

Noam Chomsky's politics and Albert Einstein's violin

Guest commentary by
Edward A. Stern

Professor Carlos Otero's vituperative attack in last Thursday's Daily on Professor Edward Alexander for daring to criticize Noam Chomsky went beyond the limits of responsible debate. Besides being self-contradictory and inaccurate, it elevated a personal attack on Alexander above the issue of Chomsky himself.

Otero claims that Chomsky's association with the neo-Nazi movement was limited to signing a petition for the "civil rights" of the Nazi propagandist Robert Faurisson and writing not a preface, as Alexander said, but an "opinion" which turned up, mysteriously, in Faurisson's book—which, by the way, is entitled *Mémoire en Défense. Préface de Noam Chomsky*.

The truth is that the petition had aroused the ire of civil libertarians in France because it used the word "findings" to describe Faurisson's squalid "document criticism." Stung by complaints that his promotion of the petition (with his name at the top) had encouraged the neo-Nazi movement in France, Chomsky wrote an essay saying even fascists and racists should have free speech. He sent the essay to one of his neo-Nazi cronies named Serge Thion, telling him to use it as he thought best.

When Chomsky learned that it was to go into Faurisson's book, he wrote to express misgivings. But once the book appeared, with his essay as preface, Chomsky (according to Faurisson's publisher, Pierre Guillaume) declared his letter of retrieval null and void, and said he stood by the preface. Guillaume has praised Chomsky for his loyalty to the neo-Nazi publishing house *La Vieille Taupe*, a loyalty to which neo-Nazi "revisionists" credit much of their present strength in France.

Otero's laughable claim that Chomsky is the world's greatest civil libertarian is a far more egregious misrepresentation of civil libertarians than any George Bush perpetrated in the presidential campaign. Civil libertarians may give legal aid to Nazis; they do not, as Chomsky has done, cooperate with Nazis, publish their books with Nazi publishers, and print their articles in Nazi journals. Otero's apologia for him makes one wonder whether Chomsky, had he been given the chance, would have contributed a preface to *Mein Kampf* in 1924. About how many civil libertarians do we ask that question?

With steam-enging regularity, Otero keeps repeating that Alexander accused Faurisson and Chomsky of "crimes," a word that never appeared in his article. Perhaps Otero is projecting upon his opponents Chomsky's well-known habit of calling people he disagrees with (as he used to call President Kennedy about once a week) "criminals." Although Alexander did not say that Faurisson is a criminal, Chomsky may wish to note the fact that courts in Canada and elsewhere have ruled that "freedom of speech" is no excuse for spreading falsehood in order to inflame racial hatred.

I grant Otero that many people "would not readily conclude that a denunciation of America as a great threat to peace is necessarily a crime." But he conveniently forgets that Chomsky has denounced America as "the greatest threat to peace" (*American Power and the New Mandarins*), has called for the "denazification" of America, and argued that "if dictators were smarter they would surely use the Ameri-

can system of thought control and indoctrination."

Such sentiments are not indictable offenses, any more than Chomsky's undying belief in the other country, right or wrong, but they might cause us to wonder whether his reputation as a linguist should confer authority on him as a political thinker. Albert Einstein, a much greater intellectual as a physicist than Chomsky as a linguist, played the violin in his spare time, but he never advised aspiring violinists to come to him for guidance.

In view of the terrifying accounts of the Khmer Rouge genocide that have recently been in the news again, I can understand Otero's embarrassment at mention of Chomsky's apologetics for the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia. But no sane person can read the 159 pages on Cambodia in the Chomsky-Herman book *After the Cataclysm* (1979) and believe Otero's claim that they are a mere anthology of press reports rather than an attempt to whitewash a murderous communist regime.

Since it requires the mental equivalent of hip-boots to wade through the prose of this book, readers may prefer to sample Chomsky's apologetics in his *Nation* article of June 25, 1977. Here Chomsky excoriates the "establishment press" for concocting "tales of Communist atrocities," and ignoring the "constructive role" of the Khmer Rouge, and he points to "repeated discoveries that massacre reports were false." As for Cambodian refugees, Chomsky treats them in precisely the way that his neo-Nazi friends treat Jewish survivors of the Holocaust: "refugees . . . have a vested interest in reporting atrocities on the part of Cambodian revolutionaries."

The most laughable of Otero's absurdities is the assertion that Chomsky, the darling of neo-Nazi groups, from Paris to Torrance, Calif., the favorite display-Jew of countless PLO front groups, is really a great lover of Israel. Why? Because he spent "about six weeks in 1953" on a kibbutz, prematurely doing penance for the sins he was later to commit against the Jewish state.

I admit that Chomsky's writing about Israel, given his chronic incapacity to get facts straight, can be amusing. In *Towards a New Cold War*, for example, he transforms a well-known Israeli writer into a general (Hareven), confuses a real general (Laskov) with a noted Russian novelist, and mixes up a third general (Peled) with Mussolini. But amusement is short-lived when you read somebody who equates support for Israel with support for Stalin, persistently likens Israelis to Nazis, and alleges that Israeli governments are inspired by "the genocidal texts of the Bible," and dream of plunging the world into nuclear war and destroying the planet. These sentiments may not be "criminal," but they do suggest—how shall we say?—a certain lack of charity in the Jewish direction.

Anything beyond a cursory look at Chomsky's political writings shows why the liberal historian Arthur Schlesinger wrote that "Chomsky begins as a preacher to the world and ends as an intellectual crook."

Edward Stern is UW Professor of Physics. This guest commentary concludes debate on *The Daily's* editorial page about Noam Chomsky, which included two pro-Chomsky commentaries last week and another anti-Chomsky piece last week.

If you are interested in writing a guest commentary on another topic, please contact Editor Mark Jewell at 543-2700.