The secret life of Noam Chomsky

Guest commentary by Edward Alexander

It is a commonplace of modern history that extremes of left and right often meet, as when Nazi Foreign Minister Ribbentrop in 1939 flew to Moscow to join Stalin in the non-aggression pact which led to Hitler's invasion of Poland. Many extremist intellectuals have become violent rightists, and many Nazis have turned Communist.

Noam Chomsky's singular distinction as a political activist is a perverse eclecticism that unites the worst of both extremes. He may be the only writer published and truncated by the leftist Nation and the neo-Nazi Journal of Historical Law, which promotes his books and tapes on Israel along with the works of Israeli Goldey on the authoritative word on the subject of the netural Jews. The point of view of the opposite eddies of the US unbalanced by communism and Nazism is the brain of Noam Chomsky.

In America Chomsky's leftist activities - support for Fidel, apologetics for the genocidal regime of Pol Pot in Cambodia, criticism of America as the "good threat to peace" - are much better known than his intimate, prolonged, feverish activities on behalf of neo-Nazi groups and writers.

One of his critics, Professor Werner Cohn, likens him to a "bagman who must constantly strain to keep one of his families secret from the other." The family that Chomsky would like to keep secret from his American leftist fellows is La Vieille Taupe (The Old Mouse), a neo-Nazi organization that seeks to vindicate the original Nazis by denying that they murdered the Jews of Europe.

The group's favorite author (barring Chomsky himself) is Robert Faurisson, a virulent anti-Semite who was suspended from his post at the University of Lyons because of his constant attacks on the Nazi death camps in World War II and his student attacks on all aspects of the modern history of the Jewish people as a lie. Chomsky plunged into the defense of Faurisson, putting his name at the top of and aggressively promoting a petition that complained of his "silencing." This petition which Faurisson had been subjected to because he was making his findings public, tmy 1980.

Chomsky then wrote a preface to Faurisson's book in which he claimed this crankpot as "a sort of apolitical liberal." He also made the brilliant statement that he "sees no anti-semitic implications in denial of the holocaust." Interviewed by the New York Times (Dec. 5, 1980), Chomsky said he had "nothing to say about the contents of the book"; and the historian of the 20th century, Robert Conrath, wrote: "The distortion of Faurisson's views were horrendous, saying that he was not sufficiently involved in the issue to pursue or evaluate it.

This alleged indifference to the subject of Hitler and Nazi is belied by the licentious frequency with which they are referred to in Chomsky's writing about America and Israel. "What is needed in the U.S.", Chomsky has often written, "is de-Nazification." Israel is for Chomsky's experiment station. The Irishman of letters Conor O'Brien once said that when you come across a writer who takes "Nazis and Hitler" over every reference to Israel, like some popular seasoning or condiment, you are almost certainly referring to an anti-Semite. Chomsky's Fateful Triangle, all of whose heroes come from Jewish roots, are references to Jewish actions, perfectly fits this description.

Noam Chomsky is speaking tonight on "The Roots of U.S. Foreign Policy: The Middle East" 3 p.m. in Kane 130. Tickets are $3.60. For information, call the Middle East Center at 543-4227.

He is also speaking tomorrow on cognitive science at 3 p.m. in Kane 130 in a free lecture.

He ends his Seattle engagement tomorrow night speaking on "The Roots of U.S. Foreign Policy: Central America" at 7 p.m. at the First United Methodist Church, 5th and Marion. Tickets are $3.60.

In the sixties, when his disciples were shouting down those who did not share his views on Vietnam, Chomsky consistently refused to condemn their violence. He also declared that "by accepting the assumption of malevolence of the subject on certain issues, one has already lost one's humanity.

One of those issues, this turned out in 1984, was Chomsky himself. The British linguist Geoffrey Sampson wrote in the English Biographical Companion to Modern Thought: "Chomsky forfeited authority as a political commentator by . . . repeated polemics minimizing the Khmer Rouge atrocities in Cambodia and endorsement of a book that denied the Holocaust." Chomsky then proceeded to drop Sampson's remarks from the American edition of the book. When asked how this act of censorship compared with his passionate devotion to the free speech of Nazis, Chomsky replied, "With regard to a book, readers can form their own conclusions. But an entry in a reference work is something quite different."


The level of professional judgment exercised by the academic units that have sponsored Chomsky's political lecture here makes one understand why there is widespread fear for the future of our university system, and also why O'Neill said that there are some ideas so stupid that even intellectuals can believe them.

Edward Alexander is UW professor of English. Guest commentaries are welcome from anyone. If you are interested in writing, please contact Editor Mark Lowell at 543-2700.