

Chomsky on U.S. foreign policy

By STEPHEN MORRIS

For the ten years between 1965 and 1975 Noam Chomsky's political writings were treated with enormous respect in the United States. Chomsky was not only one of the principal figures of the American new left, but his political writings were published in many of the most widely read intellectual publications of this country.

The sources of Chomsky's prestige were obvious. He was and is the most important theoretical linguist of modern times—a man referred to by many as a genius in his field. Regardless of the controversial nature of his linguistic theories, Chomsky was and is a man of enormous intelligence.

Furthermore, since 1965 Chomsky has demonstrated a seemingly boundless political energy. That energy has been channeled into his writing and speaking on behalf of the two causes which have totally animated him: the destruction of American global power and the destruction of the state of Israel. Though these two issues did not totally exhaust his political interests, they certainly dominated them.

This leads to the third factor responsible for Professor Chomsky's decade of fame: the unpopularity, particularly among American intellectuals, of American military involvement in Indochina. Chomsky seemed to provide a clear and firm basis for opposing American policy in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos—an intellectual certainty upon which one could take an unambiguous moral stance. While liberal academics, politicians, and journalists spoke of good intentions mistakenly applied, Chomsky presented a less complex, more Manichean view of America and its adversaries. For Chomsky it was perfectly clear that the United States and the regimes it supported in Indochina represented moral iniquity, while the Vietnamese, Laotian and Cambodian Communists represented moral justice. It was symptomatic of the *Zeitgeist* of America between 1965 and 1975 that Chomsky's views were at least respected, if not embraced, by a sizeable segment of American intellectual opinion.

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While most of those who had embraced the radical politics of the 1960s can now withdraw to their personal and professional lives in relative anonymity, Chomsky has no such option. He is not simply psychologically incapable of deactivation; rather, his numerous books and articles have left an indelible mark on America's intellectual consciousness. If and when American radicalism is called to account for the historical consequences of its previous political stands, Noam Chomsky would inevitably be one of the first to be called upon to testify.

The historical consequences of new left foreign policy



Cambodian refugees fleeing Phnom Penh

advocacy were quick to manifest themselves in Indochina. The "forces of progress" almost immediately began to undertake massive reprisals against the communities they had militarily conquered. In Vietnam this meant the creation of an enormous gulag of prisons, "re-education camps" and new economic zones to deal with the hundreds of thousands of people and their families who had dared to swim against the tides of history. Less than three years later, the devious dialectics of international realignment forced the Vietnamese Communist leaders to begin to undertake a final solution to their ethnic Chinese "problem." At the same time, in neighbouring Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge undertook its great historical task with even more vigor. There, the "enemies of the people" were simply "crushed to bits" (to use the terminology of Cambodian progressives).

Once the evidence of Indochinese Communist behavior began to accumulate, there were three possible responses open to those in the West who had been helping to give history a push: the first was to admit the facts and hence the error of their past political position, and work to eradicate the evil they had mistakenly contributed to; this has been the response of most of the democratic left in France. The second possible response to the evidence was to admit what was going on, but to try and justify it, usually with some bizarre form of moral relativism (letting "them solve" their own problems in "their own way"). This was the response of America's new politics liberals, led by George McGovern for the first three years of the Pol Pot regime. It is still the attitude of many of these people, including McGovern, with regard to Vietnam. The third possible response was to deny the evidence of repression, either totally or in part, and thereby retain one's pride and prejudice. The American radical left, with Professor Noam Chomsky in the vanguard, has taken this third course.

The work under review, *The Political Economy of Human Rights*, is the culminating effort of a five-year campaign by Chomsky to provide a defense for those Western intellectuals who consciously and deliberately helped put Pol Pot and Le Duan in power. Written in collaboration with Edward S. Herman, a professor of finance at the University of Pennsylvania, Chomsky's two-volume extravaganza is not only an attempt to reconstruct the anti-Western ideology of the new left; but also is the most extensive rewriting of a period of contemporary history ever produced in a nontotalitarian society.

The title of the book suggests that it is mainly about political economy. This is somewhat misleading. Most of the book is about political repression, and how the Western media covers repression in a handful of countries (viz. Timor, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia). Only two of the chapters deal with subject matter that could remotely be considered as within the realm of political economy. Even here the discussion is little more than *assertion* of a casual connection between the interests of American corporations in certain areas for investment; the American government's development of client regimes in those countries, and the massive violation of human rights by those regimes. None of these assertions are ever given a basis in scientifically tenable evidence and inference. In any case the assertions are soon forgotten when Chomsky turns his attention to the main theses of the book:

(1) America is responsible for most of the political repression in the world.

(2) The Western media is guilty of massive deception, in the way it has reported news of repression in different parts of the world. Specifically it has exaggerated and even fabricated evidence of repression in some countries (mainly the Communist-ruled nations of Indochina) while ignoring or minimizing evidence of repression elsewhere (Timor). It has done so in order to

conceal the truth of the first proposition and thus rehabilitate the imperial ideology of the United States.

How do Chomsky and Herman arrive at their first conclusion, upon which their second proposition depends?

Over the past 25 years at least... the balance of terror appears to have shifted to the West and its clients, with the United States setting the pace as sponsor and supplier. The old colonial world was shattered during World War II, and the resultant nationalist-radical upsurge threatened traditional western hegemony and the economic interests of western business. To contain this threat the United States has aligned itself with elite and military elements in the Third World whose function has been to contain the tides of change... Under frequent US sponsorship the neo-fascist National Security State and other forms of authoritarian rule have become the dominant mode of government in the Third World. Heavily armed by the West (mainly the United States) and selected for amenability to foreign domination and zealous anti-communism counter-revolutionary regimes have been highly torture- and bloodshed-prone. ... In the Soviet sphere of influence torture appears to have been on the decline since the death of Stalin. In sharp contrast torture, which "for the last two or three hundred years has been no more than a historical curiosity, has suddenly developed a life of its own and become a social cancer." Since it has declined in the Soviet sphere since the death of Stalin, it would appear that this cancerous growth is largely a Free World phenomenon. (p.8)

... the torture and killing of political prisoners appears to be more extensive in the Free World than in the Soviet Union and its satellites... (p.12)

Thus Professors Chomsky and Herman arrive at the following conclusion: "*Washington has become the torture and political murder capital of the world.*" (p. 16).

Before subjecting Chomsky's argument to the critical scrutiny it demands, I must make a few preliminary comments. The first relates to Chomsky's use of terminology. He refers to "totalitarian," "neofascist," "subfascist," and just plain "fascist" regimes; when he is speaking of those regimes he regards as clients of the United States. The word "totalitarian" is defined nowhere in the book, though there exists a voluminous scholarly literature on the subject, almost none of which defines the term in a manner compatible with Chomsky's casual use of the word as a purely pejorative instrument, with no regard for empirical content. For example, the former American-backed nation of South Vietnam is referred to as "a corruption-based totalitarian free-enterprise economy" (p. 28).

On the other hand, the successor Communist regime, whose institutional structure is almost totally derived from either Stalinist USSR or Maoist China, is not referred to as totalitarian, but merely as one which

employs "authoritarian discipline." (p. 28).

Nowhere is the term "fascism" defined; we are merely told that it has "vicious characteristics." We are also told that the species of "fascism" which the United States supports is "amenable to foreign domination," a quality which no serious student of fascism would dare attribute to the phenomenon; one of the most significant characteristics of fascism has been its chauvinistic nationalism.

But lest we might conclude from all this that Chomsky and Herman are merely vulgar Marxist polemicists, they hasten to tell us of a most important distinction between fascism of the Hitler/Mussolini variety, and the "fascism" of U.S. client states. According to the authors, U.S. client regimes lack "the mass base that a Hitler or a Mussolini could muster." Thus, it is argued, the U.S. clients should be labelled "subfascist," for they are "lacking the degree of legitimacy of a genuine fascist regime." We are left to conclude that the clients of the United States have even less "right" to rule than a genuine fascist regimes.

The authors claim to have a broad interest in human rights and have made an attempt to provide a crude index of human rights violations in various countries. Yet their delineation of the dimensions of human rights violations is never clear and consistent. In the first, summary chapter, it reduces simply to the killing and torturing of political prisoners. While these dimensions of political repression are among the most serious, they are hardly exhaustive. One also must take into account the mere holding of political prisoners (in terms both of absolute numbers and of their proportion of the total population of the country), regardless of whether they are killed or tortured; this dimension is never adequately dealt with in the author's conceptually sloppy analysis. One must also consider in one's calculus the sealing off of a country's borders by the regime to prevent citizens from exercising their right to emigrate. This latter right is a crucial option for people who live under a repressive regime, and its absence must surely be crucial to any overall judgment of a regime's repressiveness. Yet this latter aspect of human rights is never considered in the work under consideration, for reasons which will become obvious.

The authors criterion of inclusion in the two categories being compared — the "free world" and "the Soviet sphere of influence" — involves a blatant dual standard for applying the concept of a "sphere of influence." For while the American sphere of influence is defined in terms of a *broad* analytical class — those third world regimes the United States arms and provides economic aid to — the Soviet sphere of influence is defined much more *narrowly*, in terms of its geographically contiguous Warsaw Pact allies.

If Chomsky and Herman's comparison of Soviet and American spheres of influence were to be even remotely fair from an analytical standpoint, they would have to base it on (a) the United States and the other Western industrial democracies versus the Soviet Union and its Eastern European Communist allies, or (b) the United States, the other Western industrial democracies, and those third world nations armed and aided by the Western



industrial democracies versus the Soviet Union, its Eastern European allies, *and* those third world nations armed and aided by the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies. This would inconveniently include not only Vietnam, Cuba, Ethiopia, etc., but also Idi Amin's Uganda, Masia's Equatorial Guinea and Qadaffi's Libya — all unfair competitors for the late Shah and the late President Park in the international human rights violation competition. Chomsky and Herman's inflation of the conception of an American "sphere of influence" while narrowing the range of the Soviet sphere of influence may be convenient for their ideological purposes, but is intellectually absurd.

In making a judgment about where most of the world's human rights violations are occurring, and who is responsible, one would have to at least consider countries which are neither in the American sphere of influence, nor in the Soviet sphere of influence, no matter how loosely either of these categories may be defined. Since Stalin's death even official Marxists have recognized that the world is no longer divided into only two blocs. For example, the People's Republic of China and its former ally Albania, as well as neutral North Korea, are part of the world. Yet their massive violations of human rights

(continued on page 26)

Chomsky

(continued from page 5)

are never mentioned by the authors. And of course there is Pol Pot's Kampuchea — correctly called the Auschwitz of Asia. Even when Chomsky and Herman manage to admit casually that the Pol Pot regime was in power when an "outbreak of violence, massacre and repression" occurred in Cambodia, and even when they grossly understate the number of victims of that regime (putting the figure at a preposterously low 100,000 dead), they are still left with an example which helps falsify their claim that "Washington has become the torture and political murder capital of the world." Or do they wish to argue, along with Hanoi and its Neanderthal minions, that Pol Pot is part of the American sphere of influence?

There is only one regime which has received arms and aid from the United States, and which has a record of brutality which is even a noticeable fraction of the brutality of Pol Pot, Idi Amin, Mao, or the Hanoi politburo. That is the Suharto government in Indonesia. But there are several reasons why the brutality of the Suharto regime cannot be used to support the Chomsky-Herman thesis. First, its major act of domestic brutality — the massacre of Communists and suspected Communists in the wake of the aborted Communist coup in 1965 — was carried out with arms and aid supplied by the Soviet Union and China. The United States was not the principal foreign supplier of Indonesia when the generals seized power. (Nor is there any credible evidence of American involvement in the coup.) Second, within the period of American military assistance to Indonesia, and in particular during the period of the Carter Administration, the number of political prisoners has declined in Indonesia. Finally, the current brutality of the Suharto regime, which Chomsky devotes most of his attention to, is being directed against the people of East Timor — a former colony of Portugal which Indonesia is trying to take over by force.

The fact that the brutality is being perpetrated as part of an external war in no way diminishes the inhumanity of the act. But it is a brutality which is being exercised as part of the process of foreign military intervention, not as part of its normal process of domestic rule. It is a trite observation, but one that bears repeating here, that states usually behave according to different moral rules in the conduct of foreign policy than they do in the conduct of domestic policy. The latter is often guided by a restraining notion of moral community. Without making such a distinction, one would be forced to conclude that the allied powers of World War II, who brutally bombed the civilian populations of Hamburg and Dresden, were indistinguishable from the Nazis in their attitude to human rights.

But even if one were to play the game by Chomsky's rules, and judge the human rights record of a regime by referring to its behaviour in foreign wars, then Indonesia's

cruelty towards the East Timorese has at least one serious competitor — the Vietnamese invaders of Cambodia. The Vietnamese Communist regime, which had launched a military invasion of its neighbor under the pretext of saving the Cambodian people from Pol Pot, had prevented food and medicines from being delivered to the starving population via a truck convoy from Thailand. According to the Central Intelligence Agency study *Kampuchea: A Demographic Catastrophe* (recommended to me by Professor Chomsky), the Vietnamese invasion and food embargo caused 700,000 deaths in Cambodia in 1979. This is seven times as many people as had died (in Chomsky's estimate) in East Timor.

Thus it would seem that the Soviet-armed and Soviet-supported Vietnamese had, in one stroke, destroyed the single shred of argument Chomsky had been presenting for the view that the United States is "responsible" for most of the human rights violations in the world. Yet not even that monumental act of inhumanity by Chomsky's and Herman's comrades in Hanoi was necessary to disprove their thesis. It is an easily calculated fact that either the Maoist regime alone (whose executed and imprisoned victims number in the millions) or the Pol Pot regime alone (whose murder victims are estimated at nearly two million) has killed more than the combined total of all civilians killed by American-armed and aided regimes in Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East, and the Indonesian invaders of East Timor. Even the Idi Amin regime, which according to Amnesty International probably murdered up to 300,000 Ugandans, far outstrips the domestic death toll of all America's third world "clients" combined. Amin at "peace" has probably killed many times more than Indonesia at war. He was not armed and aided by the United States, but by the Soviet Union and Libya. These facts are known to any minimally literate student of international affairs, but they are ignored by Chomsky and Herman.

Finally, if this central thesis needs any further rebuttal, it must be stated that when the United States, or the Soviet Union for that matter, supplies a given country with arms and aid, it does not automatically follow that the recipient becomes part of the great power's "sphere of influence." First the simple fact tells us nothing about the relative importance of U.S. or Soviet arms and aid, compared with other external sources. Second, this fact alone tells us nothing about the dependency of the particular regime upon the external sources for its domestic stability. Third, the validity of the connection between arms and aid on the one hand, and a "sphere of influence" on the other, must be demonstrated empirically, by observable criteria. It cannot be assumed to be true a priori. Fourth, the period of aid provision must be related to the time of a recipient's repression.

This last point is no mere piece of logical nitpicking. Chomsky and Herman make the repression in Argentina (and alleged American responsibility) one of the centerpieces of their argument. Yet while the United States had supplied Argentina with considerable assistance over many years before 1977, it was only in 1976 that the truly repressive Videla regime came to

power. Within a year of the Videla coup, once the nature of the Argentinian junta had been clearly established, the United States terminated its arms sales to Argentina. Furthermore, the United States has continually denounced Argentinian repression in international forums, where the Soviet Union has come to the defense of a country that Chomsky and Herman would classify a U.S. satellite. And on a recent crucial issue for U.S. foreign policy — the grain embargo of the Soviet Union in retaliation for the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan — Chomsky's "American satellite" rejected its "master's orders" and played a vital role in sabotaging the boycott.

So far I have focused my attention on flaws in the basic argument of the book. These are sufficient reasons in themselves for discarding it. But when we examine Chomsky and Herman's empirical research, especially with regard to Indochina, we find the most disturbing feature of their work.

The facts about post-1975 Indochina are fairly well-established. The repression of the Vietnamese, Laotian, and Kampuchean Communists is exceptional by international standards. The Khmer Rouge in particular have a record of brutality and mass murder which compares unfavorably with that of the two greatest tyrants of our century — Hitler and Stalin. Yet for the entire period since 1975 Chomsky has devoted an enormous amount of his time to the task of trying to discredit accounts of repression in Indochina, while promoting accounts which paint a more benign picture of the new orders.

What is most disturbing however is not Chomsky's denial of the truth; far more serious are the *methods* he uses to deny the truth. For Linguistics professor Chomsky, here working in conjunction with Finance professor Herman, has adopted the halo of Professional Scholar, armed with hundreds of footnotes to give the pretence of serious and balanced inquiry. Yet the footnotes cannot stand serious scrutiny. What Chomsky and Herman do over and over again is to present the most tenuous and unreliable sources as firm and credible evidence, while dismissing the contradictory accounts of eyewitnesses whose past record (often of support for the Communist movement) makes them highly credible sources. The Chomsky-Herman technique involves character assassination of the people they disagree with and quite elaborate distortion and misrepresentation of their opponent's views. There are even instances of widely reported and credible evidence (published in newspapers Chomsky and Herman are happy to quote when it suits them) not even being mentioned at all.

First, let us briefly summarize the "human rights" record of the Vietnamese Communists since 1975. Instead of embarking on a program of "national reconciliation and concord," as provided for in the Paris Peace Agreements they signed in 1973 and as promised in the policy platforms which they had promulgated for over fifteen years, the Vietnamese Communists embarked on a policy of revengeful repression. They arrested and incarcerated hundreds of former military officers, civil servants, intellectuals, and religious leaders. Under the

guise of re-education these Vietnamese victims of "liberation" were confined — most of them indefinitely — in prisons and forced labor camps of Hanoi's gulag. Except for a fortunate minority whose families were able to obtain their release through bribery, the majority were condemned to a slow death through overwork, malnutrition, and disease. None of the hundreds of thousands of political prisoners have been formally charged with anything. Many have deported to the new economic zones (NEZs). The NEZs are remote, inhospitable regions of the country, comparable to the Siberian exile long employed by Hanoi's patrons.

As if these atrocities did not suffice, the Hanoi regime in 1978 began a racist pogrom against its ethnic Chinese citizens. The regime deported those without gold or jewelry to China or the NEZs and expelled those who could afford to pay the massive exit bribe in unseaworthy boats into the South China Sea. This racist policy, like the earlier repressive policies, elicited the protest of the civilized wing of the American antiwar movement, led by Joan Baez. But it did not raise a murmur from Professor Chomsky and friends. The distinguished professor of Linguistics was too busy trying to prove that it couldn't all be true. For Chomsky and Herman there were only two questions to be asked about the issue of Vietnam: whose interests were being served by all these "negative reports," and how could the reports be disproved?

Chomsky and Herman continually emphasise how the picture of Vietnam I have just presented is useful for "reconstructing the imperial ideology" of American capitalism. The objective of their reiteration cannot be to rationally convince their readers of the truth of the situation. The objective is rather to affect emotionally the *attitude* of their less sophisticated readers. After all, Chomsky and Herman fail to make the equally obvious observation that their own point of view serves the interest of the Communist rulers of Indochina.

When we turn to an examination of the truth of the situation in Vietnam, we get a rapid acquaintance with "anti-imperialist" techniques of scholarly inquiry. Chomsky and Herman quote a string of foreign journalists and political activists who had been allowed to visit Vietnam for varying periods after 1975. All of these favorable reports are by foreigners, all of whom had been screened by the Hanoi authorities for their past political writings and activities, and few of whom had actually lived in Vietnam for an extended period of Communist rule. Chomsky and Herman are quite uncritical of these accounts of life under the new order, challenging neither the typicality of their observations, nor their personal integrity. Many of these accounts have been published in the most obscure of political newsletters, with names like *New England Peacework* and *The Disciple*. Yet these reports are simply taken at face value.

A different standard is taken towards accounts of Vietnam which cast the regime in an unfavorable light. This countervailing evidence of repression comes not only from scores of refugees, interviewed by the experienced correspondents of some of the world's most prestigious newspapers (especially including Pulitzer Prize winner

Henry Kamm of *The New York Times*, George McArthur of the *Los Angeles Times*, and R.P. Paringaux of *Le Monde*). The evidence also comes from five highly articulate and exceptionally credible eyewitnesses — four Vietnamese and one French — all of whom had actually lived under both Communist and non-Communist regimes for several years, and several of whom had been actively opposed to both the former Thieu regime and the United States. Two of these direct eyewitness accounts (by Andre Gelinas and Nguyen Cong Hoan) are dismissed, after some nasty attempts at character assassination and misrepresentation of their views, simply on the grounds that the (previously mentioned) foreign visitors didn't see what these local residents saw.

Gelinas is subject to particularly spiteful abuse. The bulk of his analysis of repression in Vietnam, and the evidence he presents for it, are not even discussed. Instead, Chomsky hones in on a few carelessly worded statements, wrenches them out of their context, and gives them a significance which is not to be found in the article itself. For example in the context of discussing tensions between the Northern communists and the Southerners, Gelinas mentions the demoralization of northern troops after they witnessed the fact that life in South Vietnam had not been as grim as their own propaganda had been suggesting. Gelinas says:

They had been told that they had come to liberate their brothers who were miserable, enslaved by the Americans, etc. They had discovered a country with freedoms, and a rich one, a real Ali Baba's cave. They discovered above all that they were not welcomed as "liberators" but that they were more often hated. And not this time by the French or Americans, but by Vietnamese like themselves.

The meaning of these sentences was clear to anyone who read the article. However, Chomsky, a specialist in linguistics, choose to ignore the context in crudely extracting the words that suited his purpose.

In the widely cited interview that made his fame, he writes that the North Vietnamese troops who conquered the South "discovered a country with freedoms, and a rich one, a real Ali Baba's cave."

From this Chomsky infers that Gelinas must have been part of the U.S. "colonialist enterprise," for such a statement indicates either blindness or cynicism towards the poverty and misery of Vietnam.

Note that Chomsky and Herman have not dealt with Gelinas' main point — that the Northern troops were disillusioned with the gap between their propaganda-induced expectations and reality. It is a point that has been made time and time again by refugees. Yet Chomsky and Herman don't have to deal with that point. Thanks to a careful manipulation of Gelinas' text, readers don't even now that the point was made. The entire substance of Gelinas' testimony is dealt with in this way. His extensive and complex analysis is systematically caricatured beyond recognition. Other important eyewitness accounts are dealt with differently. The published

Congressional testimony of Nguyen Van Coi, who was tortured by the Hanoi regime, is mentioned without criticism, but only in a footnote!

Finally, two equally compelling eyewitness accounts of the gulag by former inmates — the former antiwar, anti-Thieu, anti-American political activist Doan Van Toai and Nguyen Huu Hieu — are not even mentioned at all! This is in spite of the fact that Toai's Paris press conference account was published in every major French newspaper (from *France Soir*, through the liberal *Le Monde*, to the socialist *Le Matin* and *Liberation*) and the liberal and leftist weekly magazines (*L'Express* and *Le Nouvel Observateur*), which Chomsky often refers to when they support a conclusion he is defending. Toai's press conference was reported well before Chomsky and Herman finished their book and was also excerpted in *Newsweek* and *The Observer*. Toai had a major impact in Europe and went on to write a best-selling book published in five languages. Later, he and a former Buddhist monk, Nguyen Huu Hieu went on a lecture tour of the United States, and their accounts were published in many newspapers, including the *Washington Post* and the *Boston Globe*. It seems that Chomsky and Herman never caught sight of any of this.

It is remarkable how these crusaders for the truth are able to discover sources nobody has ever heard of (like *Vietnam Southeast Asia Journal*, *New England Peacework*, and *The Disciple*), chide as propagandists those who overlook these "important sources" of traveler's tales, but then themselves fail to find important eyewitness reports which appear in ten major newspapers in three countries. Professor Chomsky's research assistant at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, should at least be informed of the existence of the *Boston Globe*.

The above oversight is not unique. There are other classic instances of Chomsky and Herman falling down in their research. One of Chomsky's principal sources for the view that Hanoi is not all that bad, happens to be the well-known French journalist and biographer of Ho Chi Minh, Jean Lacouture. Chomsky strongly recommends the account given by Jean Lacouture and his wife, based on a visit to Vietnam in 1976. Though not uncritical of the new regime, it paints a fairly optimistic picture of the regime's goals and methods. Chomsky quotes Lacouture's statement that the Vietnamese Communists "are probably the first victors in a civil war (embittered and aggravated by two foreign interventions) who have not unleashed any operation of massive reprisal." Chomsky and Herman then bemoan the fact that Lacouture's book could not find an American publisher and was not reviewed in the United States. This is seen as further evidence of how the liberal press suppresses information that contradicts the "imperial ideology."

What the authors fail to mention, however, is that Lacouture no longer holds the views Chomsky and Herman are so eager to quote. Under the influence of the aforementioned Doan Van Toai and others, Lacouture

has changed his opinions and now holds the view of Vietnam which Chomsky and Herman are trying to discredit. But we must not be too harsh on Chomsky and Herman; after all, Lacouture only became "a defender of the interests of U.S. imperialism" a year before the Chomsky-Herman book went to press. What with all the backcopies of *The Disciple* and *New England Peacework* to go through, no wonder Chomsky, Herman, and the MIT-Wharton School research team had not time to keep up with the views of the people they were quoting.

Finally, let us take a look at how Chomsky and Herman deal with those few eyewitness sources they dare to quote before discarding them. Take the case of Nguyen Cong Hoan. Hoan was a former Third Force Buddhist opponent of Thieu and the United States during the Vietnam War. Hoan's "progressive" credentials were such that the Vietnamese Communist regime offered him a seat in the rubber-stamp Vietnamese National Assembly. Hoan's background, as a privileged member of the new regime who chose to flee to an uncertain future in the United States, makes him a very important source indeed.

In a series of interviews with *The New York Times*, and later in *Newsweek*, the *Free Trade Union News* and extended testimony before the House of Representatives Subcommittee on Human Rights, Hoan described the massive network of prisons and "re-education camps" which litter the Vietnamese countryside, crammed with hundreds of thousands of prisoners. He also gives the first account from a reliable source, of the mass executions which have taken place since the Communist victory. Hoan also speaks of the restriction on freedom of movement and the persecution of religion. Much of this was observed at first hand, from his privileged position as member of the Communist National Assembly.

But Chomsky and Herman have enormous difficulty accepting Hoan's testimony:

How credible is his testimony in general? His account of religious persecution is expressly contradicted by direct observations of Westerners and Vietnamese who lived in or visited Vietnam . . .

Hoan's account is confirmed by far more credible sources than the guided tourists and foreign friends Chomsky has so much faith in. The Central Executive Council of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, in a statement issued in Ho Chi Minh City on June 9, 1977, levelled all the charges of political as well as religious repression which Hoan has made abroad. The Buddhist leadership was at the center of militant anti-American and anti-government activity during the Vietnam War. Their statement was smuggled out of Vietnam and released in several different places.

It was published in 1978 in a detailed study of religious repression in Vietnam undertaken by the noted antiwar activist, the Reverend James Forest. The Forest study, entitled *The Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam: Fifteen years for reconciliation*, confirms the accounts of Hoan and others that there are "hundreds of thousands suffering and dying in the re-education camps," that

corruption among party and government officials is rampant, and that there is systematic discrimination in favor of party and government officials and their families, with regard to schooling, health services, and other social amenities. The study by the Reverend Forest, with its meticulous documentation of its major charges, was sent to prominent members of the American antiwar movement. Somehow or other, Chomsky and Herman never saw or heard anything of the report.

Hoan's report of religious persecution had also been confirmed by the Venerable Thich Mian Giac, a Buddhist monk who had served as liaison between the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam and the Communist government, before fleeing by boat from Vietnam. Giac's report of imprisoned monks and priests, smashed religious statues, sacked pagodas, and persecuted religious organizations was contained in an interview published in the *Washington Post* on February 10, 1978. Somehow or other Chomsky and Herman never came across the *Washington Post* on that day. Nor did they see the issue of April 30, 1978, which contained a long article based on excerpted interviews with several former inmates of Hanoi's re-education camps. Nor did they see *Paris Match* of December 8, 1978, which published detailed accounts by three former political prisoners. The cited articles are just the most spectacular example of an enormous number of overlooked pieces of evidence. Such defects in scholarship enable the authors to reach the following dismissive conclusion:

Either the many visitors and westerners living in Vietnam who expressly contradict his claims are, once again, lying, or a charade of astonishing proportions is being enacted — or, more plausibly, Hoan is simply not a reliable commentator.

The authors never even discuss the possibility that the carefully selected foreign visitors might have been lying, or else subjected to an astonishing charade. Without a shred of supporting evidence or even logic they simply leap to the dogmatic and unwarranted conclusion that Hoan is unreliable. This defamatory slur is unjustified not only on the basis of direct evidence, but there are also good historical precedents for believing a man of Hoan's background. During the eras of Hitler, Stalin, and Mao, contemporary observers also had to evaluate "contradictory evidence." Refugees and defectors then gave "negative" accounts of concentration camps, police terror, and deportations, while Western visitors saw not such things. That the refugees were reliable informants and foreign visitors unreliable is not an indubitable part of the historical record. Some of the foreign visitors were lying (for money or a "higher cause"); others were simply deceived. All were being used as propagandists by the regime.

Chomsky and Herman make no reference to this very relevant historical experience in evaluating what they think is "contradictory evidence." After all the Vietnamese communists are, and always have been, great admirers of Joseph Stalin. Stalin gave the Vietnamese

Communists their moral and political unbringing in the Soviet Union of the 1930s. It is to be expected that a regime which still lists Stalin in its pantheon of moral and political heroes and which borrowed most of its political institutions from the Stalinist USSR would *ipso facto* have a Stalinist attitude to human rights. It is also to be expected that Stalin's enthusiastic students would conceal their crimes with the same techniques that he used, especially visitors visas for "friends" only. Such expectations are confirmed by what the refugees and defectors tell us.

But just in case the foreign friends don't have quite the stomach for all the necessities of history, there is also the model prison, the model re-education camp, and the model new economic zone. Have Chomsky and Herman not heard of the concept of a Potemkin village? Have they not heard of Theresienstadt, the camp where famous Jews were kept alive and well by the Nazis, for the publicized visits of an earlier generation of Richard Dudmans and John Frasers. Have Chomsky and Herman not heard of Stalin's Bolshevo Prison, or Mao's Peking Prison Number One? Do they think that the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Hewlett Johnson was a credible observer because he had been able to travel around the Soviet Union in the 1930s and came out convinced that Stalin was a decent man? Johnson was after all a "devoted Christian," like the "devoted Christian" delegates of the Americans Friends Service Committee, who have nothing but praise for the re-education camps they were shown in Vietnam and of whose accounts Chomsky and Herman suspend all critical judgment.

Finally let us turn to the moral climax of the Chomsky-Herman book — their apologies for Pol Pot. Little needs to be said about the Pol Pot regime, a regime so odious that it compares unfavorably with those of Hitler and Stalin. The facts about the brutality of the Khmer Rouge were known as early as 1975, though it took most Americans until 1978 to express widespread concern — by which time possibly two million Cambodians were already dead. (On this horror story, as with the repression in Vietnam, American liberal consciences were lagging about a year behind those of the democratic left in France.) The extent of the bizarre cruelty of the Khmer Rouge was first reported by several Western journalists who from their refuge in the French Embassy the forced depopulation of Phnom Penh. Stories of mass executions and even more deaths from overwork, malnutrition, and disease began to trickle out from those refugees lucky enough to escape their villages and avoid the armed patrols and minefields which blocked their escape route to Thailand. Refugee accounts were published in a variety of newspapers around the world.

Later, John Barron and Anthony Paul attempted to conduct their own refugee interviews in order to provide a more systematic account of the Holocaust. Their book *Murder of a Gentle Land* reported cruelty reminiscent of Nazi death camps. Because Barron and Paul were politically conservative, many intellectuals in the West

refused to take any notice of the story they were presenting. It took another study, by Francois Ponchaud, a French priest with previous sympathies for the Khmer Rouge, to persuade the most stubborn doubters. By 1978 most people in the Western world had come to realize that hell on earth had been created in Democratic Kampuchea.

The belated shock of these revelations of horror stirred Professor Chomsky to write in defense of Pol Pot. The 160 pages of *The Political Economy of Human Rights* which deal with Cambodia represent the most recent and extensive effort in this vein. One hopes it will be the last. Chomsky and Herman use much the same scholarly techniques which we saw employed in their attempts to whitewash the Hanoi regime. They attempt to discredit their opponents by challenging their integrity, or by taking issue with some point of detail which they then blow out of all proportion, suggesting the rest of the study is questionable. Chomsky and Herman then drag out the most obscure authors, some published in the most obscure magazines or newsletters and some not even published at all, and accuse the Western media of having suppressed their reports. In contrast with their fine-tooth comb examination of the books by Ponchaud and Barron and Paul, Chomsky and Herman abandon all critical scrutiny when it comes to the pro-Pol Pot reports. Not only do they fail to notice that some of the "scholarly counterevidence" in favour of Pol Pot relies almost solely on the regimes official regime publications and radio broadcasts; once again they fail to take note of the fact that some of their "scholarly sources" have now renounced the views which Chomsky and Herman are still quoting.

It is impossible to deal with all the instances of "anti-imperialist" methodology employed in the Cambodia chapter. I will confine myself to illustrative instances. Chomsky and Herman wish to cast doubt on the reports of a brutal, forced evacuation of Pnomh Penh. The reports, written by Sidney Schanberg of *The New York Times* and Jon Swain of *The Times* (London), were based solely on personal observation from their refuge in the French embassy. Schanberg and Swain observed numerous bizarre details, including the crippled and severely wounded being forced to crawl or being wheeled in their hospital beds by their relatives out into the countryside.

But Chomsky and Herman are not convinced. They have managed to come across an important, hitherto undiscovered document which casts the whole issue in a new light. It is nothing less than *News From Kampuchea*, a broadsheet published by Khmer Rouge sympathizers living in Australia. In this important publication Chomsky and Herman have found a very different account of the evacuation. It is by the noted authority Shane Tarr and his wife Chou Meng, New Zealand residents whose principal claim to fame is the pro-Pol Pot newsletter they co-edit. The Tarrs also claim to have participated in the long march out of Pnomh Penh into the countryside, but after three days returned (or were

returned) to the French Embassy to await their deportation from the country. The Tarrs claimed that the march was not forced, that everyone was willing to go, and that there was no suffering or executions as the insidious Western press reported. They were happy to have been able to participate in the "wonderful" revolution.

Chomsky and Herman don't seem to know anything about these important authorities, other than the fact that they claim that their glowing reports were rejected by several newspapers in New Zealand and that Swain mentioned them in his article as having espoused revolutionary rhetoric and as having fraternized with the Khmer Rouge guards outside the embassy walls. Chomsky and Herman seem to think that the Tarrs, about whose background and, hence, intelligence and integrity they know nothing, are as credible as two professionally trained journalists working for two of the world's best newspapers, whose background is on the public record.

This question of background is of particular relevance with regard to Sydney Shanberg's account. For in an earlier article published a few days before the Communist victory, Schanberg had welcomed the end of the war, expressed his doubts about U.S. government predictions of a Khmer Rouge bloodbath, and declared that nothing could be worse than continuation of the war. Even his account of the deportations and his own evacuation was careful not to go beyond direct observation. Then, and for some time after, Schanberg refused to make any statement of moral condemnation of the Khmer Rouge. All of this should have been sufficient to convince a reasonably impartial analyst that Schanberg was an experienced observer with no "anti-Communist axe to grind," and that what he claims they saw actually did occur.

Chomsky and Herman's polemic continues on this level. They tell us about another important authority, whom the ideologically blinded Western press has overlooked. It is Ben Kiernan, described as "an Australian scholar" of Cambodia, who has published in important journals like the *Melbourne Journal of Politics*. What Chomsky and Herman don't tell us is that Kiernan is a graduate student at an Australian university, and that his first important, overlooked study was published in the journal of the Melbourne University department of political science's undergraduates. It is a journal specifically designed for student contributions.

Kiernan later managed to get published in *Australian Outlook*, a journal open to professors as well as graduate students. But his work here, as elsewhere, hardly constitutes a challenge to the Barron and Paul or Ponchaud books. It is based largely on a hypothesis that perhaps Khmer Rouge terror was localized to the northwest of the country and not a result of central state direction. Our valiant crusaders against "distortions at fourth hand" never tell us that Kiernan relied heavily on official regime publications, newspaper reports and mysterious second-hand accounts. Even more depressing

for our anti-imperialist authors is the fact that their scholarly source has since disowned his "important studies" and admitted he was wrong about Pol Pot.

Another mysterious source that Chomsky and Herman continually refer to in their expose of the failure of Western reporting on Cambodia is Michael Vickery, whose scholarly efforts have been deliberately ignored by the "ideologically blinkered Western liberal intelligentsia." Who is Michael Vickery? That's not at all clear. He is not identified by an institutional affiliation. He is simply described as a "Khmer-speaking westerner who is an academic specialist on Cambodia." He doesn't seem to have published much either. In fact Chomsky only refers briefly to what appears to be Vickery's major publication — a contribution to the magazine *Westerly*.

Chomsky and Herman don't tell us much about this neglected repository of scholarship — for good reason. Anybody with the time and energy to work through the Library of Congress will be rewarded with the discovery that *Westerly* is an Australian literary quarterly! One is left wondering whether Vickery's important suppressed views on Cambodia are in fact poems or short stories. But it is only fair to point out that the crusaders against U.S. imperialist propaganda are not relying solely on the important *Westerly* piece. Vickery's main scholarly work, judging by the number of pages Chomsky and Herman devote to it, is a long letter he has written to Chomsky. How the Western press managed to overlook this document is not clear, but the oversight certainly raises questions about their integrity. Still, one is left puzzled about who Michael Vickery actually is. Is he a Harvard professor of Khmer Civilization? Or is he perhaps a Melbourne taxidriver, with an unrecognized talent for scholarly letterwriting? Unfortunately, the man who singlehandedly discovered Vickery's talents, Noam Chomsky, does not enlighten us on this matter.

There remains only one question to be asked: how is a book like this possible? How can two professional academics, employed by two of this nation's most prestigious universities, dare to write a book which is such a travesty of academic standards?

The answer is unfortunately a simple one. The authors are totalitarian political ideologues, with an intense emotional commitment to the cause of anti-Americanism. Operating on the principle that "my enemy's enemy is my friend" they have wholeheartedly embraced the struggle of two of the world's most ruthlessly brutal regimes. The standards of professional conduct, which they are capable of applying in their professional fields, simply collapse in the face of the political task to which they have committed themselves.

But the attempt to whitewash or apologize for tyranny was not the only option open to Professors Chomsky and Herman. Many members of the European left have had the courage to admit that the political movements whose victory they had advocated for so many years were now morally indefensible. Unfortunately for the credibility of America's new left, its most prominent spokesmen have been unable to muster such courage. □