Latin America and the U.S. after 9/11

— Noam Chomsky & Eduardo Mendieta —

Eduardo Mendieta: Shortly before 9/11, Mexican President Vicente Fox and George Bush Jr. met to discuss new immigration policies that would help ameliorate the conditions of migrant workers. These talks were shelved, and in fact abandoned, after 9/11. What do you think is going to happen now with relations between the United States and Mexico?

Noam Chomsky: It’s a complex issue and of course, it goes far back. I presume Mexicans haven’t forgotten that the United States is sitting on half of Mexico; it’s called the U.S. southwest, which was stolen 150 years ago in a very ugly war. Since then, relations have been complicated. Mexico is just a little too independent. The U.S. doesn’t like it, and there have been efforts to deal with that. Mexico had a significant period of economic development in the 1950s, ’60s and ’70s. It had a tremendous debt crisis in the early ’80s, which came about for very complicated reasons. A large part of the Latin American crisis had a lot to do with domestic U.S.
financial policies. Interest rates were zoomed to try to impose a certain domestic regime within the U.S., and since the debt is keyed to U.S. interest rates for all sorts of old imperial reasons, the Latin American countries suddenly found themselves in a huge debt crisis. It's not that they had more debt; it's just that the arrangements were changed. Mexico dealt with this under a lot of pressure. First, they were going to default, and they dealt with the debt crisis by instituting what are called reforms. “Reforms” is a word that means following IMF-World Bank orders. It’s called the Washington consensus, properly. It comes out of Washington, which is a whole array of neo-liberal measures, and Mexico follows those. Its usual effects ensued: wages went way down, the number of billionaires went way up, corruption went way up, privatization took place and enriched the corrupt and politically connected and wealthy. It didn’t improve services, but that was the effect.

In 1990 or '91, there was an important meeting in Washington under the auspices of the pentagon. It was called the Latin American strategy workshop, or something like that, with lots of specialists and businesses and so on, and they concluded that U.S. relations with Mexico were fine, unimpeded by corruption and brutality and torture and so on and so forth, but good relations. However they did see one cloud on the horizon, namely what they called a “democracy opening.” They said that there might be a “democracy opening” in Mexico, which would open the way to a more independent policy, and that fear was understandable. The rule of the ruling party, PRI, had been shattered. They had only maintained control by a fraudulent election. It was clear that there could be a dreaded democracy opening. So what do you do if there is a threat of democracy opening that might lead Mexico to follow a more independent course reflecting its own population? Well, you have to tighten control so that they won’t be able to do it even if they do have a democracy opening, and that means instituting the neo-liberal programs more intensively. There is a name for that. It is called NAFTA.

NAFTA came out of that, and it was openly described, in elite circles at least, as a way to lock Mexico into “the reforms,” as they call them. Lock them into these programs so that even if a democracy opening takes place, they won’t be able to do anything about it because the structure of the economic system will be so constrained by the Washington consensus rules. And that’s pretty much what NAFTA did. It locked Mexico into this system.

EM: Didn’t Vicente Fox come in precisely as someone perhaps trying to lessen the effects of NAFTA?

NC: Yes, trying, but let’s take a look at the immigration issue that you raised. Clinton is not a fool. He’s a smart person. When NAFTA was implemented, something else was implemented along with it—Operation Gatekeeper. The Mexican border
had been a very porous border. Like most borders, it’s just the result of conquest. It’s an artificial border, and pretty much the same people live on both sides, and they were going out and back. It wasn’t very carefully controlled. But it was understood that NAFTA was probably going to cause what is called an economic miracle in Mexico, which means an economic catastrophe for much of the population, and there would be a flood of people trying to escape. So you had to institute Operation Gatekeeper, which militarized the border. So along with NAFTA came the first militarization of the border, and hundreds of Mexicans are killed every year, we don’t know how many, by just trying to cross the border.

EM: Texans are organizing themselves into militias and are taking shots at them.

NC: It goes along with it. Part of NAFTA, the so-called reforms, is making sure you cage the population in. NAFTA is not a free trade agreement, not the kind Adam Smith would have talked about. Free trade means free movement of labor. Otherwise you don’t have anything like free trade. But it had to be controlled, so there is free movement of capital but no free movement of labor, and that’s critical if you want to construct a system in which the rights of concentrated capital dominate and the rights of people don’t matter. In fact, if you look at the regulations inside NAFTA, they are very explicit. So a U.S. company, say General Motors, can go to Mexico and demand what is called “national treatment.” They have to be treated like a Mexican company, but a Mexican of flesh and blood can’t go to New York and demand national treatment—we know what will happen to him. So these are proposals which certainly radically oppose any classical liberal conception of free economic systems and so on. They are designed to ensure the rights of concentrated capital, and the rights of people just don’t matter that much. Well, what’s happened in Mexico since NAFTA is that wages have declined about another 25 percent, which is an understatement because in the informal economy wages are estimated to have declined by about 40 percent, and furthermore, the economy is becoming increasingly informal. So, there has been a significant deterioration of living standards. Foreign investment in Mexico has increased, but total investment in Mexico has actually declined because a lot of Mexican businesses are being wiped out. They can’t deal with international competition. The fact is that total investments declined, the wage and income levels for the majority of the population have declined, and the worst hit has yet to come. It’s when Mexico—and I think this is what Vicente Fox is worried about—opens up the country. They have had some U.S. agricultural imports, but if they open it up freely, huge numbers of Mexicans are going to be driven off the land. What happens to them?

EM: Already the corn market has been devastated.
NC: The corn market has collapsed. A lot of the Mexican entrepreneurs are doing fine. They monopolize parts of the corn market, but in association with the U.S. exporters, and the U.S. exporters have nothing to do with the free market. This is highly subsidized agribusiness export in which many costs, like so-called externalities, are huge and are not even counted. The Mexican farmer can’t compete with this, just like no one else can. This includes U.S. farmers, who are also being driven off of small family farms and so on. The effect of this is likely to spur an effort to escape. That means immigration barriers, and that’s what’s waiting there. If Mexico continues to subordinate itself to these policies, it’s going to be in much more serious trouble.

EM: It seems that before we had Iraq as a patriotic alibi for this new unilateral war, we were trying out neo-liberalism in Latin America. Argentina is a perfect example of that; that was devastating. And also Brazil, Brazil is a ticking bomb.

NC: It is. It’s rather traumatic to see what is happening in Brazil. Let’s take a look at a little longer stretch. Forty years ago, Brazil had a populist president, Joao Goulart. He was nothing like Lula. Lula is a very impressive person and has a huge popular base. Goulart didn’t, but he was kind of mildly popular. Well, the Kennedy administration didn’t like Goulart. They organized a military coup, and he was overthrown. It happened a little after the Kennedy assassination, but it was organized by the Kennedy administration. This was greeted with rapture by the Washington liberals. It was the Kennedy’s ambassador who called it “the greatest victory for freedom in the mid-twentieth century,” or some name like that. The generals were praised for their wonderful democratizing achievements while they were torturing people and imposing a national security state, kind of a neo-nazi state. It made such a wreck of the economy that they finally left and let the civilians take over. In the ’80s, the same thing happened in Chile. For a long period in Brazil, there was a military dictatorship, which had formal growth by some measures. But for the general population it was and is misery and tremendous poverty, some of the worst inequality in the world. It’s a rich country.

EM: There is genocide against the Indians in the Amazon.

NC: It is just horrible. Out of this came a very impressive popular movement, the most impressive in the world. The Landless Workers movement, started in the mid-’80s roughly, became an extremely significant movement, which began taking over unused land and turning it into productive land for landless workers, cooperatives, schools, and so on. It’s enormous, hundreds of thousands of people. The workers party, which grew out of similar things, came from industrial workers, agricultural workers, and so on. There were also, quite apart from this, rural unions being de-
veloped all over the place and in very interesting ways. In fact, a large part of the country is extremely organized. Well, they finally elected their own president, but notice there is no military coup or even talk of it. There are a number of reasons for that. One reason is that populations wouldn’t tolerate it anymore, either here or in Brazil—it’s not the 1960s. And another is that they don’t need it. They don’t need it because of the neo-liberal measures. The neo-liberal measures are designed to prevent governments from following democratically supported policies, and this is well understood. The liberalization of capital, which is the first neo-liberal measure from the early ’70s, broke down the earlier Bretton Woods system. If you allow capital to flow freely, and you deregulate currency so that it is no longer within a band, you are just opening the way to massive speculation. In fact, speculation just rose astronomically after that. And now with modern telecommunication, it’s instant speculation, second by second. What it creates is what some economists called a “virtual Senate” of investors and lenders who carry out what they call a “moment by moment referendum” on government policies. So if a government tries to institute say health programs—or something that is regarded as irrational because it helps people not profit, that’s the definition of irrational—so if you carry out an irrational program, the economy can be strangled by capital flight, by attacks on the currency, by other measures, and that’s just what’s happening. Lula is following Cardoso’s policies.

EM: Can I ask you about Fernando Enrique Cardoso, who is a fascinating phenomenon. There you have a left economist, in many ways a leader for the movements in the ’60s and maybe even the workers movement in Brazil. He was instrumental in implementing these policies. Here’s an economist of the left who understands very well Marx and understands the relationship between capitalism and the outflow of national capital, and he was the one who basically sold the country.

NC: Yes. There were some achievements. He cut back inflation, which was a very serious problem. But he left the country with a huge public debt and this is kind of like a curse that they have to deal with somehow. The obvious way to deal with the debt would be to repudiate it.

EM: Can Brazil do that?

NC: The debt is not an economic fact. It is an ideological fact. For example, take Iraq. Iraq has a huge debt. The United States is considering repudiating it, and they have a mechanism for doing that, a mechanism which, in fact, the U.S. invented. It had to do with Cuba a century ago. It’s the concept that’s known in international law as “odious debt.” So, when the United States “liberated Cuba,” meaning prevented Cuba from liberating itself, which is what the invasion was, Cuba was
about to liberate itself from Spain. The U.S. intervened in 1889 to prevent that. It’s called “year of the liberation of Cuba,” meaning prevention of Cuban liberation, and Cuba was turned into essentially a colony. But when the U.S. took it over, Cuba had a big debt to Spain, and the U.S. didn’t want to take that over, so they repudiated it and created the doctrine called “odious debt,” which is a plausible doctrine. It says, if a debt is incurred under coercion, it’s illegitimate. So, if I borrow money from you because you have a gun to my head, that’s not a legitimate debt. They pointed out correctly that the Cuban debt to Spain was a colonial relationship, and it was accepted by Cuba under coercion, in fact, not by the Cubans, but rather by a small Cuban elite. The Cuban people didn’t ask for the debt. They had nothing to do with it. So, a small Cuban elite connected to the ruling imperial country incurred a debt for their own interest. As far as the population is concerned, it was a gun to their head, and this is odious debt. So the U.S. repudiated it. It did the same thing in the Philippines. The U.S. took over the Philippines shortly after and also repudiated the debts owed by the Philippines for the Spanish railways, and that sort of thing.

Actually the U.S. had done the same when it threw out the British during the revolutionary war. It simply confiscated the British possessions and didn’t pay for them. This is what the powerful do. The concept of odious debt continues. So there was a case, Costa Rica vs. Great Britain. Costa Rica didn’t want to pay some debt to Canada, and Great Britain was the responsible authority. This went to arbitration, international arbitration, by William Howard Taft, chief Supreme Court justice, and he granted Costa Rica’s right to repudiate the debt on the grounds that it was odious debt. Well you know the whole third world debt is odious debt. The people of Mexico never incurred the debt. This is the same everywhere else.

EM: Ernesto Zedillo is right now teaching at Yale, where he is the director of the Center for the Study of Globalization, even though he is being prosecuted in Mexico for stealing the nation’s public coffers.

NC: It’s not even stealing. Take the Brazilian debt. Brazilian workers and peasants didn’t ask for the debt. They didn’t borrow it. It was borrowed by the Brazilian rich for their own purposes. So under the concept of odious debt, which the powerful use when they feel like it, like the U.S. will probably use in Iraq, the third world debt would disappear. Actually there is an even simpler way to eliminate the debt. Suppose you lend me money, and I go out and buy a Mercedes. And then you come back and ask me to pay you the money, and I say, “I’m sorry. I bought a Mercedes. I don’t have the money. Why don’t you get my neighbors to pay it?” That’s not the way it’s supposed to work in a capitalist economy, but that’s the way it works in the international economy. So when a country is in debt, meaning its rich have
borrowed money for their own purposes and spent it to buy fancy apartments in Europe or commodities for themselves and so on, the lenders come back and say, “Pay me.” The rich say, “I'm sorry. I'm not going to pay you. Get the peasants to pay it.” That's called structural adjustment. See, if you're the lender, under capitalist principles, you're not supposed to say, “Well, okay. He's not paying me back, so his neighbors have to pay me back.” You're not supposed to do that. But that's what the IMF is, an insurance company for the lenders if the debt doesn't get paid back. The debt is paid back by the poor people, who didn't borrow the money in the first place, not by the rich. And if the debt isn't paid back, northern taxpayers pay it back. That's what the IMF is. It's free risk insurance.

The whole thing is a scam, an ideological scam from beginning to end. But it's a stranglehold. Now, going back to Brazil, Lula and the Brazilian Workers Party would be completely justified in simply repudiating the debt, saying, “Let's use the capitalist principle. You rich guys lent the money to these rich guys here. Get it back from them. We didn’t borrow it. It’s up to them to pay it back.” But the point is, to do that would be virtually revolutionary and would require enormous public support not only in Brazil but also in the region, and would require support from the north.

EM: The neo-liberal version of globalization pushed by the United States throughout the world, and in Latin America in particular, has devastated the Latin American economies. Argentina is the most egregious of these economic disasters, but comparable cases are Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador, and of course Colombia. As a reaction to this destructive type of neo-liberal globalization, some left leaning candidates have been elected in Brazil, Bolivia, and Ecuador. When Lula was inaugurated as president of Brazil, he called a meeting with Castro, Chavez, and I think Toledo from Peru. They talked about an axis of good, an axis of good for Latin America.

NC: It should start with debt repudiation.

EM: Do you think that they might be able to form such an axis? Is it possible that a Latin American bloc of resistance may emerge?

NC: It's very tough. First, they have to work together, and they don’t. There are just too many things dividing them from one another: foreign power, domestic power, the international markets, and so on. Theoretically, you could do it, but it would require an international level of popular mobilization, support, and commitment, which probably doesn’t exist. I think maybe the beginnings of it are coming into being. The World Social Forum is the beginning of an international solidarity movement that might make it possible for countries in the future to do this.
This really can’t be done without the support of the rich northern countries. People here would have to prevent their own government from intervening either violently or economically. Take Cuba. Cuba broke out of the international U.S. dominated system in 1959. Since then, it has been under constant U.S. attack, massive international terrorist attack for many years, economic strangulation, and so on. As long as the population of the United States allows that to go on, Cuba hasn’t got, well, maybe enough to survive, but barely. This attack has to be blocked from inside the imperial country, and unless that happens, it’s going to be awfully hard for the southern cone, even if it were united, to pull out of the system. There are too many weapons on the outside, and these weapons have to be muted from within the powerful countries. That’s why international solidarity is critical, and that’s why things like the World Social Forum are so significant. It’s really the first institutionalized manifestation of international solidarity. There was support. Witnesses for peace go down to El Salvador, but that’s on an individual level. It’s very important, but that’s kind of people-to-people interactions, nothing organized on a large scale level, which is really required if countries like Brazil, and they are not the only one, are going to be able to deal with their own problems rationally—same with Mexico.

EM: Here in the U.S., we are facing a slowing down of the economy, possibly even a depression. Then you have the Brazilian economy about to implode, and Argentina and Mexico are also facing dire consequences. Is it possible that we are going to have a kind of collapse of Latin American economies that then roll back the democratic and social gains of the last 25 years?

NC: It’s worth bearing in mind that there has been a collapse of the Latin American economies for 20 years. A very striking fact about the neo-liberal programs, which are roughly 20 to 25 years old, is that just about everywhere they have been applied, there has been an economic collapse. The only countries that didn’t collapse—there have been countries that developed in the last 20 to 25 years, like East Asia—didn’t follow the rules. That is very striking. It’s so striking that even the conservative economists are recognizing it, for example, the Economic Commission for Latin America, which was a strong supporter of the Washington consensus. The director, Ocampo, gave a talk at the American Economic Association about a year ago, in which he pointed out that the promises of the neo-liberal era had not been fulfilled. After a big growth period before following these rules, the economies have stagnated, which means for most of the population, it probably declined. The wealthy sector often enriches itself. So when you get stagnation, for most people it means decline. That’s been for 20 years.
He also went on to point out that that is true for every region of the world that has followed the neo-liberal programs. He said they were most religiously followed in Latin America, also in Sub-Saharan Africa, a catastrophe. They were largely ignored in East Asia, and as a result, they had a growth period. In fact, when South Korea, and Thailand too, liberalized its finances under tremendous U.S. pressure in the early 1990s, they quickly had a collapse—big surprise to the IMF and World Bank. They had to withdraw the publications that they were already distributing about the great success. South Korea did pull out if it by their own measures. The correlation is quite real. So yes, Latin America has had 20 years of basically stagnation, or decline.

EM: A form of economic war?

NC: Well, no. Some mixed economic growth, nothing like what happened for the preceding 30 years. In fact, that’s worldwide. There had been a slow down of the industrial economies, too, under these principles. It’s not surprising. Financial liberalization is not good for growth. There is too much rapid fluctuation. Too much capital is put into speculation rather than productive investment, which is no good for the economy. Other measures also apparently impede growth. So little is understood about these things you can’t be sure, but at least the correlations are pretty clear. There has been a decline. In the U.S. for example, the big growth period, what they sometimes call the golden age of modern capitalism, was around 1950-1975, before the neo-liberal programs. Since then, it’s been much lower growth, also highly egalitarian growth. Through the golden age, it was egalitarian, so the lowest quintile did about the same as the highest quintile. Since 1975 it’s been going like this ... [hands move apart, one lower, one higher] ... inequalities back to the 1920s. Since Reagan, late Carter to Reagan, for the majority of the population wages and incomes have pretty much stagnated. In fact, the last census figures real male wages still haven’t reached the level of 1979 despite the boom, the little boom at the end of the 1990s, which has since collapsed. There are serious economic problems across the board connected with policy and whether you can patch it together or not. It is really hard to say. These are very rich countries that can do lots of things.

EM: Arguably, with Chavez in power, Venezuela was one of the few countries that decided not to follow this route of neo-liberalism. Chavez has faced stiff resistance from the U.S., and I imagine Washington is very annoyed with him.

NC: Washington supported the coup.

EM: Exactly. I was going to ask you about the coup. The U.S., with great alacrity, endorsed the junta that sought to unseat Chavez, until they were stopped by popular
support and parts of the military. But Venezuela is very important because of local petroleum. Why has Washington tolerated Chavez? Why haven’t they sent one of those special paratroopers in to get him out?

NC: I don’t think that they can do it anymore. Back in the ’60s and early ’70s they could still manage it, but I think the population here has just changed too much. I don’t think people here will support a military coup. Actually, the Reagan administration tried it. If you take a look at when the Reagan administration came in 1981, their focus was Central America. It was getting out of control. If you look at what they did the first couple of months of the administration, it was almost a point-by-point copy of what Kennedy did in 1961. First, they came out with a white paper, a State department white paper about how communist Russia is taking over the hemisphere, doing this and that, all full of lies, pretty much like Kennedy’s white paper when they were planning the invasion of South Vietnam. The press, of course, repeated it, “Oh God—terrible. We’re going to get destroyed!” But there was a popular reaction from churches and popular groups that they hadn’t anticipated. There was just a groundswell of opposition, which there wasn’t in 1961. That was enough to make them pull back. They essentially told the press to cool it. “Don’t blow this up.” A couple of months later the press started exposing lies in the white paper.

When they pulled back, they turned to clandestine terror. Clandestine is a funny word. It means everybody knows about it except the American population. The victims know about it; so does the international terror network. The U.S. is a powerful country, so we can construct an international terror network. It’s not individual terror; it’s states: Britain, Taiwan, Israel, Argentina. As long as they were under neo-nazi generals, they were also part of an international terror network, which moved in and supported, financed, and directed the state terror and the contra terror, insofar as the U.S. couldn’t do it itself. To a large extent it could do it itself, and that went on, but it’s called clandestine. It’s not like an invasion. It’s not like sending in the paratroopers. That’s public. I think the same problem is in Venezuela. I doubt that the U.S. population would tolerate a direct invasion of the traditional kind.

EM: Before 9/11 and after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the number one nemesis of the U.S. was the narco-traffickers. In fact, one could argue that the low intensity conflict of the Cold War was mutated into a war against narco-traffickers. There was a great militarization of foreign policy in Latin America.

NC: It’s very definitely happening.

EM: And now terror, so we can combine the two.
NC: That’s exactly what’s happening. Now, if you look at the disposition of U.S. troops in that region, the Andean region basically, it’s higher than during the cold war. There are big military bases all over the place. There is a big one in Ecuador. There are newly established bases in the Dutch Islands. There is one in El Salvador, just surrounding the region. There are American troops all over the place. For example, fumigation operations, privatized chemical warfare, are conducted by corporations like Dyncorps which is mostly ex-U.S. military but privatized. So, it’s composed of civilian pilots from the military, military officers who run it, ex-military officers, but it’s a private corporation like MPRI. They are now functioning all over the world. These are privatized offshoots of the military, which use military personnel and get all their funding from the U.S. government. But they’re private. It’s another form of keeping intervention from the population.

EM: American paratroopers and paramilitaries.

NC: Then there are paramilitaries, who in Colombia you can trace back to the Kennedy Administration. In 1962, Kennedy sent a Special Forces mission to Colombia headed by Special Forces General Yarborough, and he gave a report in which he advised the Colombian military to carry out what he called “paramilitary terror” against known “Communist proponents.” Well, in the Latin American context, in the context of U.S. counter-insurgency, “Communist proponents” means priests organizing peasants, union leaders, human rights activists, anybody who doesn’t follow the rules. The advice was, “Carry out paramilitary terror against them.” It took a while before that really took shape, but by the ’80s, and particularly the ’90s, it had become a huge phenomenon. In fact, even the State department concedes that the paramilitaries, and the military between them, are responsible for the large majority of atrocities in Colombia. Now that too has been privatized by corporations, neo-liberal principles again, such as Dyncorps and MPRI. So in Colombia, the percentage of atrocities attributed to the paramilitaries and the military remains pretty constant in the neighborhood of 75 percent, but the percentage attributed to the military is dropping and the percentage attributed to the paramilitaries is going up. On the other hand, the paramilitaries are so closely linked to the military that Human Rights Watch calls them the sixth division of the Colombian army alongside the official five divisions. With this privatization you get deniability. Then Clinton and now Bush and Powell come to congress and say, “Well, look at Colombia’s record. It’s clean. It’s the paramilitaries that are carrying out the atrocities.”

There has been another U.S. victory in Colombia. The war had turned the guerillas into just another army. There was a time when the guerillas had a kind of social program and social base, but that’s pretty much gone. By now, they are
just another private army, and the peasants are now subjected to that army, the rampaging army from one side, the paramilitaries from another, and the military behind them. This militarization of the conflict and undermining of the social content of, at least, the guerrilla organizations is a big achievement for the imperial power. You want to turn your enemy into terrorists. It’s extremely important. Then comes the terror business. So you can have an anti-terror campaign, an anti-drug campaign, that will be what lies behind the very likely next target. It’s not impossible that the next target or one of the next targets in the international intervention scheme could be the Andes. People are talking about Syria and Iran, but the Andes are not impossible for the reasons you mentioned. It’s out of control. It’s got very rich resources, and it’s now got a network of military bases and troops that can be the bases for further intervention. And it has the pretext—drugs and terror.

EM: I recently read that you had been to Colombia, and that you had been in every major area of devastation, war, terrorism.

NC: I just went to Cauca, which is in south Colombia, which actually has the worst human rights record in the country, which is saying a lot.

EM: But I understand that you were ...

NC: ... in Medellín.

EM: I understand that Medellín was one of the few occasions where you were actually afraid or fearful.

NC: I wasn’t. The people were. I have gone to many very conflicted and dangerous areas, but I have never been in a place before where the people organizing it were ...

EM: ... were terrified.

NC: I wouldn’t say they were terrified, but they were very cautious. You know they are very brave people. They don’t get terrified, even if they are facing assassination. There were a couple of us: one Colombian professor, and one Colombian activist from the United States, a Colombian woman who lives here. We went to Cauca which is one of the worst places, and they would not let us out of the capital city. We couldn’t go visit the peasants. They had to bus peasants in to see us because it was too dangerous. It is the only place I have been where they have arranged the press conferences as I was leaving, not to protect me, but to protect themselves. They just want it to be over. They don’t want to be there. I wouldn’t say anybody was terrified, just facing reality.

The level of violence in the country is so extreme that you can’t disregard it. I was in Medellín, which is a city after all, and I talked at the University. A couple
of days after I left, a student was murdered right outside the hall where I was talk-
ing. You don’t even know who. It’s urban warfare. It could be guerillas. It could
be paramilitaries. It could be gangs of one sort or another. The number of political
assassinations had about doubled in the last two or three years. It’s now estimated
at about 20 per day. It’s all over. On the other hand, these people are incredibly
brave. I spoke to somebody I know from earlier visits. One of the priests, who has
been one of the heads of the human rights groups in Columbia, is now living in a
very conflicted and dangerous area in the countryside—a big area about the size
of El Salvador, where he is working. There are peasants who have tried to set up
peace communities. This has been going on for some time. They declare themselves
separate from the conflict. “We don’t want anything to do with the guerillas or
paramilitaries, so leave us alone. We won’t cooperate with anyone.” So you have
these peace communities scattered around. It’s very dangerous. The outsiders come
in sometimes just for symbolic killings, just to let you know that “We are here.”
Take somebody, kill them in the main street and leave. When I was there, the main
peace community, San José, was under blockade by paramilitaries. It had been
under blockade for about a month. Again, this priest who I know, one of the lead-
ing human rights activists, arranged for some people to come out; I could talk to
them in Bogotá. What they are describing is just forced starvation. They are under
blockade by paramilitaries, but they are somehow surviving anyhow.

This priest is working in this whole area, trying to make arrangements with
the militaries, with the paramilitaries, with the guerillas, and trying to allow these
communities to just survive. To live in that environment, I don’t know how you
describe it. He’s not terrified. Even if he were terrified, he would not leave Bogotá.
But it’s getting somewhere. It’s building up some kind of framework of potential
peace. Actually, he’s being supported by a World Bank project, to their credit. Not
everything they do is destructive. This is a good important project, and things like
this are happening. On the other hand, it’s extremely difficult.

EM: Unfortunately, I think we are running out of time, and I wanted to ask you
this question: I know that Bertrand Russell is someone who you admired tremen-
dously, and in particular for his stand against the U.S. war on Vietnam. I wonder if
something like that could be organized today. In 1966, Russell and his foundation
organized the War Crimes Tribunal against the U.S. for its illegal war in Vietnam.
I think you were involved with the tribunal.

NC: I was asked to be involved, but I didn’t agree.

EM: You did not?
NC: Not because I had any objections to it, but just because I thought it was not the right thing to do at that time. The War Crimes Tribunal in that context was Sartre, Russell, and other famous people putting themselves in the position of judges over these events. Many good papers were given and so on, but it was not a tribunal which represented anything other than a sector of intellectual elite opinion. And that doesn’t seem to me the way to organize people. In fact, it had virtually no effect. It was just marginalized and vilified. If something came out of a significant popular movement, “We’ll make our own tribunal,” then okay, that’s interesting, but if it comes from small groups of elite international intellectuals, I don’t really see a lot of point to it—it’s just self-promotion, not that I criticize the people. They are doing good things.

EM: One last question. Recently we had Richard Rorty visiting Stony Brook, and he gave an interesting talk about the uncertain future of American Empire. And here he laid out in his typical fashion, these two tracks of understanding the United States. In one, it’s a republic and in the other, it’s an empire. He rejects the notion that we are an empire. We are really a republic that has been very unfortunate to have fallen into the clutches of someone like Bush. Do you think we are a republic or an empire?

NC: Well, there is a recent book by a friend of mine, a law professor named James Wilson, called *The Imperial Republic*, which goes through the legal history of the United States and shows convincingly that it’s always been an imperial republic. There is no conflict between these; I mean, republic is kind of a funny word. What it is internally we could debate, but whatever it is internally, it’s been imperial from the outset.

Why are we sitting here? There were people here, after all. Where are they? From the moment the colonists landed, it was conquest. Why are we sitting on half of Mexico? Was that because Mexico cheerfully handed over half of their territory? How did we get to Hawaii and the Philippines? Hawaii, in 1898, was just stolen from the population by guile, force, violence, taken over. Now it’s part of the United States. The Philippines were conquered, a couple of hundred thousand people slaughtered. It’s not a mistake—the interventions throughout Central America and the Caribbean. Some of the worst of them were under the most progressive people, like Wilson. It’s not that you’re looking the other way—this is policy. After the Second World War when the U.S. became a world dominant state, the policies are explicit. We are a very free country. You can read this stuff in the declassified record. If you want to deny the facts and bury your head in the sand, that’s an option. If you want to look at the documentary and historical record, it’s explicit.
can call it imperial or call it whatever you like. It's a country that from its origins has fought to extend its domain.

Take Cuba. It's the oldest foreign policy issue in U.S. history. It goes back to the 1820s. The founding fathers were saying, “Well, we can’t conquer Cuba now because the British navy is too strong.” Britain was the enemy. It was the deterrent. It prevented the colonies from conquering Canada. That's why there's a Canada up there. They tried but were beaten back. They couldn’t conquer Cuba, but John Quincy Adams pointed out that sooner or later the U.S. would be strong enough to overcome the British deterrent. The U.S. was ambivalent about the independence of the Spanish colonies. They wanted them to stay colonies, certainly not develop. Cuba, said Adams, will fall into our hands by the laws of political gravitation as a ripe fruit. In other words, when the British become weak enough and we become strong enough, we'll grab it.

Is that by accident? It was planned in the 1820s. They carried it out by 1898. As soon as Cuba did liberate itself in 1959, it was within months subjected to terrorist attacks. This is an accident? I mean you really have to purposely blind yourself to a rich documentary record, which is in front of us to read, and a historical record, which is quite consistent and perfectly sensible. It's exactly the way powerful states operate.

**EM:** I want to thank you for answering my questions. – • –