

The attack on Noam Chomsky was unjustified

Guest commentary by
Carlos P. Otero

Professor Edward Alexander closes his attack on Noam Chomsky in yesterday's Daily with the remark that "there are some ideas so stupid that only intellectuals can believe them."

I wholeheartedly agree—particularly if we understand "intellectuals" to mean "intellectuals of Professor Alexander's intellectual and moral caliber."

Most of what precedes his final remark provides relevant evidence. What is worse, "anyone familiar with Chomsky's history" knows that every one of his outlandish charges against Chomsky is an outright lie. Not surprisingly, he is careful not to provide any reference or any other shred of evidence in support of his fantasies. The reason is that none exists.

From what he has actually written, it is not easy to piece together the threads of Professor Alexander's reasoning, but it is clear that he tries to convey the impression that Chomsky is guilty of serious crimes. Perhaps the most serious ones are the following: (1) "Apologetics for the genocidal regime of Pol Pot in Cambodia"; (2) "defense of Faurisson" and concern "only with Faurisson's academic freedom"; (3) considering Israel "the devil's experiment station."

Other acts he takes to be demeaning are only so for "nationalists" with moral standards no higher than Professor Alexander's. Many other people, both in this country and abroad, would not readily conclude that a denunciation of America as a great threat to peace is necessarily a crime.

One can even quote one of the authors he admires (Orwell) on this: "The nationalist not only does not disapprove of atrocities committed by his own side, but he has a remarkable capacity for not even hearing about them." Needless to say, Chomsky does not fall into this category.

Let us turn now to the really serious charges. As one might suspect from Pro-

fessor Alexander's lack of specific references, there is no empirical basis for the first charge. The crucial sources here are the little known monograph (it was suppressed by Warner Publishing) *Counter-Revolutionary Violence: Bloodbaths in Fact and Propaganda* (1973), by Chomsky and Edward Herman (Professor of Finance at the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania), the second volume of *The Political Economy of Human Rights* (1979), by Chomsky and Herman, *The Chomsky Reader* (1987), pp. 289-297, and *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (1988),

caust, and Chomsky was a kind of accomplice in giving him even libertarian support.

As Chomsky is quick to point out, "any commisar could say the same"; the real question is "whether you believe in freedom of expression for views you regard as horrendous." "If the answer is no, then you're just a fascist, a commisar," Chomsky concludes. That's why, in his view, the Faurisson affair has become an extraordinarily important case, "almost a criterion," he says, "of belief in free speech" (*Boston Magazine*, December 1981, p. 135-136).

Professor Alexander states that "Chomsky

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by Chomsky and Herman. (Significantly, the attacks are concentrated on Chomsky, although half of the responsibility for these writings is obviously Herman's.)

The authors painstakingly insist that they are drawing no conclusions at all on what the facts actually are, but rather asking the question of how the evidence available was refracted through the ideological prism. How can this be taken to be "apologetics" for any regime?

The second charge is still more revealing. Chomsky's "defense" of the French author Robert Faurisson consists of his being one of about 500 signers of a petition to the French Court that calls upon them to safeguard Faurisson's civil rights. Period.

Everything else Chomsky has written on the matter has been in response to people who, like Professor Alexander, are incapable (or conveniently pretend to be incapable) of distinguishing between defense of a person's theses from defense of his rights to express them. According to some, including Professor Alexander, Faurisson was a criminal for writing what he wrote about the Holo-

then wrote a preface to Faurisson's book." This is false. What he did, upon request, was to write a 2000-word article entitled "Some elementary comments on the right of freedom of expression," which was added, as an "Avis" (i.e., opinion), not a preface, to a new book by Faurisson which Chomsky did not know about when he wrote his "elementary comments."

On pages 57-58 of Chomsky's 1974 book, anyone who takes the trouble can read the following: "The Zionist case relies on the aspirations of a people who suffered two millennia of exile and savage persecution culminating in the most fantastic outburst of collective insanity in human history, on the natural belief that a normal human existence will be possible only in a national home in the land to which they had never lost ties, and on the extraordinary creativity and courage of those who made the desert bloom." (My emphasis. The essay was originally published in *Liberation* in November 1969.)

The third charge is no less revealing. As is well known, as a teenager Chomsky in-

tended to drop out of college in order to pursue his interests in socialist, binationalist options for Palestine, and in the kibbutzim and the whole cooperative labor system that had developed in the Jewish settlement there.

It was only the accident that a person with very similar political interests happened to be one of the greatest linguists of the moment that eventually led Chomsky to change course. Still, he did unskilled agricultural work in a kibbutz for about six weeks in 1953 while he was at the Society of Fellows at Harvard (see *The Chomsky Reader*, pp. 6ff) and to this day has continued trying to contribute to Jewish-Palestinian cooperation.

As Chomsky often repeats, "it takes a phrase to produce a falsehood or distortion, and a paragraph to unravel it." A piece such as Professor Alexander's can only be sampled in an article such as this one, but perhaps these comments are sufficient to give a taste of Professor Alexander's scrupulousness and trustworthiness, and even to raise some questions about his motivation.

I wonder whether he would have dared to write some of the libelous material he writes about someone who does not refuse in principle to grant the state the right to settle questions of libel. A representative example is his remark that "once news of Chomsky's Nazi family in France reached these shores, he decided to present himself as a civil libertarian." Suffice it to say that both parts of the statement are false: long before 1980, Chomsky defended the freedom of speech of many people, including some who he considers authentic war criminals such as Henry Kissinger.

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Anyone is welcome to write a guest commentary.