Foreword: Remaking the Future

By John Stickney, Senior Editor, The New York Times Syndicate

Who or what makes the future?

This book's title refers to the epigraph, which states the worldview of a former senior advisor to President George W. Bush:

"We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors ... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do."

"History's actors" should be so unlucky that an observer as knowledgeable, indefatigable, writerly and unflinching as Noam Chomsky is on hand to "study what we do."

Events belie the senior adviser as this book goes to press. The Occupy movement is on fire worldwide, ignited by outrages that Chomsky explores here: inequality, disenfranchisement, official arrogance and deceit.

"I've never seen anything quite like the Occupy movement in scale and character, here and worldwide," Chomsky said at Occupy Boston on October 22, 2011, a talk adapted for this book's final entry. "The Occupy outposts are trying to create cooperative communities that just might be the basis for the kinds of lasting organizations

necessary to overcome the barriers ahead and the backlash that's already coming."

Such is the material monthly column that Chomsky writes for The New York Times Syndicate. *Making the Future* comprises the second edition of those columns.

The first edition, *Interventions*, published in 2007, was banned at Guantanamo in 2009.

As Carol Rosenberg tells it in the *Miami Herald*, a Pentagon defense lawyer sent an Arabic-language edition of *Interventions* to a detainee. U.S military censors rejected it.

"This happens sometimes in totalitarian regimes," Chomsky told Rosenberg by email. "Of some incidental interest, perhaps, is the nature of the book they banned. It consists of op-eds written for The New York Times Syndicate and distributed by them. The subversive rot must run very deep."

Subverted or otherwise, I edit the Chomsky column. It began when Syndicate editors were looking for commentary on the first anniversary of the September 11 attacks. Chomsky's book *9-11*, published in October 2001, had become a best-seller. He was a natural to approach.

Chomsky's first Syndicate op-ed, "9-11: Lessons Unlearned," gained a wide readership, especially abroad. Chomsky's writing was largely disregarded by the mainstream press at home, perhaps because of his uncompromising perspective on what he has called "the global hegemon." But his voice traveled across borders. Why not try a monthly column?

Taken together, the columns in this edition present a narrative of the events that have made the future since 2007: the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; the U.S. presidential race; the ascendancy of China; Latin America's leftward turn; the threat of nuclear proliferation in Iran and North Korea; Israel's invasion of Gaza and expansion of settlements in Jerusalem and the West Bank; developments in climate change; the world financial crisis; the Arab Spring; the death of Osama bin Laden; and the Occupy protests.

As often happens, Chomsky's columns anticipate events. His August 2011 column, "America in Decline," foreshadows a premise of the Occupy movement:

"The resulting concentration of wealth [since the 1970s] vielded greater political power, accelerating a vicious cycle that has led to extraordinary wealth for a fraction of 1 percent of the population, mainly, while for the large majority real incomes have virtually stagnated."

In every sense Chomsky lives up to the title of "public intellectual." He is constantly on the road, giving talks. (Often on campuses he will speak to an audience on current events and to a smaller gathering on his day-job specialty, linguistics.) A hallmark of a Chomsky talk is the questionand-answer period afterward—which tends to continue, freewheeling, until organizers shepherd him to the next stop on the schedule.

Chomsky frequently grants interviews to periodicals around the world, and he maintains an exhaustive email correspondence. Meanwhile he reads voraciously: the mainstream press, journals, books and blogs from the U.S. and around the world. His office at Massachusetts Institute of Technology is in a building designed by Frank Gehry, where walls tilt inward as the horizontal stack of books on Chomsky's desk climbs ever upward.

Chomsky's habit with newspapers is to read down the articles until he comes to the most revealing material, often submerged toward the end—such as the quote from the unnamed Bush advisor.

This collection's op-eds very much reflect Chomsky's public exchanges, as at Occupy Boston. Notes for talks and answers to questions, along with his reading, evolve into columns and material for his books, and vice versa. The dialogue with all his audiences informs Chomsky's voice.

The op-ed, "Making War to Bring 'Peace," from July 2009, tracked his speech that month to the U.N. General Assembly. As a panelist—uncharacteristically in a necktie—Chomsky spoke on the policy known as "responsibility to protect" or R2P. Afterward delegates lined up with questions and challenges.

Chomsky's outspokenness puts him at risk. In 2010, on his way from Jordan to the West Bank to give a talk at Birzeit University, Israeli officials barred Chomsky at the border. He gave the Birzeit talk anyway in a videoconference.

Everywhere, Chomsky is besieged by his editors, myself included. Road-weary or jet-lagged, he heeds yet another deadline and delivers an op-ed, often after midnight—carefully researched and annotated, as befits his scholarly background. Then he submits to the editing process, another back-and-forth in which his editors come to respect the care and craft and accuracy of his work.

In his Occupy Boston talk, Chomsky tells truths and summons his listeners to informed action:

"Karl Marx said, 'The task is not just to understand the world but to change it.' A variant to keep in mind is that if you want to change the world you'd better try to understand it. That doesn't mean listening to a talk or reading a book, though that's helpful sometimes. You learn from participating. You learn from others. You learn from the

people you're trying to organize. We all have to gain the understanding and the experience to formulate and implement ideas."

How Chomsky thinks, and what he covers in this collection, engage readers not to leave to anybody but themselves the task of making the future.