

Noam Chomsky and the Compatible Left, Part I

Posted on [March 4, 2019](#)

<https://lorenzoae.wordpress.com/>

Noam Chomsky recently took to the pages of *The Intercept* to [give his blessing](#) to the US military's occupation of Syria, solidifying his support for the Pentagon after years of having done so in slightly more anguished terms. As far as the occupation, the only concession to what might once have been considered "Leftist" values is the MIT professor's acknowledgement that the US is motivated by "[power considerations](#)" rather than "humanitarian objectives." Today, the brief nod to *realpolitik* is what's supposed to pass for a progressive anti-war stance.

The Intercept is really a natural fit for Chomsky to deliver this message. The nonagenarian professor has limited years left on earth, and when he passes, Glenn Greenwald and Pierre Omidyar's website will probably become the new face of the permissible Left. That Chomsky lends his radical imprimatur to a US military occupation in its pages is a testament to what kind of a "Left" Chomsky has helped to create and is bequeathing to Greenwald and Omidyar.

To get an idea of the before-and-after picture, consider two recent pieces from Alfred McCoy, a historian who, like Chomsky, has produced radical scholarship for almost half a century. McCoy has done some of the best work on the CIA's role in the global heroin trade, the relationship between foreign counterinsurgency and domestic policing, and the United States' peerless role in developing and exporting new forms of torture. McCoy claims that while researching his landmark book *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia*, [he came under attack by CIA mercenaries](#); after its publication, McCoy was monitored by the CIA and audited by the IRS, and ultimately had to move to Australia for 11 years in order to keep working. Here is part of a 2015 article on American hegemony, where McCoy explains how the US's superpower status shares DNA with Nazi Germany and what effects this has had on the world:

[So the United States, as the planet's last superpower or](#), in Schmitt's terms, its global sovereign, has in these years repeatedly ignored international law, following instead its own unwritten rules of the road for the exercise of world power. Just as Schmitt's sovereign preferred to rule in a state of endless exception without a constitution for his Reich, so Washington is now well into the second decade of an endless War on Terror that seems the sum of its exceptions to international law: endless incarceration, extrajudicial killing, pervasive surveillance, drone strikes in defiance of national boundaries, torture on demand, and immunity for all of the above on the grounds of state secrecy. Yet these many American exceptions are just surface manifestations of the ever-expanding clandestine dimension of the American state. Created at the cost of more than a trillion dollars since 9/11, the purpose of this vast apparatus is to

control a covert domain that is fast becoming the main arena for geopolitical contestation in the twenty-first century.

Much of the torture that became synonymous with the era of authoritarian rule in Asia and Latin America during the 1960s and 1970s seems to have originated in U.S. training programs that provided sophisticated techniques, up-to-date equipment, and moral legitimacy for the practice... CIA interrogation training became synonymous with serious human rights abuses, particularly in Iran, the Philippines, South Vietnam, Brazil, and Uruguay.

The previous segment is [in line with the bulk of his scholarship](#). Now here are some conclusions from McCoy's 2017 *Intercept* interview with co-founder Jeremy Scahill, on the subject of America's imperial decline and the rise of a multipolar world:

[The British empire was relatively benign](#). *Yes, it was a global power, there were many excesses, many incidents, one can go on, but when it was all over, they left the Westminster system of parliament, they left the global language, they left a global economy, they left a culture of sports, they created artifacts like the BBC. So the US empire has been, and we've had our excesses, Vietnam, we could go on. Afghanistan. There are many problems with the U.S. exercise of its power but we have stood for human rights, the world has had 70 years of relative peace and lots of medium size wars but nothing like World War I and World War II... Our successor powers, China and Russia, are authoritarian regimes. Russia's autocratic, China's a former communist regime. They stand for none of these liberal principles.*

*So you'll have the realpolitik exercise of power, all the downsides with none of the upsides, with none of the positive development. I mean we've stood for women's rights [note: Russia passed women's suffrage 3 years before the US], for gay rights [Russia legalized gay sex 10 years before the US], for human progress [Russia has a higher literacy rate than the US], for democracy [Russia extended the franchise universally 48 years before the US]. You know we've been flawed in efficacy, but we've stood for those principles and we have advanced them. So we have been, on the scale of empires, comparatively benign and beneficent. And I don't think the succeeding powers are going to be that way. Getting radical scholars—and scholars with radical reputations—to sound like they're writing for *Foreign Affairs* magazine is very much *The Intercept's* stock-in-trade. "[The day after Trump threatened to militarily intervene in Venezuela](#)," writes Stansfield Smith, "Jeremy Scahill posted his [interview](#) with Eva Golinger on *The Intercept*. Venezuelan-American lawyer Eva Golinger, the author of *The Chávez Code: Cracking US Intervention in Venezuela*, is known as an outstanding defender of Venezuela during the Chavez era. She hardly goes as far in anti-Maduro criticisms as Scahill, who may fit what Shamus Cooke characterized as 'the intellectually lazy 'pox on both houses' approach that has long-infected the U.S. left,'" according to Smith. "Yet within her valuable analysis, and precisely because of her valuable analysis, both in the interview and in her article Golinger makes some statements that require correction," he wrote, enumerating 11 points where Golinger provided Washington-friendly misrepresentations of the Venezuelan government. She responded with the*

popular twofer of claiming lived experience and accusing her critic of hating women.

The billionaire-owned publication is just the latest loudest voice among the permissible “Left,” an ecosystem of which Chomsky is still the most recognizable face. Since the late 1960s, Chomsky has both reflected and shaped this milieu. A reverent 1997 book on the MIT professor written by Robert Barsky, which advertises itself as the closest thing we’ll get to a Chomsky autobiography, contains a major section titled “the Milieu Chomsky Helped to Create,” attesting to the professor’s privileged place in this world. If one considers *radical* according to its true definition—solving a problem by striking at its root—then it is a world of dissenters who are less radical than ever.

The “Left” has taken quite a journey from the 1960s, the beginning of Chomsky’s career as a political commentator, to now. During that time, what people perceive as “the Left” transformed from something which was usually opposed to the status quo and genuinely radical into something more like what CIA official Cord Meyer called the “[compatible left](#),” an agglomeration of “liberals and pseudo-intellectual status seekers who are easily influenced” by the elites that they purport to challenge, in the words of Doug Valentine. One of the primary purposes of “[courting the compatible left](#),” according to Valentine, was to “court Socialists away from Communists” and into safe channels. Chomsky is a uniquely useful figure for demonstrating how these changes happened, although his more recent work owes a great debt to Barack Obama. The latter’s presidency was a powerful fulcrum for shifting the wider culture of left-liberalism—of which Chomsky is an avatar and gatekeeper—far to the right.

Both have played large roles in turning the Western “Left” into what it is today.

What Made Radicals Radical? What Made “the Left” Leftist?

But before delving more into what America’s most famous dissident is saying now, it’s necessary to get a general sense of the radical political ecosystem in the late 1960s—the point at which Chomsky began his ascent to national prominence. One of the reasons why revolution seemed not only possible but, to many, even inevitable was due to the diverse network of interests and progressive groups working towards similar goals. The radical coalition included a substantial left-liberal milieu of which Chomsky would eventually become the pre-eminent figurehead.

There are plenty of left-liberal activists from the era who can make for a useful case study in taking the temperature of this milieu, but Carl Oglesby might be the most illuminating. Oglesby was a labor activist who became a president of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Like Chomsky, he also published books and articles of political analysis, and like Chomsky, he identified as a non-Marxist Leftist. In his 1967 essay “Vietnamese Crucible, he called for activists to look beyond the “[socialist radical, the corporatist conservative, and the welfare-state liberal](#)” and seek answers from the traditions of “American democratic populism” and “the American libertarian right.”¹ “Crucible” was a 170-page analysis of American capitalism and imperialism, particularly as it related to Vietnam and the Cold War, the “first major statement in book form from the ‘New Left.’”

Unlike Chomsky, Oglesby’s eminence as a radical analyst and scholar was due to

his status as a movement leader, not due to his elevation by ruling class institutions like the *New York Review of Books* and MIT.

Oglesby described himself as a “radical centrist” and a “centrist libertarian.” He delves into this in his memoirs, where he describes his political beliefs and says that they make him “a centrist rather than a typical New Leftist.”² “Chomsky is regularly identified by the media as a prominent anarchist/libertarian communist/anarcho-syndicalist (pick as many as you like),” observes one of Chomsky’s many chroniclers. “More importantly he places himself within this political spectrum.”³ But it would be the height of idealism to put stock in the idea that people’s self-professed political identities carry much weight. There are all sorts of reasons why someone would fail to correctly situate themselves politically, beyond just being incorrect. In 2008, when the Bush brand was radioactive, Bill O’Reilly [called himself an anarchist, too](#). Filmmaker John Milius describes himself as either an anarchist or a fascist depending on his mood. Tim Allen recently said that he’s not really a Trump supporter *per se*, more of “[kind of an Anarchist](#).”

Yet despite Oglesby’s self-identification, his place in the struggle caused him to develop the sort of organically materialist thinking that comes from marrying objective study to revolutionary action. In the pages of his seminal 1976 book *The Yankee and Cowboy War*, which remains one of the best books on America’s ruling classes, he ended up sounding like a Communist:

The distinction between the East Coast monopolist and the Western tycoon entrepreneur is the main class-economic distinction set out by the Yankee/Cowboy perspective. It arises because one naturally looks for a class-economic basis for this apparent conflict at the summit of American power. That is because one must assume that parties without a class-economic base could not endure struggle at that height.

The whole thrust of the Yankee/Cowboy interpretation...posits a divided social-historical American order, conflict-wracked and dialectical rather than serene and hierarchical, in which results constantly elude every faction’s intentions because all conspire against each and each against all.

Also worth quoting is Oglesby’s dissection of a piece by liberal columnist Andrew St. George, who purports to explain Vietnam and Watergate through psycho-history and “inept empire” bumbling:

St. George knows or surmises that a conflict shoots through the CIA, through the presidency, through the entire executive system, and that effective presidential command and control are the more deeply in doubt the deeper one goes into the heart of the national defense and security establishments. Then why try to explain breakdowns, when they occur, as though they were the result of “turning away from reality, from empirical data, provable facts, rational truth, toward image-making and self-deception?” Why ignore the overwhelming differentials of policy and faction at play in these breakdowns? It is not Nixon himself, the Joint Chiefs, or the CIA whom Nixon, the Chiefs, and the CIA are deceiving, it is only ordinary people. Nixon knew he was secretly bombing Cambodia. The Joint Chiefs knew they were secretly bombing exempted targets in North Vietnam. The defense and security establishment knew that “peace with honor” was a slogan with a hatch in the bottom, and that the “peace

mandate” Nixon would secure with it was prestructured for easy transmutation into a war mandate. Watergate cannot be reduced to a question of Nixon’s personal psychology. He was not deceiving himself, only others. He was not deceiving his class.

Whatever words he chose to describe himself, Oglesby’s analysis was moving towards something objectively Marxist, because his radical movement necessitated a Marxist analysis if there was any hope of understanding reality accurately, acting on it, and then changing it. Oglesby’s work is a useful lesson in how the nature of the era’s liberatory struggles forced even the “centrists” to act and think in a substantively radical way if they wanted to be effective instead of irrelevant.

The nature of the struggle meant that plenty of revolutionaries ended up following similar intellectual paths. Malcolm X began his adult life as a petty criminal before gaining what the Nation of Islam called knowledge of self and joining the conservative black nationalist NOI. But his revolutionary work was a liberation struggle and not an academic exercise, so as theory was tested and revised, X came to sound like a Communist. “Show me a capitalist and I’ll show you a bloodsucker,” he said in 1964 after returning from his final trip to Africa. He even delivered lessons in dialectical and historical materialism, like “Capitalism used to be like an eagle, but now it’s more like a vulture... It’s only a matter of time in my opinion before it will collapse completely.” He explained the base-superstructure relationship in terms that anyone could understand, analogizing capitalism surrendering white supremacy or evolving into socialism as akin to a chicken laying a duck egg: “A chicken just doesn’t have it in it to produce a duck egg. It can’t do it. [...] The system in this country cannot produce freedom for the Afro-American. It is impossible, period.”⁴ He came to see race and class as interlinked, and explained that the annihilation of white supremacy would not come without the end of capitalism, as he said in a speech delivered 3 days before his murder: “It is incorrect to classify the revolt of the Negro as simply a racial conflict of black and white, or as a purely American problem. Rather, we are today seeing a global rebellion of the oppressed against the oppressor, the exploited against the exploiter.”⁵ This was increasingly common. In response to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “Beyond Vietnam” speech, where King connected imperialism abroad to white supremacy at home, an FBI memorandum warned that King’s condemnation was “a direct parallel of the communist position on Vietnam.”⁶

The subtitle to Oglesby’s *The Yankee and Cowboy War* is *Conspiracies from Dallas and Beyond*. The book is a thoroughly researched and compellingly argued analysis of America’s two main ruling class power blocs, what he terms the “Yankees” of the Eastern establishment and the newer, more petty-bourgeois “Cowboys” of the South and Sun Belt economies. Like hundreds of other researchers, Oglesby believed that a coalition of reactionary interests orchestrated a coup in Dealey Plaza, and he posits numerous major events in then-recent history as battles in this war between the ruling blocs.

At that point in time, there was no overwhelming stigma associated with what is today termed “conspiracy theorism,” partially because there was so much evidence of covert action. Author and researcher Peter Dale Scott uses the

term [“deep politics”](#) or [“parapolitics”](#) to describe the political forces that act under the surface of the everyday public political procedures. Oglesby elaborates: *We see the expressions and symptoms of clandestine America in a dozen places now—the FBI’s COINTELPRO scheme, the CIA’s Operation Chaos, the Pentagon’s Operation Garden Plot, the large-scale and generally successful attempts to destroy legitimate and essential dissent in which all the intelligence agencies participated, a campaign whose full scope and fury are still not revealed. We see it in the ruthlessness and indifference to world, as well as national, opinion with which the CIA contracted its skills out to ITT to destroy democracy’s last little chance in Chile. We see it as well, as this book argues, in the crime and cover-up of Dealey Plaza, the crime and cover-up of Watergate. Clandestinitism is not the usage of a handful of rogues, it is a formalized practice of an entire class in which a thousand hands spontaneously join. Conspiracy is the normal continuation of normal politics by normal means.*

In 1991 there was a surge of interest in the JFK assassination due to Oliver Stone’s film *JFK*. A couple years later, Chomsky responded with the strange statement that [“the left has just been torn to shreds](#) because they see CIA conspiracies... secret governments [behind] the Kennedy assassination. This kind of stuff has just wiped out a large part of the left.” As is the case when he’s counseling compliance, Chomsky provides no evidence to support his claim.

The idea that theories not accepted by the mainstream media should be ignored is [a recurrent theme](#) with America’s greatest dissident. But during the 1960s and ‘70s, plenty of radicals and left-liberals engaged in good research and analysis of covert action and weren’t afraid to propose conclusions based on the evidence. Dalton Trumbo used the work of two major conspiracy researchers as the basis for a proto-*JFK* titled *Executive Action*, released in 1973. In a [making-of documentary about the film](#), Executive Producer Edward Lewis and star Burt Lancaster discuss what brought them to the film. What they have to say illustrates both that it was even possible for a political radical to influence mainstream tastemakers, and that those mainstream figures were more willing and able to consider unsanctioned narratives about the world:

Lancaster: *The subject matter, and the possibility of saying that a conspiracy was the result of the president’s death was a little shocking to me. It was something I didn’t want to believe.*

Lewis: *We then arranged a meeting for him, Trumbo, and myself. Dalton told him how he became converted to believing in the film, gave him the books. Burt, who’s a very serious actor, began reading.*

Lancaster: *And slowly I began to develop the feeling that there was a very strong possibility on the basis of the evidence and the things that I read, that Kennedy could very well have been killed by a conspiracy.*

Mae Brussell, the era’s most prominent left-liberal anti-fascist conspiracy researcher, said that analysis of the Kennedy assassination had a major effect on opening up the field of radical analysis. [“If Kennedy’s assassination had one purpose](#), it may have been to open up the field of muckraking and exposing, because from the time of World War I up through Kennedy’s death, so many, many crimes and murders were done and covered up. But this might have been the straw that broke the camel’s back.” Alternative theories about the Kennedy

assassination were so common that the CIA invented the “conspiracy theory” slur in 1967, [in document #1035-960](#), which proposed using “friendly elite contacts” and “propaganda assets” (their words) in the media to promote that idea that “charges of the critics are without serious foundation, and that further speculative discussion only plays into the hands of the opposition. Point out also that parts of the conspiracy talk appear to be deliberately generated by Communist propagandists. Urge them to use their influence to discourage unfounded and irresponsible speculation” (It’s all very similar language to that used by Cass Sunstein in his 2008 article on combating “[conspiracy theories](#)”). “In spite of the risks, assassination is sometimes the most efficient technique for eliminating opponents of the state,” writes Al Szymanski, “The major drawback of assassination is that should it ever be exposed as the work of the state or the capitalist class, a very serious legitimacy crisis could ensue.”⁷

Speaking about the assassination of JFK, artist/activist Dick Gregory said “If we would like to believe that the FBI would do all this viciousness and all of these things to an individual and would stop short of killing him, then we’re out of our minds. In America today, if we believe the CIA would deal with foreign assassinations and would not consider that at home, that’s like saying ‘the mafia runs crooked gambling tables in South America but honest ones in America.’ It just ain’t true.” Gregory saw no contradiction between theorizing about elite conspiracies based on an analysis of evidence and his wider activist work. He even ran for president in 1968 on a ticket with Mark Lane, author of the JFK conspiracy analysis *Rush to Judgment*, an act which earned Gregory a spot on Nixon’s enemies list. Gregory and Lane also co-authored a book analyzing the case for Federal involvement in the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. A jury in a [civil trial later found in favor of a conspiracy](#) in the King murder, to no ill-effect on the health or credibility of “the Left.”

This period revealed such conspiracies as the CIA’s wide-ranging involvement in creating front groups to influence, shape, and police the wider radical culture, a conspiracy theory confirmed and elaborated on in publications from *Ramparts* to [Redstockings](#) to [The Berkeley Barb](#). The flagship publication of the underground press, Paul Krassner’s *The Realist*, was home to Mae Brussell’s column, so readers could see the case for a given conspiracy and derive their own conclusions. Great, substantive radical analysis of covert actions continued into the 1990s through publications like Phil Agee’s *CovertAction Information Bulletin*, a journal to which Chomsky has himself contributed. The doctrine of plausible deniability means that we’ll never see an invoice from the Mafia to J. Edgar Hoover for the assassination of Martin Luther King, but since such, yes, *conspiracies* are part of how the ruling class maintains power, theorizing soundly on them is an essential element of understanding that power. Moreover, disavowing conspiracy analysis altogether opened up an enormous entry point for fascists and other creatures of the extreme-right to successfully vacuum up curious information-seekers.* Noam Chomsky does not explain why, if “conspiracy theories” had such a deleterious effect on “the Left,” the CIA went to such great lengths to stigmatize them. Despite the fact that he’s beaten the “coincidence theory” drums for decades, Chomsky occasionally shows that he really does understand that conspiracies are an essential part of ruling class

praxis. He did so in 2017 when [he blamed Donald Trump for masterminding false-flag terrorist attacks](#) that hadn't even happened (if it's counterproductive to theorize about real events, surely it's infinitely more foolish to peddle conspiracy theories about imaginary things, as Chomsky did here).

Many more ideas that Chomsky would help turn into "common knowledge" would have looked and sounded very strange to those engaged in the liberation struggles of that era.

Take [his instruction for people to vote Democrat](#), a demand which has gotten so unwavering and tendentious that Chomsky now refuses to brook any argument (observe the [note at the top](#)). As the black liberation struggle intensified and moved from seeking legal redress to revolutionary change, movement leaders including Dr. King and Malcolm X identified white liberals and moderates as bigger obstacles to creating a truly democratic society. Malcolm X had for many years thought very little of the various American communist and socialist parties, mostly due to their rejection of the progressive aspects of black nationalism and their advocacy of "lesser evil" alliances with the Democratic Party. X compared taking guidance from groups with these shortcomings to drinking from a bottle with "the skull and crossbones on the label" in 1964.⁸ That same year, when he was asked about the Lyndon Johnson and Barry Goldwater campaigns, X pointed out that

If Johnson [had been running all by himself](#), [he would not have been acceptable to anyone](#). The only thing that made him acceptable to the world was that the shrewd capitalists, the shrewd imperialists, knew that the only way people would run toward the fox would be if you showed them a wolf. So they created a ghastly alternative. And it had the whole world—including people who call themselves Marxists—hoping that Johnson would beat Goldwater.

I have to say this: Those who claim to be enemies of the system were on their hands and knees waiting for Johnson to get elected—because he is supposed to be a man of peace. And at that moment he had troops invading the Congo and South Vietnam!⁹

Author and journalist Robert Vernon echoed the sentiment a year later in a critique of a posthumous hatchet-job on Malcolm X written by liberals Bayard Rustin and Tom Kahn:

Note carefully whom Rustin and Kahn single out as enemies. Not the power structure, but the racist power structure, i.e. the Dixiecrats and other who oppose civil rights overtly. These certainly are enemies of black people, but they are not the only enemies we have in this God's country.

One conspicuous enemy of black people not listed here is His Imperial Highness, Emperor of the Congo, South Vietnam, and the Dominican Republic, and Lord and Master of the Seven Seas and All Shores Adjacent Thereto. Eastland and Goldwater are not the ones who run this racist country, although they do have much to say. They could be considered the enemy only by liberals who are concerned exclusively with integration, civil right, and assimilation of middle-class Negroes into this best of all possible societies.¹⁰

When "lesser evilists" talk about a Democratic Party still substantively beholden to America's working class, they're describing the party of 50 years ago much more than they are the party of today. But even during this era, the idea that

workers owed the Dems their votes, even only for strategic reasons, would have sounded very strange. In May 1968, a month after Dr. King's assassination, movement leaders went ahead with the Poor Peoples' March. Only a few years after Lyndon Johnson and a Democratic Congress passed the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, King's successor Ralph Abernathy declared "We have been taught by 200 and 5 years of bitter experience that we cannot trust the leadership of this nation. We cannot trust the elected representatives of Congress. We cannot trust the Administration, whether Republican or Democrat, to fulfill the promise of America to the disinherited."¹¹

James Kunen, an SDS activist who chronicled a year of rebellion at Columbia University in 1968, said "I will give [America] one more chance. But if the Democrats do not nominate [Eugene McCarthy], whom against my better judgment I love, or if they do nominate [McCarthy] and he turns out to be what I suspect but won't admit he is, then I will have no recourse but to acknowledge that democracy is not only dead, but is also not about to be revived through democratic means.¹² Another former activist recounts that "[Most of us who have built the antiwar movement](#) demonstration by demonstration, dorm meeting after dorm meeting, are so sickened by the corruption of American politics that we refuse to participate" in the 1968 election.

In their book on the Black Panther Party, Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, Jr. describe what the Democratic Party did next: "At the disastrous Chicago convention in August 1968, the Democratic Party leadership had pushed through a prowar candidate and prowar platform against the will of the Democratic Party base and lost the presidency as a result. But since then, the Democratic Party leadership had increasingly called for an end to the Vietnam War."¹³ Regardless, 5 years later, Mae Brussell said "[I was a registered Democrat in those days \[the Kennedy era\]](#). I wouldn't support the Democrats now because there is no 'Democratic' Party. There's just one party in Washington and it's called the Military-Industrial Party."

During this time, radicals did not look primarily towards the Democratic Party for alliances and inspiration, but to the newly post-colonial world. All this writing and theorizing was in service of revolution, so those who had done so successfully were natural sources for guidance. "They say travel broadens your scope," Malcolm X told a meeting of the Militant Labor Forum in 1964, "and recently I've had an opportunity to do a lot of it in the Middle East and Africa...I noticed that most of the countries that have recently emerged into independence have turned away from the so-called capitalistic system in the direction of socialism."¹⁴ X called the Congo's first president, Patrice Lumumba, "the greatest black man to ever walk the African continent." He pointed to the cases of [Algeria, Kenya, and China](#) as examples of why armed struggle was the path to liberation. "[In late 1964, Malcolm X](#) sought to collaborate with Cuban-Argentine revolutionary Che Guevara in his upcoming secret campaign to assist the Lumumbists in Congo... Malcolm X was attempting to recruit African-American veterans into an 'Afro-American Brigade' that would have fought alongside the Cubans and the Congolese in 1965."

One chronicler notes that in the case of the SDS "early international contacts with representatives of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, the Republic

of North Vietnam, Cuba, European Communist parties, and assorted Third World guerrilla groups were important in forging an international perspective for the Movement in its later stages.” A *New Republic* columnist noted that “the most striking fact about the young radicals was the extent to which they identified with the Viet Cong.”¹⁵ Julius Lester, a spokesman for SNCC and speechwriter for Stokely Carmichael, wrote that “we are trying to follow in the footsteps of Lenin, Mao, and Fidel.” [Eldridge Cleaver travelled to Cuba, Algeria, China, and North Korea](#); the Black Panther Party’s required reading list included Malcolm X, Mao, Frantz Fanon, and Che Guevara. “We must establish a true internationalism with other anticolonial peoples,” said George Jackson, “Only then can we expect to be able to seize the power that is rightfully ours, the power to control the circumstances of our day-to-day lives.” “Comrade Che is alive,” wrote Lester after the Argentine’s assassination, “on East 103rd street.”¹⁶

In contrast, Chomsky said “Guevara was of no interest to me; this was mindless romanticism, in my view.”¹⁷ Speaking of mindless romanticism, even then, as the eyes of Western revolutionaries were looking to Cuba, Africa, and Asia, the professor was pointing to the anarchist Erewhon of Spain circa-1936 as “the most convincing example” how to do revolution—namely, “a very sudden, spontaneous” revolution. In contrast to those post-colonial Third World states beginning the path to self-determination, Chomsky highlighted this lovely sounding place as “[a nearly classic example](#)” of non-violent revolution to be emulated, “which was successful at least for a year or two in developing a collective society with mass participation and a very high degree of egalitarianism and even economic success.” These comments were part of a debate with several thinkers including Hannah Arendt and Susan Sontag on the subject of non-violence. Unlike the others, Chomsky at least had positive things about the socialist societies being built in China, Vietnam, and Cuba (Arendt said “As to the Viet Cong terror, we cannot possibly agree with it, just as we couldn’t agree with the terror of the National Liberation Army in Algeria. People who did agree with this terror and were only against the French counter-terror, of course, were applying a double standard.” And as liberals know, hypocrisy is the worst crime of all, certainly worse than colonialism). But to have inveighed against these revolutions at this time would have been to lose all credibility in activist circles, which is why you’d be hard-pressed to find revolutionaries of the era who had much interest in the thoughts of Hannah Arendt.

Nevertheless, while making these concessions to prevailing radical sentiment, Chomsky muddied the water quite a bit by using the term “non-violence” interchangeably with the concept of “enjoying popular support” and then proposing that revolution would happen as it “did” in Spain, through “a possibility of spontaneous revolution” which would somehow restrict itself to using violence only in ways that were morally unimpeachable. If so few revolutions conform to the Chomsky template it may be because for the people of Algeria, the Congo, Cuba, and Vietnam, life under imperialism and colonialism was intolerable. They couldn’t wait for morally pure revolutions that erupted everywhere non-hierarchically because they were not making revolutions in heaven, where such ideal conditions are possible. They had to radically change *this* world under the constraints that existed in real life. Chomsky

sometimes invokes anarchish-sounding ideas to compel compliance: when arguing that bombing Libya would be a “humanitarian intervention,” he said “[it would be too strong to hold that](#) [the burden of proof for believing the White House] can never be satisfied in principle—unless, of course, we regard nation-states in their current form as essentially holy.” This is a non-sequitur—it does not follow logically that one who doesn’t believe in Western “humanitarian interventions” “regards nation-states as holy,” but it *does* help Chomsky paint skeptics and anti-imperialists as people motivated by irrational worship of the nation-state.

Towards the end of the discussion, a man in the audience made the points that 1) the Cuban revolution was both violent and enjoyed widespread popular support, 2) the discussion did not touch on the major revolutionary factor in American life, namely black resistance, and 3) the discussion was mostly academic navel-gazing: “It seems to me that until you can begin to show—not in language and not in theory, but in action—that you can put an end to the war in Vietnam, and an end to American racism, you can’t condemn the violence of others who can’t wait for you.” In his hagiography of Chomsky, Robert Barsky muses that the professor’s work “is built upon particular precepts that are explained with regard to individual issues (Vietnam, Cambodia, the Middle East), but that it implicitly poses, without fully answering, questions... Chomsky will not tell us how to act.”¹⁸ “[\[T\]he question about which I have least to say](#)...is the question of the forms resistance should take,” the professor said in an article published in December 1967 titled “On Resistance.” Chomsky claimed to agree that the recent Pentagon protests had signaled a shift from “dissent to resistance,” but he was far less clear about what either term actually entailed, other than to say that “resistance requires careful thought, and I do not pretend to have very clear ideas about it.” In this area, Professor Chomsky has provided the most useful framework for understanding the difference between himself and the rest of the radical milieu. Speaking on the subject of scientific inquiry, Chomsky explains the dichotomy between *problems* and *mysteries*:

[Our ignorance can be divided](#) into *problems* and *mysteries*. When we face a *problem*, we may not know its solution, but we have insight, increasing knowledge, and an inkling of what we are looking for. When we face a *mystery*, however, we can only stare in wonder and bewilderment, not knowing what an explanation would even look like.

For countless activists, changing the world was a problem to be solved. For Chomsky, it was and remains a mystery to bedevil us. For some reason, of all the revolutionaries of the era, the man who would become the face of the Western “Left” was one of the few people who wasn’t grappling with the issue of how to actually make revolution.

And while Chomsky had few ideas about what activists *should* do, he also differed from his peer group in that he had lots of idea about what activists *shouldn’t* do. “[Dissent and resistance are not alternatives](#) but activities that should reinforce each other,” he said, adding that tax refusal and draft resistance were two acceptable options. However, other than these two techniques, it was still time to mostly talk (“I think it should be emphasized that the days of ‘patiently explain’ are far from over”) and not do anything too extreme (“The argument that

resistance to the war should remain strictly nonviolent seems to me overwhelming”). The professor conceded that America’s war machine *could* theoretically be hampered by non-violent means like strikes and sabotage, but “I am skeptical, however, about their possible effectiveness.” Moreover, direct action would be too dangerous to the protestors (“Forcible repression would not, therefore, prove very difficult”) and the *real* danger would be to the engineers and graduate students whose Pentagon-funded research was benefiting the scientific community when it wasn’t exterminating the Vietnamese (“Therefore the long-range threat [of strikes and sabotage], whatever it proved to be, would be to American humanistic and scientific culture”). Finally, anti-war protestors had to be circumspect about applying too much pressure to the unconvinced: “We must not, I believe, thoughtlessly urge others to commit civil disobedience, and we must be careful not to construct situations in which young people will find themselves induced, perhaps in violation of their basic convictions, to commit civil disobedience.” So ultimately, after a couple thousand words ostensibly “on resistance,” one was left with a general sense that the war was bad and that only a couple tactics which would result in incarceration (not paying your taxes and evading the draft) were legitimate.

The *New York Review of Books* received a couple letters in response to “On Resistance,” to which Chomsky responded. One writer, William X, identified himself as a black revolutionary who had been forced underground, and he raised many good points about what kind of counsel the professor was offering the movement:

Chomsky’s article is unsatisfactory for reasons he himself admits to—he does not see where resistance is going and he does not believe that the organized draft resistance he discusses will be very effective. I feel the difficulty lies in a too narrow view of resistance: while Chomsky feels the Washington demonstrations and anti-war protest generally are aspects of (or only “symbolize”?) the move “from dissent to resistance,” all he writes about is one form of draft resistance and various forms of dissent. Are the current demonstrations a move from dissent to resistance or not?

I hope I have begun to make several points clear. The first is that the most effective anti-war activities are those which are the most disruptive, the most costly, those which most undermine the authority of the government domestically and in its war policy. In this light the ghetto rebellions must be seen as one of the activities which most affect the war — and therefore those elements of the white middle class opposed to the war must work to protect participants (whether or not they agree with the aims or means of those involved, I would say). The anti-war and anti-draft demonstrations are also in this category.

Because the above is so, the kind of specific draft resistance Chomsky and “The Resistance” advocate is the least effective—it causes men to volunteer for prison. [...] I have met others, both black and white. I think we would agree that Chomsky’s notion of the alternatives—the military, prison, or exile—is too limited, constrained by lack of experience and by lack of a full comprehension of what is to be done. Our attitude is, prison or exile, yes, before the military—but

the cost of trying to catch us will be theirs. We have work to do, or simply lives to live, and don't intend to make their job easier or our lives more miserable.

William X seems to have had much clearer ideas on resistance and the wider movement, so we might wonder why *The New York Review of Books* didn't offer him a column instead of the MIT professor. In response, Chomsky reiterated that draft resistance was the way to go—although when pressed about the shortcomings of this tactic, he said that “No one can evaluate the effectiveness of various tactics with any precision,” which makes one wonder what's the point of the exercise. While the pseudonymous William X mentioned numerous concrete ways that direct action helped hobble the war machine even without shutting down the Pentagon, Chomsky said quite a lot of words without saying much of consequence (“resistance can be, and I feel quite generally is, undertaken as a political act”) before coming back around to his initial claim that draft resistance is the one good option, with the not-terribly-substantive rationale that it “raise[s] the general level of political and moral consciousness.” The professor did not engage with X's point that the cause would be better serviced by radicals aiding their communities, rather than martyring themselves in prison, other than to adjure that “Punishment of resisters will deepen this disaffection [with the government], and may channel it in new directions.” He offered no evidence for this claim. As far as the black militancy giving the ruling class its greatest nightmares, Chomsky simply said “I have said nothing about ghetto rebellions. These may affect the war, in one or another way, but they are not acts undertaken with the end of bringing about American withdrawal, and must, I think, be considered in a totally different context.”

For what it's worth, the government of North Vietnam and the Vietnamese National Liberation Front did not believe that black rebellion was of a “totally different context,” and they very much felt that these affected the war. According to a CIA cable from August 1967:

[Neither the American bombing raids nor the spiraling food prices](#) and rice shortages seriously affect the morale of the North Vietnamese. The race riots and the emerging “black power” movement in the United States, which the North Vietnamese government considers the beginnings of a popular revolution in the United States, have had a most salubrious effect on the North Vietnamese morale. The North Vietnamese government believes the Civil Rights disturbances will force the United States to divert money and manpower from its commitment in the Vietnam War.

The United States Government will be forced to divert large sums of money to educational, housing and social reforms to maintain the loyalty of the underprivileged elements and prevent them from joining the ranks of the Civil Rights dissidents. The North Vietnamese believe that the United States will have to maintain more troops in the United States to control the rioters.

In a diplomatic cable from the same month, North Vietnam's Ambassador to China, Ngo Loan, articulated that North Vietnam was comfortable setting conditions for talks with the US because “[world opinion was against the US](#) and that negro riots in the US were part of this overall picture” (pp. 5-6). The cable continues:

He [Ambassador Ngo] also pointed out that the American position was weakened by the pressure of world opinion on the US and by the internal problems of the Americans, particularly the recent race riots which he considered had a direct connection with the resistance of the American negroes against the war in Vietnam. In this connection he recalled that the French did not REPEAT not lose Vietnam at Dien Bien Phu, but in Paris.

It's not very hard to understand the connection: every National Guard and Airborne infantry unit tied down in America's cities was a unit incapable of exterminating the Vietnamese. Uprisings and sabotage rooted in the anti-racist struggle, as happened on the aircraft carriers *Kitty Hawk* and *Constellation*, meant ships that couldn't fire on Vietnam. One didn't need access to classified signals intercepts to deduce this, either. In spring 1965, professor Robert Browne advocated for combining the black freedom and anti-war movements on the grounds that "the civil rights movement represents the moral conscience of America and therefore belongs in the vanguard of the Vietnam protest."¹⁹ At the end of an April 1968 anti-war conference in New York, SNCC telegraphed a message to NLF representatives which said "our effort to destroy domestic colonization of black people is an aid to your struggle. Our two peoples have a common enemy and a common victory to win."²⁰ So on this crucial issue, Chomsky demonstrated an extraordinary myopia, at the very least. He was surely one of only very few thinkers whose advice during this era amounted to "talk" and "get arrested."

In 1967, scholars and activists from around the world met in Stockholm, Sweden to hold a war crimes tribunal for American imperialism in Vietnam. The tribunal was named after the British philosopher Bertrand Russell, who organized the body and is often identified as Chomsky's primary intellectual antecedent. SNCC's Julius Lester provided a blistering criticism of the tribunal that should be read in full. Lester's 1969 book *Revolutionary Notes* is a fascinating text to compare to Chomsky's work from the same period because it comments on many of the same events and phenomena from the perspective of a black radical activist, rather than that of a white anti-Communist academic. So in December 1967, a month and a half after the March on the Pentagon, Chomsky took to numerous fora, including his *New York Review of Books* article "On Resistance" and the debate with Arendt and Sontag, to parse the finer points of non-violence (and offer few conclusions other than "draft resistance is a good idea, most other things aren't"). In contrast, Lester's article on violence is a page and a half long, and begins with "Violence is neither good nor evil. It is. So if we are going to fight to humanize America, i.e. make revolution, let us not concern ourselves with moral arguments overt the necessity of violence." Chomsky said that while dissent and resistance were complementary, he didn't really have clear ideas about the latter—other than the fact that the only moral way to resist was to volunteer for prison. In his August 1967 essay "Protest and Resistance," Lester wrote "To resist is not to go to jail when sentenced, but only when caught and surrounded... To resist is to make the President afraid to leave the White House because he will be spat upon wherever he goes to tell his lies." Lester even wrote a brief article on American media which contains the nucleus of Herman and Chomsky's critique enumerated in *Manufacturing Consent*: "the *New York*

Times is more 'liberal' because it is opposed to the bombing of North Vietnam. The *Daily News* is conservative because it wants the bombing escalated. Yet the two newspapers agree that 'communism' should be stopped."²¹

Lester's article on the Russell Tribunal in particular is interesting for how it anticipates and critiques the phenomenon of which the MIT professor would be the exemplar; namely, the shift in radicalism's center-of-gravity from activism and revolution to academia and journalism. It's worth quoting at length, especially in the light of Chomsky's [contemporary ideas about the inherent power of information, his claim that public opinion constitutes a "superpower,"](#) his support of "free speech absolutism," and his revising the history of what actually ended the Vietnam War ("a group of women standing quietly"):

To accomplish its task, the Tribunal brought together some of the greatest intellectual minds of the West—Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Isaac Deutscher, as well as such European radicals as Lelio Basso, Italian Socialist; Vladimir Dedijer, former Yugoslav partisan; and Mehmet Ali Aybar, Turkish socialist.

These were the people who sat for eight days listening to the evidence that had been collected by the four investigating teams sent to North Vietnam, and the evidence was overwhelming. For the first time, it was proven conclusively that the U.S. was systematically bombing schools, churches, hospitals, hamlets, cities, and dikes. It was brought out that the U.S. was using a new kind of antipersonnel bomb.

The Tribunal's judgment was, of course, that the U.S. was guilty of aggression in Vietnam, that the U.S. was guilty of bombing civilians in North Vietnam. Having said that, what was said? The judgment had not changed the political reality, which was the war in Vietnam.

The judgment had been made. They had not been silent, as had the citizens of Germany when the smoke from the crematoria had filled their nostrils. They had marshaled many documents of evidence to show that the U.S. had broken international law.

Of course they had. The world is not governed by law, but by power, and the U.S. had the power to break or make any law that is in its interest to do so. Thus, the law is a fiction and will remain so until Justice takes off her blindfold, puts down the scales, and picks up a machine gun... Many Third World political activists viewed the Tribunal as did a diplomat from Mali, who said "What is the Tribunal going to do? Give Johnson four years in jail?"

America is fighting for its own salvation, and you can publish a million photographs of napalmed babies and by the time you've finished, you'll have a million more to publish.

Since World War II, a mystique has grown up around "acts of conscience," as if it were enough, in and of itself, to speak out in the face of injustice. Undoubtedly it is better to speak than not to speak, but the result is too often the same—the political realities remain unchanged.

Aside from the information that the Tribunal has amassed and published, it was probably more of a danger than an asset. In an age of revolution, an "act of conscience" is a luxury that cannot be afforded. As Fidel Castro has said, "The job of a revolutionary is to make revolution." The effect of the Tribunal was not

toward revolution. Even if it had been toward disruption it would have been more valuable. But it refused to deal with the question of racism [When Lester's fellow SNCC delegate Courtland Cox discussed the racial element of black GIs being sent to die in Vietnam, "it was Isaac Deutscher who said in patronizing tones, 'I trust, gentlemen, that we will not inject race into the discussion.' And he continued into various clichés about race not being that important, etc.]" But it refused to deal with the question of racism; it refused to place U.S. aggression in Vietnam in an international context.

Thus, the nature of the war has only been dimly illuminated and the war itself remains unchallenged. Instead, we have more napalmed babies to contemplate and more atrocities to shock our moral consciences, while David Rockefeller opens a branch of Chase Manhattan in Saigon and the U.S. builds an American-style suburb for 50,000 servicemen outside Saigon and expressways to lead into that city and Danang.

In and of itself, there is nothing wrong with a war crimes tribunal. But the manner in which the session at Stockholm was run amounts to an abdication of responsibility if one's aim is to be politically effective. If the only aim was to salve the consciences of a few European radicals, I'm certain that they are sleeping well these nights, though the bombs still fall.²²

Lester writes that numerous Asian delegates grew frustrated by the insistence that race be kept out of the tribunal and tried to leave; they had to be repeatedly entreated to stay. The American delegates, including Oglesby of the SDS and Cox of SNCC, tried to leave at one point because they did not see any relevance of the tribunal to their anti-war activism; they, too, had to be talked into staying. According to Tom Hayden, Oglesby used to agree with Chomsky that a well-reasoned anti-imperialist argument could convince bourgeois systems managers to lay down their arms. "[He used to think you could argue with Pentagon intellectuals](#) like Robert McNamara and get them to change their minds... But he later decided there would have to be a fundamental power shift." Chomsky has, if anything, gone the other way. Lester even took aim at the "what about their agency?" crowd decades before analysis of the international dictatorship of the United States came to be derided as an example of reverse-Orientalist America-centric solipsism, as so many blue-checks do today: "Sartre's reply was, 'America is not the center of the world.' No, it isn't. It is the world." Notice, too, how it was white intellectuals chastising black revolutionaries for being inordinately fixated on America. Reflecting on how Sartre thwarted "every attempt to broaden the scope and approach of the Tribunal," Lester mused that "I couldn't help but feel that Sartre was as much my enemy as LBJ."²³

In December 1967, Chomsky was already saying that "[we live under conditions of almost unparalleled freedom.](#)" At this point, the murders of civil rights activists like Medgar Evers were well known, especially in radical circles. As early as 1958, four months after Malcolm X was designated Elijah Muhammad's successor, a mole in the Nation of Islam named John Ali passed the plans for Malcolm X's Queens apartment to the FBI. The NYPD invaded X's home and fired into his office, though they missed killing him. His food was poisoned in Cairo in 1964 (X claimed that the waiter was a white man whom he'd seen in New York), and he was successfully assassinated in 1965. X had been denied entry into France a few

weeks before his death despite having entered the country successfully within the previous year, and one African diplomat told journalist Eric Norden that it was because the French government knew his assassination was imminent and didn't want it to happen on their soil. "The United States is beginning to murder its own citizens," the diplomat said.²⁴

Hundreds of prominent artists, including Ernest Hemingway, Pearl S. Buck, George Bernard Shaw, and Sinclair Lewis, were monitored by the FBI (they usually incurred Hoover's ire for their opposition to fascism in the '30s and '40s). David J. Garrow says "well before 1950 most Americans in public life realized that the FBI's enemies list was one that no self-concerned person wanted to be chosen for."²⁵ Richard Wright, the first bestselling black American author, was on the list, and when his best friend Ollie Harrington ribbed him about his "paranoia," Wright said that "any black man who is not paranoid is in serious shape. He should be in an asylum and kept under watch."²⁶ It was common practice for prominent activists, particularly black ones, to have their passports revoked, and Wright was investigated by HUAC and had his passport revoked twice. He sought refuge in France, where he was monitored by America's secret police. One author writes that state intimidation was prevalent enough among the 30,000 Americans in Paris that they "espoused different views in public and in private. If they read left-wing newspapers, they did so in the privacy of their homes."²⁷ Wright told French media about his surveillance and American racism before dying of a heart attack at 52 despite being in decent health and not suffering heart trouble (Ollie Harrington and Wright's daughter, Julia, believe it was an assassination). Wright died the year before [Paul Robeson was MK-ULTRA'd](#) in Moscow. Robeson's passport had been confiscated, too. A Supreme Court ruling returned it to him, but when he chose to continue his activism, the CIA poisoned him. The core of the Black Panther Party convened in 1966 and police harassment was routine by the next year. In October 1967, Huey Newton was involved in a shootout with Oakland police for which he was tried for murder. He claimed that it was a police assassination attempt on his life, a claim that was supported by the later release of a CIA hit list with his name on it. Operation CHAOS began in August 1967; it would eventually have computerized files on 300,000 dissidents. One Puerto Rican activist involved in the anti-war and independence movements described the typical treatment meted out to people like him: "The FBI and the CIA started to visit my neighborhood, the boarding house where I live and the one where I had lived, the places I often go to, the place where I used to work."²⁸ "The fear of surveillance being as effective as surveillance itself," writes Doug Valentine, "the result was that many Americans refrained from writing letters to their representatives or otherwise participating in the democratic process, knowing that to do so was to risk wiretaps on their phones, FBI agents' reading their mail, being blackmailed for past indiscretions, made victims of vicious rumor campaigns, losing their jobs, or worse."²⁹ Covert actions against radicals were so widespread that even Joseph Califano, President Johnson's top aide and the man responsible for coordinating the White House's response to domestic unrest, was shocked at how many conspiracies were carried out. After the Church and Pike Committee revelations, Califano marveled "I had to wonder... were there two White Houses in

1967?”³⁰ Muhammad Ali, America’s most famous anti-war resister, said that his April 1967 decision to refuse induction had “jeopardize[d] my life walking the streets of the South and all of America.”³¹ James Kunen describes turning on the TV one night and seeing something that disturbed him:

[O]n the Les Crane show were the founder of the W.E.B. DuBois Clubs and a former member of a DuBois Club. The former member had for two years worked as an undercover agent for the Chicago police, infiltrating the DuBois Club in San Francisco. He was with the Red Squad of the police, and all the while he was a member of the John Birch Society.

*He supported the HUAC’s Luce Report, which recommended issuing ID cards to blacks and shipping suspicious individuals to detention camps... He was a backwards and hateful man, and he was in the employ of the police. So, there are secret police. There are red squads. There are agents and provocateurs. There are. I know that. It makes me sick. You know that, too.*³²

Malcolm X called 1964 “one of the most violent years in the history of America.”³³ What Chomsky described as a time of “almost unparalleled freedom” another author calls the beginning of “what must have been one of the most violent periods in American history since the labor struggles of the 1890s.”³⁴ At the same time, many activists were operating under fewer illusions than Chomsky: “The myths of freedom that exist in this country have lulled us into thinking that we can preach revolution under the constitutional provisions of free speech and thereby escape the consequences of that preaching,” wrote Lester. “That is true only as long as the preaching does not constitute a threat to the system. America loves a part of that preaching because it indicates the weaknesses that need to be eradicated if the system is to preserve itself.”³⁵ Case-in-point: the CIA, through its Congress for Cultural Freedom, published excerpts of Richard Wright’s *Black Power* in several of its magazines (including *Encounter*) in order to demonstrate that the US was dealing with the blight of Jim Crow. Then it murdered him.

As far as the effects of anti-communism’s increasing stranglehold among the intellectuals of the permissible Left following the revolutionary high tide,** I’ll leave the last word to this CIA report on the rightward shift of the French intelligentsia:

[Anti-Americanism formerly also stood as a mark of intellectual status...](#) Now, the opposite is true; finding virtues in America—even identifying good things about US Government policies—is looked upon as an indication of discerning judgment.

This climate of intellectual opinion will almost certainly make it very difficult for anyone to mobilize significant opposition among intellectual elites to US policies in Central America, for example. It is also likely to deny to other European intellectuals—notably, in Scandinavia and West Germany—who are hostile to US policies and interest the powers [and] now need to create a West European consensus on transitional issues, such as disarmament.

It’s great that Chomsky and other anti-communist scholars helped bring light to the Reagan White House’s genocidal dirty wars in Latin America. It’s less great that their Red-bashing and “neither Washington nor Moscow” equivocation

helped enable the slaughter of over half a million people. But at least we got a lot of devastating Chomsky lectures out of it.

[Read Part II here](#), [Part III here](#), and [Part IV here](#)

* One of the main reasons why most of the “conspiracy” community offers so much wild speculation, utter bullshit, anti-Semitism, and fascism is because left-liberal academics surrendered this field to the ultra-right. It is impossible to calculate how many curious and skeptical people fascists successfully propagandized with racist trash by practically owning the field of conspiracy theorism, but even one is too many, particularly given that this did not need to happen at all. The CIA invented “conspiracy theories” as a delegitimizing slur, Chomsky and generations of status-conscious writers made it happen, and then generations of people slunk away from analysis of covert actions out of fear of being labeled insane. Fascists saw this wide-open field and took full advantage of it. Why would they have done any differently?

If an internet user gets an odd feeling about the Islamic State’s origin story, and justifiably thinks they detect the fingerprints of Langley, to whom will a Google search direct them? Progressive scholars who take “conspiracy” analysis seriously, like Peter Dale Scott, Douglas Valentine, Michael Parenti, Robert Parry, Dave Emory, Russ Baker, or John Potash are as obscure as Chomsky’s fans claim the MIT professor is. That user might see Chomsky say “[there is no merit to conspiracy theories](#) circulating in the region that hold that the US planned the rise of this extraordinary monstrosity.” Since Chomsky offers little evidence for his contention, a person who values critical thinking might keep searching so that they can make up their own mind, and they will see a lot of circumstantial evidence which does indeed implicate Washington—like the fact that numerous ISIS commanders (including their minister of war) were trained by Blackwater. If they keep searching they will most likely stumble upon Alex Jones, whose InfoWars operation is handsomely funded and who is happy to offer speculation mixed in with heavy doses of anti-Semitic nonsense and extreme-right misinformation.

Willis Carto, one of the central figures in American Holocaust denial, began an effort to widen his appeal at least as early as 1984, when he founded something called the Populist Party. Carto’s Populist Party borrowed the name from the earlier labor party and plastered it onto a group for white supremacists and other fascists. Anti-Semitism at their first major meeting was so prevalent that “one group of farm activists from the Midwest left the meeting after complaining that too many of the attendees were obsessed with Jews.” [Chip Berlet & Matthew Nemiroff Lyons, *Right-Wing Populism in America: Too Close for Comfort*, The Guilford Press, 2000. p. 191]

At the same time, Carto had something of a small media empire. His Noontide Press publishing house put out books with such charming titles as *Auschwitz: Truth or Lie—An Eyewitness Report*, *Hitler At My Side*, and *For Fear of the Jews*. His magazine *Spotlight*, on the other hand, [began aggressively recruiting the sort of people](#) who had, prior to the 1980s, had their ideas taken seriously by radicals. The first was Air Force Colonel L. Fletcher Prouty, the primary inspiration for the “Mister X” composite character in Oliver Stone’s *JFK*. Prouty

wrote a 1973 book called *The Secret Team*, but in the mid-1980s he was hired by *Spotlight* and Carto added loads of anti-Semitic misinformation to Prouty's work. What Prouty called "the Secret Team," Carto rechristened "the Secret Jewish Team." CIA whistleblower Victor Marchetti co-authored a best-selling Agency exposé in 1973 titled *The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence*, which Langley tried to suppress via legal action. Marchetti, too, was recruited by *Spotlight* in 1989, as was author Mark Lane several years later.

The 1980s were a period replete with very real conspiracies, conspiracies which went all the way from the jungles of Latin America, the mountains of Central Asia, and America's inner cities to the Oval Office. These included Reagan's October surprise, Iran-Contra, the CIA's involvement in the crack epidemic, Operation Cyclone, the dirty wars in Latin America, etc. Progressive journalists including Robert Parry and Gary Webb did great work exposing many of these conspiracies, as did the Christic Institute, which among other tasks successfully sued the perpetrators of [the 1978 Greensboro massacre](#). Still, at this point, anti-conspiracist hardliner Chip Berlet observed that "[chances are that when the talk turns to conspiracy](#) the same sources will be cited: the Christic Institute; the right-wing, anti-Semitic Liberty Lobby and its *Spotlight* newspaper; and Lyndon LaRouche publications." (As someone with beliefs about political power, Berlet believes many conspiracy theories: "[Chip Berlet repeatedly denounces conspiracy investigations](#) while himself spending a good deal of time investigating Lyndon LaRouche's fraudulent financial dealings, conspiracies for which LaRouche went to prison. Berlet never explains why the LaRouche conspiracy is a subject worthy of investigation but not the JFK conspiracy.")

Most whistleblowers are conservatives seeking to reform the system, but the abdication of conspiracy analysis by left-liberal thinkers certainly made it easier for disillusioned insiders to be courted by fascists. When Stone asked Prouty about his involvement with Carto and the Institute for Historical Review, the Colonel said he was "[neither a racist nor an anti-Semite](#)... but merely a writer in need of a platform."

** Some notes on anti-Communism during the height of the radical era:

- Many of the nascent radical movements repudiated the Communist movements of the past, in order to emphasize their ideological independence. Longtime activist Peter Bohmer says that one of the biggest failings of the movement was making these concessions to official anti-Communism and failing to learn from the earlier radical movements: "[We didn't do enough of this in the 1960's and 1970's](#), e.g. learning from those who faced repression during the McCarthy witch hunts of the 1950's. We need to build multi-generational movements and groups."
- Anti-communism among the various New Left groups was a mixed bag—James Kunen of the SDS wrote "We have red flags flying from the roof. I explain to a cop on the sidewalk below that these stand for revolution, not for communism." [Kunen, *The Strawberry Statement*, p. 31] Despite all the concessions that the New Left made to official anti-Communism, Chomsky was still substantially more prone to Red-bashing than his contemporaries. In his *Firing Line* appearance he agreed with William F. Buckley that the

People's Democracies of Eastern Europe were places where "[Stalinist imperialism](#) very brutally took control and still maintains control." Compare this to Carl Oglesby's "Vietnamese Crucible," which refers to the same events as "Stalin's seizures within East Europe to build a buffer zone against aggression from a rebuilt Germany." [Oglesby, *Containment & Change*, p. 16]

- "[The new left movement of the 1960's](#) grew up independently of the Marxist-Leninist tradition. Its roots were in the pacifist and social democratic tradition. It moved to Marxism-Leninism because of identification with the struggles of the Cubans, Vietnamese and Chinese (during their Cultural Revolution). The characteristics of these three revolutions did not seem to us to have anything in common with the image of Communism/Soviet Union that we had been conditioned to accept, and thus we became strongly predisposed to a Maoist type argument that the Soviet Union's brand of 'Communism' really was a capitalist of the Nazi type, i.e., what we had believed all along, while the 'Communism' of China, Cuba and Vietnam was a qualitatively different phenomenon—people's power, or the realization of the true; socialist ideas of equalitarianism, democracy and control of production by the common people. The Maoist alternative allowed formerly strongly anti-communist youth to easily make the transition to Marxism without having to, question the fabricated stereotype of Soviet communism they had grown up with, while romanticizing Cuban, Vietnamese and Chinese Communism, portraying the two types as having nothing in common."
- Writing about the Warsaw Pact intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968, Julius Lester said: "This will undoubtedly be interpreted by some as covert approval of Russian intervention in Czechoslovakia. It is not. Nor is it disapproval. Perhaps the correct position on the matter is that taken by China and Cuba—condemnation of both Russia and Czechoslovakia. Neither country is a model of socialism that anyone is following, and serious questions can be raised about whether either country is totally worthy to be called socialist. But all of that is irrelevant to our infant movement's taking sides because we see pictures of tanks entering a city and, like well-conditioned animals, we scream that he at whom the tank is aimed has been wronged. This kind of reaction reveals an all too typical American syndrome—apolitical morality." [Julius Lester, "The Russian Occupation of Czechoslovakia," *Revolutionary Notes*, p. 162]

Works Cited:

1. Carl Oglesby, "Vietnamese Crucible," *Containment and Change*, MacMillan, 1967, pp. 164-65
2. Carl Oglesby, *Ravens in the Storm: A Personal History of the 1960s Antiwar Movement*, Scribner, 2010. p. 53
3. Noam Chomsky, *Chomsky on Anarchism*, AK Press, 2005. p. 7
4. *Malcolm X Speaks*, ed. George Breitman, Grove Press, 1965. p. 33
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 35-39
6. Frank Donner, *Age of Surveillance*, Vintage Press, 1981, p. 218

7. Albert Szymanski, *The Capitalist State and the Politics of Class*, Winthrop Publishers, 1978, p. 306
8. Breitman, *Malcolm X Speaks*, p. 28-29
9. Ibid., pp. 201-2
10. Ibid., pp. 128-29
11. Ralph Abernathy, quoted in Igor Geevsky & Viktor Smelov, *U.S. Documents Reveal Conspiracy to Stifle Dissent in America*, Novosti Press Agency, 1978, p. 91
12. James Kunen, *The Strawberry Statement: Notes of a College Revolutionary*, Random House, 1969, p. 151
13. Joshua Bloom & Waldo E. Martin, Jr., *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party*, University of California Press, 2016, p. 347
14. Breitman, *Malcolm X Speaks*, p. 32
15. Kirkpatrick Sale, *SDS: The rise and development of the Students for a Democratic Society*, Vintage Books, 1973, p. 262 https://archive.org/details/sds_kirkpatrick_sale
16. Julius Lester, *Revolutionary Notes*, Grove Press, Inc., 1969, p. 152; p. 6
17. Robert Barsky, *Noam Chomsky: A Life of Dissent*, The MIT Press, 1997, p. 134
18. Ibid., p. 148
19. Robert L. Allen, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America: an Analytic History*, Doubleday Anchor, 1970, p. 45
20. Ibid., pp. 255-56
21. Lester, *Revolutionary Notes*, p. 51; p. 41; p. 4
22. Ibid., pp. 9-18
23. Ibid., p. 19
24. Karl Evanzz, *The Judas Factor: the Plot to Kill Malcolm X*, Basic Books, 1993, p. 278. Kwame Nkrumah and Gamal Nasser believed X's assassination to be imminent, too, so they offered him positions in their respective governments, but he declined because his struggle was in America.
25. David J. Garrow, *The FBI and Martin Luther King: From "Solo" to Memphis*, W. W. Norton & Company, 1981. p. 79
26. Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: the Life and Times*, The University of Chicago Press, 2001 pp. 490-91
27. Ibid., p. 452
28. Juan M. Rivera-Negrón, "Mobilize the People," *We Won't Go: Personal Accounts of War Objectors*, ed. Alice Lynd, Beacon Press, 1968. p. 148
29. Doug Valentine, *The Phoenix Program*, p. 326
30. Joesph Califano, quote in Nikolai Yakovlev, *Washington Silhouettes: a Political Roundup*, Progress Publishers, 1985. p. 261
31. Muhammad Ali, "The Champ," *We Won't Go*, pp. 230-1
32. Kunen, *The Strawberry Statement*, p. 138
33. Evanzz, *The Judas Factor*, p. 212
34. Sale, *SDS*, p. 5
35. Lester, "Legalisms of Repression," *Revolutionary Notes*, p. 34

Noam Chomsky and the Compatible Left, Part II

Posted on [March 5, 2019](#)

[Read Part I here](#)

America's Greatest Dissident

All of [this](#) is crucial context because Chomsky's defenders compare him favorably to Fox News cretins and State Department snakes. But this is not a useful analytical comparison because Chomsky was not intended to supplant Bill O'Reilly and Madeleine Albright, which is why he never replaced those people in the propaganda system of which he is a part. Those whom MIT hired him to replace were all those movement leaders, thinkers, and revolutionaries who were more substantively radical than him, which is why he *did* replace those people. Chomsky has enjoyed a sinecure at one of America's wealthiest and most Pentagon-connected universities because he steers people away from all the more radical ideas mentioned above, ideas which once defined the intellectual substance of "the Left." In 1972, if someone had wandered into a GI café, SNCC meeting, or Panther safehouse and claimed that conspiracies are a distraction, people *must* vote Democrat, information is itself powerful, or the law has an inherent power to constrain the state, they would've been looked at as though they claimed to be from Mars. The mass movements of the twentieth century meant that it was no longer possible for these radical critiques of the status quo to remain invisible. The ruling class couldn't make these critiques not exist overnight—their choice was between radical critiques in the service of revolutionary change, and radical critiques which were flawed enough to be tolerable, shift people away from direct action, and foster the illusion of intellectual freedom. If the ruling class was to steer idealistic progressives away from excessively radical ideas they would have to slowly shift things over the course of decades. There was no other choice.

A long-term approach is the only one that could work, since so many ideas that Chomsky has popularized would've destroyed anyone's credibility among radical audiences circa 1970. It's entertaining to watch him shred William F. Buckley on *Firing Line*, but the reason it was *him* doing it and not someone more radical is because he has reliably pulled punches in power-serving ways when it matters. Many of the things for which he is credited—serving as most Westerners' intro to the Left, being hated by Republicans, getting written by Pat Tillman during the Ranger's disillusionment, getting quoted by Hugo Chávez at the UN General Assembly, etc.—are things which would have happened to anyone occupying his position. His best work, namely the voluble criticisms on American foreign policy and his critique of the media, was also done—without the anarcho-liberalism—by Michael Parenti. If Chomsky didn't have so many more flaws than the rest of the radical milieu circa 1967, when *The New York Review of Books* put him on the map, he would've met the same fate as the dozens of professors purged from academia during that era.¹ When Carl Oglesby died in 2011, his obituaries in the *New York Times*, *LA Times*, *Washington Post*, *Guardian*, and *Politico* all neglected to mention *The Yankee and Cowboy War* or Oglesby's radical

scholarship—which is the fate that befalls any work that crosses those lines that Chomsky so assiduously observes.

This doesn't mean that Chomsky's work has never been censored, nor that he's never incurred official disfavor or been ignored. He has certainly produced work radical enough to merit censorship, otherwise he would've never been believable as the face of the Western Left. Chomsky's books have been banned in prisons and by the government of the Republic of Korea under the country's draconian national security law. When Chomsky and Edward Herman's book *Counter-Revolutionary Violence* was released by Warner Modular Publications, an executive at Warner Communications [tried to pulp the entire run](#) of the already published book, and then shuttered Warner Modular. This is a form of censorship known as "privishing," and though most authors never do anything sufficiently rebellious to provoke the censorious impulses of their editors, it is common enough practice, and victims include Gerald Colby, Richard Barnet, and Mark Dowie. Colby, for instance, authored a 1974 book about the Du Pont family which publisher Prentice-Hall found excessively critical, and then "privished" into non-existence. When Colby sued the publisher for breach of contract, a three-judge appeals panel ruled against him, calling his book "a Marxist view of history."²

But along with his scholarship, Chomsky was making what are, especially in hindsight, clear concessions to the elite institutions whose favor he enjoyed. Even beyond the many areas enumerated [elsewhere](#) in which Chomsky was more conservative than his peer group, we might consider what was said and done at MIT during the headiest days of the anti-war movement.

During this period, MIT's various departments were researching helicopters, smart bombs and counterinsurgency techniques for the war in Vietnam and, as Chomsky says, "a good deal of [nuclear] missile guidance technology was developed right on the MIT campus." As Chomsky elaborates, "[MIT was] about 90% Pentagon funded at that time. And I personally was right in the middle of it. I was in a military lab... the Research Laboratory for Electronics." By 1969, student activists were actively campaigning "to stop the war research" at MIT. MIT had six of its anti-war student activists sentenced to prison terms. Chomsky says MIT's students suffered things that "should not have happened." However, Chomsky has also claimed that MIT has "quite a good record on civil liberties." One of Chomsky's biographers writes that in 1969, the Pentagon and NASA funded two MIT laboratories: Draper was working on inertial guidance systems while Lincoln was, according to Chomsky, "engaged in some things that involved ongoing counterinsurgency." In his debate with Arendt and Sontag *et al*, the professor advocates non-violence because "[The Institute of Defense Analysis which is run by a consortium](#) of ten major Eastern universities—Columbia, Princeton, MIT, and so on—has been working on crowd control, which means control of blacks, students, peace demonstrators. And the technology for doing this is extremely efficacious and will only improve." Since language is an indispensable part of the "human terrain system," we can surmise that the great dissident probably played some role in improving this crowd-control technology. He once told Amy Goodman that during the war "[I happened to be working in a](#)

[laboratory \[at MIT\]](#) which was 100 percent supported by the three armed services.”

Universities have been such an essential part of the military industry that one *LA Times* columnist wrote “The only two atomic weapons ever dropped on an enemy—the bombs that obliterated Hiroshima and Nagasaki—could easily have borne the legend: ‘Designed by the University of California as a service to the people of the United States.’”³ During the Vietnam War, historian Michael Klare dubbed universities “America’s fourth Armed Services,” and pointed out that there was an “extraordinary concentration of scientists and engineering talent at MIT” working for the Pentagon. In 1966, MIT spokesman Edward B. Hanify said: *MIT is in the front rank of the forces of science dedicated to the essential research which the Government of the United States considers indispensable to the National Defense. It is a scientific arsenal of democracy.*

“MIT has, in fact, become fixed in the popular imagination as the very paradigm of university-military collaboration,” in Klare’s words.⁴ Tensions were growing between MIT’s leadership, which naturally sought to continue its lucrative relationship with the Pentagon, and anti-war students, who understood that MIT was a major node in the military industry that was destroying millions of lives in Vietnam and around the world. There was a large strike at MIT on May 4th 1969 to protest MIT’s involvement in the military industry, which led to “press accounts of young scientists who have quit defense research to work on environmental problems—or who quit science altogether to become full-time political activists,” according to Klare. Dr. John S. Foster, Jr., the Pentagon’s Director of Defense Research and Engineering, observed that the unrest would force military research into the hands of more cooperative but “less competent” institutions, which was precisely the point.⁵

Chomsky proposed a middle ground: “Chomsky maintains that it was impossible at that time for MIT and its researchers to sever ties with the military-industrial complex and continue to function. What he proposed then he stands by even today: universities with departments that work on bacterial warfare should do so openly, by developing departments of death. His intention was to inform the general population of what was going on so that individuals could make informed and unencumbered decisions about their actions.” In the midst of an anti-war movement engaged in shutting down the war machine at home and “turning the guns around” in Vietnam, Chomsky argued that it was impossible to stop MIT’s part in the imperial slaughter, and thus it would be ideal to emphasize “systems of a purely defensive and deterrent character” (as though such a thing were possible) and add an element of informed consent. While giving weapons designers better information to opt in or out of helping exterminate people might be nice for their consciences, the professor elides the fact that this offers nothing to the victims of imperialism. The only way for MIT students to stop the slaughter of the Vietnamese was to shut down MIT, which Chomsky opposed. James Kunen describes participating in a protest at Columbia and writing in chalk “I am sorry about defacing the walls, but babies are being burned and men are dying, and this University is at fault quite directly.”⁶ Chomsky’s ideas about informed consent sound very nice, and he even addresses himself to bourgeois clerks in some of his books in hopes that they’ll walk away from the war machine. But as far as the

efficacy of this approach, we might consider that all of Chomsky's great anti-war commentary hasn't even been able to stop Noam Chomsky from working for the Pentagon. He also defended his involvement with MIT because the university is not "totalitarian," whatever that means.

In short, wrote Robert Barsky,

*Chomsky's position on this issue is that no formal constraints should be put on research. So at this important time the professor took what he calls a 'pretty extreme position,' and indeed 'one that might be hard to defend had anyone ever criticized it,' which he describes as follows: 'Nothing should be done to impede people from teaching and doing their research even if at that very moment it was being used to massacre and destroy.'*⁷

Chomsky said as much in "On Resistance," when he warned that direct action to shut down the war machine should be avoided because "the long-range threat would be to American humanistic and scientific culture." He neglected to explain why ending imperial wars would hurt "American humanistic culture," rather than making American culture more humane. Here, Chomsky not only differed from the radical consensus of the era, but was diametrically opposed to it. Julius Lester wrote that the only way to "humanize America" was to "make revolution." Stokely Carmichael said the same thing. During one anti-war protest, Paul Potter of the SDS said "the war goes on; the freedom to conduct that war depends on the dehumanization not only of Vietnamese people but of Americans as well."⁸ In 1969, the *Chicago Daily Defender*, a black-oriented progressive journal, heralded Black Panther protests at Yale as a measure that "may provide the dynamism for the reformation of American society...Yale has now become the focus for justice for the Black Panthers. With the singular exception of a few isolated incidents, the New Haven institution is going peacefully and serenely about the business of transforming a sick society into a healthy consortium."⁹ Radicals of the era mostly believed that protesting America's worst institutions would make the country more humane. Chomsky claimed the opposite, allegedly out of a vague commitment to principles of free speech and unfettered intellectual inquiry. This emphasis on the liberatory power of information is a theme which has suffused both Chomsky's work in particular and increasingly defined the wider Western Left since the radical heyday. It is an idea which does not come from what could be considered the radical tradition, which saw collective action—not appeals to reason—as the wellspring of freedom, power, and progress. For example, in his "[Ballots or Bullets](#)" speech, Malcolm X said "Black people are fed up with the dillydallying, pussyfooting, compromising approach that we've been using toward getting our freedom. We want freedom now, but we're not going to get it saying 'We Shall Overcome.' We've got to fight until we overcome." One SDS leader said that their belief was that "freedom lies in collective, class struggle."¹⁰ In a September 1969 letter collected in his book *Soledad Brother*, George Jackson wrote "There are those among us, we must admit, who cannot take any sizable amount of freedom. They are in the majority! You cannot relate to them with ideals. They have fallen beyond caring about ideals. The only thing that will make them move is a push, no explanation, just a shove."

In contrast, Chomsky's emphasis on "[A truly independent press](#)" as "a foundation for a truly free and democratic society" is liberal, not radical. It inverts a radical

understanding of how the press works and whom it serves—a “truly free and democratic society” comes first, and only then could one hope to enjoy a “truly independent” press. Of course, the question of how to create a truly free and democratic society is the most important one, and it was the question with which the revolutionaries of the era were grappling while Chomsky was counseling them to get arrested and go easy on MIT. “The only relationship the press can have to any radical or revolutionary organization is negative, to be used as tools for the government,” wrote Julius Lester, so “it must be realized that the press and television can in no way be used by the left to communicate with people. It is not the function of the press to report; its function is to shape opinion.”¹¹ Lester here is demonstrating a grasp of what Marx said about those owning the means of production likewise owning the means of *mental* production. Lester also spoke to the utility of appealing to the oppressor’s conscience by quoting “what a New York businessman told an Abolitionist, the Rev. Samuel May, in the spring of 1845, when the good cleric had come to the businessman with moral arguments against slavery.”

*“Mr. May,” the businessman told him, “we are not such fools as not to know that slavery is a great evil and a great wrong... We cannot afford, sir, to let you and your associates succeed in your endeavor to overthrow slavery. It is not a matter of principle with us. It is a matter of business necessity. We cannot afford to let you succeed... We do not mean to allow you to succeed. We mean, sir, to put you Abolitionists down—by fair means, if we can, by foul means, if we must.”*¹²

In this important area, Chomsky sounds most like the progressive liberals of the era, not the radicals. Gerald W. Johnson, for instance, was an author, essayist, and journalist whom one biographer called “[one of the most eloquent spokespersons](#) for America’s adversary culture.” He was friends with H. L. Mencken and was a prominent liberal opponent of McCarthyism and the Red Scare at a time when it mattered. In *Peril and Promise: An Inquiry into Freedom of the Press*, Johnson extols the virtues of his profession, saying that the journalist is both “socially dangerous” and “socially necessary,” because “the highest attainable freedom is contingent upon the fullest and most accurate information; so those agencies whose function is the dissemination of information are crucial... journalism alone is concerned almost equally with public affairs, spiritual affairs and educational, which is to say, cultural affairs.” Thus the journalist “has wider opportunities, whether for good or evil, than either the politician or the educator.”¹³

For his part, Johnson enjoyed a long and illustrious career as a man of letters. Despite his repudiations of McCarthy, he was [reliably anti-Communist and produced work](#) extolling the virtues of the free enterprise system and “Americanism.” He worked for many years for Adlai Stevenson, who as America’s ambassador to the UN called criticisms of Washington “[irrational, irresponsible, insulting and repugnant](#),” among other things. [Johnson won a Peabody Award](#), a Sydney Hillman Foundation Award, and a DuPont Commentators’ Award. Alfred du Pont’s widow created the latter award as “[as a tribute to the journalistic integrity](#) and public-mindedness of her late husband,” and the Columbia School of Journalism calls it the “the most prestigious award in television and radio

news, the broadcast equivalent of the Pulitzer Prizes.” She founded the award in 1942, the year America entered World War II, and almost certainly did so to rescue her late husband’s reputation since his company was one of the biggest Western supporters of Mussolini and Hitler. Johnson was not responsible for the actions of Ambassador Stevenson or the DuPont Corporation, but his relationship to these elite functionaries and corporate foundations demonstrates how the ruling class selects “eloquent spokespeople of America’s adversary culture” based on their having one foot firmly in the elite world. How could it be any other way? The “truth shall set you free” vision of freedom advocated by Chomsky and Johnson, so popular with the liberal intelligentsia, is quite alien to the radical tradition. Power, said Malcolm X, “real power, comes from conviction which produces action, uncompromising action. It also produces insurrection against oppression.”

It’s true that the radical movements of fifty years ago were strong enough that they forced their ideas into the public eye. But even at the time, radical ideas were not suddenly free from the predictable constraints. James Kunen, then a teenaged rebel at Columbia University, describes being booked on a local talk show to be interviewed by a host named Alan Burke. Burke’s booking secretary assured Kunen that Burke would be receptive because he is “kind and liberal.” *For the first few seconds of the show I am too nervous to speak, but then I become involved and settle down. I can handle my opponent, I can handle the almost unanimously negative questions from the audience, I can try to handle the invective of Mr. Burke, who contrary to assurances soon becomes my antagonist. But I have some problem with the station breaks, which always follow Burke’s most cutting remarks, and with an overly enthusiastic member of the audience who jumps up to lead applause after each remark against me, effectively preventing me from answering them. It turns out that this clapper is the prompter who cues the audience when to applaud, according to the instructions given them before the show.*

I am dubbed a “deranged anarchist” and Mr. Burke concludes the show with the suggestion that I stick to panty raids, which he says are “more constructive.”¹⁴

Compare this sort of treatment to Noam Chomsky’s long exchange with William F. Buckley on *Firing Line*. Chomsky was never given his own hour-long show, but he also was able to expound on his ideas at length in various fora without the sort of interruptions and invective directed at Kunen. Maybe it was just because Chomsky had an encyclopedic recall of so many facts and figures; i.e. because he was simply the best and smartest radical voice. The subsequent rise of a media ecosystem which sustains people like Chomsky, Amy Goodman, and Glenn Greenwald would seemingly confirm that there’s a market for this. But Kunen came from a radical movement, while Chomsky enjoyed a high position at one of America’s wealthiest universities. As a college student, Kunen’s stances on any number of matters were probably unpredictable, while Chomsky had by that point established his more conservative, pacifist, and anti-Communist *bona fides*. As a radical activist, Kunen engaged in direct action. Chomsky not only heralded the power of information, he deplored most forms of direct action, and he said so. According to one writer:

[During the time Chomsky was involved](#) with protests against the war in Vietnam, he was always hostile—like Theodor Adorno—to on-campus protests that got in the way of pursuing the Truth. It was one thing to march against the war; it was another thing entirely to occupy a building that was dedicated to counter-insurgency research. According to Barsky, Chomsky admired “the challenge to the universities” but thought their rebellions were “largely misguided,” and he “criticized [them] as they were in progress at Berkeley (1966) and Columbia (1968) particularly. This is corroborated by Norman Mailer, who spent time with Chomsky in a jail cell after being arrested at the Pentagon protest in 1969: “He had, in fact, great reservations about the form that the 1968 student uprisings ultimately took.”

One activist/academic points out that despite Chomsky’s “extraordinary” memory, the professor recounts this period with some odd changes:

[MIT was a major military contractor](#), and much of what happened there was funded by the Pentagon. Even Chomsky’s work was supported by the military. In the late 1960s, as the student movement reached its peak, war research on campus came under increasing attack, particularly projects being done at two MIT labs. [Chomsky recalls] the political line-up: right-wing faculty wanted to keep the labs, liberal faculty wanted to break relations with the labs formally (so that the same work would be done but invisibly), while “the radical students and I wanted to keep the labs on campus, on the principle that what is going to be going on anyway ought to be open and above board....” But this obscures the fact that most radical students, as well as many liberal students, wanted first and foremost to stop the war research and thus to convert the labs to non-military pursuits. We didn’t want the war research to go on in divested labs, nor did we want it to go on in affiliated labs. We wanted the war research stopped, period.

Chris Knight discusses many more examples of how Chomsky defended and made excuses for MIT, both during this crucial time in the anti-war movement and in subsequent decades:

[Back in 1969, MIT’s student radicals](#) were keen to take direct action against the university’s war research by, among other things, occupying the office of its president, Howard Johnson. Again, Chomsky took a different position and at one point, according to one of his academic colleagues, he joined with other professors in standing in Johnson’s office to prevent the students from occupying it. As he said later about the 1960s student tactic of occupation, “I wasn’t in favor of it myself, and didn’t like those tactics.”

Adopting a quite different tone, however, Chomsky told Time magazine that Johnson was an “honest, honorable man” and, in 1970, it seems he even attended a faculty party held to celebrate Johnson’s success at coping with a year of student protests.

Still more puzzling was Chomsky’s attitude when Walt Rostow visited MIT in 1969. Rostow was one of those prominent intellectuals whom Chomsky had so eloquently denounced in his ‘Responsibility of Intellectuals’ article. As an adviser to both President John Kennedy and President Lyndon Johnson, Rostow had been one of the main architects of the war in Vietnam. In particular he was the strategist responsible for the carpet bombing of North Vietnam.

Against this background, it was hardly surprising that when Rostow arrived at MIT, his lecture was disrupted by students furious at his presence on their campus. Far from associating himself with such student rage, however, when Chomsky heard that Rostow was hoping to return to his former job at MIT, he actually welcomed the prospect. Then, when he heard that the university was poised to reject Rostow's job application for fear of more student disruption, Chomsky went to Howard Johnson and threatened to lead MIT's anti-war students to "protest publicly" —not against—but in favor of Rostow being allowed back to the university.

Rostow wasn't the only powerful militarist at MIT to receive support from Chomsky. Twenty years later, Chomsky was, as he says, 'one of the very few people on the faculty' who supported John Deutch's bid to become university President... Fearing that the university was about to become even "more militaristic," MIT's radicals—with the notable exception of Chomsky—joined others on the faculty to successfully block Deutch's appointment. Then, later, when President Clinton made Deutch No.2 at the Pentagon and, in 1995, Director of the CIA, student activists demanded that MIT cut all ties with him. Chomsky once again disagreed... Of course, the most remarkable thing about all this is that, throughout this entire period, Chomsky was churning out dozens of brilliantly argued articles and books denouncing the CIA and the US military as criminals, their hands dripping in blood.

"Rostow not only strongly influenced White House intelligence planning but served as a liaison to the intelligence community, including the CIA," writes Frank Donner. At MIT, Rostow "became a leading and 'witting' figure in a CIA front (it was subsidized by the CIA and headed by a former CIA official), the Center for International Studies."¹⁵ MIT students worried that Professor Rostow might do things like turn their school into a home for covert CIA think tanks had fears that were actually quite well founded.

Chomsky is whitewashing his role at MIT considerably, seeing as he did quite a lot more than just teach there. But he asks prospective critics to consider the following: "Did you ever hear anyone suggest that Marx shouldn't have worked in the British Museum, the very symbol of British imperialism?"¹⁶ That is indeed not a common contention, mostly due to the fact that the British Museum was the *symbol* of British imperialism, while MIT's role in American imperialism was quite a lot more than merely symbolic.

MIT was a major center for military research and development—missile guidance systems, crowd suppression, and counterinsurgency warfare are three areas of research that Chomsky himself has highlighted. He participated in at least one of those. At the time Marx was in the library stacks, Britain was waging a war of ghastly brutality in India. If, at this important time, the British Museum was developing new and innovative ways to exterminate the people of India in their quest to throw off the shackles of colonial slavery; and Marx's research was involved in developing these fearsome new weapons (to the extent that his research was "100 percent" funded by the military); and if Marx defended the museum from students who would shut it down; and he also went well out of his way to help various British generals, viceroys, and proconsuls get jobs at the museum over the objections of the radical student body, then and only then

would Chomsky be making a good analogy. And, to answer the professor's question, *yes*, it is quite likely that not only would many people object to Marx's role, those looking objectively at his actions and not his radical reputation would suggest that he was helping the Crown perpetrate a slaughter.

It is ultimately more useful to consider Chomsky's role at MIT than what he was saying or doing anywhere else. Even leaving aside the fact that Chomsky seems quite comfortable with misrepresenting his role in the history of this period—falsely portraying himself as aligned with student radicals rather than opposed to them—it is standard operating procedure for liberals to denounce something bad in the abstract while defending specific instances of that bad thing, or blanching at actual solutions to the problem. Biographer Hazel Rowley describes Richard Wright encountering this very dynamic over and over during a lecture tour in the mid-'40s: "he was shocked by the vast ignorance about race in America. He met people of good will who abstractly wanted to do something to help, but they seemed frightened when he made concrete suggestions."¹⁷ "There is a class of whites who call themselves liberals," wrote Julius Lester, "who will agree with everything a revolutionary may say up to the point of agreeing to what must be done to solve the problem."¹⁸

At that point in time, Chomsky was just one commentator among many; at a time when what would today be called the movements' "thought leaders" were activists and revolutionaries, not writers and thinkers.¹⁹ As a man best known as a radical MIT professor, it is in this capacity that he should be primarily judged. To adapt the [Chomsky rule](#) slightly, his own concern was primarily the terror and violence carried out by his own university. For the important reason that; namely, he could have done something about it. So even if MIT was responsible for two percent of the violence in the world, it would be that two percent he would be primarily responsible for. And that is a simple ethical judgment. That is, the ethical value of one's actions depends on their anticipated and predictable consequences. It is very easy to denounce the atrocities of someone else. That has about as much ethical value as denouncing atrocities that took place in the 18th century.

In various forums, [draft resistance](#) was the only concrete political action that Chomsky ratified for American activists. One of Chomsky's significant contributions during the anti-war heyday was founding the activist non-profit [RESIST](#), which was first oriented towards draft resistance. Like the wider radical movements, there was ideological heterogeneity in the ranks of draft resisters. Some did so out of religious pacifism, some due to black nationalism, etc. One draft resister, Stephen Fortunato, explained that he refused to serve based on his Christian faith, a nonviolence tract by Leo Tolstoy, and the work of such Chomsky-like anti-war intellectuals as A. J. Muste and Bertrand Russell.²⁰ But Fortunato was a rare exception. Just like the wider radical movements, most draft resisters followed a path that involved an initial connection with the fight against American racism, and then they drew inspiration from the national liberation struggles of the global south. Go through contemporary accounts of soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines who were incarcerated for defying the Vietnam draft and there is a remarkable adherence to this pattern.

- PFC James Johnson of the Fort Hood Three: “Now there is a direct relationship between the peace movement and the civil rights movement. The South Vietnamese are fighting for representation, just like ourselves.”²¹
- David Mitchell, 1966: “I became continually more aware of the aggressive and dangerous nature of America’s policies. My examination of such policies was first sparked by Cuba and the attempts to turn back the Cuban Revolution and regain an economic and political stranglehold over the Cuban nation.”²²
- Tom Bell, 1967: “So often, radicalization comes from travel—to the third world, to Europe, or the American South—where a view of the true nature of American society is more obvious.”²³
- John Otis Sumrall, 1967: “For me personally, I would feel just like the KKK over there. Denying those people freedom of choice, just like black people are denied freedom of choice in the US. So that’s why I want to stay here and fight for freedom in the United States.”²⁴
- “John”: “I was never a hippy, but was early a political activist: civil rights demonstrations, protesting the Cuban invasion, all that.”²⁵
- “Hank”: “Involved in what was then known as the civil rights movement. Started working with CORE my junior year in high school. I was also going out at the time with a girl from Cuba—she told me a lot about Fidel. It was funny, because in school we were discussing Cuba at the time and what she was telling me was in direct conflict with what I was being taught.”²⁶

It’s great that Chomsky approved of and enabled draft resistance, but these people were not looking to him for guidance. As a radical professor at MIT, the area where Chomsky demonstrated the most influence to oppose or enable American imperialism was with *radical students at MIT*. Draft resisters mostly looked to anti-racist activists and third world revolutionaries—the people most likely to heed Chomsky’s advice were radicals on his campus. He may have issued blistering condemnations of American imperialism in any number of journals, but in the one realm where he had a tremendous impact at the time when it mattered, he defended America’s war machine. His record as far as protecting his parent institution from the radical activists trying to shut it down is extensively well documented, and it is radically at-odds with his radical reputation. Chomsky himself points out that his positions were “pretty extreme” and “would have been hard to defend” relative to the rest of the American radical movement—although he has also made the contradictory claim that “the radical students and I wanted to keep the labs on campus,” which is, to put it mildly, not true. More representative of prevailing radical sentiment was Peter Bohmer of San Diego State University (SDSU), a professor and activist who both disagreed with MIT’s war work and acted to stop it. Bohmer was ultimately fired by the fiat of SDSU President Donald Walker, acting on “secret information,” over the objections of students and the department. A contemporary report from the Harvard *Crimson* recounted that the “secret information” which got him sacked “[apparently concerns Bohmer’s arrest and conviction](#) for participation in a political demonstration on January 16, 1970 at MIT.” Bohmer recounts: *After three lengthy hearings that all ruled in my favor, and in spite of very large demonstrations supporting me, the State University system still fired me*

although I was voted best teacher by students at San Diego State University. Even the conservative American Economics Association ruled it was a case of political discrimination but after a lengthy court case, California Supreme Court ruled that San Diego State U did not have to restore my faculty position. Bohmer continued his activist work despite his firing in 1972, being charged later that year with [attempting to block a train](#) delivering military material. That same year, despite the official end of COINTELPRO a year earlier, [the FBI ordered a fascist vigilante group](#) to assassinate Bohmer. Bohmer has remained an activist into the current decade. Unlike Chomsky, who usually concludes interviews today by saying something like making revolution is “[not very hard](#),” the activist Bohmer warned in 2010 that “Although Cointelpro officially ended in 1971, it has continued although in a somewhat less extreme form without the name up to September 11th 2001. Since then we are going backwards towards more police powers, infiltration and framing of activists.”

Chomsky incurred plenty of disfavor in the halls of power during this period of radical ferment. But if he hadn't been so accommodating of MIT's military industry work, he would likely have been out of a job, as was Bohmer. If he had participated in shutting down the war machine he criticized, instead of making excuses for it, he may have even been marked for death, as was Bohmer. Chomsky's explanations for his own prominence leave a lot to be desired. In 1995, he told Barsky that at the end of the 1960s, “We confidently expected that I'd be in jail in a few years. In fact, that is just what would have happened except for two unexpected events: 1) the utter (and rather typical) incompetence of the intelligence services, which could not find the real organizers of resistance, though it was transparent, and kept seeking hidden connections to North Korea, Cuba, or wherever...as well as mistaking people who agreed to appear at public events as 'leaders' and 'organizers'; and 2) the Tet offensive, which convinced American business that the game wasn't worth the candle.”²⁷ There are some things here that are true enough: by 1969, a significant part of the ruling class, including Wall Street, began to consider that the Vietnam War was not worth the costs. Chomsky also makes the accurate assessment that people like him who spoke at rallies were not the leaders and organizers of these radical movements. But his description of incompetence and bumbling on the part of America's secret police bears little resemblance to reality. The FBI, CIA, military intelligence, and local PDs were actually quite adept at identifying and “neutralizing” the “real organizers of resistance,” as the professor acknowledges when discussing the history of COINTELPRO. America's secret police successfully identified Bohmer as a subversive, for example, and carried out plots against him. The FBI and CIA *claimed* that they were looking for the “real” foreign instigators of the era's radical movements, but this was a *pretext* to expand their budgets and policing powers (programs like Operation CHAOS). If Chomsky really believes this, then he is taking establishment lies at face value contrary to a wealth of available evidence. After the 1968 Chicago DNC, for example, the Special Agent in Charge of the FBI field office told Hoover that “Effectively tabbing as communist or communist-backed the more hysterical opponents of the President on the Vietnam question in the midst of the presidential campaign would be a real boon to Mr. Johnson.”²⁸ Internal documents attesting to the fact that this was merely a

pretext, including memoranda between CIA director Richard Helms and the Johnson and Nixon White Houses, were released in the mid-'70s during the Church Committee hearings, so when the professor told Barsky this, his bad information was two decades out-of-date. Chomsky's contention that the state's repressive apparatus was too distracted by apocryphal Kremlin plots to discipline him is not plausible.

The professor himself sometimes claims that he managed to circumvent the Herman/Chomsky propaganda model by doing good linguistics scholarship, but he's not highlighted as the pre-eminent voice of the Western left because of his insights on phonemes and morphemes. When the professor is asked why he is so famous if his propaganda model is correct, he has said ["it has nothing to do with me"](#), it has to do with marginalizing the public," which is confusing and still does nothing to explain why he is famous. Marginalizing the public from what? The purpose of a propaganda machine is to brainwash the public, not marginalize them.

It's also not true: the concept of "marginality" as he and Ed Herman use it in *Manufacturing Consent* refers to dissident figures and media outlets, *not* the public. There are two references to the poor as marginal members of the public, but contrary to what Chomsky said in that Q&A, the propaganda model as it's discussed in the book is clearly about the marginalization of media figures:

- "We have long argued that the 'naturalness' of these processes, with inconvenient facts allowed sparingly and within the proper framework of assumptions, and fundamental dissent **virtually excluded from the mass media (but permitted in a marginalized press)**, makes for a propaganda system that is far more credible and effective in putting over a patriotic agenda than one with official censorship."
- "A propaganda model...traces the routes by which money and power are able to **filter out the news fit to print, marginalize dissent...**"
- "The elite domination of the media and **marginalization of dissidents** that results from the operation of these filters..."
- "an advertising-based media system will gradually increase advertising time and **marginalize or eliminate altogether programming** that has significant public-affairs content."
- "The steady flow of **ex-radicals from marginality** to media attention shows that we are witnessing a durable method of providing experts who will say what the establishment wants said."
- "Even if ad-based media cater to an affluent ('upscale') audience, they easily pick up a large part of the 'downscale' audience, and **their rivals lose market share and are eventually driven out or marginalized.**"

Chomsky does not respond to the question of why he's famous by debunking, he responds by dissembling. Either Herman wrote all of *Manufacturing Consent* and Chomsky hasn't actually read it, or Chomsky is lying because it's impossible for the West's most famous academic to be considered "marginal." To figure out which it is, we might consider Chomsky's 1996 exchange with the BBC's Andrew Marr. Marr challenges Chomsky about the propaganda model and asks whether the professor believes Marr is being disingenuous, to which Chomsky replies ["what I'm saying is"](#), if you believed something different, you

wouldn't be sitting where you're sitting." Chomsky says nothing about "marginalizing the public." Here, as in *Manufacturing Consent*, Chomsky explains that the propaganda model is about keeping dissident thought and radical thinkers out of the public eye. It is only when he himself is the subject that the propaganda model starts to mean new things.

In another interview he is asked again about his marginalization, and he replies with the bizarre and even more confusing statement that "the matter of being forced to the margins is a matter of fact, and the fact is the opposite of what this claim [*sic*], the fact is it is *much* easier to gain access to the major media than it was 20 years ago." You probably need a doctorate in linguistics to parse the koan-like phrase "it is a fact, and the fact is the opposite," but sure: his marginalization is a fact, and the fact is the opposite, which is that it's easier to access the major media than ever. At least this sounds like a long-overdue admission from the most famous intellectual in the Anglophone world that he is not marginalized in any meaningful sense of the world.

But when Charlie Rose asked him about what is ridiculously called his "marginalization," Chomsky replied that it was natural, "otherwise they [the media] wouldn't be performing their societal function." He does not reconcile this with his contradictory statement that the propaganda model did not refer to marginalizing dissidents at all, but the public. He doesn't explain how the media can simultaneously marginalize him because that is "their societal function" and yet "the fact is it is *much* easier to gain access to the major media than it was 20 years ago." Neither does he offer evidence for the mystifying claim that it's easier to access the major media than ever before. But ultimately he's totally correct: it is the media's job to marginalize dissenting voices, and *he really does* have easier access to the mass media than ever. He leaves it to the power of celebrity and the pull of conformity to ensure that his fans don't question why this is.

In one of the numerous hagiographies of America's greatest dissenter, Wolfgang Sperlich summarizes the shift from revolution to writing which Chomsky embodied:

Forms of internal repression in the US were mainly of subtle but effective variety, such as COINTELPRO... Given such repression at home, the US activists retreated into what they knew best: dissent by speaking out and writing. One of the champions of this activist genre was going from strength to strength: Noam Chomsky.²⁹

This account of what happened to the liberation struggles of yesteryear is typical: it posits an America mostly free of "totalitarian" things like overt state repression; it holds that dissenters shifted seamlessly from activism to commentary; and it claims that Chomsky's star rose based mostly on his own merits, rather than the rewards-and-sanctions system that defines the propaganda machine. At least this admits that the United States has what would be called "political repression" at all. Far more representative of what passes for "common knowledge" is the following: "the FBI fought their battles against modern and progressive tendencies in American society but this hardly ever resulted in effective censorship, let alone in the imprisonment or execution of people because of their political, artistic, or intellectual convictions."³⁰

Internal repression did and does exist in the United States, but it was not mostly subtle, it was mostly overt. The presence of police—with guns, clubs, dogs, tear gas, and firehoses—is not subtle. Burning crosses are downright ostentatious. Deployment of the National Guard to put down urban uprisings was common practice—there were over 1,000 urban uprisings between 1960 and the mid-’70s, which means hundreds of instances of tanks, armored personnel carriers, and columns of soldiers invading American cities. According to the most conservative estimates, between 1965 and ’67, around 130 black men were killed and 28,000 arrested in various instances of urban unrest (when you consider that 43 people were killed in Detroit in July 1967 alone, those numbers seems way too low).³¹ The McCarran Internal Security Act of 1950 established a concentration camp system (6 were completed) where accused subversives would be interned in the case of national emergency; Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, and Martin Luther King all warned that this law could be used against their movements.³² In 1950, the [FBI actually drew up a list of 12,000 accused subversives](#) who were to be rounded up and held in Guantánamo Bay-style indefinite detention—the only reason they weren’t is that Truman declined Hoover’s demands to incarcerate them. After the riots that followed MLK’s assassination, the Army drew up apocalyptic plans under the rubric of [Operation Garden Plot](#) to deploy brigades to 25 cities to wage an open counterinsurgency war. If resistance to the status quo had intensified in the 1970s, rather than waned, the Pentagon was ready to turn American cities into “scenes of destruction approaching those of Stalingrad during World War II,” in the words of one Army general.

During the Chicago DNC protests, George McGovern said that the police violence was a “blood bath” which “made me sick to my stomach,” and he’d “seen nothing like it since the films of Nazi Germany.”³³ C. Kilmer Myers, a California bishop, said that Governor Ronald Reagan’s 1968 crackdown on UC student protests was redolent of the “strong-armed and brutal methods which I as a student observed in Germany in 1939.”³⁴ “[S]evere repressive measures, including the alleged framing of militant student leaders on campus on murder and rioting charges and police and National Guard invasions of black campuses, were reportedly employed at a host of schools,” wrote one professor.³⁵ The brutality towards campus unrest escalated to the famous massacre at Kent state, where 4 activists were shot (a fifth victim was clubbed to death elsewhere on campus), and another spate of killings at Jackson State. “The spectacle of American soldiers killing American citizens had a chilling effect on many people, many of whom suddenly realized that dissent was as dangerous in the United States as it was in South Vietnam,” writes Doug Valentine. “Nixon himself articulated those murderous impulses when he told his staff, “Don’t worry about decisiveness. Having drawn the sword, stick it in hard. Hit ’em in the gut. No defensiveness.”³⁶ More common were massacres like the one in Orangeburg, South Carolina in 1968, where police killed 3 activists and injured dozens for the crime of trying to desegregate a bowling alley. Julius Lester elaborates:

The Orangeburg Massacre comes after eight years of beatings, jailings, and murders of blacks and whites in the course of the black liberation movement. There were thirteen blacks killed during the Mississippi Summer Project of 1964, the four young girls killed in the church bombing in Birmingham, Jimmy Lee

*Jackson and the hundreds killed in Watts, Newark, Detroit, and Harlem. But nothing seems more truly red, white, and blue Star-Spangled Banner My Country 'Tis of Thee American than three dead and fifty wounded for trying to desegregate a bowling alley. One gets the feeling that if the students had been trying to desegregate two bowling alleys, South Carolina would have dropped the Bomb.*³⁷

Maybe one could make the argument that finding your mail tampered with, or hearing the telltale *click* of a phone tap, counted as unobtrusive repression. But even the “subtle” repressive actions like COINTELPRO weren’t particularly low-key. One component of the program was a form of intimidation known in FBI memoranda as “harassment arrests,” whose name is self-explanatory. Then there were the dozens (and possibly hundreds, or more) of assassinations, the non-subtlety of which was intended to send a clear message. For instance, the last leader of the American Indian Movement, John Trudell, accumulated one of the longest FBI files and was warned to stop his activism or he would be punished. In 1979, Trudell led a protest in Washington, DC and burned an American flag in front of FBI headquarters. Hours later, [a fire began at his Nevada home](#), killing his wife, mother-in-law, and his three children. There’s something to consider, lest someone believe Chomsky’s claim that we enjoy unparalleled freedom. It’s true enough that when the status quo is secure, you probably won’t get in trouble for burning the flag (although cops can and might arrest you for it, [if they feel like it](#)). But if that act of non-violent, non-coercive, Constitutionally protected free speech is part of something that’s a genuine threat, they may go ahead and murder your entire family. They did it to John Trudell.

Perhaps if COINTELPRO had been as subtle as Sperlich claims it was, Trudell might have continued his activism. Instead, he took up poetry and music. All this not-at-all-subtle repression had the intended effect of destroying much of the activist community. As the people most threatening to the capitalist system were murdered or imprisoned, there was a parallel project to erase the substance of what these radical movements did and stood for. For future liberal historians to say that “activists retreated into speaking out and writing,” they would need to convert the revolutionaries into people who had just been describing things all along.

After leaving the Nation of Islam and moving towards socialism, for instance, Malcolm X founded the Organization for Afro-American Unity and began devising concrete plans for changing the world. Charging the United States with committing genocide against African-Americans had been a major nightmare for the ruling classes when black communists including Paul Robeson and William L. Patterson tried to do so in the 1950s. Biographers Karl Evanzz and George Breitman both point out that Malcolm X’s similar plan to pass a UN resolution condemning the US as a colonial power, with the help of newly post-colonial African governments, terrified the American power elite. By December 1964—a period Malcolm X told Alex Haley was the high point in his life—his efforts looked sure to succeed. On December 16th, he told an audience at Harvard that African “statesmen are beginning to connect the criminal, racist acts practiced in the Congo with similar acts in Mississippi and Alabama.”³⁸ Two months later, before X could attend the Bandung Conference of the non-aligned countries as

the representative of black America, he was murdered. Karl Evanzz points out that some of X's African contacts who had been working with him were assassinated at the same time, supporting the theory that his murder had Federal fingerprints.³⁹ "[R]ejection of Martin Luther King's peculiar version of Gandhism is not in itself a program," observed Robert Vernon, which is why X "addressed himself to the difficult task of getting an organization off the ground, of developing a program for the immediate struggle and a long-range program for the long haul, of soliciting and sifting through new ideas and fresh thinking, making contacts with allies abroad."⁴⁰

In order to turn these radical movements into a "compatible left," step one was to erase the fact that the revolutionaries had been doing anything other than talking—since talking would be the primary remit of the "compatible left." So the liberal Bayard Rustin, for one, wrote 3 articles shortly after the murder of the man eventually known as El Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, characterizing the martyred leader as "not a hero of the movement, but a victim of the ghetto" and "a conservative force" who "never had many actual followers" and was "moving toward the mainstream of the civil rights movement." Despite X's work organizing black Americans into a conscious revolutionary force ("we need a Mau Mau" to win freedom, he'd said), and coordinating international solidarity to turn back the tide of American global power, Rustin described X as "having described the evil [with] no program for attacking it."⁴¹ Several more prominent Lefty critics said some variation of this; cofounder of the future Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) Irving Howe wrote that "Malcolm, intransigent in words and nihilistic in reality, never invoked the possibility or temptations of immediate struggle; he never posed the problems, confusions and risks of maneuver, compromise, retreat. Brilliant Malcolm spoke for a rejection so complete it transformed him into an apolitical spectator."⁴² Subsequent generations of people paid to tell us what to think have solidified the notion that Malcolm X was ultimately a misguided malcontent. This is the subtext of [Manning Marable's *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*](#), a book intended to supplant X's autobiography as the definitive word on the late revolutionary. In his paean to the Obama presidency *We Were Eight Years in Power*, Ta-Nehisi Coates describes X as "more an expression of black America's heart than of its brain," whose "political vision was never complete like that of Martin Luther King, who hewed faithfully to...nonviolence."⁴³ Marable and Coates equate non-violence with political coherence much like Chomsky equated non-violence with popular support.

Thus, the past was re-written to make the "Left" something that is primarily concerned with describing the world, rather than changing it. Some former revolutionaries got tenured positions and continued to produce revolutionary scholarship while staying in something close to total obscurity. There was also a body of writers and commentators, safely ensconced in academia and foundations, producing radical writing without the radical action that had so threatened the system. As Herman and Chomsky put it in *Manufacturing Consent*, "The steady flow of ex-radicals from marginality to media attention shows that we are witnessing a durable method of providing experts who will say what the establishment wants said." Dissidents who were a genuine threat to the

system were murdered, imprisoned, or scared off. Those who were given platforms were often safe ones who could be relied upon to provide an ersatz, safe facsimile of robust radical resistance. The more searing their condemnations, the more effective they are for pushing acceptance of the status quo when the time comes. Arthur Silber, in a post that needs to be read, calls this “[embalmed dissent](#).” Silber describes “embalmed dissent” as that commentary which provides a lucid liberatory critique, and “holds out the promise of change—but then tells you it’s too difficult, it carries too much risk, it might be possible, but it’s not something we’d actually want to do.” It’s not hard to see Chomsky’s 1967 essay “On Resistance” as the ur-text of this genre, particularly given passages like this one:

[One must then consider in what ways it is possible](#) to pose a serious threat.

Many possibilities come to mind: a general strike, university strikes, attempts to hamper war production and supply, and so on.

Personally, I feel that disruptive acts of this sort would be justified were they likely to be effective in averting an imminent tragedy. I am skeptical, however, about their possible effectiveness. At the moment, I cannot imagine a broad base for such action, in the white community at least, outside the universities.

Forcible repression would not, therefore, prove very difficult.

A more apt title might’ve been “On Submission.” The one accurate part of Sperlich’s account is that Chomsky became the champion of this genre, but it was not the product of immaculate conception, it was no accident, and it was not due to the quality of his commentary.

[Read Part III here](#)

Works Cited:

1. Albert Szymanski, *Human Rights in the Soviet Union*, Zed Books, 1984, p. 192; Chapter 4 of Frederic Lee, *A History of Heterodox Economics: Challenging the mainstream in the twentieth century*, Routledge, 2011
2. Michael Parenti, *History as Mystery*, City Lights Publishers, 2001 p. 188 and Chapter 5 generally
3. Kenneth Lamott, *Anti-California: Report from our First Parafascist State*, Little Brown, 1971, p. 154
4. Michael Klare, “The Military Research Network—America’s Fourth Armed Service,” *Taking Power: the Sources and Consequences of Political Challenge*, ed. John C. Leggett, Harper & Row Publishers, 1973, p. 387
5. *Ibid.*, p. 197
6. James Kunen, *The Strawberry Statement: Notes of a College Revolutionary*, Random House, 1969, p. 22
7. Robert F. Barsky, *Noam Chomsky: A Life of Dissent*, The MIT Press, 1998, p. 140
8. Kirkpatrick Sale, *SDS: The rise and development of the Students for a Democratic Society*, Vintage Books, 1973, p. 123 https://archive.org/details/sds_kirkpatrick_sale
9. Joshua Bloom & Waldo E. Martin, Jr., *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party*, University of California Press, 2016, p. 263
10. Sale, *SDS*, p. 317

11. Julius Lester, *Revolutionary Notes*, Grove Press, Inc., 1969, p. 53
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14
13. Gerald W. Johnson, *Peril and Promise: An Inquiry into Freedom of the Press*, Harper & Brothers, 1958, p. 28
14. Kunen, *The Strawberry Statement*, p. 53-54
15. Frank Donner, *Age of Surveillance*, Vintage Press, 1981, pp. 260-1
16. Barsky, *Noam Chomsky*, p. 141
17. Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: the Life and Times*, The University of Chicago Press, 2001, pp. 322
18. Lester, *Revolutionary Notes*, pp. 74-75
19. In *The Troubles*, historian Joseph Conlin sneers at and mocks essentially every action and person involved in the radical movements of the 1960s and '70s: Huey Newton was, among other things, "Bright but pampered and lazy" and had a "magnetism unlikely to attract adults" [pp. 150-51]; the Panthers provided only a "veneer" of ideological substance [p. 156]; Julius Lester was "a Negro New Leftist who was an early exploiter of bourgeois white guilt as well as a victim of its delusions" [p. 178]; Malcolm X, too, was in Conlin's summary guilty of peddling self-flagellation to liberals racked with white guilt. But Chomsky gets no mentions in Conlin's book, possibly just because he was not a particularly consequential figure in radical circles, but maybe because Conlin approved of Chomsky's extremely conservative attitudes towards resistance. Joseph Conlin, *The Troubles: a jaundiced glance back at the movement of the 60's*, Watts, 1982.
20. Stephen Fortunato, Jr., and Others, "Thou Shalt Not Kill," *We Won't Go: Personal Accounts of War Objectors*, ed. Alice Lynd, Beacon Press, 1968, p. 81
21. James Johnson, "The Fort Hood Three," *We Won't Go: Personal Accounts of War Objectors*, ed. Alice Lynd, Beacon Press, 1968, p. 187
22. David Mitchell, "What is a Criminal?," *We Won't Go*, pp. 92-3
23. Tom Bell, "Organizing Draft Resistance," *We Won't Go*, p. 219
24. John Otis Sumrall, "Freedom at Home," *We Won't Go*, p. 91
25. Willard Gaylin M.D., *In the Service of Their Country: War Resisters in Prison*, The Viking Press, 1968, p. 223
26. *Ibid.*, p. 88
27. Barsky, *Noam Chomsky*, p. 126
28. Donner, *Age of Surveillance*, p. 218
29. Wolfgang B. Sperlich, *Noam Chomsky*, Reaktion Books, 2006. p. 85
30. Joes Segal, *Art and Politics: Between Purity and Propaganda*, Amsterdam Universal Press B.V., 2016. p. 77
31. Robert Ivanov, *Blacks in United States History*, Progress Publishers, 1985, p. 245
32. "Internal Security Act," *Encyclopedia of Japanese Internment*, ed. Gary Y. Okihiro, Greenwood, 2013. p. 71
33. Norman Mailer, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, Signet Books, 1968, p. 171
34. Lamott, *Anti-California*, p. 165
35. Robert L. Allen, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America: an Analytic History*, Doubleday Anchor, 1970, p. 259
36. Doug Valentine, *The Phoenix Program*.

37. Lester, *Revolutionary Notes*, p. 66
38. Karl Evanzz, *The Judas Factor: the Plot to Kill Malcolm X*, Basic Books, 1993, pp. 270-72
39. Ibid., pp. 311-13
40. *Malcolm X Speaks*, ed. George Breitman, Grove Press, 1965, p. 132
41. Ibid., pp. 82-93
42. Ibid., p. 93
43. Ta-Nehisi Coates, *We Were Eight Years in Power: an American Tragedy*, One World, 2017, p. 100

Noam Chomsky and the Compatible Left, Part III

Posted on [March 6, 2019](#)

[Read Part I here](#) and [Part II here](#)

The Left gets Hoped and Changed

One of the more insidious aspects of contemporary American mass culture is how [it is celebrated as something so progressive](#) at a time when it is more reactionary than at any point in living memory. Look at the spectacle around *Black Panther* from last year—a film that features a black hero teaming up with the CIA to kill African radicals. Black representation on film is actually much worse than it was 20 years ago, although we’re told it’s becoming better than ever. In the early 1990s, it was probably *more* common to see movies and TV shows with mostly African-American talent in front of and behind the camera. More importantly, the messages were mostly better, too. In *New Jack City*, for one, the villain, a drug lord played by Wesley Snipes, even explains that he’s just a pure expression of capitalism. It’s a similar story with the case of *Dead Presidents*, which told the somewhat sanitized story of a black guerrilla gang and contained the message that Vietnam was “not our war.” The first Marvel superhero blockbuster, 1998’s *Blade*, actually featured two black leads, but it wasn’t a grand progressive event because media consumption had yet to be remade as political praxis.

To return to the example of *JFK* which Chomsky so dislikes, [Roger Ebert called *JFK* the best film of 1991](#), while his successor Richard Roeper called it “utterly crapola” and “journalistically bankrupt nonsense.” [Roeper had nothing but good things](#) to say about *American Sniper*, which unlike *JFK* actually is journalistically bankrupt nonsense and utter crapola, in addition to being genuinely boring and as hokey as a Hummel figurine. To use another example from the film industry, director Jonathan Demme used the Portuguese expression *A luta continua* as the motto of his production company. “A luta continua” was a motto of various Marxist-Leninist liberation groups in Lusophone Africa, including Mozambique’s FRELIMO and Angola’s MPLA. Demme got it from making music videos for Artists United Against Apartheid, and it appeared in the credits of several of his films, including *Silence of the Lambs* and *Philadelphia*, into the mid-’90s. It’s very hard to imagine Damien Chazelle sticking a *labaykh ya Nasrallah* at the end of *First Man*.

The TeleCommunications Act of 1996 bulldozed most of the heterogeneity that existed in American media up to that point, but before that, you could still occasionally see things like Montel Williams giving airtime to [Gary Webb and Ricky Ross to talk about CIA drug-running](#), or a local CBS affiliate inviting [Huey Newton and Ishmael Reed to talk about black masculinity](#) and the media. More in keeping with what people are told today, an NBC News piece on Trevor Noah's debut as host of *The Daily Show*, which pointed to the use of a Kanye West song to connect the program to the legacy of Malcolm X and call it "[the most racially and politically radical debut in Late Night TV History](#)," omitting the fact that the actual Malcolm X used to appear on TV. In the late 1980s and early '90s, a comic book company in California named Eclipse Comics enlisted some big names like Alan Moore, Joyce Brabner, and Bill Sienkiewicz to release [anti-war comics](#) and "trading card" sets on [US-backed dictators](#), [Iran-Contra](#), and the JFK assassination conspiracy. Moore and Sienkiewicz [did an awesome single-issue](#) detailing the history of CIA covert actions, coups, and killings. This is the sort of radical work that's unimaginable today; these days, [issues-oriented comic fare is mostly regime change-friendly "creative nonfiction"](#). The left-liberal milieu in academia, publishing, and law was still substantively radical enough that people like William Kunstler, Michael Ratner, Christopher Simpson, and Frank Donner were still doing great work into the 1990s.

In a 1989 interview, Angela Davis sounded an optimistic note about the upcoming decade (which sounds like the sort of thing someone might say today): "[Young people who were hardly born in the late '60s](#) seem to be not only concerned about racism, sexism, issues affecting working people" but want to act on those concerns.

Sure, they also want to get their MBAs and get on with the business of making money but that, says Davis, is nothing new.

In the '60s, she says, "white students would come out en masse around issues related to the war in Vietnam. They would not come out en masse to defend black political prisoners or associate themselves with the Black Panther Party." Today, she believes, white students understand that fighting racism is not an act of charity but is very much in their self-interest.

Back in 1992, "[we were transferring black rage to white kids](#) and white kids were mad at the same stuff that black kids were mad at," said artist Ice-T last year. Today, "these kids are soft. Right now there is no rage. We are dealing with a very delusional state of the world and the only thing that woke the world up is Donald Trump's maniac ass... I've been calling it a pop bubble of bullshit."

I've shared [this video of Richard Pryor explaining](#) the persistence of racism before, and it's worth highlighting for 2 reasons. First, there is the fact that a comedian and celebrity could explain the fact that white supremacy is not the result of confusion, stupidity, or myopia: it exists primarily because it is profitable. The second reason, though, is the commentary beaming that "Richard Pryor nails the connection between racism and capitalism 40 years ago!" It's great that people are able to discover the ideas of the radical heyday. But the fact that these insights seem so astonishing today shows how effective the effort to erase connections with the revolutionary activism of the past has been. Organic

radical thinking like that shown by Pryor wasn't a rare bolt from the blue 40 years ago; it was more of the norm.

Though Trump took some of the gild off the lily, the idea that progressivism was surging in Obama era America after some moribund decades was an inversion of the truth. The proximity to the revolutionary high tide meant that the political culture even during the Reagan and George H. W. Bush years was much better in general—the content of the “Left” was more substantively progressive, the liberals were actually a lot more “woke,” politics was more *political* and less religious, and so on.

Over the years, there have been plenty of reactionary “movements” or ideologies which use a progressive veneer to shift people rightwards. Zionism has been one of these: during the first decades of the Zionist entity's existence, there was quite a successful effort to present the state of Israel as an exciting experiment in socialism, and to frame Arab nationalist resistance as the genocidal heir to European Nazism. “Hanoi” Jane Fonda achieved American infamy for doing one of the greatest things a Hollywood celebrity had ever done; namely, going to Vietnam during the war and expressing solidarity with people valiantly resisting extermination. By the early 1980s, Western audiences had been subjected to years of media conditioning about Israel as a bastion of democratic freedom on a frontier populated by violent savages. In 1981, promoting the Israelis vs. Arabs thriller *Rollover*, Fonda warned that “If we aren't afraid of Arabs, we'd better examine our heads. They have strategic power over us. They are unstable. They are fundamentalist, anti-woman, anti free-press.”¹ She has spent the subsequent years apologizing for her Vietnamese anti-aircraft photo-op. Israel is also the major connective tissue between 2012 Green Party-Roseanne Barr and 2016 Donald Trump-Roseanne Barr.

Speaking of anti-Arab sentiment: Islamophobia, particularly after 9/11, is another one of these levers. 9/11 was the pretext for people like Christopher Hitchens to switch *rhetorically* from liberalism or Trotskyism to neoconservatism, much like fear of the radicalism of the 1960s turned many liberals and Trotskyites into the nucleus of the future neoconservative movement. There's a straight line from Sam Harris believing that Muslims have to be mass-surveilled, racially profiled, and tortured for the good of Western civilization to now promoting Charles Murray and Jordan Peterson. You could consider “humanitarian intervention” discourse to be another one of these levers, which turned so many liberals into frothing hawks in the 1990s. The current mainstream anti-Trump campaign is one, too: it's so suffused with Orientalist racism, anti-Semitic tropes, and Nazi-originated anti-Communism that most Democrats now sound like Birchers and show no signs of the fever breaking.

Obama's legacy includes many parts, including solidifying a new Gilded Age and generally arrogating to the president the power of a king. Although it's hard and maybe impossible to quantify, his ascendancy looks like it made liberal politics much more religious in general. We can see this manifested in the way that the consumption of major media products like Hollywood blockbusters has become a referendum on the virtue of the consumer. Think of how the release of a Disney Corporation movie is treated as an event with political significance on par with the raid on Harper's Ferry. Obama's status as an individual who would obviate

racism by his own personal magic surely made it easier to turn brands—as he himself was—into things with metaphysical progressive powers.

These reactionary levers work like they do because they are modeled after liberal-sounding ideologies. Zionism was sold as a “civilizing mission” in the style of European colonialism, which later took on the dimension of being reparations for the Holocaust. Bill Maher-style Muslim-bashing purports to be a defense of Western democratic values from barbaric Oriental tyranny. Brand Obama, for its part, was explicitly constructed to resemble the progressive mass-movements of the ‘60s and ‘70s, with elements of religious evangelism in service of a right-wing corporate agenda.

The man himself established the tone for his future presidency during his 2004 address at the Democratic Convention, which could be best summarized as a “woke” spin on traditionally über-patriotic American exceptionalism. “My father got a scholarship to study in a magical place—America—that is shown as a beacon of freedom and opportunity,” he said. One *Guardian* write-up of the 2004 DNC speech noted at the time that it was ultimately more conservative bootstraps mythmaking: “He described his father’s struggle as a foreign student newly arrived from Kenya, and paid tribute to his white maternal grandmother’s work on a bomb assembly line during the second world war. But he shied away from explicit appeals for civil rights or racial equality, using his family history as a lesson in self-reliance.”² At this point Obama had already been ordained by the right-wing Democratic Leadership Council; as soon as he joined the Senate he began currying the favor of the super-rich and the Pentagon. In 2005, *Chicago Tribune* reporter Jeff Zeleznny described how the freshman Senator was amassing “an army” of rich backers across the country, including billionaire investor Warren Buffet:

“I’ve got a conviction about him that I don’t get very often,” Warren Buffett explained later in an interview. “He has as much potential as anyone I’ve seen to have an important impact over his lifetime on the course that America takes. By year’s end, Obama will have collected about \$1.2 million as he builds a coast-to-coast army of backers. At a seafood lunch in Beverly Hills, Calif., a dinner in Austin, Texas, or through events in more than a dozen other cities, Obama is creating a network unlike any other freshman senator since Hillary Rodham Clinton.

*[T]heir friendship has provided Obama entree into at least a slice of Buffett’s vast and influential circle, including a dinner this year with Bill Gates, a close Buffett friend. And among those in the Omaha living room was Donald Graham, chairman of The Washington Post Co.*³

Obama’s “anti-war” credibility rested on his single 2002 speech about how the attack on Iraq was a bad idea, but once the war started, [his campaign scrubbed the speech from his website](#) and the candidate basically aligned himself with the Bush White House while issuing superficial complaints. He told reporters attending the 2004 DNC that “On Iraq... There’s not that much difference between my position and George Bush’s position at this stage. The difference, in my mind, is who’s in a position to execute.”⁴ That year, the freshman Senator told Charlie Rose that “[I’m a hawk when it comes to defeating terrorism](#). I was strongly supportive of Afghanistan. I would have picked up arms myself to

prevent 9/11 again.” A year later, Republican Senator Richard Lugar, whom *The Atlantic* once dubbed “[perhaps the most influential U.S. senator](#) in the realm of foreign policy since Scoop Jackson,” formalized Obama’s induction into the Pentagon priesthood by choosing the second most-junior Senator as a protégé (“I very much feel like the novice and pupil,” he said during a 2005 trip to Ukraine with Lugar.⁵

Other than calling the Iraq War “dumb” in 2002, none of this differed greatly from Hillary Clinton or John McCain. A progressive façade had to be manufactured out of a lot of strategic ambiguity and savvy direct-messaging to the liberal netroots. “[One evening in February 2005](#),” according to the *Chicago Tribune*, “Senator Barack Obama and his senior advisers crafted a strategy to fit the ‘brand.’” It would be in keeping with his record in the Illinois State Senate (where he mostly voted “present”), which was vague rhetoric married to a corporatist agenda. Here again is the *Tribune*:

Throughout his time in the Senate, Obama has followed a cautious path, avoiding any severe political bruises. Even before the national mood was turning on Iraq, Obama was a critic of the war, but for most of his time in the Senate he was not a strong voice in opposition. Similarly, the former civil rights attorney and law lecturer did not take to the bully pulpit to speak out publicly on judicial appointments. His strategy called for him to turn away from the cameras when he might otherwise have been a resonant voice.

In 2006, the *Tribune* described some more of the Senator’s trademark strategic ambiguity:

From the moment he arrived here, Obama has been the object of much affection, particularly among Democrats who viewed him as a beacon for the party’s future... While the newfound visibility has fanned speculation about his political ambitions, it also has spawned questions from a growing number of Democrats about how he intends to use his megaphone as he carefully navigates between the political left and the center. “Everyone has their hopes and dreams invested in him, but it will be more of a severe blow if he doesn’t do something to show results—not today or tomorrow, but soon,” said a Democratic strategist, speaking on condition of anonymity to talk candidly about Obama.

For all the publicity surrounding his entrance to the Senate, Obama remains largely undefined on a broad spectrum of issues. His carefully phrased criticisms of Republicans—and Democrats—allow supporters to find both sides of an argument in his words.

Obama’s balancing act was possibly the preeminent characteristic of his political career, and what made him such a uniquely skilled politician. One finds it in his tenure in the Illinois State Senate, and even back in his Harvard days. This is from a 1990 report on the future president’s election to the head of the Harvard Law Review:

Some of Obama’s peers question the motives of this second-year law student. They find it puzzling that despite Obama’s openly progressive views on social issues, he has also won support from staunch conservatives. Ironically, he has come under the most criticism from fellow black students for being too conciliatory toward conservatives and not choosing more blacks to other top positions on the law review.⁶

This blank-slate approach was a perfect canvas for reflecting the fantasies of disaffected progressives, who were invited to project onto him through appeals delivered via hipper new forums. “In addition to his book, rereleased after its original publication in 1995, he has embraced newly powerful forms of media,” Zelezny wrote in 2005. “Through weekly podcasts, Web logs and appearances on programs including *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, his exposure multiplies, and so do his investors... Beyond entertainment, Obama devotes considerable time to generating discussion among Democrats, particularly in grass-roots Internet venues. In the flourishing world of political debate on the Web, Obama is seen as almost a cultlike figure, with people praising him as the hope and future of their party.”⁷

The national campaign would require a twist on these existing elements. Harvard professor Marshall Ganz joined the Obama campaign in May 2007 and devised an innovative advertising scheme that would be the foundation for Obamania. The campaign came up with a series of marketing seminars called Camp Obama trainings, where activists studied the 2004 address and were taught “values” that he allegedly represented, which they would use to evangelize on the candidate’s behalf. Ganz explains that [his feel-good storytelling techniques were modeled](#) off of elements from the Civil Rights, feminist, and United Farm Workers movements of 50 years ago. Unlike these mass-movements, though, the campaign did not advance a collectively devised progressive agenda—it “focused mostly on storytelling, and dropped the other organizing skills. According to Aaron Schutz and Marie Sandy, the Obama election campaign resembled more an evangelical effort of conversion than an organizing campaign.”^{8*}

Ganz describes the Obama marketing blitz as something which bolted the apparatus of a mass movement—“lateral’ connections,” “volunteer engagement,” and “social capital”—onto an advertising campaign on behalf of billionaires and the Pentagon. Ganz claimed that the electoral effort would draw its strength from “values” rather than “ideas,” replacing [“issues-based organizing”](#) with “values-based organizing.” This all sounds very nice, but it’s unmistakably Madison Avenue rather than Mothers Against the War. An example of how the values-over-issues scam worked was Obama’s approach to executive illegality. He said in the abstract that “the era of Scooter Libby justice...will be over” once elected, but he specifically said that Bush did not commit any “serious breaches” of the law, and he voted to immunize telecom companies who had spied illegally after 9/11. The “values” are supposed to be justice and fairness, but on all the actual issues, he clearly supported the White House breaking the law with impunity. One can value peace in the abstract, but the way to achieve it is to shut down wars, otherwise the “values” are meaningless (“What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds?,” asks the Book of James, “Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” Leave it to core politics to be *more religious than religion*). In contrast, appeals to universally loved values and positive vibes are how corporations compel consumers to sign up for an American Express card instead of a Visa. The emphasis on “values” meant the candidate could be all

things to all people—who doesn't like hope? Meanwhile, in real life, the man himself supported all sorts of issues and ideas, ideas which were very popular with the millionaires, billionaires, and [right-wingers who came out in droves support him](#) in 2008.

In a blog entry posted in March 2008 (and deleted, for whatever reason, about a year later), tech billionaire Mark Andreessen described how he came to support the Obama campaign after meeting the candidate privately in February 2007. Andreessen said that he was convinced Obama was several important things, including “[not a radical](#).”

“This is not some kind of liberal revolutionary who is intent on throwing everything up in the air and starting over,” wrote the influential Silicon Valley oligarch. “Put the primary campaign speeches aside; take a look at his policy positions on any number of issues and what strikes you is how reasonable, moderate, and thoughtful they are.” Andreessen also praised Obama for abandoning what he saw as the baggage of the revolutionary era. “Most of the Boomers I know are still fixated on the 1960's in one way or another—generally in how they think about social change, politics, and the government. It's very clear when interacting with Senator Obama that he's totally focused on the world as it has existed since *after* the 1960's.”

Of course, despite repudiating radicalism, Obama saw enough to admire in these movements to poach their aesthetics in order to get elected. In 2007 Ryan Lizza wrote a typically reverent profile of the candidate in the *New Republic*, which demonstrates how successful Obama was at cloaking himself in the superficial trappings of the '60s while serving as an anodyne cipher who gave his fans warm-fuzzies: “[Obama is linking himself to America's radical democratic tradition](#),” wrote Lizza, a tradition whose practitioners “became famous in the '60s for the political theater championed by [Saul] Alinsky,” yet the “post-partisan consensus builder” [“consensus builder,” why does [that sound so darn familiar?](#)] nevertheless “gives the impression of being above the ideological fray” and “is a generation removed from the polarizing turmoil of the 1960s. The mirror he holds up is invariably flattering—reflecting back a tolerant, forward-looking electorate ready to unite around his consensus-minded brand of politics.” (Lizza also tells an incredible story of Obama dressing-down a panhandler, scolding the poor man about personal responsibility. [Seriously](#).) The intended effect of all of this was to portray Obama as a figure who embodied the transformative progressive promise of the era's radical movements, while at the same time transcending their excesses, rough edges, and controversies through his unique personal magic.

While much of Obamania's deformative effect on the wider progressive culture is hard to trace, there are certain direct links. Ganz's techniques in selling Obama were widely circulated to foundations, NGOs, and institutions like the Sierra Club and MoveOn. In this regard, the Obama campaign, which was so successful at defusing radical sentiment, fed back into the wider “nonprofit-industrial complex” that had been co-opting anti-establishment feeling for decades. One of the responses to the radical movements of the '60s and '70s was [an explosion in funding for NGOs](#) and foundations that would draw in resistance and steer it into acceptable channels—making activists beholden to the Ford Foundation instead

of their communities. In 1974, activist/scholar Abdul Alkalimat (f.k.a. Gerald McWhorter) warned that the black liberation struggle was threatened by “[the main agents of the imperialist system](#)” like Richard Nixon, “all agencies that serve the ruling class” like the RAND corporation and the Council on Foreign Relations, and “philanthropic foundations like Ford and Rockefeller.” Alkalimat is another revolutionary of the era who was both [a more prolific writer](#) and more radical thinker than Chomsky, and yet he remained a relative unknown as the MIT professor was becoming a household name. 40 years later, he said: *[The movement toward social equality by African Americans has been reversed and exists now for an ever smaller section of the Black middle class. The autonomy of our social justice movements, and movement for political empowerment has been replaced by state and foundation funded NGO’s who set the agenda and parameters for “radical discourse.” Voting rights are being eliminated state by state. Much of this is being implemented by a government led by Black people.](#)*

The ruling class could not rely on force alone, so “setting the agenda and parameters for radical discourse” was an essential part of remaining in power, as Richard Wright observed in 1960. That year, Wright somehow learned that the Congress for Cultural Freedom was a CIA front—in 1950, the group had convened numerous Western intellectuals like Bertrand Russell to promote “intellectual freedom”; it was 100 percent CIA funded and its executive director, Michael Josselson, was an agent. “The Americans now do all their important work through the non-communist left,” Wright wrote to a friend, “an anti-communist left which they bought and they control.”⁹

Making activists beholden to big-business foundations was another way to recover lost ground: “Philanthropy suggests yet another explanation for the decline of the 1960s’ and 1970s’ protest movements,” writes Andrea Smith. “Radical activism often was transformed by grants and technical assistance from liberal foundations into fragmented and local organizations subject to elite control. Energies were channeled into safe, legalistic, bureaucratic and, occasionally, profit-making activities.”¹⁰ The Obama campaign was an escalation of this, and truly represented a major coup. At least NGOs were nominally associated with causes and “issue-based organizing”—the campaign finally severed idealistic progressives from the world of “ideas” (to quote Ganz) and funneled them into a cult-like marketing campaign, with some grassroots trappings, on behalf of Wall Street. This is why his campaign won AdAge’s marketer of the year in 2008: every advertiser’s wildest dream is to convince the public to treat their product the way they would a religion or a social movement. The effects of this billion-dollar marketing blitz have been profound. Obama had—and continues to have—a singularly powerful sway over the left-liberal ecosystem of which Chomsky is the pre-eminent luminary. This power is attested-to by how many of the prominent rebels of yesteryear made a journey over the decades through small businesses, foundations, and NGOs and into the Illinois Senator’s 2008 campaign.

Michael Klonsky of the SDS “[today \[2008\] supports Barack Obama so enthusiastically](#)” that until recently he was blogging on the Illinois senator’s campaign website. And boycotting *this* November’s election, Klonsky maintains,

would be a 'tragic mistake.' He notes that Barack Obama isn't Hubert Humphrey, 2008 isn't 1968, and the strong movement he served back then is 'relatively weak' now. 'My own support for Obama is...a recognition that the Obama campaign has become a rallying point for young activists and offers hope for rebuilding the civil rights and antiwar coalitions that have potential to become a real critical force in society.'"

Progressives for Obama resembles a Who's Who of SDS luminaries. In addition to [Tom] Hayden, [Mark] Rudd, and [Carl] Davidson, the group includes Bob Pardun, SDS's education secretary during the 1966–67 school year; Paul Buhle, a radical professor who has recently attempted to revive SDS; Mickey and Dick Flacks, red-diaper babies who helped craft 1962's Port Huron Statement, a seminal New Left document; and SDS's third president, Todd Gitlin.

But given the substance of his policies on the 2008 campaign trail, Barack Obama's 1968 analogue was not Hubert Humphrey and certainly not Eugene McCarthy, it was Richard Nixon.

Despite the fact that Nixon was a product of the far-right political ecosystem, journalist William A. Reuben observed that the man who was at that point the Vice President owed much of his success to a lot of strategic ambiguity. "Nixon's fabulous career is a triumph of modern-day sales, advertising and public relations techniques—and gimmicks."

In the brief ten-year span of his public career, Mr. Nixon has been presented to the public in many guises. He has portrayed himself as a conservative, liberal, and middle-of-the-roader. He has had the support of many who believed him to be an isolationist and a conservative, as well as those convinced he is a liberal internationalist; he has been hailed as both pro- and anti-McCarthyite; and even he palmed himself off to unsuspecting voters of the 12th California Congressional district as a Democrat. On a matter of issues, he has managed to take a position at every step of the gamut.¹¹

In 1969, President Nixon inherited a war that a significant portion of the ruling class had determined was doing more harm than good. Between 1967 and 1969, a majority of the public went from supporting the Vietnam War to opposing it. Protests were growing, and increasing numbers of people were sharpening their critiques into something against the capitalist system. The Nixon Administration responded by several means, primarily: 1) escalating secret police violence, 2) shifting towards bombing over boots-on-the-ground, 3) escalating terror in Southeast Asia through the CIA and Special Operations Forces, and 4) making certain concessions in order to cleave liberals away from the radical movements. The Bush administration had enjoyed widespread bipartisan support for its Global War on Terror, but by 2005, resistance in Iraq and the disaster of Katrina had done serious damage to America's reputation. Moreover, there were growing anti-war and immigrants' rights movements to contend with even before the 2008 financial crisis, the latter of which made a major rebranding a necessity. At the end of the Bush years, Zbigniew Brzezinski summarized the sentiment of a majority of America's ruling class when he complained that the President's "[Manichaeian paranoia](#)" had "squandered our credibility, our legitimacy, and even respect for our power."

Like many, Brzezinski recognized that Hillary was too “conventional” to undo Bush’s damage and it was only Obama’s rhetoric and résumé which had the unique power to “[change the nature of America’s relationship with the world](#),” as he explained when endorsing Obama in August 2007 and officially joining his campaign as its foreign affairs guru. As Ganz himself said, the Illinois Senator’s unconventional aesthetics were his single strongest selling-point. The “[Obama campaign departed sharply](#) from what had become the conventional way to run campaigns [and this] was a wise choice because for the insurgent Obama candidacy a conventional approach could only have strengthened the hand of the candidate with more conventional resources.” One tech executive said it best: “[His unique life history arguably puts him in a better position](#) than any other candidate to change the anti-American attitudes rife in many other countries. What other candidate could do that simply by being elected?”

Obama himself understood that this was his job: as he told reporters in 2004, “I am skeptical that the Bush administration, given baggage from the past three years, not just on Iraq... I don’t see them having the credibility to be able to execute [the War on Terror]. I mean, you have to have a new administration to execute what the Bush administration acknowledges has to happen.”¹² If the big-business press was what it claimed to be, there would have been no surprise that Obama governed as a “Bush 2.0.” He said he would do just that, and he said so as early as 2004.

Much like Nixon, Obama stewarded the empire through the crisis by 1) escalating secret police powers (see the 2012 NDAA), 2) shifting towards drone strikes and local proxies over major invasions (echoes of secret wars past and “anything that flies on everything that moves”), 3) drastically expanding the scope of CIA covert actions and Special Operations Forces, and 4) [causing the anti-war movement to evaporate](#). As far as a policy platform, Obama’s vague gestures towards anti-war sentiment most closely resemble Nixon’s “secret plans” to end the war in Vietnam. After the Tet offensive in 1968, the CIA escalated the notorious Phoenix Program, a project to subjugate Vietnam through the widespread use of torture, assassinations, and psychological warfare. In Doug Valentine’s *The Phoenix Program*, he quotes one Vietnamese author who describes Phoenix with words that could have been said about Afghanistan or Yemen post-2009: “Phoenix is a series of big continuous operations which, because of the bombing, destroy the countryside and put innocent people to death... In the sky are armed helicopters, but on the ground are the black uniforms, doing what they want where the helicopters and B-52’s do not reach... Americans in black uniforms are the most terrible.”

Of course, there were some major differences between the two presidents, beyond the superficial ones. After the invasion of Cambodia, hundreds of universities were shut down in May 1970, leading to shootings at universities in Kent, Ohio and Jackson, Mississippi. The protests were so widespread that Nixon became extremely alarmed, making an [impromptu 5am visit to the Washington Monument](#) to confer with anti-war activists. On the other hand, since would-be activists were encouraged to support and even love Obama, rather than see him as their enemy, the scaling-up of wars against countries like Pakistan and Yemen did not lead to the mass shutting-down of universities. Instead, the White House

escalated imperialism and lawlessness, assassinating the first American citizens in 2011. A few years later, an alleged black extremist would be put to death via robot bomb in Dallas, bringing drone killings home for the first time. In order to hobble the anti-war movement, Nixon had to at least make changes like switching from a draft army to the all-volunteer force. In contrast, because progressive activists were encouraged to campaign for him rather than protest against him, Obama managed to cripple the anti-war movement mostly by just existing. As far as “just existing” is concerned, he is peerless—he even won a Nobel Prize for it. It turned out that a candidate who told the *Chicago Tribune* editorial board in 2004 that he [supported a pre-emptive strike on Iran](#), and said in 2006 that “[I believe that US forces](#) are still a part of the solution in Iraq” had very different goals than activists interested in “rebuilding the civil rights and antiwar coalitions,” as Klonsky put it. Consequently, perceiving him as anything other than an enemy made his campaign a “rallying point for young activists” in the same sense that a whale’s gullet is a “rallying point” for plankton and krill. But, as with so much else about his campaign, it was designed that way.

“Observers of the Obama campaign have noted that there was a concerted effort not to engage young people who were already organized into networks, which would require a higher degree of accountability from the president once in office,” writes Sujatha Fernandes. “Because they were not organized outside of electoral campaign networks, these volunteers were disempowered once the campaign was over, with few channels to press their concerns before and established administration.”¹³ Pushing activists out of movements and into an electoral campaign is inherently disempowering, because an electoral campaign offers them no leverage to get their demands met. “The Obama project co-opted that brewing storm from below,” writes William I. Robinson, “channeled it into the electoral campaign, and then betrayed those aspirations, as the Democratic Party effectively demobilized the insurgency from below with more passive revolution.”¹⁴

Since Obama so successfully captured the imaginations of people who would have protested the same policies coming from a Republican, he was able to be more reactionary than Richard Nixon—as [both he and Chomsky](#) have pointed out. Richard Nixon never told activists to “make him do it” because they were actually making him do things; Obama said “make me do it” because he knew activists had already surrendered that power.

By the president’s second term, even Angela Davis was defending Obama with the “make him do it” myth. In 2014, she was asked about black deaths at the hands of police, and said “[people like to point to Obama as an individual](#) and hold him responsible for the madness that has happened. Of course there are things that Obama as an individual might have done better but people who invested their hopes in him were approaching the issue of political futures in the wrong way to begin with—it’s always a collective process to change the world.” If the name “Obama” were substituted with “George Zimmerman” it would be correctly called bullshit of the highest order, but such is the previous president’s unique power. Obama was no more and no less individually responsible for American white supremacy than Ronald Reagan, and yet, observing that “[life for many American blacks](#) is worse now [in the 1980s] than in [Dr. Martin Luther] King’s day,” Davis

said the Reagan administration “[created a climate](#)” that legitimized racism and made America “[the most sexist, the most racist](#), the most warlike government in the entire history of our country.”

But if that was true about Reagan, what was black life like under Barack Obama? [Black and Latino wealth plummeted](#) under Obama much as it did under Reagan, with one 2015 report from the Boston branch of the Federal Reserve, Duke University, and the New School showing that the [household median net worth](#) of white families was \$247,500 versus \$8 for black families in Boston. One article from 2013 noted that corporate profits “[are more than twice as high as their peak](#) during President Ronald Reagan’s administration.” Obama repudiated the very concept of black America, saying in his 2006 speech at the Democratic Convention that “there is no white America, no black America, only the United States of America.” [He praised Reagan frequently](#), saying during the 2008 election that unlike Franklin Roosevelt, Reagan was a transformative figure. It’s easy to explain why various Republican policies look fascist, but Obama was very good at making things like the extradition of Assata Shakur, the assassination of Ferguson activists, or an anti-Russia campaign straight out of Nazi Germany look like something other than fascism.

Most Democratic politicians are whitewashed with the narrative that they don’t believe anything, but this is not true, as in the case of Obama’s rhetorical love of Reagan matching his zeal for Reagan-esque policies. Obama actually lived up to his word quite frequently, though you wouldn’t know it by reading Angela Davis. The effort to make Obama a blameless and agency-free figure was not only for the sake of his legacy, it was part of a campaign to undo the idea that political opinions should be situated in “issue-based” reality, rather than superficial “value-based” gestures and partisan affiliation. “Leftists” who insisted on factual analysis would be “purists”—if not even the President of the United States was accountable for his actions, who on Earth could be responsible for anything? The Team Good/Team Bad dichotomy between how Davis treats Obama and Reagan tells you this is religion, not politics.

Angela Davis and roughly one-third of the CPUSA [began a new democratic socialist party](#) after 1991. Known as the [Committees of Correspondence](#) for Democracy and Socialism (CC-DS), the group quickly became more inconsequential than even the CPUSA of 1992. If you go to the group’s website, they will tell you the following about Barack Obama:

[The 2008 election was a blow against right-wing reaction](#) that portends a left-center realignment of the nation’s politics. It was the response of a rising progressive majority that matured during eight years of neoconservative policies that represented the most reactionary sectors of US capital. The election of Barack Obama to the presidency is an historic affirmation of centuries of struggle against oppression and racism—a struggle that continues with new inspiration.

This is not the organization’s line from 2008, but *today*. It’s also pretty much what Davis’ previous outfit, the CPUSA, says. But again, such is his power. One of Mae Brussell’s acolytes, who had done a decade of great research during the administration of Ronald the fascist devil Reagan, nevertheless came to be very

fond of Reagan's future White House successor. While raising some great questions about the Ed Snowden scam, he nonetheless warned:

[It is a safe bet that the resulting alienation of the young](#), idealistic voters who rallied to Obama in 2008 contributed to the low voter turnout in the 2014 off-year elections. That low voter turnout, in turn, contributed to the election of the pro-[David] Duke, anti-Social Security GOP.

The GOP is indeed hostile to social security, one of the last vestiges of the New Deal. But in 2012 President Obama said "[I suspect that, on Social Security](#)," he and Mitt Romney have "got a somewhat similar position. Social Security is structurally sound. It's going to have to be tweaked the way it was by Ronald Reagan." Yet another positive reference to Ronald Reagan, from a leader who never tired of praising Reagan. Zbigniew Brzezinski, who founded the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation with the fascist Lev Dobriansky, officially joined Obama's team in 2007. Yet even when Obama made good on Reagan's promise to deliver Ukraine to the OUN-B, there were more exculpatory excuses like Republicans "[pressuring Obama](#)" to hand Kiev to Nazis. Team Good, Team Bad.

Even America's most "uncompromising Marxist" professor feels [compelled to lie about Obama's political sympathies and whitewash the 44th president's legacy](#). Another commentator said last year that "[Obama's greatest failing](#)" is that "he didn't clean out the DNC of the Clintonian neoliberals...and the Third-Way Democratic party policies still rule." But lamenting that Obama didn't clean out the Clintonite neoliberals from the DNC makes as much sense as lamenting the fact that Donald Trump didn't purge racists from the GOP. Trump would never do that, obviously, because he is a racist and those are his friends and colleagues, just like Obama is a Clintonian neoliberal and those are his friends and colleagues. Even if someone didn't cotton to that in 2008—when Obama had been anointed by the right-wing DLC, was Wall Street's favorite candidate, and raced to defend the Senate seat of Joe Lieberman—surely it's absurd for progressive commentators to make that mistake in 2017. But again, such is the unique power of Brand Obama.

The previous president's effectiveness in this regard is particularly striking when one considers his effect even on those few left-liberal figures who had his number from day one, whose very small ranks include the MIT intellectual. Take this perceptive and lacerating deconstruction of the Obama marketing myth from the 2008 election:

[Before watching the debate](#), I'd read about how electrifying and inspirational Barack Obama was supposed to be. I'd heard about the arenas jam packed with teary-eyed 20-somethings. I'd seen clips of a wild-eyed Chris Matthews salivating uncontrollably every time the word "Obama" was uttered, as if the slick Illinois senator was standing off-camera ringing a little bell. Indeed he's got about half of the younger-at-heart media demographic responding to that little bell of his, even people that I know.

Now that I've watched Barack Obama debate, and beheld this modern-day Martin Luther King Jr., this Kennedy-meets-Lincoln-by-way-of-John-The-Baptist, along with his co-star in this miserable prime time drama, Hillary Clinton, I gots ta ask: how can you people stand it?

However, even on this foundation, a few years of Obama in the White House was enough to get withering skeptics misty-eyed about the Constitution and the American dream:

[Anytime anyone says anything libertarian](#), spit on them. Libertarians are by definition enemies of the state: they are against promoting American citizens' general welfare and against policies that create a perfect union. Like Communists before them, they are actively subverting the Constitution and the American Dream, and replacing it with a Kleptocratic Nightmare.

Now with a Republican in the office, it's "[Scratch an anti-Communist](#), find a fascist." Good advice.

Paul Street—"Obama's most prolific and early critic on the left"—produced some of the best analysis of what Senator Obama was actually saying and doing. Street looked at *The Audacity of Hope* and asked if Obama's left-liberal fans "[see the part where Obama relates youthful discomfort](#) with his college roommates' 'irresponsible' criticism of 'capitalism' and then confesses respect for Ronald Reagan's supposed success in embodying what Obama calls 'American's longing for order' (p. 31)?"

How about the part where Obama commends "the need to raise money from economic elites to finance elections" for "prevent[ing] Democrats...from straying too far from the center" and for marginalizing "those within the Democratic Party who tend toward zealotry" (p. 38) and "radical ideas" (like peace and justice)? Obama also praises fellow centrist Senators John F. Kerry (D-MA) and Hillary Clinton (D-NY) for "believing in maintaining the superiority of the U.S. military" and embracing "the virtues of capitalism" (p. 38).

The Bush-Cheney gang-bangers are "possessed," Obama says, "of the same mix of virtues and vices, insecurities and long-buried injuries as the rest of us." Then there's the chapter (simply titled "Race") where Obama tries to cover his ass with white America by claiming that "what ails working- and middle-class blacks is not fundamentally different from what ails their white counterparts." Equally soothing to the master race is Obama's argument that "white guilt has largely exhausted itself in America" as "even the most fair-minded of whites...tend to push back against suggestions of racial victimization and race-based claims based on the history of racial discrimination in this country" (p. 247).

But Obama did enough right that even Street could say that Noam Chomsky and Gilbert Achcar had convinced him to support Obama's war on Libya in 2011. "[The knee-jerk, almost self-caricaturing counter from some sides of the so-called radical left](#) says that it's all about Washington's desire to grab Libya's oil," wrote Street, and "Washington's claims of humanitarian concern should be taken with more than a grain of salt, of course." But nevertheless, "Think like Obama from a realpolitik perspective on the potential deadly political consequences of letting Gadaffi move forward with a massacre: significant global and Western public outrage over standing to the side + a worsened economic situation exacerbated by an inevitable embargo = a no-brainer self-interested equation for 'humanitarian intervention.'" It's hard to think of anyone other than Obama making State Department lies look like "a no-brainer" to Street and his audience.

You could add Adolph Reed, Jr., who has the distinction of [having had Obama's number back in 1996](#). Despite saying he didn't vote for him in 2008, Reed claimed that the president was worse than he'd imagined and yet he voted for him in 2012. In 2016 he said it "was important" for people to "[vote for the lying neoliberal warmonger](#)," and even resurrected an anti-Communist smear which was most likely brought into the modern era [by longtime Clinton hatchet-man Sid Blumenthal in a 2008 book](#).

Chomsky, too, was one of the very few people of any prominence to make accurate observations about Obama's actual politics at the time when it mattered. Here is some analysis from October 2008:

[I prefer that Obama be elected without any illusions](#). He is a centrist Democrat who will very likely back away from the more extreme, crazed elements of the Bush programs, but will go pretty much to the center... he had no principled criticism of the war. His only criticism was that it was pointless, silly, or waste of money.

Also from the same month:

[When the German news magazine Der Spiegel asked him](#) if he was fired up with the Democratic candidate's slogan of "Change", Chomsky said: "Not in the least. The European reaction to Obama is a European delusion."

"That is all rhetoric. Who cares about that? This whole election campaign deals with soaring rhetoric, hope, change, all sorts of things, but not with issues," said the world renowned linguist in the interview this month.

A few weeks after Obama's election, it was more good radical commentary debunking the "hope" and "change" scam:

[In an interview with an editor of the Wall Street Journal](#), Emanuel was asked what the Obama administration would do about "the Democratic congressional leadership, which is brimming with left-wing barons who have their own agenda," such as slashing defense spending (in accord with the will of the majority of the population) and "angling for steep energy taxes to combat global warming," not to speak of the outright lunatics in Congress who toy with slavery reparations and even sympathize with Europeans who want to indict Bush administration war criminals for war crimes. "Barack Obama can stand up to them," Emanuel assured the editor. The administration will be "pragmatic," fending off left extremists.

Obama's transition team is headed by John Podesta, Clinton's chief of staff. The leading figures in his economic team are Robert Rubin and Lawrence Summers, both enthusiasts for the deregulation that was a major factor in the current financial crisis.

Internationally, there is not much of substance on the largely blank slate. What there is gives little reason to expect much a change from Bush's second term, which stepped back from the radical ultranationalism and aggressive posture of the first term.

Those are the actions, at the time of writing. The rhetoric is "change" and "hope."

By 2012, having counseled his fans to vote for Obama twice, Chomsky observed with no apparent dissonance that Obama was both "[pretty reactionary](#)" on many issues and "[in many ways he's worse](#)" than George W. Bush.

Part IV coming soon

* The campaign circumvented inconvenient facts about Obama's actual record by employing what can only be described as the tactics of a cult. In a book discussing the 2008 campaign, Aaron Schutz and Marie Sandy describe what went on at Camp Obama trainings, where activists were "converted" into evangelists:

We use "conversion" purposefully, here, because the model Ganz developed was drawn directly from the evangelical religious tradition. The use of personal stories to encourage others to come over to a particular denominational point of view, to an acceptance of a particular religious figure (God, Jesus, Buddha, etc.), is a classic tool used by missionaries and others. In evangelical workshops members are given suggested structures for their conversion stories that look quite similar to those Ganz provided in his trainings. In fact, Ganz was quite clear that his inspiration from this approach came from these religious sources. In the training Exley attended, Ganz asked his audience several times, "Where does your hope come from?" finally getting the answer he wanted, "Faith." "Exactly," Ganz responded, "That's why faith movements and social movements have so much to do with each other." In the workshops, volunteers were taught to tell the stories of their conversion to Obama, just as evangelicals tell about how they were "born again" to those they are seeking to bring into the fold.

Schutz and Sandy insist that what Ganz was running was not a cult because "volunteers didn't have the enormous time required to brainwash anyone," but this is irrelevant—Scientology is the same whether a punter gets a single E-meter reading or whether they clear the Bridge to Total Freedom. More importantly, they then describe classic brainwashing tactics:

At the same time, the particular practice the Obama campaign used, having volunteers retell their conversion stories hundreds if not thousands of times, seems likely to have only intensified their tendency to trust Obama. In their interactions with voters, volunteers were repeatedly telling a story about themselves, who they were, how they thought, and what they cared about. Telling this story with emotion (manufactured at times or not) would seem to be a powerful tool for magnifying commitment among canvassers, something Ganz acknowledged in his organizing course. "The significance of the experience [of moving from despair to hope]," he argued, is "itself strengthened by the telling of it." Telling stories to others is also a form of public commitment making. It is probably harder to change one's mind about something when one has emphatically stressed one's commitment to others in such a public and emotional fashion than if one has simply made a private decision, or even if one has more casually mentioned one's decision to a few others. They declared their "faith" in Obama and connected this to "who" they were.

Repeating an emotionally charged statement *thousands of times* is unmistakably a cult brainwashing technique. Ganz says outright that the extreme repetition was intended to create a deeply felt, irrational fervor: "The significance of the experience [is] itself strengthened by the telling of it." Connecting one's faith in the Messiah to one's very self—"declaring their 'faith' in Obama and connecting this to 'who' they were"—is entirely religious and not even slightly political. What

Schutz and Sandy benignly refer to as “public commitment making” in order to make it “harder to change one’s mind” is the classic method of using group pressure to ensure conformity by crushing critical thinking and skepticism. Schutz and Sandy describe the experience of a woman named Lori who received two canvassers, and it bears all the hallmarks of a visit from religious evangelists: *Two Camp Obama trained volunteers, the foot soldiers of this “movement” were at my front door yesterday. They “loved” Obama and wanted to make sure that I would vote for the man who is transforming politics from all the bitter fighting of the past. They urged me to read his book but couldn’t give me one reason why they thought his positions would be preferable to anyone else’s. In fact, the best they could do is point me to his website if I was really that interested in issues.* This is classic cult behavior: two people “love” their savior for his promises to elevate society beyond bad things, but they can’t explain how that would actually happen. When pressed for specifics, they can only point to the savior’s own words and refer the non-converted to their “movement’s” promotional literature. [Aaron Schutz & Marie G. Sandy, *Collective Action for Social Change: An Introduction to Community Organizing*, Palgrave-MacMillan, 2011, pp. 119-20]

Works Cited:

1. Michael Parenti, *Make-Believe Media: The Politics of Entertainment*, St. Martin’s Press, 1992, p. 30
2. “Barack Obama ‘we must be United.’” *The Guardian*, 29 Jul 2004, pp. 16. *elibrary*, <https://explore.proquest.com/document/246191303>. I got access to this media archive for free through my local library; it’s a fantastic wealth of information and I would highly, highly recommend getting a library card if you don’t already have one!
3. Jeff Zeleny, “Obama’s National Appeal Rallies an Army of Backers Series: SEN. OBAMA’S FIRST YEAR IN WASHINGTON: Fourth in a Series of Reports.” *Chicago Tribune*, 20 Nov 2005
4. David Mendell and, Jeff Z. “Democratic Keynote Speaker Says Bush has Lost Credibility.” *Knight Ridder Tribune News Service*, 26 Jul 2004, pp. 1. *elibrary*, <https://explore.proquest.com/document/457124583?>
5. Jeff Zeleny, “A Foreign Classroom for Junior Senator; Barack Obama Tours the Former Soviet Union, Monitors the Destruction of Cold War Munitions—and Takes Notes from a Senior Statesman Series: SEN. OBAMA’S FIRST YEAR IN WASHINGTON Third in a Series of Reports.” *Chicago Tribune*, 23 Sep 2005
6. Tammerlin Drummond Special to *The Star*, *Los Angeles Times*. “Cook’s Grandson Gets Top Legal Post.” *Toronto Star*, 18 Mar 1990, pp. D5. *elibrary*, <https://explore.proquest.com/document/436151233>.
7. Jeff Zeleny, *Tribune*, “Obama’s National Appeal Rallies an Army of Backers Series: SEN. OBAMA’S FIRST YEAR IN WASHINGTON: Fourth in a Series of Reports.” *Chicago Tribune*, 20 Nov 2005
8. Sujatha Fernandes, *Curated Stories: the Uses and Misuses of Storytelling*, Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 32
9. Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: the Life and Times*, The University of Chicago Press, 2001, p. 519)

10. Andrea Smith, *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, Duke University Press, 2017, p. 121
11. William A. Reuben, *The Honorable Mr. Nixon*, Action Books, 1960. p. i
12. David Mendell & Jeff Z. “Democratic Keynote Speaker Says Bush has Lost Credibility.” *Knight Ridder Tribune News Service*, 26 Jul 2004, pp. 1. *elibrary*, <https://explore.proquest.com/document/457124583?>
13. Fernandes, *Curated Stories*, p. 32
14. William I. Robinson, *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity*, Cambridge University Press, 2014. p. 171

Noam Chomsky and the Compatible Left, Part IV

Posted on [March 7, 2019](#)

[Read Part I here](#), [Part II here](#), and [Part III here](#)

The Professor Becomes What He Always Was

Most of Chomsky’s shortcomings have been present from the beginning. He has long had the tendency to issue searing condemnations of American imperialism while damning its most demonized victims in even more totalizing terms. So despite conceding that Soviet “imperialism” was [more benign](#) than the American version, for instance, he nevertheless concurs with Ronald Reagan that “[the ‘Evil Empire’ was in fact evil](#), was an empire and was brutal.” Despite acknowledging that America imperialism’s impact on the world has been more malignant, he nevertheless does not damn America as “evil.”

In another interview, he enumerated over the course of thousands of words some of America’s worst crimes from the past and present, yet concluded that it was actually North Korea which was probably “[the most dangerous, craziest government](#) in the world, and the worst government.” In a 2006 interview Chomsky began a discourse on Bush’s “axis of evil” speech with “[North Korea is one of the most horrible countries](#) in the world, nothing good to say about it.” Chomsky has called America “one of the most dangerous” countries, one of the world leaders in “committing crimes,” and “the world’s biggest terrorist,” but he does not say it is “one of the most horrible,” which, along with “evil” and “the worst,” implies a degree of immanence that “the most dangerous” doesn’t carry. He does not start discussions about America by saying that “America is one of the most horrible countries in the world.” The worst thing he says in that 2006 interview is “The US is for the moment dominating the world by force. I mean, in the dimension of violence the United States is unparalleled.” He usually says it is “one of the freest” countries in the world, too—in that same interview, he said that a century ago “Britain and the US...were the most free countries of the world.” He is talking about the US under Jim Crow, by the way.

This is not semantic pedantry; these points are central to framing America as legitimate despite all its violence and terror. While Chomsky may issue blistering condemnations of American policy, he nevertheless presents the country in its totality as better than any competitors, especially any socialist ones. It may be “the most violent” and “most dangerous” country *at the moment*, but at least

America is “[non-totalitarian, non-authoritarian](#).” Presenting America as fundamentally legitimate, benign, and fixable despite all its flaws is a *sine qua non* of perpetuating the status quo, as explained in a recent US Army field manual on counterinsurgency:

*[The legitimacy of the host-nation government](#) is achieved because the population accepts its authority and how it governs can be justified in terms of the population’s beliefs. **It is not enough for the host-nation government to be simply seen as effective and credible.** The governmental structure must be justifiable to the population and that justification must be based on the population’s norms and values... The key is that legitimacy is ultimately decided in the minds of the population. **Counterinsurgents must understand how the population will perceive a government. A host nation that is less efficient but perceived as legitimate by the population will be more effective than an efficient host-nation government that cannot be justified by the values and norms of the population.** [emphasis mine]*

This narrative amounts to “America has many serious and systemic problems, which I have described clearly and unflinchingly... but at least it’s not *truly evil*, like our enemies are.” It is a foundational power-serving perspective that Chomsky did not share with the revolutionaries of yesteryear, but one he shares with the compatible Left. John Oliver has helpfully provided as clear an example of this attitude as can likely be found:

*[Since the President won’t stick up for this country](#), I will. America and Russia are **not the fucking same!** And don’t get me wrong: America has had, and continues to have, endemic problems that need fixing. That might as well be the title of this show. But hold on, because our elections have some flaws, but they are not rigged. Our human rights record is far from perfect, but it doesn’t compare to Putin’s Russia. And our press is at least currently free enough that I can routinely [mock Donald Trump]. [original emphasis]*

Now here’s a description of a typical radical from 50 years ago:

[I remember sitting on the floor of this big room](#)...and there were 150 organizers for the migrant program, many of them products of SDS, Students for a Democratic Society. And there was a large black gentleman who was the trainer that day... And so help me God I will always remember this. He said, “altogether now, ‘Fuck America!’ Stand up and say, ‘Fuck America!’” I mean this was the revolution and there was just so much of that.

Chomsky is of a kind with John Oliver and the “compatible Left,” not the radicals he replaced (it’s [utterly ridiculous](#) to put John Oliver in the same sentence as “the Left,” but that’s America for you). Oliver’s flag-waving super-patriotism is on one end of the spectrum, but Chomsky is on the left-most end of the same spectrum. That Chomsky ultimately presents America as essentially good is just much harder to see because his critiques of imperialism are so thorough and damning. However, in the last decade, the professor’s flaws have become glaring. His descriptions of our freedom seem more irrational than ever, his advocacy of compliance increasingly strident. His lectures are so predictable and tedious that they sometimes seem generated via algorithm. Chomsky is as famous as he is because he’s always demonstrated power-serving biases—as early as 2009, Seamas Milne observed that “[He describes himself as an anarchist or libertarian](#)

[socialist](#), but often sounds more like a radical liberal.”* But Chomsky, too, has evinced a major rightward slide under Obama.

For instance, Chomsky used to explain how American imperialism could destroy a country and this would still produce benefits for the wealthy classes who dominate US policy. He theorized this as minimal vs. maximal goals: a totally subservient neo-colony may be the maximal goal, but the minimal goal of a failed state still squelches what Parenti calls “[the threat of a good example](#)” and warns other countries not to displease the wealthy whose interests Washington represents. In an interview from 1982, for example, he says “I think the chances of the US meeting its minimal goals, namely just preventing any constructive nationalist revolutionary movement from taking power and being able to do anything, that minimal goal I think the US can and probably will achieve. The maximal goal of installing the kind of government we succeeded in installing in Guatemala in 1954 may not succeed.”¹ He explained the US destruction of Vietnam in similar terms. This may be a vulgarized version of a Marxist critique of imperialism, but it’s illuminating commentary because it still has at least one foot in the world of radical, class-based analysis.

In contrast, under the previous president, Chomsky moved away from this good radical analysis and has pushed a class-free image of the US as a blundering giant, an “empire of chaos” as he calls it, destroying countries on accident mostly due to lack of knowledge. “[The chaos and destabilization are real](#), but I don’t think that’s the aim,” he said in 2015. “Rather, it is a consequence of hitting fragile systems that one does not understand with the sledgehammer that is the main tool, as in Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan and elsewhere.” As is increasingly the case as he gets worse, Chomsky does not explain why his previous framework of “minimal vs. maximal goals” does not apply. Readers are meant to believe that post-2009 wars are the first instances of American imperialism which did not benefit the ruling class. Iraq, prosecuted by the Bush junta, “[is a different story: Iraq is a country \(the United States\) wanted to invade](#),” because of its resources and strategic location in the middle of the world’s biggest oil-producing region.” Iraq is a confusing case, though, since back in 2005, Chomsky said that the “minimal vs. maximal goals” framework [did not apply to Iraq](#), so we can’t be sure what exactly the professor wants us to think about that country’s destruction. This is actually a good example of how Chomsky’s fans have, in their arsenal of defenses, the fact that the brilliant professor has brilliantly professed contradictory things over the course of his long career. For instance, in the ‘60s he said “we live under conditions of almost unparalleled freedom.” He said “[We enjoy incomparable privilege and freedom](#)” in 2006 and more recently. But in order to make the case that that the professor doesn’t consistently whitewash American repression, a Chomsky fan could point to things like a 1997 discussion at MIT where he said that COINTELPRO “[did ruin a lot of things and caused serious harm to others](#).” It’s true enough that Chomsky will mention things like COINTELPRO before concluding that Americans are mostly very, very free, much like some Democrats will concede that drone strikes are quite bad before saying that Barack Obama is the greatest man alive. Since there is such a disparity, the most productive course is to examine what conditions are shaping his contradictory messaging.

The history of domestic repression in the '60s and '70s has already been laid out; Chomsky's comments post-9/11 happened at a time when America's ruling class openly embraced the country's imperial status and decided to begin purging the last bourgeois democratic right its citizens enjoyed. In 2006, for example, when Chomsky boasted about our "incomparable privilege and freedom," Guantánamo Bay had been open 5 years and the recent Military Commissions Act "[cast aside the Constitution](#) and the principle of habeas corpus," in the words of the ACLU. As Bohmer said, since 9/11 "we are going backwards towards more police powers, infiltration and framing of activists." Al McCoy defined post-9/11 governance as a time of "endless incarceration, extrajudicial killing, pervasive surveillance, drone strikes in defiance of national boundaries, torture on demand, and immunity for all of the above on the grounds of state secrecy." This period saw an explosion in membership in the InfraGard program, a public-private partnership administered by the FBI and Homeland Security. InfraGard has deputized over 22,000 of what the ACLU called "corporate bigwigs" who will enjoy special privileges, including licenses to kill with impunity, in the event of national emergency. One business owner told the *Progressive* that when the FBI briefed him, they said martial law was a matter of "[when—not if.](#)"

If some hypothetical person enjoyed a position as a compromised gatekeeper of the Left, times when the system looks the worst, and is thus most liable to be threatened, would be ideal times to defend it most irrationally. In contrast, his 1997 MIT appearance was a conversation with former SNCC and Black Panther Party activist Kathleen Cleaver. As a major figure in the radical movements of the era, Cleaver would probably have laughed out loud if Chomsky told her that she and the Panthers "lived under conditions of almost unparalleled freedom." For the sake of comparison, when Chomsky is speaking to someone who musters barely a hint of skepticism, like Robert Barsky, the professor seems most willing to misrepresent history, as he did when he falsely claimed that radical students wanted MIT's war work to continue with minor reforms. The discussion with Cleaver also took place at a time when radical movements in America were relatively anemic and the mainstream consensus held that it was an "end of history" vindication of capitalism. It was, in other words, a very safe time to discuss the real nature of American repression—particularly when his co-panelist would not have bought Chomsky's usual bill of goods.

He does this quite a lot. So in a piece written in 2008 on the legacy of 1968, Chomsky says quite a lot of starry-eyed and incorrect things about contemporary democracy in America. For instance: "[it was unimaginable in 1968](#) that there would be an international Solidarity group in 1980." To use just one example, in November 1968, the Hemispheric Conference to End the War in Vietnam was held in Montréal, Canada which brought together hundreds of anti-war activists from North America and Western Europe, as well as 1600 delegates from 25 different countries, including Salvador Allende of Chile and North Vietnam's culture minister Hoang Minh Giam. A [memorandum from Tom Huston to Richard Nixon](#) pointed out that Western radical groups, foreign governments, and national liberation movements held major meetings in Montréal; Havana, Cuba; Sofia, Bulgaria; Budapest, Hungary; Kyoto, Japan; Grenoble, France; and

Bratislava, Czechoslovakia in 1968 alone. International solidarity was at its most robust, the opposite of “unimaginable.”

But at least he finally mentions one of the major factors in ending the Vietnam War: “The Pentagon Papers tell us that, because of the fear of growing unrest in the cities, the government had to end the war—it wasn’t sure that it was going to have enough troops to send to Vietnam and enough troops on the domestic front to quell the riots.” In another interview from around the same time, he even says “[the GIs coming home were turning against the war](#), and because soldiers in the field were—well, they were throwing grenades under the officers’ tents, you know, the fragging phenomenon.” He does not explain why he was so quick to dismiss the liberatory effect of black resistance at the time when it mattered, nor does he reconcile these facts with his commentary 50 years ago that imprisonment was the only acceptable option, but at least he has finally incorporated these crucial factors into his analysis of the war. However, Chomsky says this in order to adduce that resistance to the Iraq War was even stronger than was resistance to Vietnam. “The Iraq War was the first conflict in western history in which an imperialist war was massively protested against before it had even been launched,” he said, neglecting to mention that despite the protests, the war *was then launched*, killing over a million Iraqis.

In this regard, Iraq does not compare favorably to the Vietnam War, it’s more like the Korean War. In 1950, there were protests against the Korean War: figures including W.E.B. DuBois founded the Peace Information Center (PIC) in order to agitate against the conflict, and DuBois authored an anti-racist and anti-war declaration titled “[A Protest and a Plea](#)” which was signed by over 100 African-American leaders. The PIC circulated a document called the Stockholm Peace Appeal, which was signed by many prominent artists and thinkers as well as 2.5 million Americans—all at a time when even the faintest whiff of political heterodoxy would get someone fired, blacklisted, or worse. But all this initial protest did not stop the Korean War, much like the initial 2002-3 protests did not stop the Iraq War. However, if one was to keep an anti-war movement from developing, it would be a good idea to tell would-be activists that they had already done enough by showing up for a week of protesting and then disappearing once the war started.

If we read more Chomsky, we will end up even more confused, because a few years later he said that “[I talked to them \[“the Vietnamese”\]](#). What they liked was quiet, non-violent demonstrations which, you know, a group of women standing quietly somewhere.” Fortunately, “the Vietnamese” did not express their feelings towards proper anti-war resistance in private conversations with the professor, they made their feelings public, so we can go straight to the source rather than placing blind trust in Chomsky. In August 1967, for instance, the same month those secret US cables revealed that the Vietnamese had great hopes for the Civil Rights Movement becoming the vanguard of a revolution, Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam Pham Van Dong issued a statement “[expressing staunch support of the Vietnamese people](#) for the righteous struggle of the Afro-American people.” After the October 1969 National Moratorium protests brought out 100,000 people who were mostly non-violent but certainly not quiet, Pham wished “[your ‘fall offensive’ a brilliant success.](#)”

Contradictory messages from the professor are common: see how he sometimes says that he is marginalized because that is the function of the propaganda system, but also says that it's easier to access the media than ever, or that the propaganda model actually has nothing at all to do with marginalizing dissent. Or how he can discuss the history of the first Red Scare by correctly observing that there was a wave of "[brutal internal repression, which \[was\] the worst in American history](#)" and yet the country was also the "most free." Or how he produced large amounts of commentary encouraging radicals to get sent to prison (through tax evasion and draft resistance), but when a black revolutionary said "the cost of trying to catch us will be theirs. We have work to do, or simply lives to live, and don't intend to make their job easier or our lives more miserable," the professor retreated to "No one can evaluate the effectiveness of various tactics with any precision." I can't verify this independently, but Hugo Turner informed me that "there are many anecdotes of people spending hours with him discussing JFK or 9/11 etc. with him showing interest, canceling meetings to learn more, and then pretending ignorance on these issues," which is consistent with his changing stances depending on to whom he's speaking. Chomsky also grasps the fact that people have to act in accordance with the constraints imposed by reality—but only as long as it pertains to linguistics. On the subject of language acquisition, he has explained that things evolved the way they did because "we are after all [animals, not angels](#)." When it comes to actually changing the world, Chomsky still holds to standards that only angels could hope to meet.

Even if a someone wants to handwave this all away and say that he's just very complex and nuanced, it really shouldn't be this difficult to get one consistent answer about questions as fundamental as whether revolutionaries in the West face state repression, how to end a war, or whether or not dissent is marginalized. Chomsky's contradictory answers on such important questions look like they're based on factors which have nothing to do with conveying the facts; factors including the strength of radical mass-movements, how overtly America is repressing its citizens, and the credulity of his interlocutor. This is not behavior that's consistent with producing the best radical scholarship, it's triangulation which is consistent with sheepdogging.

Some might balk at the word "triangulation," since it might imply a degree of intentionality. Ultimately, as with anyone, it doesn't matter what Chomsky "really" thinks, it only matters what he does and what his effect is. But "triangulation" and "sheepdogging" are the best framework for explaining Chomsky's contradictory commentary. This much is clear for the reasons already enumerated, and it's clearer still when you see how Chomsky shifted his commentary as opposition to the Vietnam War progressed and intensified. Someone performing a sheepdogging function will steer people towards compliance when they can, but have to make convincing concessions to radical sentiment in order to maintain their credibility. Then they will steer people back towards accommodating the status quo when conditions were more favorable to do so. This is what we see when reading Chomsky's contemporary commentary on the increasingly radical direction of the anti-war movement.

According to Chomsky in 1967, when the anti-war movement was beginning to gain major traction through highly visible demonstrations like the March on the Pentagon (or the Watts uprising), practicing “non-violence” meant foreswearing any use of force at all, and the only legitimate forms of resistance were the self-sacrificing actions of tax evasion and refusing induction. Chomsky even disagreed with William X that resisters should place the onus of catching them on the government, with the MIT professor essentially advocating that activists volunteer for prison. The professor held on to an extremely circumscribed definition of “coercion,” warning that even too much pressure to induce the unconvinced, “perhaps in violation of their basic conviction,” was intolerably authoritarian. He said that the evidence for his position seemed “overwhelming.” He articulated this position through his many platforms, so no one can reasonably claim that Chomsky left any doubt on this issue.

This was an extraordinarily restrictive position even in 1967. Few, if any, radicals at the time were as hesitant as Chomsky to “construct situations in which young people will find themselves induced to commit civil disobedience.” During a December 2nd 1964 protest at UC Berkeley, leaders of the Free Speech Movement organized a non-violent sit-in. “The speakers made it clear that in their view anyone who did not enter Sproul Hall was deserting his fellow students,” writes sociologist Max Heirich, and when the student body president asked students not to sit-in, “Mario Savio called him a traitor and a fink.”²

The Civil Rights Movement has been constructed as the most morally defensible struggle in US history. Ta-Nehisi Coates, official spokesman for what liberals are supposed to think about racism, writes that “The fact and wisdom of nonviolence is beyond dispute—the civil rights movement profoundly transformed the country.”³ But not even this movement has the flawless and saintly dimensions with which it has been imbued. In 1962, Louis Lomax, a progressive black journalist, wrote “The slogan of the Negro revolt might be rendered as: *Direct Action to Augment Legalism*... the Negro masses [have] forced the issue by demanding militant, immediate action.”⁴ Contrary to Chomsky’s extremely limited definition, “direct action” actually refers to a panoply of non-violent methods which “can assume a variety of forms, including sit-ins and lie-ins,” to quote political scientist John Leggett. “Direct action may or may not involve the breaking of the law... picketing landlords or engaging in a sit-down strike would be so considered.”⁵

If black activists had taken Chomsky’s advice and waited until most people agreed with them before implementing direct action tactics, there would have been no civil rights movement. Most Americans did not support the movement until after the Civil Rights Acts were passed in 1964 and ‘65, which was the result of over a decade of movement activism. A *Saturday Evening Post* editorial from that time announced that all of America was under siege by civil rights activism when it declared “We are all, let us face it, Mississippians.”⁶ According to Gallup polls conducted in 1964-65, even when a majority of Americans began to support the Civil Rights Act, only about [a quarter of respondents felt that civil rights were a national problem](#). Almost 70 percent felt that the government was moving too fast to implement civil rights legislation.

And while many might have hated the inner-city uprisings of 1967 and '68, these got results, too. Consider the case of Dr. Fred Schwarz. Schwarz, founder of the far-right Christian Anti-Communism Crusade, differed from fascists like the John Birch Society and Liberty Lobby in that he did not initially blame the civil rights movement on a communist conspiracy. It was not until the late-1960s, when the black liberation struggle intensified into open rebellion, that Schwarz turned against the movement. After Stokely Carmichael went to Cuba in summer 1967, Schwarz thundered that "The guerrilla forces are made up of the criminals, the fanatical black nationalists, the Black Muslims, and the Communists," with the reds serving as masterminds of America's racial strife. However, despite the fact that black rebellion may have antagonized people like Schwartz, direct action got the goods. Like many, Schwarz augmented his hardline "law and order" turn with appeals to the White House and Congress to implement social programs to raise living standards in black America.⁷ As one sociologist put it, "During the late 1960s the upper-class desires to minimize recurrent revolt...moved large sections of the upper class to be conciliatory. The hope for compromise with the rebelling wretched proved to be both primary and ascendant for a considerable length of time."⁸

This is probably why, in his Arendt/Sontag debate on "non-violence," Chomsky simply claimed agnosticism on the connection between black resistance and the Vietnam War. The black freedom struggle has been the arena in which the contours of American capitalism, and the revolutionary struggle against it, have been most apparent. As such, it's the area in which the shortcomings of Chomsky's extreme self-sacrificing pacifism are most apparent.

If activists had listened to Chomsky, the anti-war movement would've been sitting on their hands alongside the black revolutionaries, waiting for everyone to agree with them before they actually did anything. But fortunately for the people of Vietnam, putative revolutionaries didn't obey Chomsky. In 1968, Julius Lester observed that the Bertrand Russell Vietnam "Tribunal was reminiscent of the early days of the civil rights movement when its thrust and motion were toward the moral conscience of America. Nonviolence was the weapon and, it was felt, America could not help but respond positively to the just cause of the movement. Well, it didn't take long to find out that America has no moral conscience. Every tree that grows in this country was watered by the blood of Indians and Negroes. Recognizing this, the movement has undergone a transformation."⁹

This "transformation" meant an increasing emphasis on direct action to physically stop the war machine. Furthermore, this job got underway even though a majority of Americans didn't support it. According to the Gallup polling agency, in April 1967, [half of Americans supported the war on Vietnam](#) while only a minority thought the war was a mistake. Despite Chomsky's warning that direct action should only be undertaken when most people already agree with you, anti-war activism had a demonstrable effect. James Kunen, for one, said that during one strike at Columbia, a passerby told him that "I've been incredibly enlightened over the past three months. If that's the only way you can do it, politicize, we gotta have a strike every year."¹⁰

By 1970, there were many groups who had been incarcerated and charged with felonies related to non-violent direct action. These were groups like the Baltimore

Four, the Milwaukee Fourteen, and the Catonsville Nine—the latter of whom were nine protestors who broke into a Maryland selective service office and destroyed hundreds of draft cards with homemade napalm. Two of the Catonsville Nine were Phillip and Daniel Berrigan, Catholic priests who became prominent in the anti-war movement. In 1970, writing about the Berrigans in an essay titled “On the Limits of Civil Disobedience,” Chomsky begins by stating “The Berrigans have a disturbing habit of posing hard questions...by what they do. A reasonable person will admit that there exist, in principle, circumstances under which civil disobedience, even sabotage, is legitimate. The Berrigans have argued...that such circumstances now exist.”¹¹

A couple years earlier, the professor argued that no direct action was acceptable unless a majority of the population already agreed with the intended aim, and in his Berrigan essay he acknowledges that “it is, I presume, the dominant opinion in the US, the assumption that American intervention is legitimate.” Chomsky affects a tone of academic detachment and spends a couple thousand words recapping the history of the war, before getting around to his current feelings on anti-war resistance:

My own impression...is that mass demonstrations have been a major factor in bringing the war to public attention, and that resistance, particularly draft resistance, has had an appreciable effects in bringing many people to examine their own complicity to draw them to the kinds of actions that have influenced policymakers.

Chomsky praises “an AWOL soldier in the fall of 1968” whose presence at MIT drew “great numbers of apathetic or hostile students into a serious consideration” of that university’s role in the war machine. Of course, only a few years earlier, Chomsky had argued that even going AWOL was less effective than volunteering for prison. When William X disagreed with him (saying “we don’t intend to make their job easier”), Chomsky reiterated his point, so the professor left no ambiguity about his stance on the issue. As he continues discussing the current state of anti-war resistance in his Berrigan piece, Chomsky seems to have experienced a sea change in his attitude towards direct action.

Townsend Hoopes’ interesting memoirs indicate that the operative domestic factor in post-Tet planning was protest and resistance, the fear that American society would become ungovernable. Hoopes reports that his own opposition to escalation, even continuation of the war, was based in large part on his belief that it would lead to renewed demonstrations... Others who have been close to the formation of policy have spoken in similar terms.

No one would argue that every antiwar action has been effective either in combating the general passivity that permits the war-makers to act freely or in increasing the level of opposition to the war. However, it seems fairly clear that, had it not been for the mass actions of protest and the determined resistance of a few, the scale and intensity of the American war in Southeast Asia would have been even more ferocious.

“No one would argue that every antiwar action has been effective,” Chomsky said in 1970. But of course, only a couple years earlier he argued that almost every antiwar action was not only ineffective but counterproductive and dangerous. It’s odd that it seemed “fairly clear” to Chomsky in 1970 that direct action reduced

“the scale and intensity of the American war,” since it was so clear to him in 1968 that almost any direct action was a bad idea and should be avoided. He even praises “student activism” for rousing “the academic community” from its quiescence—only a couple years after he had opposed nearly every form of student activism.

Chomsky goes on to dispute at length the contentions of authors like *The New Republic*'s Andrew Greeley, whom Chomsky accuses of failing to grasp that direct action has “made it difficult for the government to wage the war,” which is a desirable outcome regardless of any other factors. Chomsky erases the fact that until relatively recently, he was one of these commentators who opposed direct action on the part of the great unwashed. He said so repeatedly, too.

Chomsky does not account for the inconvenient fact that he too opposed direct action quite vocally for many years. Rather than explain his change, he engages in a bit of rhetorical sleight-of-hand, saying that the problem is direct action that helps “create an atmosphere in which some people have been led to terrorist attacks.” Terrorist adventurism is indeed a dangerous, ill-founded, and counterproductive approach, which is why America's secret police have deployed *agents provocateur* for a century and a half. But this is a position that Chomsky only adopted once the radical milieu had advanced well beyond his stringent self-sacrificing pacifism.

Chomsky simply ignores this and essentially re-writes his own history. For example, he claims that “It is often maintained that [willing submission to state authority] is a necessary component of legitimate civil disobedience. I simply do not see the logic of this argument. It seems to me there is no moral compulsion for one who seeks to prevent criminal actions of the state to submit voluntarily to punishment for his actions.” But this “willing submission to state authority,” where one “submits voluntarily to punishment” was the position espoused by Noam Chomsky himself. It's a position for which he advocated across numerous platforms, and he stuck to those guns even when revolutionaries objected to his brand of martyrdom. He does not explain why he now fails to see the logic in his previous position, a position which he seemed to have abandoned only very recently. He does not explain any of the shifts evinced by his essay on the Berrigans, even though he had changed quite a lot. In 1967, he said that no amount of “coercion” was acceptable, but by 1970 he said “There is no doubt that there is a coercive element [to destroying draft files]... It seems to me that the crucial issue is the impact of such actions on ending the atrocity of the American war. If the contribution is significant, then this more than compensates for the element of coercion which is rarely absent in some form in nonviolent civil disobedience.”

Again, his fans might say that Chomsky's critics just fail to grasp his admirably complex position. But this is not nuance, this is whipping between contradictory positions on a foundational issue depending on outside circumstances. Chomsky is many things but he's not dumb, so it's hard to take unexplained switches on such important things at face value. This looks a lot more like rear-guard action to maintain his credibility with his target audience, which had already overrun the *extremely* limited bounds of acceptable resistance for which he advocated.

This is what's meant by the idea that Chomsky's role is mirroring and shifting the progressive culture as the ruling class's approved avatar of "the Left"—reflecting the more substantively radical aspects of the progressive milieu in order to garner influence and credibility, and then steering it into safer channels. So even today, as he warns that climate change and the nuclear Sword of Damocles threaten to end life on Earth, here he is again warning that a movement must enjoy a vast majority of popular support before it does anything too drastic: "[But unless the great mass of the population](#) comes to believe that needed change cannot be implemented within the existing system, resort to 'drastic measures' is likely to be a recipe for disaster." But this is a bar that no real movement could ever hope to clear, and Chomsky is asking his fans to gamble with nothing less than the future of life on Earth at stake.

With the Vietnam War long-since over and safely in the past, in 2008 Chomsky was able to speak freely about how urban uprisings and fraggings contributed to ending the war. Then he presented this as proof that the need for direct action was a thing of the past, as it had imbued public opinion with inherent—we might say *metaphysical*—powers. Once again, Silber's conception of "embalmed dissent" sounds most correct, as Chomsky holds up the radicalism of the past like an insect in amber to say "See? Our work here is done. No direct action needed." It's the same approach that he brings to his commentary on American repression. He is comfortable discussing history with great lucidity, but he usually describes events accurately when they're ensconced safely in the past. At moments of tension and crisis, he seems to keep saying "*Now* things are mostly fine." When he does so, his finger-wagging is more plausible because all the rest is so credible to his target audience.

With things as bad as they are, Chomsky proffers highly idealistic, liberal, not-remotely radical ideas about American imperialism. While droning on about the living hell that Libya was turned into by NATO in a war he supported through wrung hands, Chomsky nevertheless concludes that "[the bombing of Libya could be considered](#) 'humanitarian intervention' per the concept of 'responsibility to protect.'"

"In the case of Afghanistan, I suspect it was just revenge. It's probably just as Abdul Haqq said: they wanted to 'show their muscle'. You know, 'somebody attacked us, we're gonna show the world that we can attack somebody even more harshly.'"

This mentality is echoed in Trump's nuclear comment to North Korea about having "a bigger button than you do." As Chomsky points out, there was "no strategic or other purpose behind it."

For those keeping track, according to Chomsky in 2018: Libya was a genuine humanitarian intervention, Afghanistan owes to a psychological need for revenge, and North Korea is just more of Trump's dick-waving braggadocio. This is not only terrible commentary by Chomsky's standards, it'd be bad for *USA Today*. A report prepared by the Office of Naval Intelligence in 1938 claimed that "Realistically, all wars have been fought for economic reasons. To make them politically and socially palatable, ideological issues have always been invoked. Any future war will, undoubtedly, conform to historical precedent."¹² This fact

has long been a basic element of a radical anti-war critique, but Chomsky is now forcing us to re-litigate such foundational ideas as why wars are fought. Just as significantly, Chomsky's ideas about American "humanitarian" imperialism changed considerably during the Obama years, with little explanation from the eminent scholar. In the same 1982 interview mentioned above, Chomsky said that "The rhetorical goal" of American imperialism "is democracy, but to see how meaningful that rhetorical goal is, all you have to do it to look at our actual successes in the countries under our domination, for example in Latin America and the Philippines." So America's real goal isn't democracy and humanitarianism, but neither does America achieve this even on accident: "If you look around at the world, if you look at **our actual impact on the world**, it's astonishing that sane people can even discuss this question. Our support of fascist regimes has been systematic, very systematic" (original emphasis).¹³

Today, though, Chomsky no longer believes that American imperialism can't have a great liberatory power. While reciting boilerplate that "The United States, like other great powers, does not pursue humanitarian objectives," America's greatest dissident nonetheless concludes that "it makes sense for the United States to maintain a presence" in Syria to achieve humanitarian objectives. While Chomsky is [able to parse the finer points](#) of UN Security Council legitimacy and "Responsibility to Protect" doctrine in the case of Libya, he neglects to mention that a US occupation of Syria [violates every tenet of international law](#).

He has also stepped comfortably into the role of Lefty-gatekeeper which he has *de factoserved* for decades, saying that those who question the mainstream narrative on Syria can only be "[ludicrously called 'the left'](#)." Now, to even apply the sort of media skepticism for which Chomsky is famous makes one's claim to being a Leftist "ludicrous." He once said that [if his political books](#) ever got reviewed in the *New York Times*, he'd know he's doing something very wrong. It's technically true that he wasn't getting his *political* books reviewed, although as early as 1979 a *Times* writer called the professor "[arguably the most important intellectual alive](#)" while pointing to him as an important radical thinker.

Regardless, he's now so safe that in the past few years, he's [not only been interviewed on at least 3 occasions](#) by the *Times*, he's been [quoted by Tucker Carlson](#) on Fox News. Chomsky shows no signs of introspection in regards to whether this indicates he's "doing something very wrong."

This new step of supporting the US occupation of a regime change target must owe a great deal to the unique power of Barack Obama. It's hard to imagine Chomsky's accommodation to America's "humanitarian" wars taking place under a president who wasn't such a successful marketer for the Pentagon and CIA. Chomsky's idea that the Defense Department is going to inadvertently create a red Catalonia in Northern Syria, rather than another Israel or Kosovo—or that it has a right to do so— seems inconceivable without Obama's unique power and the banner of the "Arab Spring." Chomsky was instrumental in transmuted anguished support for Obama's MENA wars into something that could pass for a radical stance. Paul Street identified Chomsky as one of the "leading left intellectuals on U.S. policy in the Middle East" who had "significantly influenced"

his own support for the war on Libya. In his piece advocating for the NATO war, Street sums up the new default stance of the permissible Left:

[Some U.S. Web “radicals”](#) (their self-designation often reflects confusion between [a] stridency and cynicism of rhetoric and [b] depth of analysis/knowledge) are uncomfortable with the notion that any U.S. and Western military intervention in what we used to call the Third World might happen to have a positive humanitarian impact in one instance. They are afraid that their core identity as bad-ass, hard-core enemies of Empire (and of Obama) will be compromised. Let me (an early radical-Left critic of Obama) assure these comrades that acknowledging this is in no way to go soft on Washington or the current administration and its commitment to the petro-imperial project. The analysis presented in this essay is as cynical, radical, and power-centered as any hard core leftist could want.

A few of the ingredients that jump out are: psychologically based sneering towards anti-imperialism, substitution of *realpolitik* wonkery for radical analysis, and credulity towards the White House and State Department. The Rojava op must be considered quite a success, and not only for how it finally implanted a slew of US military bases on Syrian soil. It had excellent progressive marketing; consider this defense of the US occupation from the DSA: [“The 2,000 US troops in Syria are not there to conduct ‘regime change.’](#) They are there to defend the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) in North East Syria and to oppose ISIS. Trump has made that clear.” As any democratic socialist knows, the most reliable source for determining the Pentagon’s true intentions and long-term plans is Donald Trump, and surely Obama had to play a role in giving the Oval Office such sterling credibility among the permissible Left. Whatever astute skepticism Chomsky may have leveled in 2008 against the man who murdered thousands of Muslim children and teenagers, Dr. Noam learned to stop worrying and love the bombs (some might say he doesn’t *love* bombs, but a difference that makes no difference is no difference). Back in 1982, as the professor himself pointed out, “it’s astonishing” to think of any “sane” person saying then what Chomsky is saying today.

Today’s Chomsky transported back to 1982 would’ve sounded like this:

“There’s no justifying the Sandinistas. On the other hand, the fact of the matter is that they are essentially pretty much in control of Nicaragua now, thanks largely to Soviet and Cuban support. In my opinion it makes sense for the United States to maintain a presence which would deter an attack on the Miskito areas. They have the one part of Nicaragua which has succeeded in sustaining a functioning society with many decent elements.”

Unfortunately, though, we don’t need to speculate on what Chomsky’s hypothetical support for regime change in Nicaragua would look like—he’s come out for that, too. In a July 2018 interview with *Democracy Now*, the professor discussed the current state of Nicaragua and issued what sound like typically mainstream denunciations of the social democratic government in Managua: [But there’s been a lot of corruption](#), a lot of repression. It’s autocratic, undoubtedly. The opposition is nothing to write home about, either, for the most part. So, it’s by no means a pretty situation. One would hope that negotiations could reduce the tensions. And my own view is that I think it would be a good

thing for Nicaragua if Ortega were to call early elections and allow them to be run without corruption and brutality. But that doesn't look as if it's—it's hard to hard to see a simple way out at this point. It's a very unfortunate situation. This all might sound unobjectionable enough to someone with no knowledge of how the US overthrows governments, but the equivocation and these buzzwords—corruption, repression, autocratic, brutality—are the same ones that are invoked every single time the White House seeks regime change. The reason “corruption” is so often cited as a *casus subverteri* is because it exists in every country. As Jackie Chan said, “[does corruption exist in the US? Of course!](#) The US is the most corrupt in the world! Who makes the world collapse? The US!” We need only go back about 10 years to find the example of Wall Street funding all 3 major presidential candidates and then all 3 voting to hand the banksters \$7 trillion. Same for “repression”—any country with a police force (which is to say, all of them) can be accused of repression. All who incur Washington's disfavor *will* be accused of repression.

Chomsky accuses the government of Daniel Ortega of being “in essence, neoliberal,” which is another common complaint directed at Washington's targets. Since intransigent governments are economically isolated, they are usually forced to make concessions to foreign investors. Then, these governments are condemned by the Western punditocracy as “neoliberal” for these measures, which demobilizes much left-wing opposition to regime change. If people who might protest a war come to believe that both sides are equally bad, it reduces the motivation to actually do anything—as the CIA pointed out when discussing anti-Communism's effect on disabling opposition to Reagan's dirty wars. Despite the fact that the Sandinistas of today are not exactly the same as the Sandinistas of 1979, Roger Harris enumerates many of the Ortega government's very impressive post-2006 achievements and concludes that “[Nicaragua has provoked the ire of the US for the good things its done, not the bad.](#)”

Other than a rambling digression on the refugee crisis, Chomsky's comments on Nicaragua are now essentially identical to those of the most servile imperial media outlets he used to critique. Take this recent bit of regime-change agit-prop from a *gusana* writing in *Time Magazine*:

[Nicaragua is in full cardiac arrest.](#) Since protests began on April 18, the government of President Daniel Ortega has been accused of using “lethal force” and at least 146 people have died. Hundreds more are wounded or missing and the body of a U.S. citizen was found shot dead on June 2. Without international intervention, the collapse of my country could create a new cycle of war and destruction in this precarious region.

I am a mother and a businesswoman, managing several American franchise restaurants across Nicaragua with over 650 employees. The first tremors came in April, when demonstrations against the Ortega regime, largely led by students, started in Managua and quickly spread to cities across the country. The government's reaction was swift, and in the first few days dozens were killed by police and paramilitary forces using live rounds of ammunition.

Chomsky's claims are as vacuous as anything else from the Time/Warner media empire, or USAID, which recently denounced the Nicaraguan government as “[Ortega's brutal regime.](#)” Chomsky does not articulate how the Nicaraguan

government is corrupt. He does not explain how it's more repressive than any other government, or why we should believe stories about Ortega's brutality any more than we should believe in Iraq's WMDs. He does not explain in what way the Nicaraguan president is "autocratic," much less "undoubtedly" so. He does not provide any evidence that the Ortega Administration is ruining elections with "corruption and brutality," nor does he give us any reason to think that a right-wing opposition representing the interests of a pro-US bourgeoisie would run elections, much less a government, with less "corruption and brutality." Chomsky does not substantiate his claim that "it would be a good thing for Nicaragua if Ortega were to call early elections," much less why the Sandinistas should agree to this. As President Ortega said, he was elected by a majority of the Nicaraguan people, according to the legitimate democratic procedures set out by and within the term limits of Nicaraguan law. Chomsky doesn't tell us why a right-wing opposition seeking to bend the Nicaraguan government to the designs of "American franchises" should have its wishes represented over the will of the majority of Nicaraguan voters who elected Ortega.

We can be confident that if Chomsky had strong evidence for these claims he would present them, since it's his trademark to issue encyclopedic recitations of data when proving a point. But he's able to throw off these one-line accusations because he is swimming with the tide of imperial orthodoxy, echoing the mainstream media, Donald Trump, pro-US business owners, USAID, the Heritage Foundation, [Mike Pence, and Ken Roth](#). Here, again, it's useful to quote pre-Obama Chomsky back at today's Chomsky:

[the beauty of concision](#) is that you can only repeat conventional thoughts. Suppose I get up on Nightline, and I say Qaddafi is a terrorist, Khomeini is a murderer...all this sort of stuff, I don't need any evidence, everybody just nods. On the other hand, suppose you say something that just isn't regurgitating conventional pieties. Suppose you say something that's the least bit unexpected, or controversial...you'd better have some evidence, you'd better have a lot of evidence. You can't give evidence if you're stuck with concision, that's the genius of this structural constraint.

Gotta love those classic Chomsky speeches. Someone should really forward that guy's stuff to Noam Chomsky, especially since the professor is helping Donald Trump overthrow the government of Nicaragua.

What's happening in Nicaragua bears all the hallmarks of a typical regime change operation originating in Washington. As one Bulgarian journalist said about CIA trickery in 2000, "[the specialists from beyond the ocean](#) don't rack their brains uselessly or rely on imagination. They strictly follow tried and true methods—it's all modular, plug-and-play. If it worked before, use it again." The Bulgarian Socialist Party was overthrown by American regime change efforts in 1990 and 1997, and both waves followed the typical patterns. "The protest movement in Bulgaria was beginning to feel and smell like the general strike in British Guyana to topple Cheddi Jagan in 1962, and the campaign to undermine Salvador Allende in the early '70s—both operations of the CIA—where as soon as one demand was met, newer ones were raised, putting the government virtually under siege, hoping it would over-react, and making normal governing impossible" writes William Blum in *Killing Hope*. Consider this June

2018 *Time* Magazine article: “[The crisis started on April 18 when pro-government gangs](#) violently crushed a small student-led demonstration against planned reforms to the pension system. The government responded with force, and the protests escalated; dozens were killed over the next few days. Ortega, 72, has since dropped his original plan for pensions, but opponents are now calling for his resignation.” *Time* also points out that Ortega’s ouster is most desired by “the Catholic Church and business leaders.”

The pattern is so predictable that what’s going on in Nicaragua would be obvious even if someone had only started paying attention in the last 5 years. Consider as well the claim that Ortega’s government unleashed Nicaraguan police to go on a berserk violence-spree against protestors. With a cursory knowledge of recent regime change ops, one could surmise that this is a lie. In Ukraine 2014, for instance, President Viktor Yanukovich was forced to flee after snipers opened fire on anti-government protestors and police—the attacks were blamed on the government, but [look much more likely](#) to be a successful anti-government false-flag provocation. In Venezuela last year, the Bolivarian government was blamed for a spate of violence which was [largely perpetrated](#) by the right-wing pro-US opposition—fascist violence which included burning [people alive and lynching blacks](#). One need only dig a little bit to find that Nicaragua’s death counts are [highly dubious and largely the result](#) of the pro-US opposition (once again, we see the fascist technique of burning people alive). “[The Guardian](#), [The Washington Post](#), the BBC and NPR have assigned an American anthropologist with no previous journalistic experience to cover the crisis in Nicaragua. The novice reporter, named Carl David Goette-Luciak, has published pieces littered with falsehoods that reinforce the opposition’s narrative promoting regime change while relying almost entirely on anti-Sandinista sources.”

Again, one could have deduced all this about Nicaragua even if they had only paid attention for the past few years. But Chomsky has not been writing about American imperialism for only 5 years, he’s been doing it for over 50 years. Does St. Noam the indispensable genius dissident really not know what the very consistent pattern of regime change looks like? Does that question really need to be asked?

The fact that Chomsky has signed up for Latin American regime change is significant because he simply has none of the justifications that one could claim exist in the case of Syria. There have not been 7 years of horror stories portraying Daniel Ortega as a monster worse than Adolf Hitler, nor is there anything comparable to the Rojava op in Nicaragua. There has been no push to associate anti-imperialists with fascists, as was done to the “Hands off Syria” crowd. There is no widespread consensus among the permissible Left that Ortega must go—at least not yet. His defenders are quick to adduce reasons why Chomsky’s support for the US occupation of Syria is consistent with anarchist humanitarianism, despite the fact that he’s helping Donald Trump. None of those excuses can be plausibly invoked with Nicaragua. The professor has always subtly steered and reflected the existing flaws of the academic/alt-media milieu of which he is very much a part, but he is leading the pack here. Consider, too the fact that he said identical things about Libya as he has said about Syria, and yet the return of

slavery to Libya has given him not a moment's pause. Given all this, it's clear that Chomsky the State Department and Pentagon flack is here to stay.

As always, his defenders will continue to maintain that it's counterproductive and/or insane to criticize the professor, especially with things as bad as they are, but this is a canard. There will never be a good time to criticize liberal gatekeepers: as long as there is class society, there will be a political "right" which openly pushes for more rigid hierarchies and enforces them with violence and terror. There will also always be a "compatible left" which criticizes these hierarchies while steering people into accommodating them. As the gatekeeper of the Western Left, Chomsky has played an outsized role in injecting flaws into the radical milieu, to the point that many among the "Western Left" see no tension arising from supporting US military occupations. The free pass afforded to Chomsky and the avatars of the compatible Left is not a remedy to the situation, it has been a contributing factor. As Chomsky himself once said, his defenses of America's war machine were once a "pretty extreme position" and would have been "hard to defend had anyone ever criticized it." But he got away with it then, enabling his squishy tolerance of the Pentagon to become the mainstream stance of the permissible Left.

A "socialism" at home funded by colonialism abroad, as a defining feature of the "Western Left," dates back to the era of classical imperialism. Eduard Bernstein once beamed that so many of Europe and North America's social blessings were the result of "the colonial enterprise."

Without the colonial expansion of our economy, the poverty that still exists in Europe today, which we are trying to eradicate, would be much worse and we would have much less hope of eliminating it. Even when counter-balanced by the crimes of colonialism, the benefits derived from colonies always weigh much more heavily in the scales.¹⁵

In the era of national liberation revolutions, the West's ruling classes faced a nightmare scenario in which Western Leftists understood their enemies to be the wealthy of the First World, not the poor of the Third. As long as there is class society in the West, there will be money for a compatible Left which sees its fate intertwined with the former, rather than the latter.

As the left-most boundary of permissible thought, Chomsky had to adopt radical positions when movements were substantively radical, otherwise he would have had no credibility among his target audience. So when America's mass movements were linked to things like Communism and national liberation, the professor sounded Marxish. But once Obama mostly de-linked the "Left" from the bulk of its progressive principles, Chomsky lost his obligation to mirror this genuine radicalism. So despite the fact that he's always had elite-approved flaws, he's gotten this bad in the last few years because the Obama spectacle was wildly successful at doing what it was meant to do. The campaign was a marketing blitz to turn "the Left" upside down, from a loose tendency defined by progressive *ideas* and radical *issues* into something defined by nice-sounding "values" and pleasant, banal "storytelling." Stephen Gowans describes the same phenomenon coming from one of Chomsky's fellow *Interceptors* Mehdi Hasan, who "[has transfigured Leftism into the concept of avoiding](#) all choices that have potentially awful consequences," retreating "from the political struggles of the

real world into impotent moral posturing, where no choices are ever made, because the consequences of all choices are awful to one degree or another.” It’s all part and parcel of a very successful propaganda coup that transpired over the last decade, a campaign to denature “the Left” of any of the actual substantive qualities that were its essence for over a century.

That Chomsky, the defining voice of the Western left, has added support for regime change to the list of acceptable “Leftist” values is a testament to how successful this campaign has been. It’s impossible to imagine it happening under any figurehead other than the last president, whose marketing snow-job hobbled genuine radical sentiment in ways that we can only begin to understand. Regardless, we’re here now, and the professor has made it quite apparent which side he’s on. Which is good, because if he succeeds in removing anti-imperialism from “the Left,” whatever remains will not be a movement that’s capable of saving humanity.

Special thanks to [@RancidSassy](#) and others for editing suggestions

* Chomsky was an outlier even during the radical heyday, and today he sounds little like any of those radicals and most like liberal Senator J. William Fulbright. Consider this snippet from Fulbright’s essay “Vietnam Revisited”: “The invasion of Cambodia was a dreadful act. As best they could, the Cambodians had maintained their neutrality; and our attack was inexcusable. But we did it, and the events that followed ruined Cambodia—and the consequences are still being felt in that part of the world. We’ve contributed to an awful lot of tragedy in the world. I’d like the Vietnamese to get out of Cambodia. Perhaps the Russians will play an effective mediating role. But I should think no one wants the Khmer Rouge back. It’s a very difficult problem.” [J. William Fulbright with Seth P. Tillman, *The Price of Empire*, “Vietnam Revisited,” Pantheon Books, 1989, p. 127]

Works Cited:

1. Noam Chomsky, *Language and Politics*, AK Press, 2004, p. 310
2. Max Heirich, “The Conflict Deepens: Round Two,” *Taking State Power: the Sources and Consequences of Political Challenge*, ed. John C. Leggett, Harper & Row Publishers, 1973, p. 291
3. Ta-Nehisi Coates, *We Were Eight Years in Power: an American Tragedy*, One World, 2017, p. 100
4. Louis Lomax, *The Negro Revolt*, Perennial Library, 1971, p. 168
5. Leggett, *Taking Power*, p. 439
6. Charles E. Cobb, *This Nonviolent Stuff’ll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible*, Duke University Press, 2015, p. 228
7. Hubert Villeneuve, “Teaching Anticommunism: Fred C. Schwarz, the Christian Anti-Communism Crusade and American Postwar Conservatism,” August 2011
8. Leggett, *Taking Power*, p. 323
9. Julius Lester, *Revolutionary Notes*, Grove Press, Inc., 1969, p. 19

10. James Kunen, *The Strawberry Statement: Notes of a College Revolutionary*, Random House, 1969, p. 128
11. Noam Chomsky, "On the Limits of Civil Disobedience," *The Berrigans*, ed. William VanEtten Casey & Philip Nobile, Avon Publishers, 1971
12. Carl Oglesby, "Vietnamese Crucible," *Containment and Change*, MacMillan, 1967, p. 165
13. Chomsky, *Language and Politics*, pp. 310-1
14. William Blum, *Killing Hope: U. S. Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II*, Common Courage Press, 1995, p. 317
15. Domenico Losurdo, *Class Struggle: A Philosophical and Political History*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2016 p. 139