

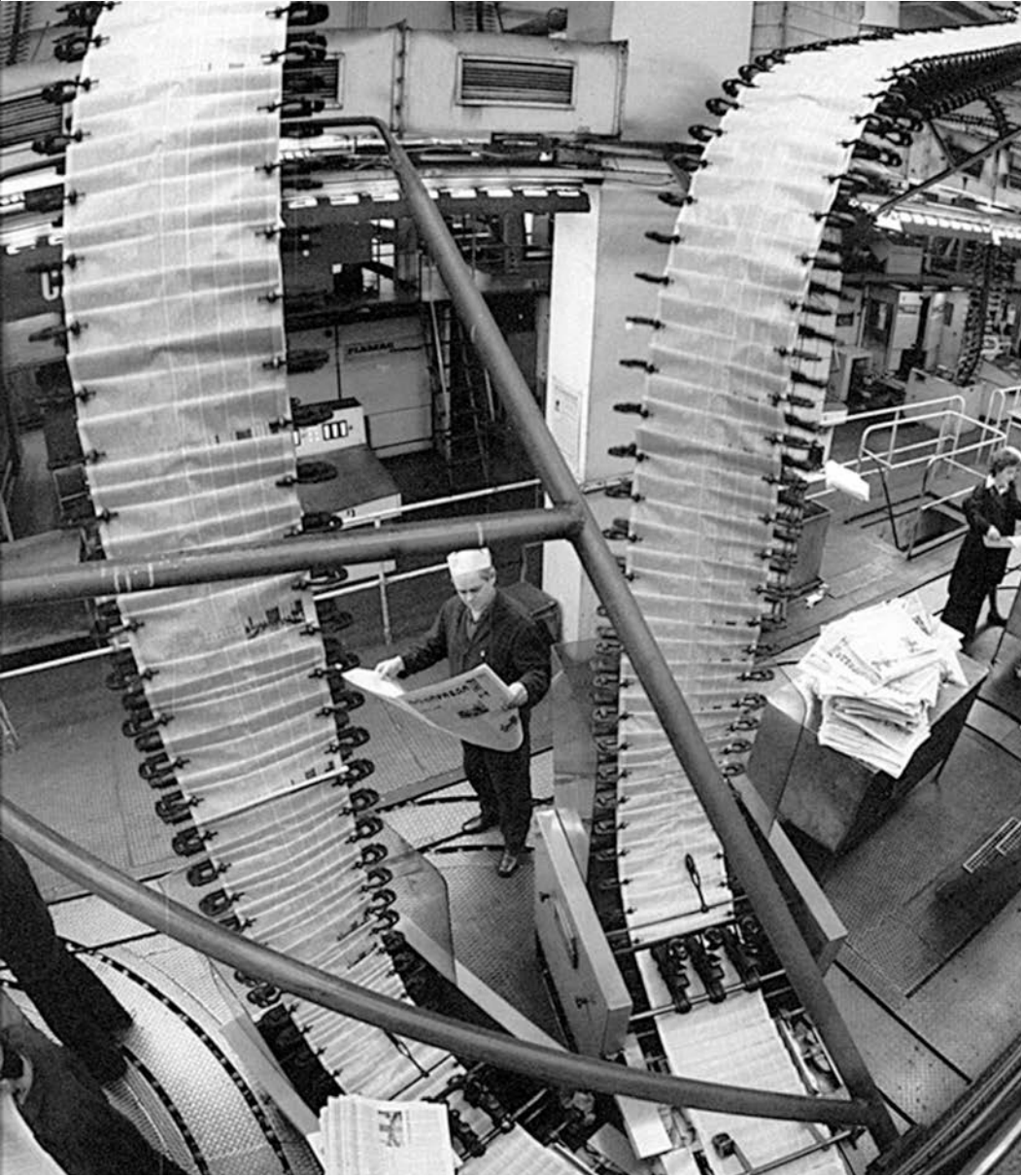
With a new preface by the authors

NOAM CHOMSKY

AND DAVID BARSAMIAN

ON POWER, TABLA IDEOLOGY, RACISM, AND CAPITALISM

The New York Times, the New York Review of Books, and the New Yorker
JFK, the Vietnam War, and US Political/Cultural Ideology
The Political Economy of Human Rights—Volume II, Paid



On Power and Ideology

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THE MANAGUA LECTURES

Noam Chomsky



Haymarket Books
Chicago, Illinois

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Original edition published by South End Press in Boston, Massachusetts.

This edition published in 2015 by

Haymarket Books

P.O. Box 180165

Chicago, IL 60618

773-583-7884

www.haymarketbooks.org

info@haymarketbooks.org

ISBN: 978-1-60846-400-5

Trade distribution:

In the US, Consortium Book Sales and Distribution, www.cbsd.com

All other countries, Publishers Group Worldwide, www.pgw.com

This book was published with the generous support of Lannan Foundation
and Wallace Action Fund.

Cover design by Josh On. Cover photo of *Pravda*'s printing presses in 1982 by
Vladimir Rodionov.

Printed in Canada by union labor.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Preface to the 2015 Edition

The chapters that follow are based on lectures given in Managua in 1986, at the peak of Reagan's terrorist war against Nicaragua. The lectures took place at about the time when the International Court of Justice condemned the United States for "the unlawful use of force"—aka international terrorism—and ordered it to cease the crimes and pay substantial reparations. The court was haughtily dismissed as a "hostile forum" by the editors of the *New York Times*, offended that it should dare condemn the United States for its crimes. For some years, the United States was joined in defiance of the World Court by Muammar Qaddafi and Enver Hoxha, but Libya and Albania have since complied with the Court judgments, leaving the United States in the splendid isolation it proudly occupies on many international issues.

The essential problem that the United States faces in the world was explained by State Department legal advisor Abram Sofaer. The world majority, he observed, "often opposes the United States on important international questions," so that we must "reserve to ourselves the power to determine" which matters fall "essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of the United States, as determined by the United States," in this case, international terrorism that was intended to punish and devastate the country where I was lecturing—or in approved Orwellian translation, to bring it the blessings of freedom and democracy.

At the same time the cultural correspondent of the *New York Times*, Richard Bernstein, explained in the *Times Magazine* the world was out of step because of various psychological and social maladies. His article was accordingly entitled “The U.N. versus the U.S.,” not “the U.S. versus the U.N.”

The pathologies of the world continue. In December 2013, the BBC reported the results of an international Gallup poll showing that the United States was regarded as the greatest threat to world peace by an overwhelming margin. No one else even came close. Fortunately, the Free Press spared the American public this further evidence of global backwardness.

At the time of these lectures, in March 1986, Reagan’s terrorist war was taking its toll in many ways. A minor one was regular power failures, so that the talks were constantly interrupted until the sound system could come back on. That of course was the least of it. The goal of the terrorist attack, as privately conceded by Administration officials, was to “debilitate the Sandinistas by forcing them to divert scarce resources toward the war and away from social programs” (45), a fact that aroused little comment in the civilized West.

That policy made good sense. It was directed rationally to the threat posed by Nicaragua, “the threat of a good example,” to borrow the title of a study by the development agency Oxfam, which reported that Nicaragua was “exceptional” among the seventy-six countries where Oxfam worked in the government’s commitment “to improving the condition of the people and encouraging their active participation in the development process.” Oxfam’s judgments were confirmed by the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank. Another sign of Sandinista criminality was that they accepted Costa Rican-initiated diplomatic efforts that the United States was desperately seeking to evade while claiming that they were being blocked by Nicaragua. Perhaps the ultimate crime was to conduct free elections in 1984

that were carefully monitored and judged free and fair, despite massive U.S. efforts to disrupt them (83f.)—elections that took place only in the world, but not within the rigid U.S. doctrinal system that prevails to this day.

In the terminology of U.S. planners, the threat of a good example is rephrased as the threat that one rotten apple can spoil the barrel, that a virus can spread contagion, that the dominoes may fall. Another version, explicit in internal documents, is that successful independent development in a poor country subjected to U.S. control might inspire others facing similar problems to pursue the same course, so that the whole system of imperial domination will erode. As discussed below, this is a leading theme of Cold War history, masked in fanciful tales of defense against enemies of awesome power, like Nicaragua. At the time of these lectures, President Reagan declared a national emergency because of the dire threat to U.S. national security posed by the government of Nicaragua, which had armies poised only two days' marching time from Harlingen, Texas. But in his best John Wayne pose, Our Leader was prepared to confront the terrifying enemy about to overwhelm us.

The driving fears were expressed eloquently by President Lyndon Johnson, an authentic man of the people, addressing U.S. troops in Asia. LBJ plaintively told the soldiers that they were protecting us from the billions of people of the world, who vastly outnumber us, and if they could would sweep over us and take what we have (41). So we'd better stop them in Vietnam while we still have a chance to survive.

Such fears have deep roots in American culture. They appear in the Declaration of Independence, where Jefferson lamented the fate of the innocent colonists subjected to the vicious policies of King George of England, who "excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of

warfare is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions,” words intoned solemnly every July 4. There followed fears of all sorts of other awesome and demonic enemies. Small wonder that to this day courageous souls carry guns on their hips when they venture to the corner store for a cup of coffee.

Inflamed and pathetic rhetoric aside, the actual threats of good examples abroad—not to speak of resistance by the oppressed at home—have been real, and go a long way toward explaining U.S. policies in the world since World War II, with ample precedents in earlier imperial systems, or, for that matter, within the smaller domains of the former junior superpower.

In the first two lectures I attempted to outline, as best I could, what seem to me to be the primary guiding principles of policy decisions: “the commitment of the state to serving private power in the domestic and international arena and the commitment of the ideological institutions to limiting popular understanding of social reality,” policies that “are firmly rooted in the institutional structure of the society and are highly resistant to change” (126). Lecture three seeks to apply the doctrines of global management to Central America. The two final lectures turn to the United States itself, to national security policy during the post–World War II era and to the domestic scene, in particular, to the “very limited form of democracy” that exists under capitalist democracy.

The conclusions of the first two lectures are, I think, well confirmed by events since. Particularly informative is the impact of the collapse of the Soviet Union, which eliminated the primary pretext for the policies of the preceding years: defense of all civilized values from the machinations of the Kremlin “slave state,” whose “fundamental design” and “implacable purpose” was to gain “absolute authority over the rest of the world,” destroying “the structure of society” everywhere—in the terminology of NSC 68 of 1950, one of the most influential internal documents

in setting policy for the postwar era. A few years after these lectures, the Cold War ended with the collapse of the global enemy. For those who want to understand the Cold War era, an obvious question is: what happened when the slave state disintegrated?

The answer is straightforward: little changed, except that earlier policies were pursued more intensively. Consider NATO. According to doctrine, NATO was established to protect Western Europe (and the world) from the Russian hordes. What happened, then, when the Russian hordes disappeared? Answer: NATO expanded to the East, in violation of verbal agreements with Mikhail Gorbachev, reaching right to the borders of Russia in ways that are by now raising a serious threat of confrontation. The official role of NATO was also changed. Its mandate became control over the global energy system, sea lanes, and pipelines, while it serves in effect as a U.S.-run intervention force.

Shortly after the Berlin Wall fell, the United States invaded Panama in order to kidnap a minor thug, Manuel Noriega, who had fallen out of favor when he began defying U.S. orders. U.S. forces bombed poor residential areas, killing many people, several thousand according to Central American human rights organizations. After a vulgar assault on the Vatican Embassy where Noriega had taken refuge, U.S. forces apprehended him and brought him to the United States where he was tried and sentenced mostly for crimes that Washington had praised when he was committing them while on the CIA payroll. The shameful episode was not particularly novel, apart from the pretext: no more Russians, so we were defending ourselves from Hispanic narcotraffickers. Other pretexts were developed later as circumstances required.

With the slave state gone, the Bush I administration issued a new National Security Strategy and military budget. The basic message was that things would remain much the same, but with new pretexts. A huge military establishment was still necessary

because of the “technological sophistication” of Third World powers. It was necessary to maintain “the defense industrial base,” in part a euphemism for high-tech industry that is substantially subsidized through the Pentagon system in our free-market economy. We must continue to maintain intervention forces targeting the crucial Middle East region, where the serious threats we had faced “could not have been laid at the Kremlin’s door,” contrary to decades of pretense, now abandoned, with the recognition that the primary threat had always been “radical nationalism.”

Nuclear weapons strategy also had to be reconsidered. The leading problem was to determine “The Essentials of Post-Cold War Deterrence”—the title of a partially declassified study issued in 1995 by President Clinton’s Strategic Command (STRATCOM), which is in charge of nuclear weapons. The study concludes that after the Soviet collapse, nuclear weapons “seem destined to be the centerpiece of U.S. strategic deterrence for the foreseeable future.” We must retain the right of “first use” of nuclear weapons, even against non-nuclear states, and make it clear that our actions may “either be response or preemptive.” Nuclear weapons must always be readily available because they “cast a shadow over any crisis or conflict,” with the obvious implications. We should also not “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.” For our strategic posture, it is “beneficial” if some parts of the decision-making apparatus “may appear to be potentially ‘out of control,’” thus posing a constant threat of nuclear attack—a resurrection of the “madman theory” attributed to Richard Nixon.

The Clinton Administration went on to present its geostrategic doctrine, which asserts that the United States is free to resort to “unilateral use of military power,” if deemed necessary, to ensure “uninhibited access to key markets, energy supplies and

strategic resources.” A less expansive version, the Bush II doctrine of preemptive war, was implemented a few years later with the U.S.-UK invasion of Iraq, the worst international crime of the new millennium, with consequences that are now tearing not just Iraq but the whole region to shreds.

More was learned about the extreme dangers of nuclear weapons even when their use is not contemplated, including the years just prior to these lectures. A November 2014 study of the years 1977 to 1983 in the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* estimated “false alarms that could be perceived as nuclear attacks” in the range of 43 to 255 per year, and speculated that not much may have changed since. The study concludes that “nuclear war is the black swan we can never see, except in that brief moment when it is killing us. We delay eliminating the risk at our own peril. Now is the time to address the threat, because now we are still alive.”

During the years of these threatening false alarms, the Reagan Administration launched operations to probe Russian air and naval defenses, simulating attacks and even a full-scale release of nuclear weapons, along with a high-level nuclear alert intended for the Russians to detect. These actions were undertaken at a very tense moment. Pershing II strategic missiles were being deployed in Europe, with a five- to ten-minute flight time to Moscow, and Reagan announced the SDI (Star Wars) program, which is understood on all sides to be effectively a first-strike strategy. That led to a major war scare in 1983. Newly released archives reveal that the danger was even more severe than had been previously assumed by analysts. A very detailed recent study based on extensive U.S. and Russian intelligence records concludes that “the War Scare Was for Real,” and that U.S. intelligence may have underestimated Russian concerns and the threat of a Russian preventive nuclear strike.

In September 2013, the BBC reported that during this dan-

gerous period, Russia's early-warning systems detected an incoming missile strike from the United States, sending the highest-level alert. The protocol for the Soviet military was to retaliate with a nuclear attack of its own. The officer on duty, Stanislav Petrov, decided to disobey orders and not report the warnings to his superiors. Thanks to his dereliction of duty, we are alive to reflect on the black swan we prefer not to see. Other studies reveal a shocking array of close calls, even apart from the "most dangerous moment in history" during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962.

An enormous gap in these lectures, not appreciated at the time, was that another and even more ominous threat was inexorably advancing: environmental catastrophe. By now no reasonable person can doubt that we are marching resolutely toward a grim fate, and not far in the future, unless the course we are following is radically altered.

Meanwhile, the neoliberal assault on the population that gained force under Reagan has taken an increasing toll, particularly after the collapse of the housing bubble in 2008 and the ensuing financial meltdown, the worst blow to the international economy since the Great Depression.

The accompanying decline of functioning democracy proceeds on course. Recent studies in academic political science reveal that a considerable majority of the population, at the lower end of the income scale, are effectively disenfranchised: their preferences have no detectable effect on policy. Influence slowly increases along with wealth until the very top, a fraction of one percent, where policy is largely determined. Formal democracy remains, but in a system perhaps more accurately termed "plutocracy."

It seems that much of the population is reasonably well aware of these tendencies, which proceed in parallel with dramatically rising economic inequality. In a careful study of the November 2014 elections, political scientists Walter Dean Burnham and

Thomas Ferguson show that the decline in voting is reaching the levels of the early nineteenth century, when voting was limited to propertied white males. “Many are convinced that a few big interests control policy [and] crave effective action to reverse long-term economic decline and runaway economic inequality,” they write, though no changes “on the scale required will be offered to them by either of America’s money-driven major parties.”

The lectures end with the observation that institutions are not fixed, that history is not at an end, and that the future offers “many severe threats and many hopeful possibilities.”

That remains both true and critically important. Not just for contemplation, but as a stimulus for action.

Preface

In the first week of March, 1986, I had the opportunity to visit Managua and to lecture at the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA), at the invitation of Rector César Jerez, S.J., and also under the auspices of the research center of CIDCA, directed by Galio Gurdíán. These lectures consisted of a morning series devoted to problems of language and knowledge, and a late afternoon series devoted to contemporary political issues. Participants included a wide range of people from the academic community and many others in Nicaragua, as well as visitors from Costa Rican universities and foreigners visiting or working in Nicaragua. The lectures, which I delivered in English, were expertly translated into Spanish for the listening audience by Danilo Salamanca and María-Esther Zamora, who translated the public discussion as well. The proceedings were broadcast (and, I subsequently learned, picked up by short wave in the United States) and transcribed, including the discussions afterward, though inevitably many of the thoughtful and informative comments from the floor were not captured properly on the tape recorder and hence do not appear here.

The chapters that follow consist of somewhat extended versions of the afternoon lectures on contemporary political issues and an edited version of the transcripts of the discussion. The morning lectures and discussion will appear in a separate volume,

to be published by MIT Press in Cambridge, with the title *Language and Problems of Knowledge*. In attempting to reconstruct the discussion from the transcript, I added material that was missing from the tape in a few places and I have sometimes transferred the discussion from one place to another where it fits more naturally with the edited lectures. Particularly in the transcripts of the afternoon discussion, I have also eliminated a considerable amount of material that I was able to incorporate into the text of the lectures, essentially in response to queries and interventions by the audience. These interventions appear only in fragmentary form below, in part because of this editing, in part because of the technical difficulty of recording speakers from the large and diffuse audience in a bilingual discussion, which proceeded with remarkable facility thanks to the translators and good will of the participants. The published transcripts therefore give only a very limited indication of the stimulating nature of the comments and questions during the lively and open discussion periods, which were all too short because of the constraints of time.

I would like to express particular thanks to Danilo Salamanca and María-Esther Zamora, not only for the careful way in which they carried out the difficult and trying task of translation in both directions, but also for their assistance to me in preparing the lectures. I was particularly pleased that Claribel Alegría agreed to undertake the translation of both volumes into Spanish—both my English text and the discussion transcripts—for the Nicaraguan edition. The English version that appears here, prepared for publication a few months later, includes supplementary documentation and further editing, along with some bibliographical notes at the end.

I would also like to express my thanks—here speaking as well for my wife, Carol, who accompanied me on this visit—to César Jerez, Galio Gurdián, Danilo Salamanca and María-Esther

Zamora, Claribel Alegría, and the many others who spent so much time and effort in making our visit a most memorable occasion for us. We much appreciate the gracious hospitality and care of the many friends, from many walks of life, whom we met in Managua, and the opportunity for very informative discussions with them, and even for some travel and informal visits at their homes, interspersed in a demanding but exhilarating schedule of meetings and lectures. I would also like to thank many people whose names I do not know or remember: the sisters of the Asunción order who welcomed us in the agricultural cooperative they organized in an impoverished peasant community near León, the participants in the public meetings and other discussions, and many others. I might mention particularly the opportunity to meet many people from the wonderful community of exiles from the U.S.-installed horror chambers in the region, who have fled to a place where they can be free from state terror and can live with some dignity and hope—though the Master of the Hemisphere is doing what it can to prevent this grave threat to “order” and “stability.”

I expected that Nicaragua would be very different from the picture that filters through the U.S. media, but I was pleased to discover how large the discrepancy is, an experience shared with many other visitors, including people who have lived for extended periods in many parts of the country. It is quite impossible for any honest visitor from the United States to speak about this matter without pain and deep regret, without shame over our inability to bring other U.S. citizens to comprehend the meaning and the truth of Simón Bolívar's statement, over 150 years ago, that “the United States seems destined to plague and torment the continent in the name of freedom”; and over our inability to bring an end to the torture of Nicaragua, and not Nicaragua alone, which our country has taken as its historical vocation for over a century, and pursues with renewed dedication today.

LECTURE 1

The Overall Framework of Order

In these lectures, I will be concerned with United States policy in Central America in the contemporary period. But I want to consider this question in a much broader context. What the United States is doing today in Central America is not at all new, and it is not specific to Latin America. We mislead ourselves by viewing these matters in too narrow a focus, as is commonly done in journalism and much of scholarship, both in the United States and elsewhere.

Surveying the historical record, we do find some variation in U.S. policies. The continuities, however, are much more striking than the variation, which reflects tactical judgments and estimates of feasibility. The persistent and largely invariant features of U.S. foreign policy are deeply rooted in U.S. institutions, in the distribution of power in the domestic society of the United States. These factors determine a restricted framework of policy formation that admits few departures.

Planning and action are based on principles and geopolitical analyses that are often spelled out rather clearly in internal documents. They are also revealed with much clarity by the historical record. If these principles are understood, then we can

comprehend quite well what the United States is doing in the world. We can also understand a good deal of contemporary history, given the power and influence of the United States. Current U.S. policies in Central America also fall into place, fitting historical patterns that change very little because of the relatively constant nexus of interests and power from which they arise.

I would like to address these questions in a fairly general way in my first two lectures, turning specifically to Central America in the third. In the fourth lecture, I want to shift the focus of discussion to U.S. national security policy and the arms race, to factors in the international arena that may well terminate history before the immediate problems that concern us can be effectively addressed. In the final lecture, I will turn to domestic U.S. society and ask how foreign policy and national security policies are fashioned. I will also want to inquire into the possibilities for modifying them, a profoundly important matter. The fate of Central America, and in fact the continued existence of human society on this planet, depend to no small extent on the answers to these questions.

Let us turn now to a review of some of the systematic patterns of U.S. foreign policy, beginning with a few general principles that I will then illustrate with various specific examples.

The first principle is that U.S. foreign policy is designed to create and maintain an international order in which U.S.-based business can prosper, a world of "open societies," meaning societies that are open to profitable investment, to expansion of export markets and transfer of capital, and to exploitation of material and human resources on the part of U.S. corporations and their local affiliates. "Open societies," in the true meaning of the term, are societies that are open to U.S. economic penetration and political control.

Preferably, these "open societies" should have parliamentary democratic forms, but this is a distinctly secondary consideration.

Parliamentary forms, as we shall see, are tolerable only as long as economic, social and ideological institutions, and the coercive forces of the state, are firmly in the hands of groups that can be trusted to act in general accord with the needs of those who own and manage U.S. society. If this condition is satisfied, then parliamentary forms in some client states are a useful device, ensuring the dominance of minority elements favored by U.S. elites while enabling the U.S. political leadership to mobilize its own population in support of foreign adventures masked in idealistic rhetoric (“defense of democracy”) but undertaken for quite different purposes. In its actual usage, the term “democracy,” in U.S. rhetoric, refers to a system of governance in which elite elements based in the business community control the state by virtue of their dominance of the private society, while the population observes quietly. So understood, democracy is a system of elite decision and public ratification, as in the United States itself. Correspondingly, popular involvement in the formation of public policy is considered a serious threat. It is not a step towards democracy; rather, it constitutes a “crisis of democracy” that must be overcome. The problem arises both in the United States and in its dependencies, and has been addressed by measures ranging from public relations campaigns to death squads, depending on which population is targeted. We will turn to examples as we proceed.

What all of this means for much of the Third World, to put it crudely but accurately, is that the primary concern of U.S. foreign policy is to guarantee the freedom to rob and to exploit.

Elsewhere, I have referred to this as “the Fifth Freedom,” one that was not enunciated by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt when he formulated the famous Four Freedoms, which were presented as the war aims of the Western allies during World War II: Freedom of Speech, Freedom of Worship, Freedom from Want, and Freedom from Fear. The history of Central America and the Caribbean—and not these regions alone—reveals just how these

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