usage: “the defiant, the indolent, and the miscreant,” the “disorderly” elements of the world who reject the right of the self-anointed “enlightened states” to resort to violence when, where, and as they “believe it to be just,” discarding “the restrictive old rules” and obeying “modern notions of justice” that they fashion for the occasion.<sup>13</sup>

The need for “credibility” is also a leading factor in long-term planning. It is stressed, for example, in a 1995 study of

“Post-Cold War Deterrence” by the US Strategic Command (STRATCOM): Washington’s “deterrence statement” must be “convincing” and “immediately discernible” by leaders of “rogue states.” The US should have available “the full range of responses,” primarily nuclear weapons, because “unlike chemical or biological weapons, the extreme destruction from a nuclear explosion is immediate, with few if any palliatives to reduce its effect.” Bioterrorism may be a weapon of the weak, but the powerful rogue states prefer more efficient means of terror, intimidation, and devastation. “Although we are not likely [sic] to use nuclear weapons in less than matters of the greatest national importance, or in less than extreme circumstances, nuclear weapons always cast a shadow over any crisis or conflict.” Furthermore, “planners should not be too rational about determining . . . what the opponent values the most,” all of which must be targeted. “It hurts to portray ourselves as too fully rational and cool-headed.” “That the US may become irrational and vindictive if its vital interests are attacked should be a part of the national persona we project.” It is “beneficial” for our strategic posture if “some elements may appear to be potentially ‘out of control.’”

While the vast destruction of nuclear weapons is the preferred mode of “cast[ing] a shadow” over crisis and conflict, low-tech options should not be overlooked. STRATCOM also advises “creative deterrence”: “an insightful tailoring of what is valued within a culture, and its weaving into a deterrence message.” One illustration is provided, and suggested as a model: When Soviet citizens were kidnapped and killed in Lebanon, “the Soviets had delivered to the leader of the revolutionary activity a package containing a single testicle—that of his eldest son.” With skillful intermingling of creative deterrence and the threat of nuclear destruction, against the background of many examples of the residual “culture of terror” described by the Salvadoran Jesuits, the

“defiant” and “miscreant” who might disturb good order should be effectively controlled.

The reasoning would be familiar to any mafia don. In one or another form, it finds its natural place in any system of power and domination, and one should hardly be surprised to find that an appropriate version is crafted by the global enforcer, and applied where necessary. This is the rational way to advance towards the ideal outlined by Winston Churchill in his reflections on the shape of the post-World War II world:

The government of the world must be entrusted to satisfied nations, who wished nothing more for themselves than what they had. If the world-government were in the hands of hungry nations, there would always be danger. But none of us had any reason to seek for anything more. The peace would be kept by peoples who lived in their own way and were not ambitious. Our power placed us above the rest. We were like rich men dwelling at peace within their habitations.<sup>14</sup>

In the post-Cold War world, the Pentagon elaborated, “deterrence strategy” shifted from the “weapon-rich environment” of the superpower enemy to the “target-rich environment” of the South—in reality, the primary target of aggression and terror throughout the Cold War. Nuclear weapons “seem destined to be the centerpiece of US strategic deterrence for the foreseeable future,” the STRATCOM report concludes. The US should therefore reject a “no-first-use policy,” and should make it clear to adversaries that its “reaction” may “either be response or preemptive.” It should also reject the stated goal of the Non-Proliferation Treaty and should not agree to “Negative Security Assurances” that ban use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states that are parties to the Treaty. A Negative Security Assurance of 1995 was overridden by internal planning and other presidential directives, leaving Cold War strategy pretty much on course, apart from the broader range of targets.<sup>15</sup>

It is perhaps of interest that none of this elicits concern or even commentary.

During the Cold War years, the standard pretext for terror and aggression was “communism,” a highly flexible notion, as the victims recognize. Inspection of the internal record reveals that leading concerns were commonly the threat of independence and “infection.” In Indonesia, as in Italy, a prime concern was that the government was too democratic, even permitting participation of a party of the left, the PKI, which “had won widespread support not as a revolutionary party but as an organization defending the interests of the poor within the existing system,” developing a “mass base among the peasantry” through its “vigor in defending the interests of the . . . poor,” Australian Indonesia specialist Harold Crouch observes. There was no Russian connection, as Eisenhower stressed “vociferously” in internal discussion.<sup>16</sup>

The PKI was pro-Chinese, but by 1965, when it was demolished by mass slaughter, Russia and China were hardly allies. The way the fear of China was invoked illustrates well the opportunistic character of Cold War propaganda. Thus, when the State Department decided to support French efforts to reconquer its former colony, US intelligence was instructed to “prove” that Ho Chi Minh was an agent of the Kremlin or “Peiping”; either would do, and when it turned out that no evidence could be found, that was taken as proof that the targeted enemy was a mere slave of its foreign masters, in one of the more comical episodes of the history of intelligence.<sup>17</sup> Moynihan’s explanation of why the US had to render the Security Council “utterly ineffective” and support Indonesian slaughter in East Timor was that the resistance was supported by China—outlandish, but it reflected the understanding that some Cold War element is required by the doctrinal system.

The significance of Moynihan’s invocation of China was illuminated by events four years earlier and four years later, the US