

Creating a Different World

Noam Chomsky

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We are meeting at a moment of world history that is in many ways unique – a moment that is ominous, but also full of hope.

The most powerful state in history has proclaimed, loud and clear, that it intends to rule the world by force, the dimension in which it reigns supreme. Apart from the conventional bow to noble intentions that is the standard (hence meaningless) accompaniment of coercion, its leaders are committed to pursuit of their ‘imperial ambition,’ as it is frankly described in the leading journal of the foreign policy establishment – critically, an important matter. They have also declared that they will tolerate no competitors, now or in the future. They evidently believe that the means of violence in their hands are so extraordinary that they can dismiss with contempt anyone who stands in their way. There is good reason to believe that the war with Iraq is intended, in part, to teach the world some lessons about what lies ahead when the empire decides to strike a blow – though ‘war’ is hardly the proper term, given the array of forces.

The doctrine is not entirely new, nor unique to the United States, but it has never before been proclaimed with such brazen arrogance – at least not by anyone we would care to remember.

I am not going to try to answer the question posed for this meeting: How to confront the empire? The reason is that most of you know the answers as well or better than I do, through your own lives and work. The way to ‘confront the empire’ is to create a different world, one that is not based on violence and subjugation, hate and fear. That is why we are here, and the World Social Forum offers hope that these are not idle dreams.

Yesterday I had the rare privilege of seeing some very inspiring work to achieve these goals, at the international gathering of the *Via Campesina* at a community of the Landless Workers’ Movement (*Movimento dos*

Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra or MST), which I think is the most important and exciting popular movement in the world. With constructive local actions such as those of the Landless Workers' Movement, and international organisation of the kind illustrated by the *Via Campesina* and the World Social Forum, with sympathy and solidarity and mutual aid, there is real hope for a decent future.

I have also had some other recent experiences that give a vivid picture of what the world may be like if imperial violence is not limited and dismantled. Last month I was in south-eastern Turkey, the scene of some of the worst atrocities of the grisly 1990s, still continuing: just a few hours ago we were informed of renewed atrocities by the army near Diyarbakir, the unofficial capital of the Kurdish regions. Through the 1990s, millions of people were driven out of the devastated countryside, with tens of thousands killed and every imaginable form of barbaric torture. They try to survive in caves outside the walls of Diyarbakir, in condemned buildings in miserable slums in Istanbul, or wherever they can find refuge, barred from returning to their villages despite new legislation that theoretically permits return. 80% of the weapons came from the United States. In the year 1997 alone, Clinton sent more arms to Turkey than in the entire Cold War period combined, up to the onset of the state terror campaign – called 'counter-terror' by the perpetrators and their supporters, another convention. Turkey became the leading recipient of United States arms as atrocities peaked (apart from Israel-Egypt, a separate category).

In 1999, Turkey relinquished this position to Colombia. The reason is that in Turkey, the United States-backed state terror had largely succeeded, while in Colombia it had not. Colombia had the worst human rights record in the Western hemisphere in the 1990s and was by far the leading recipient of United States arms and military training, and now leads the world. It also leads the world by other measures, for example, murder of labour activists: more than half of those killed worldwide in the last decade were in Colombia. Close to half a million people were driven from their land last year, a new record. The displaced population is now estimated at 2.7 million. Political killings have risen to 20 a day; 5 years ago it was half that.

I visited Cauca in southern Colombia, which had the worst human rights record in the country in 2001, quite an achievement. There I listened to hours of testimony by peasants who were driven from their lands by chemical warfare – called 'fumigation' under the pretext of a United States-run 'drug war' that few take seriously and that would be obscene if that were the intent. Their lives and lands are destroyed, children are dying, they suffer from sickness and wounds. Peasant agriculture is based on a rich tradition of knowledge and experience gained over many centuries, in much of the world passed on from mother to daughter. Though a remarkable human achievement, it is very fragile, and can be destroyed forever in a single generation. Also being destroyed is some of the richest biodiversity in the world, similar to neighbouring regions of Brazil. *Campesinos*, indigenous people, Afro-Colombians can join the millions in rotting slums and camps. With the people gone, multinationals can come in to

strip the mountains for coal and to extract oil and other resources, and to convert what is left of the land to mono-crop agri-export using laboratory-produced seeds in an environment shorn of its treasures and variety.

The scenes in Cauca and South-eastern Turkey are very different from the celebrations of the *Via Campesina* gathering at the Landless Workers' Movement community. But Turkey and Colombia are inspiring and hopeful in different ways, because of the courage and dedication of people struggling for justice and freedom, confronting the empire where it is killing and destroying. These are some of the signs of the future if 'imperial ambition' proceeds on its normal course, now to be accelerated by the grand strategy of global rule by force. None of this is inevitable, and among the good models for ending these crimes are the ones I mentioned: the Landless Workers' Movement, the *Via Campesina*, and the World Social Forum.

At the World Social Forum, the range of issues and problems under intense discussion is very broad, remarkably so, but I think we can identify two main themes. One is global justice and life after capitalism – or to put it more simply, life, because it is not so clear that the human species can survive very long under existing state capitalist institutions. The second theme is related: war and peace, and more specifically, the war in Iraq that Washington and London are desperately seeking to carry out, virtually alone.

Let's start with some good news about these basic themes. As you know, there is also a conference of the World Economic Forum going on right now, in Davos. Here in Porto Alegre, the mood is hopeful, vigorous, exciting. In Davos, the *New York Times* tells us, 'the mood has darkened.' For the 'movers and shakers,' it is not 'global party time' any more. In fact, the founder of the Forum has conceded defeat: 'The power of corporations has completely disappeared,' he said. So we have won. There is nothing left for us to do but pick up the pieces – not only to talk about a vision of the future that is just and humane, but to move on to create it.

Of course, we should not let the praise go to our heads. There are still a few difficulties ahead. The main theme of the World Economic Forum is 'Building Trust.' There is a reason for that. The 'masters of the universe,' as they liked to call themselves in more exuberant days, know that they are in serious trouble. They recently released a poll showing that trust in leaders has severely declined. Only the leaders of non-governmental organisations had the trust of a clear majority, followed by United Nations and spiritual/religious leaders, then leaders of Western Europe and economic managers, below them corporate executives, and well below them, at the bottom, leaders of the United States, with about 25% trust. That may well mean virtually no trust: when people are asked whether they trust leaders with power, they usually say 'Yes,' out of habit.

It gets worse. A few days ago a poll in Canada found that over one-third of the population regard the United States as the greatest threat to world peace. The United States ranks more than twice as high as Iraq or North Korea, and far higher than Al Qaeda as well. A poll without careful controls, by *Time* magazine, found that over 80% of respondents in Europe regarded the United States as the

greatest threat to world peace, compared with less than 10% for Iraq or North Korea. Even if these numbers are wrong by some substantial factor, they are dramatic. Without going on, the corporate leaders who paid \$30,000 to attend the sombre meetings in Davos have good reasons to take as their theme: 'Building Trust.'

The coming war with Iraq is undoubtedly contributing to these interesting and important developments. Opposition to the war is completely without historical precedent. In Europe it is so high that Secretary of 'Defence' Donald Rumsfeld dismissed Germany and France as just the 'old Europe,' plainly of no concern because of their disobedience. The 'vast numbers of other countries in Europe [are] with the United States,' he assured foreign journalists. These vast numbers are the 'new Europe,' symbolised by Italy's Berlusconi, soon to visit the White House, praying that he will be invited to be the third of the 'three B's': Bush-Blair-Berlusconi – assuming that he can stay out of jail. Italy is on board, the White House tells us. It is apparently not a problem that over 80% of the public is opposed to the war, according to recent polls. That just shows that the people of Italy also belong to the 'old Europe,' and can be sent to the ashcan of history along with France and Germany, and others who do not know their place.

Spain is hailed as another prominent member of the new Europe – with 75% totally opposed to the war, according to an international Gallup poll. According to the leading foreign policy analyst of *Newsweek*, pretty much the same is true of the most hopeful part of the new Europe, the former Communist countries that are counted on (quite openly) to serve United States interests and undermine Europe's despised social market and welfare states. He reports that in the Czech Republic, two-thirds of the population oppose participation in a war, while in Poland only one-quarter would support a war even if the United Nations inspectors 'prove that Iraq possesses weapons of mass destruction.' The Polish press reports 37% approval in this case, still extremely low, at the heart of the 'new Europe.'

New Europe soon identified itself in an open letter in the *Wall Street Journal*: along with Italy, Spain, Poland and the Czech Republic – the leaders, that is, not the people – it includes Denmark (with popular opinion on the war about the same as Germany, therefore 'old Europe'), Portugal (53% opposed to war under any circumstances, 96% opposed to war by the US and its allies unilaterally), Britain (40% opposed to war under any circumstances, 90% opposed to war by the US and its allies unilaterally), and Hungary (no figures available).

In brief, the exciting 'new Europe' consists of some leaders who are willing to defy their populations.

Old Europe reacted with some annoyance to Rumsfeld's declaration that they are 'problem' countries, not modern states. Their reaction was explained by thoughtful United States commentators. Keeping just to the national press, we learn that 'world-weary European allies' do not appreciate the 'moral rectitude' of the President. The evidence for his 'moral rectitude' is that 'his advisors say the evangelical zeal' comes directly from the simple man who is dedicated to

driving evil from the world. Since that is surely the most reliable and objective evidence that can be imagined, it would be improper to express slight scepticism, let alone to react as we would to similar performances by others. The cynical Europeans, we are told, misinterpret Bush's purity of soul as 'moral *naïveté*' – without a thought that the administration's public relations specialists might have a hand in creating imagery that will sell. We are informed further that there is a great divide between world-weary Europe and the 'idealistic New World bent on ending inhumanity.' That this is the driving purpose of the idealistic New World we also know for certain, because so our leaders proclaim. What more in the way of proof could one seek?

The rare mention of public opinion in the new Europe treats it as a problem of marketing; the product being sold is necessarily right and honourable, given its source. The willingness of the leaders of the new Europe to prefer Washington to their own populations 'threatens to isolate the Germans and French,' who are exhibiting retrograde democratic tendencies, and shows that Germany and France cannot 'say that they are speaking for Europe.' They are merely speaking for the people of old and new Europe, who – the same commentators acknowledge – express 'strong opposition' to the policies of the new Europe.

The official pronouncements and the reaction to them are illuminating. They demonstrate with some clarity the contempt for democracy that is rather typical, historically, among those who feel that they rule the world by right.

There are many other illustrations. When German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder dared to take the position of the overwhelming majority of voters in the last election, that was described as a shocking failure of leadership, a serious problem that Germany must overcome if it wants to be accepted in the civilised world. The problem lies with Germany, not élites of the Anglo-American democracies. Germany's problem is that 'the government lives in fear of the voters, and that is causing it to make mistake after mistake' – the spokesperson for the right-wing Christian Social Union party, who understands the real nature of democracy.

The case of Turkey is even more revealing. As throughout the region, Turks are very strongly opposed to the war – about 90% according to the most recent polls. And so far the government has irresponsibly paid some attention to the people who elected it. It has not bowed completely to the intense pressure and threats that Washington is exerting to compel it to heed the master's voice. This reluctance of the elected government to follow orders from on high proves that its leaders are not true democrats. For those who may be too dull to comprehend these subtleties, they are explained by former Ambassador to Turkey Morton Abramowitz, now a distinguished senior statesman and commentator. Ten years ago, he explained, Turkey was governed by a real democrat, Turgut Ozal, who 'overrode his countrymen's pronounced preference to stay out of the Gulf War.' But democracy has declined in Turkey. The current leadership 'is following the people,' revealing its lack of 'democratic credentials.' 'Regrettably,' he says, 'for the United States there is no Ozal around.' So it will be necessary to bring

authentic democracy to Turkey by economic strangulation and other coercive means – regrettably, but that is demanded by what the élite press calls our ‘yearning for democracy.’

Brazil is witnessing another exercise of the real attitudes towards democracy among the masters of the universe. In the most free election in the hemisphere, a large majority voted for policies that are strongly opposed by international finance and investors, by the International Monetary Fund and the United States Treasury Department. In earlier years, that would have been the signal for a military coup installing a murderous National Security State, as in Brazil 40 years ago. Now that will not work; the populations of South and North have changed, and will not easily tolerate it. Furthermore, there are now simpler ways to undermine the will of the people, thanks to the neo-liberal instruments that have been put in place: economic controls, capital flight, attacks on currency, privatisation, and other devices that are well-designed to reduce the arena of popular choice. These, it is hoped, may compel the government to follow the dictates of what international economists call the ‘virtual parliament’ of investors and lenders, who make the real decisions, coercing the population, an irrelevant nuisance according to the reigning principles of democracy.

When I was just about to leave for the airport I received another of the many inquiries from the press about why there is so little anti-war protest in the United States. The impressions are instructive. In fact, protest in the United States, as elsewhere, is also at levels that have no historical precedent. Not just demonstrations, teach-ins, and other public events. To take an example of a different kind, last week the Chicago City Council passed an anti-war resolution, 46-1, joining 50 other cities and towns. The same is true in other sectors, including those that are the most highly trusted, as the World Economic Forum learned to its dismay: non-governmental organisations and religious organisations and figures, with few exceptions. Several months ago the biggest university in the country passed a strong anti-war resolution – the University of Texas, right next door to George W’s ranch. And it’s easy to continue.

So why the widespread judgement among élites that the tradition of dissent and protest has died? Invariably, comparisons are drawn to Vietnam, a very revealing fact. We have just passed the 40th anniversary of the public announcement that the Kennedy administration was sending the United States Air Force to bomb South Vietnam, also initiating plans to drive millions of people into concentration camps and chemical warfare programmes to destroy food crops. There was no pretext of defence, except in the sense of official rhetoric: defence against the ‘internal aggression’ of South Vietnamese in South Vietnam and their ‘assault from the inside’ (President Kennedy and his United Nations Ambassador, Adlai Stevenson). Protest was non-existent. It did not reach any meaningful level for several years. By that time hundreds of thousands of United States troops had joined the occupying army, densely-populated areas were being demolished by saturation bombing, and the aggression had spread to the rest of Indochina. Protest among élite intellectuals kept primarily to

‘pragmatic grounds’: the war was a ‘mistake’ that was becoming too costly to the United States. In sharp contrast, by the late 1960s the great majority of the public had come to oppose the war as ‘fundamentally wrong and immoral,’ not ‘a mistake,’ figures that hold steady until the present.

Today, in dramatic contrast to the 1960s, there is large-scale, committed, and principled popular protest all over the United States before the war has been officially launched. That reflects a steady increase over these years in unwillingness to tolerate aggression and atrocities, one of many such changes, world-wide in fact. That’s part of the background for what is taking place in Porto Alegre, and part of the reason for the gloom in Davos.

The political leadership is well aware of these developments. When a new administration comes into office, it receives a review of the world situation compiled by the intelligence agencies. It is secret; we learn about these things many years later. But when Bush no. 1 came into office in 1989, a small part of the review was leaked, a passage concerned with ‘cases where the United States confronts much weaker enemies’ – the only kind one would think of fighting. Intelligence analysts advised that in conflicts with ‘much weaker enemies’ the United States must win ‘decisively and rapidly,’ or popular support will collapse. It’s not like the 1960s, when the population would tolerate a murderous and destructive war for years without visible protest. That’s no longer true. The activist movements of the past 40 years have had a significant civilizing effect. By now, the only way to attack a much weaker enemy is to construct a huge propaganda offensive depicting it as about to commit genocide, maybe even a threat to our very survival, then to celebrate a miraculous victory over the awesome foe, while chanting praises to the courageous leaders who came to the rescue just in time.

That is the current scenario in Iraq.

Polls reveal more support for the planned war in the United States than elsewhere, but the numbers are misleading. It is important to bear in mind that the United States is the only country outside Iraq where Saddam Hussein is not only reviled but also feared. There is a flood of lurid propaganda warning that if we do not stop him today he will destroy us tomorrow. The next evidence of his weapons of mass destruction may be a ‘mushroom cloud,’ so National Security Adviser Condoleeza Rice announced in September – presumably over New York. No one in Iraq’s neighbourhood seems overly concerned, much as they may hate the murderous tyrant. Perhaps that is because they know that as a result of the sanctions ‘the vast majority of the country’s population has been on a semi-starvation diet for years,’ as the World Health Organisation reported, and that Iraq is one of the weakest states in the region: its economy and military expenditures are a fraction of Kuwait’s, which has 10% of Iraq’s population, and much farther below others nearby.

But the United States is different. When Congress granted the President authority to go to war last October, it was ‘to defend the national security of the United States against the continuing threat posed by Iraq.’ We must tremble in

fear before this awesome threat, while countries nearby seek to reintegrate Iraq into the region, including those who were attacked by Saddam when he was a friend and ally of those who now run the show in Washington – and who were happily providing him with aid, including the means to develop weapons of mass destruction, at a time when he was far more dangerous than today and had already committed by far his worst crimes.

A serious measure of support for war in the United States would have to extricate this ‘fear factor,’ which is genuine, and unique to the United States. The residue would give a more realistic measure of support for the resort to violence, and would show, I think, that it is about the same as elsewhere.

It is also rather striking that strong opposition to the coming war extends right through the establishment. The current issues of the two major foreign policy journals feature articles opposing the war by leading figures of foreign policy élites. The very respectable American Academy of Arts and Sciences released a long monograph on the war, trying to give the most sympathetic possible account of the Bush administration position, then dismantling it point by point. One respected analyst they quote is a Senior Associate of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, who warns that the United States is becoming ‘a menace to itself and to mankind’ under its current leadership. There are no precedents for anything like this.

We should recognize that these criticisms tend to be narrow. They are concerned with threats to the United States and its allies. They do not take into account the likely effects on Iraqis: the warnings of the United Nations and aid agencies that millions may be at very serious risk in a country that is at the edge of survival after a terrible war that targeted its basic infrastructure – which amounts to biological warfare – and a decade of devastating sanctions that have killed hundreds of thousands of people and blocked any reconstruction, while strengthening the brutal tyrant who rules Iraq. It is also interesting that the criticisms do not even take the trouble to mention the lofty rhetoric about democratisation and liberation. Presumably, the critics take for granted that the rhetoric is intended for intellectuals and editorial writers – who are not supposed to notice that the drive to war is accompanied by a dramatic demonstration of hatred of democracy, just as they are supposed to forget the record of those who are leading the campaign. That is also why none of this is ever brought up at the United Nations.

Nevertheless, the threats that do concern establishment critics are very real. They were surely not surprised when the CIA informed Congress last October that they know of no link between Iraq and Al Qaeda-style terrorism, but that an attack on Iraq would probably increase the terrorist threat to the West, in many ways. It is likely to inspire a new generation of terrorists bent on revenge, and it might induce Iraq to carry out terrorist actions that are already in place, a possibility taken very seriously by United States analysts. A high-level task force of the Council on Foreign Relations just released a report warning of likely terrorist attacks that could be far worse than 9/11, including possible use of

weapons of mass destruction right within the United States, dangers that become 'more urgent by the prospect of the United States going to war with Iraq.' They provide many illustrations, virtually a cook-book for terrorists. It is not the first; similar ones were published by prominent strategic analysts long before 9/11.

It is also understood that an attack on Iraq may lead not just to more terror, but also to proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, for a simple reason: potential targets of the United States recognise that there is no other way to deter the most powerful state in history, which is pursuing 'America's Imperial Ambition,' posing serious dangers to the United States and the world, the author warns in the main establishment journal, *Foreign Affairs*. Prominent hawks warn that a war in Iraq might lead to the 'greatest proliferation disaster in history.' They know that if Iraq has chemical and biological weapons, the dictatorship keeps them under tight control. They understand further that except as a last resort if attacked, Iraq is highly unlikely to use any weapon of mass destruction it has, thus inviting instant incineration. And it is also highly unlikely to leak them to the Osama bin Ladens of the world, which would be a terrible threat to Saddam Hussein himself, quite apart from the reaction if there is even a hint that this might take place. But under attack, the society would collapse, including the controls over weapons of mass destruction. These would be 'privatised,' terrorism experts point out, and offered to the huge 'market for unconventional weapons, where they will have no trouble finding buyers.' That really is a 'nightmare scenario,' just as the hawks warn.

Even before the Bush administration began beating the war drums about Iraq, there were plenty of warnings that its adventurism was going to lead to proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, as well as terror, simply as a deterrent. Right now, Washington is teaching the world a very ugly and dangerous lesson: if you want to defend yourself from us, you had better mimic North Korea and pose a credible military threat, including weapons of mass destruction. Otherwise we will demolish you in pursuit of the new 'grand strategy' that has caused shudders not only among the usual victims, and in 'old Europe,' but right at the heart of the United States foreign policy élite, who recognise that 'commitment of the United States to active military confrontation for decisive national advantage will leave the world more dangerous and the United States less secure' – again, quoting respected figures in élite journals.

Evidently, the likely increase of terror and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction is of limited concern to planners in Washington, in the context of their real priorities. Without too much difficulty, one can think of reasons why this might be the case, not very attractive ones.

The nature of the threats was dramatically underscored last October, at the summit meeting in Havana on the 40th anniversary of the Cuban missile crisis, attended by key participants from Russia, the United States, and Cuba. Planners knew at the time that they had the fate of the world in their hands, but new information released at the Havana summit was truly startling. We learned that the world was saved from nuclear devastation by one Russian submarine captain,

Vasily Arkhipov, who blocked an order to fire nuclear missiles when Russian submarines were attacked by United States destroyers near Kennedy's 'quarantine' line. Had Arkhipov agreed, the nuclear launch would have almost certainly set off an interchange that could have 'destroyed the Northern hemisphere,' as Eisenhower had warned.

The dreadful revelation is particularly timely because of the circumstances: the roots of the missile crisis lay in international terrorism aimed at 'regime change,' two concepts very much in the news today. US terrorist attacks against Cuba began shortly after Castro took power, and were sharply escalated by Kennedy, leading to a very plausible fear of invasion, as Robert McNamara has acknowledged. Kennedy resumed the terrorist war immediately after the crisis was over; terrorist actions against Cuba, based in the United States, peaked in the late 1970s and continued 20 years later. Putting aside any judgement about the behaviour of the participants in the missile crisis, the new discoveries demonstrate with brilliant clarity the terrible and unanticipated risks of attacks on a 'much weaker enemy' aimed at 'regime change' – risks to survival, it is no exaggeration to say.

As for the fate of the people of Iraq, no one can predict with any confidence: not the Central Intelligence Agency, not Donald Rumsfeld, not those who claim to be experts on Iraq, no one. Possibilities range from the frightening prospects for which the aid agencies are preparing, to the delightful tales spun by administration public relations specialists and their chorus. One never knows. These are among the many reasons why decent human beings do not contemplate the threat or use of violence, whether in personal life or international affairs, unless reasons have been offered that have overwhelming force. And surely nothing remotely like that has been offered in the present case, which is why opposition to the plans of Washington and London has reached such scale and intensity.

The timing of the Washington-London propaganda campaign was so transparent that it too has been a topic of discussion, and sometimes ridicule, right in the mainstream. The campaign began in September of last year. Before that, Saddam was a terrible guy, but not an imminent threat to the survival of the US. The 'mushroom cloud' was announced in early September. Since then, fear that Saddam will attack the United States has been running at about 60-70% of the population. 'The desperate urgency about moving rapidly against Iraq that Bush expressed in October was not evident from anything he said two months before,' the chief political analyst of United Press International observed, drawing the obvious conclusion: September marked the opening of the political campaign for the mid-term congressional elections. The administration, he continued, was 'campaigning to sustain and increase its power on a policy of international adventurism, new radical pre-emptive military strategies, and a hunger for a politically convenient and perfectly timed confrontation with Iraq.' As long as domestic issues were in the forefront, Bush and his cohorts were losing ground – naturally enough, because they are conducting a serious assault

against the general population. ‘But lo and behold! Though there have been no new terrorist attacks or credible indications of imminent threat, since the beginning of September, national security issues have been in the driver’s seat,’ not just Al Qaeda but an awesome and threatening military power, Iraq.

The same observations have been made by many others. That’s convenient for people like us: we can just quote the mainstream instead of giving controversial analyses. The Carnegie Endowment Senior Associate I quoted before writes that Bush and Co. are following ‘the classic modern strategy of an endangered right-wing oligarchy, which is to divert mass discontent into nationalism,’ inspired by fear of enemies about to destroy us. That strategy is of critical importance if the ‘radical nationalists’ setting policy in Washington hope to advance their announced plan for ‘unilateral world domination through absolute military superiority,’ while conducting a major assault against the interests of the large majority of the domestic population.

For the elections, the strategy worked, barely. The Fall 2002 election was won by a small number of votes, but enough to hand Congress to the executive. Analyses of the election found that voters maintained their opposition to the administration on social and economic issues, but suppressed these issues in favour of security concerns, which typically lead to support for the figure in authority – the brave cowboy who must ride to our rescue, just in time.

As history shows, it is all too easy for unscrupulous leaders to terrify the public, with consequences that have not been attractive. That is the natural method to divert attention from the fact that tax cuts for the rich and other devices are undermining prospects for a decent life for the large majority of the population, and for future generations. When the presidential campaign begins, Republican strategists surely do not want people to be asking questions about their pensions, jobs, health care, and other such matters. Rather, they should be praising their heroic leader for rescuing them from imminent destruction by a foe of colossal power, and marching on to confront the next powerful force bent on our destruction. It could be Iran, or conflicts in the Andean countries: there are lots of good choices, as long as the targets are defenceless.

These ideas are second nature to the current political leaders, most of them recycled from the Reagan administration. They are replaying a familiar script: drive the country into deficit so as to be able to undermine social programmes, declare a ‘war on terror’ (as they did in 1981) and conjure up one devil after another to frighten the population into obedience. In the 1980s it was Libyan hit-men prowling the streets of Washington to assassinate our leader, then the Nicaraguan army only two-days march from Texas, a threat to survival so severe that Reagan had to declare a national emergency. Or an airfield in Grenada that the Russians were going to use to bomb us (if they could find it on a map); Arab terrorists seeking to kill Americans everywhere while Qaddafi plans to ‘expel America from the world,’ so Reagan wailed. Or Hispanic narco-traffickers seeking to destroy the youth; and on, and on.

Meanwhile the political leadership were able to carry out domestic policies

that had generally poor economic outcomes but did create wealth for narrow sectors while harming a considerable majority of the population – the script that is being followed once again. And since the public knows it, they have to resort to ‘the classic modern strategy of an endangered right wing oligarchy’ if they hope to carry out the domestic and international programmes to which they are committed, perhaps even to institutionalise them so they will be hard to dismantle when they lose control.

Of course, there is much more to it than domestic considerations – which are of no slight importance in themselves. The September 11 terrorist atrocities provided an opportunity and pretext to implement long-standing plans to take control of Iraq’s immense oil wealth, a central component of the Persian Gulf resources that the State Department, in 1945, described as ‘a stupendous source of strategic power, and one of the greatest material prizes in world history.’ US intelligence predicts that these will be of even greater significance in the years ahead. The issue has never been access. The same intelligence analyses anticipate that the United States will rely on more secure supplies in the Western hemisphere and West Africa. The same was true after World War Two. What matters is control over the ‘material prize,’ which funnels enormous wealth to the United States in many ways, Britain as well, and the ‘stupendous source of strategic power,’ which translates into a lever of ‘unilateral world domination’ – the goal that is now openly proclaimed, and is frightening much of the world, including ‘old Europe’ and the conservative establishment in the United States.

I think a realistic look at the world gives a mixed picture. There are many reasons to be encouraged, but there will be a long hard road ahead.