

# Three cheers for Professor Chomsky

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AMERICAN POWER AND THE NEW MANDARINS. By Noam Chomsky. Pantheon. 404 pp. \$7.95.

By Arthur Schlesinger Jr.

A half-century ago Mencken described the eruption of Thorstein Veblen on the American intellectual scene: "Of a sudden, Siss! Boom! Ah! Then, overnight, the upspringing of the intellectual soviets, the headlong assault upon all the old axioms of pedagogical speculation, the nihilistic dethronement of Prof. Dewey — and rah, rah, rah for Prof. Dr. Veblen! . . . In a few months — almost it seemed a few days — he was all over the *Nation*, the *Dial*, the *New Republic* and the rest of them, and his books and pamphlets began to pour from the presses, and newspapers reported his every wink and whisper, and everybody who was anybody began gabbling about him."

One is tempted to write in the same way about the recent emergence of Noam Chomsky. A distinguished student of linguistics, he quietly pursued arcane studies at M.I.T. in a highly specialized field. Then, of a sudden, he has burst forth as an all-purpose expert on history, strategy, foreign policy, social psychology, political science, political ethics, ethical politics. He settles every issue with ecclesiastical certitude. His sermons cover interminable pages in *The New York Review of Books*. He is cited with reverence by the young. It is rah, rah, rah for Prof. Dr. Chomsky.

*American Power and the New Mandarins*, a collection of his essays, offers a chance to see what the shouting is all about. The Vietnam war drove Chomsky into the public arena; it has obviously been the formative experience in his political thought, and it provides the perspective through which he sees both the American past and the American future. He views this war not as the result of miscalculation or stupidity but as the expression of profound aggressive drives rooted in the American commercial and industrial system. Looking back at earlier history in the light of Vietnam, he finds the quest for world domination a major and abiding American impulse.

Thus, in one long digression, he wonders whether American policy did not after all force Japan into the attack on Pearl Harbor. "It is an open question whether

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a more conciliatory American diplomacy that took into account some of the real problems faced by Japan might have helped. . . . It is hardly astonishing, then, that in 1937 Japan began to expand at the expense of China." When Roosevelt rejected a policy of appeasement and made an issue of Japan's alliance with Germany, "it may be that the underlying motive was to justify the forthcoming American involvement in the European war. In any event, the American terms, by November [1941], were such that Japan would . . . [become] a mere 'sub-contractor' in the emerging American world system." Confronted by such pressure from American imperialism, what else could Japan do but act in self-defense? There is an agreeable symmetry after all these years in watching the New Left join hands with the Old Right.

American imperialism has reached, Chomsky thinks, its culmination in Vietnam. "By any objective standard," he writes, "the United States has become the most aggressive power in the world, the greatest threat to peace, to national self-determination, and to international cooperation" — a proposition that might conceivably be read with skepticism in Prague. "If one wishes to pursue the Munich analogy," Chomsky adds, "there is only one plausible contender for the role of Hitler," and he does not mean Brezhnev. The challenge that the existence of this Nazi-like America offers to the American intellectual community gives Chomsky's book its unifying theme.

He sees American intellectuals as divided into two main groups: the Mandarins (bad) and the Resistance (good). The Mandarins are those who use the knowledge and technique demanded by industrial society to achieve personal power in collaboration with the state. They are elitist, reformist, pragmatic, managerial, manipulative, technocratic, counterrevolutionary, opposed to "popular movements and mass participation in decision making," addicted to the behavioral sciences, contemptuous of principles, moral issues and human rights. Their allegiance is "not to truth and justice, but to power and the effective use of power."

There are Mandarins in all advanced societies, including the Soviet Union, but the worst ones are in America. These believe "that the United States has the right to extend its power and control without limit, insofar as is feasible. . . . In no small measure the Vietnam war was designed and executed by these new mandarins, and it testifies to the concept of humanity and civilization they are likely to bring to the exercise of power."



Noam Chomsky

The Resistance, on the other hand, is spontaneous, democratic, humane, principled, anti-organization, pro-community, a "moral elite" dedicated to truth, justice and the creative search for alternatives. Chomsky opposes the cries of the hard New Left for revolution; but even his soft New Left seems to believe that the Mandarins deserve punishment, and he himself proposes what he obscurely calls "a kind of denazification."

All this purports to be political analysis. But Chomsky, it soon becomes evident, does not understand the rudiments of political analysis. Indeed, despite occasional pretenses of reasoned discussion, he is not much interested in the analytical process:

What I find terrifying is the detachment and equanimity with which we view and discuss an unbearable tragedy. . . .

By entering into the arena of argument and counterargument, of technical feasibility and tactics, of footnotes and citations, by accepting the presumption of legitimacy of debate on certain issues, one has already lost one's humanity. . . . [Anyone] going through the motions of building a case against the American war in Vietnam . . . degrades

## —but not just now

himself, and insults beyond measure the victims of our violence and our moral blindness. . . .

The question of how Asian revolutions will in time react on America, and through America on Europe, is very real. It is a question that does not call for speculation, but for commitment and thought and action.

Noam Chomsky, in short, is not a political analyst at all. Like John Foster Dulles and Dean Rusk, he believes in reducing political questions to rather confident and facile moral judgments. Now the historian's rule here must be *de minimis*. A few questions, like slavery or Nazism, do qualify for unequivocal moral judgments; but, as one supposed Reinhold Niebuhr had demonstrated long since, most secular questions intermingling good and evil in problematic proportions and are more usefully handled in other than moralistic categories. Moreover, those who rush around lading out moral judgments quickly arrogate to themselves an alarming and repellent sense of their own moral infallibility. Chomsky should remember his Chekhov: "You will not become a saint through other people's sins."

Political analysis requires a belief in the application of reason to *all* questions. Chomsky rejects this belief. It also requires a capacity to make distinctions. This too Chomsky lacks. Take the first sentence of his book: "Three years have passed since American intervention in a civil war in Vietnam was converted into a colonial war of the classic type." One may say many things about the Vietnam war; but one thing it is not is "a colonial war of the classic type"—i.e., a war in which a developed nation aims at the territorial annexation of an underdeveloped land. Indeed, Chomsky himself never claims that the United States wants to make Vietnam an American colony in the classic sense; it is just that he scorns precision in the use of language. Or, to consider another example, Chomsky calls Senator Mike Mansfield "the kind of man who is the terror of our age." If one uses language of this sort about Senator Mansfield, what words does one have left for Hitler or Stalin?

Political analysis requires in addition a reasonable sense of logic. Thus, in making his case against the Vietnam war, Chomsky mentions a newspaper photograph showing Vietnamese children in the Mekong Delta wounded by fire from American helicopters. "How many hundreds of such pictures must we see,"

he writes, "before we begin to care and to act?" The incident could hardly have been more horrifying; but it simply does not by itself justify political conclusions. Would the photograph of German children in Dresden or Hamburg wounded by bombs from allied planes have led Chomsky to argue that we should stop the war against Hitler? In short, logic prescribes that the case against the Vietnam war must be established—as it easily can be—on other grounds than the tragic fact of the killing or maiming of innocent bystanders. But Chomsky has no particular regard for logic.

Political analysis requires, above all, some respect for facts. This, despite a showy apparatus of footnotes and citations, Chomsky also lacks. Consider, for example, the way he deals with a President of the United States. Thus he writes:

These words recall the characteristically direct formulations of Harry Truman, who proclaimed in 1947 that "all freedom is dependent on freedom of enterprise. . . . The whole world should adopt the American system. . . . The American system can survive in America only if it becomes a world system."

In case anyone does not get the point, Chomsky, who is rarely content with saying anything once, writes some pages later:

. . . the principles that were crudely outlined by President Truman almost twenty years ago when he observed in a famous and important speech that "all freedom is dependent on freedom of enterprise," that "the whole world should adopt the American system," that "the American system can survive in America only if it becomes a world system."

On the first occasion, Chomsky cites as his source for this "famous and important speech" a book by D. F. Fleming called *The Cold War and Its Origins*. The Fleming book refers to a speech given by Truman at Baylor University on March 6, 1947. This speech is readily available in Truman's *Public Papers*. An examination of the speech shows that Truman said none of the things which Chomsky says he said. And, while D. F. Fleming is hardly celebrated for the rigor of his scholarship, even he does not claim that Truman said them. The last two quotations, as the Fleming text makes clear, were not from Truman at all but from a book by J. P. Warburg in which Warburg was giving his own theory as to what

was in Truman's mind. The first quotation does not appear on the page cited in Fleming and may well have been invented by Chomsky. (This quotation alone bears a distant resemblance to actual words of the Baylor speech, though what Truman said was essentially different: "Freedom of worship—freedom of speech—freedom of enterprise. It must be true that the first two of these freedoms are related to the third.") In the field of linguistics, Chomsky would, I am sure, be merciless on a scholar who misquoted, misattributed and made up language in order to strengthen an argument. But his contempt for political writing is evidently such that he has no hesitation in doing exactly this himself in the field of public affairs. Somewhere in the book Chomsky writes, with his usual sententiousness, "It is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth and to expose lies." He must be putting us on.

Lurking in the morasses of Chomsky's prose is a perfectly serious question: that is, the relationship between intellectuals and power. He is plainly one of those who think that all intellectuals must enact the same prescribed role. This really does not make much sense. The strength of the intellectual community lies, among other things, in its diversity. According to variations in temperament and preoccupation, some intellectuals will participate in the world of power, some will criticize, some will denounce, some will cultivate their own gardens, some will, at one time or another, do all these things. A spectrum of opinion and action is indispensable if reason is to civilize power. The Chomsky notion that no intellectual should ever, ever collaborate with the state would, of course, deliver power absolutely to the timeservers and the yahoos.

But Chomsky is, as usual, something less than precise in his own conception of what the role of the intellectual should be. At various times he describes the role as that "of a dispassionate critic" or, again, that of speaking the truth and exposing lies; but his argument contradicts the first and his practice the second. Judging by *American Power and the New Mandarins*, one can only conclude that Chomsky's idea of the responsibility of an intellectual is to forswear reasoned analysis, indulge in moralistic declamation, fabricate evidence when necessary and shout always at the top of one's voice. It need hardly be said that, should the intellectual community follow the Chomsky example, it would betray its own traditions and hasten society along the road to unreason and disaster. ☞