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The hypocrisy of Noam Chomsky

by Keith Windschuttle

On the philosopher's record of defending authoritarian regimes.

There's a famous definition in the Gospels of the hypocrite, and the hypocrite is the person who refuses to apply to himself the standards he applies to others. By that standard, the entire commentary and discussion of the so-called War on Terror is pure hypocrisy, virtually without exception. Can anybody understand that? No, they can't understand it.

—Noam Chomsky, *Power and Terror*, 2003

Noam Chomsky was the most conspicuous American intellectual to rationalize the Al Qaeda terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. The death toll, he argued, was minor compared to the list of Third World victims of the “far more extreme terrorism” of United States foreign policy. Despite its calculated affront to mainstream opinion, this sentiment went down very well with Chomsky's own constituency. He has never been more popular among the academic and intellectual left than he is today.

Two books of interviews with him published since September 11, 2001 both went straight onto the bestseller lists.^[1] One of them has since been turned into a film entitled *Power and Terror*, now doing brisk business in the art-house movie market. In March 2002 the film's director, John Junkerman, accompanied his subject to the University of California, Berkeley, where in a five-day visit Chomsky gave five political talks to a total audience of no fewer than five thousand people.

Meanwhile, the liberal news media around the world has sought him out for countless interviews as the most prominent intellectual opposed to the American response to the terrorist attacks. Newspaper articles routinely open by reminding readers of his awesome intellectual status. A profile headlined “Conscience of a Nation” in the English daily *The Guardian* declared: “Chomsky ranks with Marx, Shakespeare, and the Bible as one of the ten most quoted sources in the humanities—and is the only writer among them still alive.” *The New York Times* has called him “arguably the most important intellectual alive.”

Chomsky has used his status, originally gained in the field of linguistics, to turn himself into the leading voice of the American left. He is not merely a spokesman. His own stance has done much to structure left-wing politics over the past forty years. Today, when actors, rock stars, and protesting students mouth anti-American slogans for the cameras, they are very often expressing sentiments they have gleaned from Chomsky's voluminous output.

Hence, to examine Chomsky's views is to analyze the core mindset of contemporary radicalism, especially the variety that now holds so much sway in the academic and arts communities.

Chomsky has been a celebrity radical since the mid-1960s when he made his name as an anti-Vietnam War activist. Although he lost some of his appeal in the late-1970s and 1980s by his defense of the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia, he has used September 11 to restore his reputation, indeed to surpass his former influence and stature. At seventy-four years of age, he is today the doyen of the American and much of the world's intellectual left.

He is, however, an unconventional academic radical. Over the past thirty years, the left in the humanities has been smitten by high theory, especially neo-Marxist, feminist, and postmodernist philosophy out of Germany and France. Much of this material was arcane enough in its own language but in translation it elevated obscurantism to a badge of prestige. It inundated the humanities with relativism both in epistemology and moral philosophy.

In contrast, Chomsky has produced no substantial body of political theory of his own. Nor is he a relativist. He advocates the pursuit of truth and knowledge about human affairs and promotes a simple, universal set of moral principles. Moreover, his political writings are very clear, pitched to a general rather than specialist audience. He supports his claims not by appeals to some esoteric conceptual apparatus but by presenting plain, apparently factual evidence. The explanation for his current appeal, therefore, needs to be sought not in recent intellectual fashions but in something with a longer history.

Chomsky is the most prominent intellectual remnant of the New Left of the 1960s. In many ways he epitomized the New Left and its hatred of "Amerika," a country he believed, through its policies both at home and abroad, had descended into fascism. In his most famous book of the Sixties, *American Power and the New Mandarins*, Chomsky said what America needed was "a kind of denazification."

Of all the major powers in the Sixties, according to Chomsky, America was the most reprehensible. Its principles of liberal democracy were a sham. Its democracy was a "four-year dictatorship" and its economic commitment to free markets was merely a disguise for corporate power. Its foreign policy was positively evil. "By any objective standard," he wrote at the time, "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."

As an anti-war activist, Chomsky participated in some of the most publicized demonstrations, including the attempt, famously celebrated in Norman Mailer's *Armies of the Night*, to form a human chain around the Pentagon. Chomsky described the event as "tens of thousands of young people surrounding what they believe to be—I must add that I agree—the most hideous institution on this earth."

This kind of anti-Americanism was common on the left at the time but there were two things that made Chomsky stand out from the crowd. He was a scholar with a remarkable reputation and he was in tune with the anti-authoritarianism of the student-based New Left.

At the time, the traditional left was still dominated by an older generation of Marxists, who were either supporters of the Communist Party or else Trotskyists opposed to Joseph Stalin and his heirs but who still endorsed Lenin and Bolshevism. Either way, the emerging generation of radical students saw both groups as compromised by their support for the Russian Revolution and the repressive regimes it had bequeathed to eastern Europe.

Chomsky was not himself a member of the student generation—in 1968 he was a forty-year-old tenured professor—but his lack of party membership or any other formal political commitment absolved him of any connection to the Old Left. Instead, his adherence to anarchism, or what he called "libertarian socialism," did much to shape the outlook of the New Left.

American Power and the New Mandarins approvingly quotes the nineteenth-century anarchist Mikhail Bakunin predicting that the version of socialism supported by Karl Marx would end up transferring state power not to the workers but to the elitist cadres of the Communist Party itself.

Despite his anti-Bolshevism, Chomsky remained a supporter of socialist revolution. He urged that "a true social revolution" would transform the masses so they could take power into their own hands and run institutions themselves. His favorite real-life political model was the short-lived anarchist enclave formed in Barcelona in 1936–1937 during the Spanish Civil War.

The Sixties demand for "student power" was a consequence of this brand of political thought. It allowed the New Left to persuade itself that it had invented a more pristine form of radicalism, untainted by the totalitarianism of the communist world.

For all his in-principle disdain of communism, however, when it came to the real world of international politics Chomsky turned out to endorse a fairly orthodox band of socialist revolutionaries. They included the architects of communism in Cuba, Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, as well as Mao Tse-tung and the founders of the Chinese communist state. Chomsky told a forum in New York in December, 1967 that in China "one finds many things that are really quite admirable." He believed the Chinese had gone some way to empowering the masses along lines endorsed by his own libertarian socialist principles:

China is an important example of a new society in which very interesting and positive things happened at the local level, in which a good deal of the collectivization and communization was really based on mass participation and took place after a level of understanding had been reached in the peasantry that led to this next step.

When he provided this endorsement of what he called Mao Tse-tung's "relatively livable" and "just society," Chomsky was probably unaware he was speaking only five years after the end of the great Chinese famine of 1958–1962, the worst in human history. He did not know, because the full story did not come out for another two decades, that the very collectivization he endorsed was the principal cause of this famine, one of the greatest human catastrophes ever, with a total death toll of thirty million people.

Nonetheless, if he was as genuinely aloof from totalitarianism as his political principles proclaimed, the track record of communism in the USSR—which was by then widely known to have faked its statistics of agricultural and industrial output in the 1930s when its own population was also suffering crop failures and famine—should have left this anarchist a little more skeptical about the claims of the Russians' counterparts in China.

In fact, Chomsky was well aware of the degree of violence that communist regimes had routinely directed at the people of their own countries. At the 1967 New York forum he acknowledged both "the mass slaughter of landlords in China" and "the slaughter of landlords in North Vietnam" that had taken place once the communists came to power. His main objective, however, was to provide a rationalization for this violence, especially that of the National Liberation Front then trying to take control of South Vietnam. Chomsky revealed he was no pacifist.

I don't accept the view that we can just condemn the NLF terror, period, because it was so horrible. I think we really have to ask questions of comparative costs, ugly as that may sound. And if we are going to take a moral position on this—and I think we should—we have to ask both what the consequences were of using terror and not using terror. If it were true that the consequences of not using terror would be that the peasantry in Vietnam would continue to live in the state of the peasantry of the Philippines, then I think the use of terror would be justified.

It was not only Chomsky who was sucked into supporting the maelstrom of violence that characterized the communist takeovers in South-East Asia. Almost the whole of the 1960s New Left followed. They opposed the American side and turned Ho Chi Minh and the Vietcong into romantic heroes.

When the Khmer Rouge took over Cambodia in 1975 both Chomsky and the New Left welcomed it. And when news emerged of the extraordinary event that immediately followed, the complete evacuation of the capital Phnom Penh accompanied by reports of widespread killings, Chomsky offered a rationalization similar to those he had provided for the terror in China and Vietnam: there might have been some violence, but this was understandable under conditions of regime change and social revolution.

Although information was hard to come by, Chomsky suggested in an article in 1977 that post-war Cambodia was probably similar to France after liberation at the end of World War II when thousands of enemy collaborators were massacred within a few months. This was to be expected, he said, and was a small price to pay for the positive outcomes of the new government of Pol Pot. Chomsky cited a book by two American left-wing authors, Gareth Porter and George Hildebrand, who had “presented a carefully documented study of the destructive American impact on Cambodia and the success of the Cambodian revolutionaries in overcoming it, giving a very favorable picture of their programs and policies.”

By this time, however, there were two other books published on Cambodia that took a very different line. The American authors John Barron and Anthony Paul called their work *Murder of a Gentle Land* and accused the Pol Pot regime of mass killings that amounted to genocide. François Ponchaud’s *Cambodia Year Zero* repeated the charge.

Chomsky reviewed both books, together with a number of press articles, in *The Nation* in June 1977. He accused them of publishing little more than anti-communist propaganda. Articles in *The New York Times Magazine* and *The Christian Science Monitor* suggested that the death toll was between one and two million people out of a total population of 7.8 million. Chomsky mocked their total and picked at their sources, showing some were dubious and that a famous photograph of forced labor in the Cambodian countryside was actually a fake.

He dismissed the Barron and Paul book partly because it had been published by *Reader’s Digest* and publicized on the front page of *The Wall Street Journal*, both of them notorious anti-communist publications, and partly because they had omitted to report the views of journalists who had been to Cambodia but not witnessed any executions.

Ponchaud’s book was harder to ignore. It was based on the author’s personal experience in Cambodia from 1965 until the capture of Phnom Penh, extensive interviews with refugees and reports from Cambodian radio. Moreover, it had been favorably reviewed by a left-wing author in *The New York Review of Books*, a publication for which Chomsky himself had often written. Chomsky’s strategy was to undermine Ponchaud’s book by questioning the credibility of his refugee testimony. Acknowledging that Ponchaud “gives a grisly account of what refugees have reported to him about the barbarity of their treatment at the hands of the Khmer Rouge,” Chomsky said we should be wary of “the extreme unreliability of refugee reports”:

Refugees are frightened and defenseless, at the mercy of alien forces. They naturally tend to report what they believe their interlocutors wish to hear. While these reports must be considered seriously, care and caution are necessary. Specifically, refugees questioned by Westerners or Thais have a vested interest in reporting atrocities on the part of Cambodian revolutionaries, an obvious fact that no serious reporter will fail to take into account.

In 1980, Chomsky expanded this critique into the book *After the Cataclysm*, co-authored with his long-time collaborator Edward S. Herman. Ostensibly about Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, the

great majority of its content was a defense of the position Chomsky took on the Pol Pot regime. By this time, Chomsky was well aware that something terrible had happened: "The record of atrocities in Cambodia is substantial and often gruesome," he wrote. "There can be little doubt that the war was followed by an outbreak of violence, massacre and repression." He mocked the suggestion, however, that the death toll might have reached more than a million and attacked Senator George McGovern's call for military intervention to halt what McGovern called "a clear case of genocide."

Instead, Chomsky commended authors who apologized for the Pol Pot regime. He approvingly cited their analyses that the forced march of the population out of Phnom Penh was probably necessitated by the failure of the 1976 rice crop. If this was true, Chomsky wrote, "the evacuation of Phnom Penh, widely denounced at the time and since for its undoubted brutality, may actually have saved many lives." Chomsky rejected the charge of genocide, suggesting that

the deaths in Cambodia were not the result of systematic slaughter and starvation organized by the state but rather attributable in large measure to peasant revenge, undisciplined military units out of government control, starvation and disease that are direct consequences of the US war, or other such factors.

After the Cataclysm also presented a much more extended critique of refugee testimony. Chomsky revealed his original 1977 source for this had been Ben Kiernan, at the time an Australian graduate student and apologist for the Pol Pot regime, who wrote in the Maoist-inspired *Melbourne Journal of Politics*. What Chomsky avoided telling his readers, however, was that well before 1980, the year *After the Cataclysm* was published, Kiernan himself had recanted his position.

Kiernan had spent much of 1978 and 1979 interviewing five hundred Cambodian refugees in camps inside Thailand. They persuaded him they were actually telling the truth. He also gained a mass of evidence from the new Vietnamese-installed regime. This led him to write a *mea culpa* in the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* in 1979. This was a left-wing journal frequently cited by Chomsky, so he must have been aware that Kiernan wrote: "There can be no doubting that the evidence also points clearly to a systematic use of violence against the population by that chauvinist section of the revolutionary movement that was led by Pol Pot." Yet in *After the Cataclysm*, Chomsky does not acknowledge this at all.

Kiernan later went on to write *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power and Genocide under the Khmer Rouge 1975–79*, a book now widely regarded as the definitive analysis of one of the most appalling episodes in recorded history. In the evacuation of Phnom Penh in 1975, tens of thousands of people died. Almost the entire middle class was deliberately targeted and killed, including civil servants, teachers, intellectuals, and artists. No fewer than 68,000 Buddhist monks out of a total of 70,000 were executed. Fifty percent of urban Chinese were murdered.

Kiernan argues for a total death toll between April 1975 and January 1979, when the Vietnamese invasion put an end to the regime, of 1.67 million out of 7.89 million, or 21 percent of the entire population. This is proportionally the greatest mass killing ever inflicted by a government on its

own population in modern times, probably in all history.

Chomsky was this regime's most prestigious and most persistent Western apologist. Even as late as 1988, when they were forced to admit in their book *Manufacturing Consent* that Pol Pot had committed genocide against his own people, Chomsky and Herman still insisted they had been right to reject the journalists and authors who had initially reported the story. The evidence that became available after the Vietnamese invasion of 1979, they maintained, did not retrospectively justify the reports they had criticized in 1977.

They were still adamant that the United States, who they claimed started it all, bore the brunt of the blame. In short, Chomsky still refused to admit how wrong he had been over Cambodia.

Chomsky has persisted with this pattern of behavior right to this day. In his response to September 11, he claimed that no matter how appalling the terrorists' actions, the United States had done worse. He supported his case with arguments and evidence just as empirically selective and morally duplicitous as those he used to defend Pol Pot. On September 12, 2001, Chomsky wrote:

The terrorist attacks were major atrocities. In scale they may not reach the level of many others, for example, Clinton's bombing of the Sudan with no credible pretext, destroying half its pharmaceutical supplies and killing unknown numbers of people.

This Sudanese incident was an American missile attack on the Al-Shifa pharmaceutical factory in Khartoum, where the CIA suspected Iraqi scientists were manufacturing the nerve agent VX for use in chemical weapons contracted by the Saddam Hussein regime. The missile was fired at night so that no workers would be there and the loss of innocent life would be minimised. The factory was located in an industrial area and the only apparent casualty at the time was the caretaker.

While Chomsky drew criticism for making such an odious comparison, he was soon able to flesh out his case. He told a reporter from salon.com that, rather than an "unknown" number of deaths in Khartoum, he now had credible statistics to show there were many more Sudanese victims than those killed in New York and Washington: "That one bombing, according to estimates made by the German Embassy in Sudan and Human Rights Watch, probably led to tens of thousands of deaths." However, this claim was quickly rendered suspect. One of his two sources, Human Rights Watch, wrote to salon.com the following week denying it had produced any such figure. Its communications director said: "In fact, Human Rights Watch has conducted no research into civilian deaths as the result of US bombing in Sudan and would not make such an assessment without a careful and thorough research mission on the ground."

Chomsky's second source had done no research into the matter either. He was Werner Daum, German ambassador to Sudan from 1996 to 2000 who wrote in the *Harvard International Review*, Summer 2001. Despite his occupation, Daum's article was anything but diplomatic.

It was a largely anti-American tirade criticizing the United States' international human rights record, blaming America for the 1980s Iran-Iraq war, accusing it of ignoring Iraq's gassing of the Kurds, and holding it responsible for the purported deaths of 600,000 Iraqi children as a result of post-1991 economic sanctions. Nonetheless, his comments on the death toll from the Khartoum bombing were not as definitive as Chomsky intimated. Daum wrote:

It is difficult to assess how many people in this poor African country died as a result of the destruction of the Al-Shifa factory, but several tens of thousands seems a reasonable guess. The factory produced some of the basic medicines on the World Health Organization list, covering 20 to 60 percent of Sudan's market and 100 percent of the market for intravenous liquids. It took more than three months for these products to be replaced with imports.

Now, it is hard to take seriously Daum's claim that this "guess" was in any way "reasonable." He said there was a three-month gap between the destruction of the factory and the time it took to replace its products with imports. This seems an implausibly long interval to ship pharmaceuticals but, even if true, it is fanciful to suggest that "several tens of thousands" of people would have died in such a brief period.

Had they done so, they must have succumbed to a highly visible medical crisis, a pandemic to put the SARS outbreak in the shade. Yet no one on the spot, apart from the German ambassador, seems to have heard of it.

Anyone who makes an Internet search of the reports of the Sudanese operations of the several Western aid agencies, including Oxfam, Médecins sans Frontières, and Norwegian People's Aid, who have been operating in this region for decades, will not find any evidence of an unusual increase in the death toll at the time. Instead, their major health concern, then and now, has been how the Muslim Marxist government in Khartoum was waging civil war by bombing the civilian hospitals of its Christian enemies in the south of the country.

The idea that tens of thousands of Sudanese would have died within three months from a shortage of pharmaceuticals is implausible enough in itself. That this could have happened without any of the aid organizations noticing or complaining is simply unbelievable.

Hence Chomsky's rationalization for the September 11 attacks is every bit as deceitful as his apology for Pol Pot and his misreading of the Cambodian genocide.

"It is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth and to expose lies," Chomsky wrote in a famous article in *The New York Review of Books* in February 1967. This was not only a well-put and memorable statement but was also a good indication of his principal target. Most of his adult life has been spent in the critique of other intellectuals who, he claims, have not fulfilled their duty.

The central argument of *American Power and the New Mandarins* is that the humanities and social sciences had been captured by a new breed of intellectuals. Rather than acting as Socratic free thinkers challenging received opinion, they had betrayed their calling by becoming servants of the

military-industrial state. The interests of this new mandarin class, he argued, had turned the United States into an imperial power. Their ideology demonstrated

the mentality of the colonial civil servant, persuaded of the benevolence of the mother country and the correctness of its vision of world order, and convinced that he understands the true interests of the backward peoples whose welfare he is to administer.

Chomsky named the academic fields he regarded as the worst offenders—psychology, sociology, systems analysis, and political science—and held up some well-known practitioners, including Samuel Huntington of Harvard, as among the worst examples. The Vietnam War, Chomsky claimed, was designed and executed by the new mandarins.

In itself, Chomsky's identification of the emergence of a new type of academically trained official was neither original nor radical. Similar critiques had been made of the same phenomenon in both western and eastern Europe for some time. Much of his critique had been anticipated in the 1940s in a book from the other end of the political spectrum, Friedrich von Hayek's *Road to Serfdom*, which identified the social engineers of the welfare state as the greatest internal threats to Western liberty. Chomsky offered a leftist version of the same idea, writing:

There are dangerous tendencies in the ideology of the welfare state intelligentsia who claim to possess the technique and understanding required to manage our "postindustrial society" and to organize the international society dominated by the American superpower.

Yet at the very time he was making this critique, Chomsky himself was playing at social engineering on an even grander scale. As he indicated in his support in 1967 for the "collectivization and communization" of Chinese and Vietnamese agriculture, with its attendant terror and mass slaughter, he had sought the calculated reorganization of traditional societies. By his advocacy of revolutionary change throughout Asia, he was seeking to play a role in the reorganization of the international order as well.

Hence, apart from occupying a space on the political spectrum much further to the left than the academics he criticized, and apart from his preference for bloodshed over more bureaucratic techniques, Chomsky himself was the very exemplar of the new mandarin he purported to despise.

He was, in fact, one of the more successful examples of the breed. There has now been enough analysis of the Vietnam War to demonstrate conclusively that the United States was not defeated militarily. South Vietnam was abandoned to its fate because of the war's political costs at home. The influence of radical intellectuals like Chomsky in persuading the student generation of the 1960s to oppose the war was crucial in elevating these political costs to an intolerable level.

The result they helped produce, however, was far worse than any bureaucratic solution that might have emanated from the behavioral sciences of the 1960s. From our present vantage point, we can today see the long-term outcome of the choice Chomsky posed in 1967 between the "comparative

costs” of revolutionary terror in Vietnam versus the continuation of private enterprise agriculture in the Philippines.

The results all favor the latter. In 2001, the average GDP per head in the Philippines was \$4000. At the same time, twenty-five years of revolution in Vietnam had produced a figure of only half as much, a mere \$2100. Even those Vietnamese who played major roles in the transformation are now dismayed at the outcome. The former Vietcong General Pham Xuan An said in 1999: “All that talk about ‘liberation’ twenty, thirty years ago, all the plotting, all the bodies, produced this, this impoverished broken-down country led by a gang of cruel and paternalistic half-educated theorists.”

These “half-educated theorists” were the very mandarins Chomsky and his supporters so badly wanted to succeed and worked so hard to install.

As well as social science practitioners and bureaucrats, the other representatives of the intelligentsia to whom Chomsky has long been hostile are the people who work in the news media.

Although his politics made him famous, Chomsky has made no substantial contribution to political theory. Almost all his political books are collections of short essays, interviews, speeches, and newspaper opinion pieces about current events. The one attempt he made at a more thoroughgoing analysis was the work he produced in 1988 with Edward S. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. This book, however, must have been a disappointment to his followers.

Media studies is a huge field ranging from traditional defenses of the news media as the fourth estate of the democratic system, to the most arcane cultural analyses produced by radical postmodernist theorists. Chomsky and Herman gave no indication they had digested any of it.

Instead, their book offers a crude analysis that would have been at home in an old Marxist pamphlet from the 1930s. Apart from the introduction, most of the book is simply a re-hash of the authors’ previously published work criticizing media coverage of events in central America (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua) and in southeast Asia (Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia), plus one chapter on reporting of the 1981 KGB-Bulgarian plot to kill the Pope.

To explain the role of the mass media, Chomsky and Herman offer their “propaganda model.” This claims the function of the media is

to amuse, entertain and inform, and to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs and codes of behavior that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society. In a world of concentrated wealth and major conflicts of class interest, to fulfil this role requires systematic propaganda.

This is true, they maintain, whether the media operate in liberal democracies or under totalitarian regimes. The only difference is that in communist and other authoritarian societies, it is clear to everyone that the media are instruments of the dominant elite. In capitalist societies, however, this fact is concealed, since the media “actively compete, periodically attack and expose corporate and governmental malfeasance, and aggressively portray themselves as spokesmen for free speech and the general community interest.”

Chomsky and Herman argue that these attacks on authority are always very limited and the claims of free speech are merely smokescreens for inculcating the economic and political agendas of the privileged groups that dominate the economy.

The media, they note, are all owned by large corporations, they are beholden for their income to major national advertisers, most news is generated by large multinational news agencies, and any newspaper or television station that steps out of line is bombarded with “flak” or letters, petitions, lawsuits, and speeches from pro-capitalist institutes set up for this very purpose.

There are, however, two glaring omissions from their analysis: the role of journalists and the preferences of media audiences. Nowhere do the authors explain how journalists and other news producers come to believe they are exercising their freedom to report the world as they see it. Chomsky and Herman simply assert these people have been duped into seeing the world through a pro-capitalist ideological lens.

Nor do they attempt any analysis of why millions of ordinary people exercise their free choice every day to buy newspapers and tune in to radio and television programs. Chomsky and Herman fail to explain why readers and viewers so willingly accept the world-view of capitalist media proprietors. They provide no explanation for the tastes of media audiences.

This view of both journalists and audiences as easily-led, ideological dupes of the powerful is not just a fantasy of Chomsky and Herman’s own making. It is also a stance that reveals an arrogant and patronising contempt for everyone who does not share their politics. The disdain inherent in this outlook was revealed during an exchange between Chomsky and a questioner at a conference in 1989 (reproduced in Chomsky, *Understanding Power*, 2002):

Man: The only poll I’ve seen about journalists is that they are basically narcissistic and left of center.

Chomsky: Look, what people call “left of center” doesn’t mean anything—it means they’re conventional liberals and conventional liberals are very state-oriented, and usually dedicated to private power.

In short, Chomsky believes that only he and those who share his radical perspective have the ability to rise above the illusions that keep everyone else slaves of the system. Only he can see things as they really are.

Since the European Enlightenment a number of prominent intellectuals have presented themselves as secular Christ-like figures, lonely beacons of light struggling to survive in a dark and corrupting world. This is a tactic that has often delivered them followers among students and other idealistic youths in late adolescence.

The phenomenon has been most successful when accompanied by an uncomplicated morality that its constituency can readily absorb. In his ruminations on September 11, Chomsky reiterated his own apparently direct and simple moral principles. Reactions to the terrorist attacks, he said, “should meet the most elementary moral standards: specifically, if an action is right for us, it is right for others; and if it is wrong for others, it is wrong for us.”

Unfortunately, like his declaration of the responsibility of the intellectual to speak the truth and expose lies, Chomsky himself has consistently demonstrated an inability to abide by his own standards. Among his most provocative recent demands are for American political and military leaders to be tried as war criminals. He has often couched this in terms of the failure by the United States to apply the same standards to itself as it does to its enemies.

For instance, America tried and executed the remaining World War Two leaders of Germany and Japan, but failed to try its own personnel for the “war crime” of dropping the atomic bomb on Japan. Chomsky claims the American bombing of dams during the Korean War was “a huge war crime . . . just like racist fanaticism” but the action was praised at home. “That’s just a couple of years after they hanged German leaders who were doing much less than that.”

The worst current example, he claims, is American support for Israel:

virtually everything that Israel is doing, meaning the United States and Israel are doing, is illegal, in fact, a war crime. And many of them they defined as “grave breaches,” that is, serious war crimes. This means that the United States and Israeli leadership should be brought to trial.

Yet Chomsky’s moral perspective is completely one-sided. No matter how great the crimes of the regimes he has favored, such as China, Vietnam, and Cambodia under the communists, Chomsky has never demanded their leaders be captured and tried for war crimes. Instead, he has defended these regimes for many years to the best of his ability through the use of evidence he must have realized was selective, deceptive, and in some cases invented.

In fact, had Pol Pot ever been captured and tried in a Western court, Chomsky’s writings could have been cited as witness for the defense. Were the same to happen to Osama bin Laden, Chomsky’s moral rationalizations in his most recent book—“almost any crime, a crime in the street, a war, whatever it may be, there’s usually something behind it that has elements of legitimacy”—could be used to plead for a lighter sentence.

This kind of two-faced morality has provided a model for the world-wide protests by left-wing opponents of the American-led coalition’s war against Iraq. The left was willing to tolerate the

most hideous acts of state terrorism by the Saddam Hussein regime, but was implacable in its hostility to intervention by Western democratic governments in the interests of both their own security and the emancipation of the Iraqi people. This is hypocrisy writ large.

The long political history of this aging activist demonstrates that double standards of the same kind have characterized his entire career.

Chomsky has declared himself a libertarian and anarchist but has defended some of the most authoritarian and murderous regimes in human history. His political philosophy is purportedly based on empowering the oppressed and toiling masses but he has contempt for ordinary people who he regards as ignorant dupes of the privileged and the powerful. He has defined the responsibility of the intellectual as the pursuit of truth and the exposure of lies, but has supported the regimes he admires by suppressing the truth and perpetrating falsehoods. He has endorsed universal moral principles but has only applied them to Western liberal democracies, while continuing to rationalize the crimes of his own political favorites. He is a mandarin who denounces mandarins. When caught out making culpably irresponsible misjudgments, as he was over Cambodia and Sudan, he has never admitted he was wrong.

Today, Chomsky's hypocrisy stands as the most revealing measure of the sorry depths to which the left-wing political activism he has done so much to propagate has now sunk.

1. *September 11*, by Noam Chomsky; Seven Stories Press, 96 pages, \$8.95. *Power and Terror: Post 9/11 Talks and Interviews*, by Noam Chomsky, edited by John Junkerman and Takei Masakazu; Seven Stories Press, 144 pages, \$11.95. [Go back to the text.](#)

Keith Windschuttle's latest book is *The White Australia Policy* (Macleay Press).

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