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 evidence 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 one is the following: (1) "Forbidding the genocide of Pol Pot in Cambodia"; (2) "assistance to Faurisson" and concern "only with Faurisson's academic freedom"; (3) "considering Israel's national 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 who does not oppose 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 Professor 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 New Left Review) and the second edition 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), 1981, p. 135-136.

Professor Alexander states that "Chomsky intended 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 settlements 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. 66). And to this day has continued 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 ever 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 "the 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.