

## Letters

**Noam Chomsky on Cambodia** In LR (Sept. 1977), Murray Rothbard quotes the following statement from a review by Jean Lacouture of a book by Father F. Ponchaud on Cambodia: "When men who talk of Marxism are able to say... that only 1.5 or 2 million young Cambodians, out of 6 million, will be enough to build a pure society, one can no longer simply speak of barbarism" but rather "only madness." In a footnote Rothbard then claims that "Chomsky and Herman brusquely dismiss such statements of Cambodian officials simply because they appeared in the Thai press," referring to our article "Distortions at Fourth Hand" in *The Nation*, June 25 1977. He then comments as follows: "To dismiss any reported statements by government officials themselves merely because they were not authorized and published by the officials is a singular position for authors who presumably applaud the exposures of the Watergate horrors." The example illustrates very well Rothbard's concern for fact and logic.

The facts are as follows. Our article did not dismiss the statement to which Rothbard refers on grounds that it appeared in the Thai press. It did not appear in the Thai press. In fact, it is questionable that it appeared anywhere. Lacouture gives no source. In the book he was reviewing, Ponchaud cites an unattributed Khmer Rouge slogan: "One or two million young people will be enough to build the new Cambodia." In an earlier article in *Le Monde* Ponchaud claims, presumably on the testimony of refugees, that an unidentified Khmer Rouge military commander had stated that "To rebuild the new Cambodia, a million people are enough." We thus have three statements, differently phrased, differently attributed, with different numbers. We noted that "this is one of the rare examples of a quote that can be checked," and commented merely that "the results are not impressive," an understatement, I would think. In fact, in context it is quite unclear what is the import of the statement, if in-

deed it was ever made. It is remarkable that Lacouture and Rothbard cite this "evidence" as the basis for the conclusions they draw from it.

Elsewhere, Lacouture claimed that Ponchaud cites "telling articles" from a Cambodian Government newspaper, and quotes a paragraph, concluding that the Cambodian revolution is "worthy of Nazi Gauleiters." In his "corrections", which Rothbard cites, Lacouture noted that the source was not a "telling article" in a Cambodian Government newspaper, but a report in a Thai newspaper of an interview with a Khmer Rouge official who said, allegedly, that "he found the revolutionary method of the Vietnamese 'very slow'..." (Lacouture). The paragraph that Lacouture quotes is by the Thai reporter. As we noted, this is "by now, a sufficiently remote chain of transmission to raise many doubts... What is certain is that the basis for Lacouture's accusations... disappears when the quotes are properly attributed: to a Thai reporter, not a Cambodian Government newspaper." This is the "brusque dismissal" to which Rothbard refers.

We have since obtained a copy and translation of the original Thai newspaper article, and have discovered that the chain of transmission was in fact still longer. The Thai reporter is quoting someone who is reporting a conversation with an unnamed Khmer official in Paris. Furthermore, it turns out that the Thai reporter is using this report to question the atrocity stories about Cambodia appearing in the Western press. Not only is the chain of transmission too long to carry much credibility, but the context is quite different from what was represented.

Why should the Thai reporter have used this alleged interview to counter Western propaganda? The full report, which I cannot reproduce here, explains. What is important here is that Ponchaud misrepresented the Thai newspaper report, just as Lacouture misrepresented Ponchaud, thus further justifying the natural skepticism about the lengthy chain of transmission. As

for Rothbard's comparison to Watergate, not that Lacouture's conclusions were based on his misreading of Ponchaud's report of a Thai report of an alleged statement by an unnamed Khmer official (omitting Ponchaud's missing link and the crucial context). Suppose we were to read a report by a French leftist hostile to the US government of a report in a foreign newspaper of an alleged statement by an unnamed official in the Nixon Administration? Just how seriously would we have taken such "evidence"? Would it really bear comparison to the Nixon tapes?

As for my "applauding" the Watergate exposures, the reader who is more concerned with fact than Rothbard may consult articles I have written on the Watergate farce: e.g., introduction to N. Blackstock, COINTELPRO, Vintage.

Rothbard states that Lacouture's corrections "do not affect the substance of his argument." I urge the reader to pursue this question. Lacouture's argument is based entirely on references to Ponchaud. In fact, not a single quote or explicit reference stands up to investigation. Lacouture, I am sure, would be the first to agree that his corrections (which are not complete) very much affect the substance of his argument, since they eliminate its factual basis.

Perhaps I should stress an elementary point of logic. While Lacouture's argument collapses, it does not follow that his conclusions are false. Similarly, our very partial exposure of the stream of falsifications and deceit in the media imply nothing one way or another about the actual situation in Cambodia. Our concern in the article that Rothbard cites, and mine here, is with a different topic: the functioning of the state propaganda system (in particular, its exploitation of Lacouture's review) as it works to reconstruct the ideological system bruised by the American war in Indochina, and the remarkable willingness of many intellectuals to enlist in this cause, hardly something new in history. Specifically, it may turn out that Rothbard's conclusions are correct, though his "argument" is hardly more than a

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form of hysteria. But from a demonstration of the dismal performance of many intellectuals, one can conclude nothing about the subject under discussion. We were careful to point this out in the article in question.

To sort out Rothbard's muddles would be a lengthy, tedious and unrewarding task, as this typical example illustrates. I hope that the Review will try to attain somewhat higher intellectual standards.—Noam Chomsky, Department of Linguistics and Philosophy, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

**Murray Rothbard Replies:** Professor Chomsky's lengthy letter hinges on a misreading of a reference of mine to his and Herman's article in the *Nation*. When I wrote that his article "brusquely dismiss (ed)" "such statements" of Cambodian officials simply because they were reported in the Thai press, the linguist Chomsky triumphantly changes this to "the statement" and preceeds to refute something I never said. In fact, later in his letter Chomsky admits that he believes that the basis for Lacouture's charges "disappears" simply because a Thai reporter is quoting a statement made to him by a Cambodian official. If this is not "brusque dismissal," what is?

Indeed, the Chomsky-Herman article is itself a fascinating exercise in propaganda. In addition to dismissing the Thai reporter, Chomsky and Herman dismiss accounts of Cambodian refugees as "at best second-hand." Apart from a striking callousness toward the victims of terror, one wonders how we can get more first-hand accounts of a country which has been tightly sealed off from the outside world by its rulers. There is also the Chomsky-Herman statement that Cambodian executions "have numbered at most in the thousands", the "at most" striking a piquant note reminiscent of Stalinist apologetics of the 1930's. At one point, Chomsky-Herman

seem to admit "much brutal practice." It would be nice to hear from Chomsky what evidence has convinced him of brutal practice in Cambodia. Of course, Chomsky fails to recognize that the brutal practice "in working for egalitarian goals" might have had something to do with those very goals.

Furthermore, stress on executions alone ignores the fact that the great part of the deaths in Cambodia have occurred as a corollary to the "forced labor without respite", the deprivations, and the horrors of a population thrown unprepared into a rural world by the terror of the regime. (See R-P. Paringaux, "Evades du Cambodge," *Le Monde*, Sept. 8-14, 1977).

Chomsky-Herman's methods of reporting may be gauged by their reference to the interview held by Cambodian leader Khieu Samphan with the Italian weekly *Famiglia Cristiana*. After stating that Samphan concedes a million deaths during the war, they assert that "nowhere in it does Khieu Samphan suggest that the million post-war deaths were a result of official policies..." And yet, the report of the interview in Barron and Paul's *Murder of a Gentle Land* says as follows: the Italian correspondent: "If 1 million persons died in the fighting, what happened to the remaining 1 million?" To which Samphan replied: "It's incredible how concerned you Westerners are about war criminals."

But the major problem with Chomsky is that, by concentrating on the minutiae of reporting, Chomsky almost wilfully refuses to see the forest for the trees: namely, the reports of thousands of refugees which reveal the Cambodian regime as one of unparalleled brutality and mass murder. To quibble about precisely how many people have been killed is to return to the old Stalinist quibble about exactly how many verifiable Russians have been murdered or placed in Gulags, or indeed the equivalent of apologists for the current Chilean regime quibbling about the exact number of Chileans tortured by the government. Furthermore, it is to use that numbers game—about numbers impossible anyway to verify in a tightly closed society—to try to cast doubt on the reality of the mass brutality itself.

Since writing my article, evidence of the horrors of the Cambodian regime has continued to pile up and intensify. We have learned of such monstrosities as the systematic murder of sick people (who are, after all, drains upon social resources in a socialist country) and the death penalty for more than two examples of disobeying the authorities. Much of what we have learned comes from sources (e.g. the *Far Eastern Economic Review*) which even Chomsky and Herman hail as providing "analyses by highly qualified specialists who have studied the full range of evidence available." Thus, we find that, in the new Cambodia, "The charge of being 'old dandruff' is the most dreaded that can be thrown at anyone, meaning that person suffers from 'memory sickness' or a tendency to dream of things past for which the penalty can be death." (Donald Wise, "Eradicating the 'Old Dandruff'", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Sept. 23, 1977, p. 33. For a wide political spectrum of articles with similar reports, see Nayan Chanda, "The Pieces Begin to Fit," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Oct. 21, 1977; Stephane Groueff, "The Nation as Concentration Camp," *National Review*, Sept. 2, 1977; Henry Kamm, "Refugees Depict Cambodia as Grim, Work-Gang Land," *New York Times*, Oct. 31, 1977; Barry Kramer, "Asian Blood Bath," *Wall St. Journal*, Oct. 19, 1977; "Cambodian Regime Breaks Official Silence," *Intercontinental Press*, Oct. 17, 1977.)

It seems to me that the issue is clear: that no one can qualify as in any sense a libertarian who fails to react in horror at the Cambodian regime.

Another disturbing point about Chomsky's letter is his total evasion of the central thrust of my article, one which he brusquely dismisses as "hysteria." That point was to demonstrate that socialism, necessarily denying as it does private property in the means of production, must result in a dictatorial and tyrannical regime. Cambodia, on which Chomsky showers exclusive attention, is but the latest of a chilling array of twentieth century examples.—Murray N. Rothbard, CATO Institute, San Francisco, California.

## Libertarian Review

Founded in 1972 by  
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**Libertarian Review** is published monthly by Libertarian Review, Inc. Editorial offices are at 200 Park Avenue South, Suite 1707, New York, N.Y. 10003. Telephone (212) 533-9440. 1977 by Libertarian Review, Inc. All rights reserved. Opinions expressed in bylined articles do not necessarily reflect the views of the editor and publisher.

**Subscriptions:** Single copy, \$1.25. 12 issues (one year), \$15.00; two years, \$25.00; three years, \$35.00. **Address Change:** Write new address, city, state and zip code on plain sheet of paper. Attach mailing label from a recent issue of LR, and send to Circulation Dept., Libertarian Review, 6737 Annapolis Road, P.O. Box 2599, Landover Hills, Md. 20784. Second class postage paid at New York, N.Y. and Additional Mailing Offices.

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