

Failed States: The Abuse of Power and the Assault on Democracy

by Noam Chomsky

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A Reading and Discussion Guide

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SUMMARY

Failed states, those that implode from within and those that are crushed from without, have a trajectory leading to their demise that follows fairly traceable patterns, the most fundamental of which is an ever-constricting definition of – and subsequently an empirical lack of – true democracy. In this volume, Noam Chomsky isn't so much intent on examining the history of *other* failed states as he is on examining the policies and practices of the United States of America, and then articulating how these policies and practices might reveal a “failed state” trajectory.

In this regard, Chomsky notes two things in particular. The first is an inability (or even an unwillingness) of failed states to protect their citizens not only from overt and covert violence, but also from their own potential destruction. The second, more insidious, event involves the complete and pervasive re-working of the ability of free people to express dissent, a re-working that becomes embedded in economic, political, and cultural institutions. It is the more cunning of the two events because if one is approached by people carrying guns or machetes or a chicotte, one can be fairly sure that repression is the order of the day. If, however, one is approached by people promising protection (in, for example, a “war on terror”), the idea of losing civil liberties becomes safely and willingly defused as an acceptable “trade-off” for physical security.

Though Chomsky details both types of state actions, it is the latter that carries with it such gravity that it compels Chomsky gravely and urgently to warn us: If *we* do not claim our personal power as our own, then someone else claims it for us. Moreover, the new owners of the abdicated personal power *legitimize* that claim by ideological inventions that come to be accepted as “normal,” or “impossible to oppose” or, even more powerfully, “inevitable.” In any case, they seduce and dismantle the public just the same.

It is an artful sleight-of-hand. Democracy might be *touted* in failed states, deified even, but what is tossed about as vernacular “truth” has no relation to actuality. Chomsky surgically evaluates this actuality, noting that the United States is shaped by two overarching paradigms:

- The severe dividing line between the “substantial” people (those who have it all: power, privilege, and economic might) and the “insubstantial” ones (who cobble together a patchwork existence fraught with anxieties and stresses), and
- The “implacable line of continuity,” a cohesive and well-formed framework that ensures power and money stay firmly ensconced within privileged walls.

It is not Chomsky's style to make such conclusions (or pronouncements) without empirical justification, and he does not fail to provide support here. The evidence he lays out is compelling and robust, and it is presented with unrelenting vigor. Example after example illustrates how democracy has been not just trampled but also cordoned, reconstructed, and eviscerated in this country. Moreover, this book makes clear the implications of these actions not only for citizens of the United States but also for citizens of the world (and indeed our planet itself via the environmental assault launched on her in the guise of "progress").

Failed States: The Abuse of Power and the Assault on Democracy is a must-read for every individual who is concerned that we are on a path toward mutually assured destruction (MAD); who fears nuclear proliferation, our failure to sign the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, and Washington's stated intent to "remove the nuclear brakes"; who decries the fouling of our air, land, and seas; and who wants to steer away from a unilateralism that appears at times too blunt. This list is certainly not exhaustive. But its urgency serves as a clear and distinct call to all who are interested in reclaiming their rightful power as bestowed on them in a true democracy. Chomsky's book is not only a call for knowledge; it is also a call for action.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Of course the overarching question that one will want to get at in discussion is whether the U.S. is a failed (or failing) state. But if this question were posed at the outset it's likely that discussion would focus on what the U.S. does right and wrong and that it would veer away from Chomsky's argument. The following questions are not meant to skirt the largest question, then, but only to lead the group to it from the specific points in the book.

1. In times of war, can a nation justify holding "enemy combatants," without revealing the charges against them or working with "key allies" to transfer suspects to other countries for interrogation (p. 41)? What are the arguments for and against these actions and which position do you find most persuasive?
2. What types of words, either nouns, verbs, or and qualifiers do you find most often used to frame political discourse? (To get at this question, you might wish to compare and contrast two commentators arguing different sides of an issue, asking the group to analyze the word choice on each side and the way it works to frame the argument.
3. What do you think of the concept of "illegal but legitimate" (p. 81)? Can something be illegal and yet also legitimate? If so, in what instances? If not, why would some find this argument attractive?
4. Compare and contrast the reign(s) of one or more of the following rulers with that of Saddam Hussein: Nicolae Ceaușescu, Suharto, Ferdinand Marcos, Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier, and/or Chun Doo-hwan.
5. Consider U.S. arms policy toward Israel and Saudi Arabia and its impact on the Middle East. (You may wish to refer to an article such as the following: http://www.economist.com/world/africa/displaystory.cfm?story_id=9587673)
6. Discuss Bertrand Russell's and Albert Einstein's "inescapable" question (p. 3) in light of Chomsky's report that Britain lobbied for support of the United States' position that "obligations under the [nuclear] non-proliferation treaty are mandatory on other nations

and voluntary on the US” and that Washington “felt quite free ... to proceed with plans to research new nuclear weapons ‘designed not to deter but to wage war’” (p. 78).

7. What examples does Chomsky cite that portray how other countries view the actions of the United States government? Do you agree that the continuing intent of U.S. policy is to “place ... all other nations at our feet”(p. 93)? Why or why not?
8. In Chapter 4, Chomsky contrasts democracy in other countries, which rests on the notion of “sustained argument and lively discussion” (p. 132), with the current U.S. version of democracy, which relies on “concise sound bites” (p. 131). What aspects of the culture of the United States may contribute to our acceptance of a watered-down version of democratic rights and ideals?
9. Chomsky specifically points to U.S. decisions that reveal an indifference to true democratic ideals (including the notion of social justice). One such example is the United States’ casting of the “sole vote against the UN Right to Development” (p. 232). Do you agree with his argument? If so, can you list other examples? If not, why not?

ADDITIONAL READING

Animal Farm. By George Orwell. (1946). Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.: New York.

Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed. By Jared Diamond. (2005). The Penguin Group: NY.

Inequality and American Democracy: What We Know and What We Need to Learn. By Lawrence R. Jacobs and Theda Skocpal, eds. (2005). Russell Sage: NY.

Mark Twain’s Weapons of Satire: Anti-Imperialist Writing on the Philippine-American War. Jim Zwick, ed. (1992) Syracuse University Press: Syracuse, NY.

Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor. By Dr. Paul Farmer. (2005). University of California Press: Berkeley, CA.

A People’s History of the United States: 1492 – Present. By Howard Zinn. (2003). HarperCollins Publishers: NY.

Power: A Critical Reader. By Daniel Egan and Levon A. Chorbajian. (2005). Pearson-Prentice Hall: Upper Saddle River, NJ.

The Power Elite. By C. Wright Mills. (2000). Oxford University Press: Oxford, England.

NOAM CHOMSKY’S WEBSITE: <http://www.chomsky.info/>

RELATED FILMS

“Turtles Can Fly.” Written and directed by Bahman Ghobadi. (2004)

“Born into Brothels.” A film by Ross Kauffman and Zana Briski. (2004)

“Paradise Now.” Directed by Hany Abu-Assad. (2005)

“The Road to Guantánamo.” Directed by Michael Winterbottom. (2006)



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