

Greco on Chomsky

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Anthony F. Greco. *Chomsky's Challenge to American Power*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2013. Hardcover \$69.95, paper \$29.95, e-book \$14.99.

The back cover of this book tells us that Anthony Greco offers “a balanced assessment of the insights and shortcomings of Chomsky's positions on politics and foreign policy.” Greco in fact circumscribes his analysis, omitting Chomsky's political philosophy and Israel-Palestine from consideration, but there's more than enough that Chomsky has written on foreign policy and the media to justify a book-length assessment of his work.

Greco treats Chomsky's main themes seriously and engages with Chomsky's political ideas about American power. In looking over some fifty years of Chomsky's foreign policy writing he asks the entirely reasonable question, which of Chomsky's claims and analyses have held up in the face of later scholarship and which have not? Greco's survey is careful and thoughtful, and his notes serve as a useful literature review on recent U.S. foreign policy.

Greco's finds that Chomsky has been right about a great deal:

“Noam Chomsky has been right about a great many important issues during the course of his long career as a public intellectual. He was right to condemn America's war in Vietnam not merely as a disastrous mistake but as a moral catastrophe.... He was right, too, to point to America's alliance with repressive regimes throughout the Third World, some of them owing their very existence to US sponsorship. ... Chomsky has been a persistent and productive muckraker of American foreign policy for nearly half a century.

“Chomsky's critique of the limitations of American democracy—of the concentration of political power in the holders of corporate wealth, and the relative powerlessness and alienation of much of the citizenry—is more relevant than ever in an era of widening economic and political inequality. ...

“Chomsky has also been mostly on target in his criticisms of the US mass media for their servitude to the prevailing orthodoxies of American foreign policy. ...

“Chomsky has also been correct that America's leaders have continued to pursue global hegemony since the end of Cold War....

“Chomsky has repeatedly taken up themes that were mostly neglected in the American public arena.... At other times, Chomsky has spoken out on controversies that were very much in the public arena, but his critiques usefully challenged the boundaries of existing debate.” (pp. 207-08)

Greco also raises many criticisms of Chomsky's analysis, some of which, in my view, are well-taken,

while others are not.

One recurring criticism that Greco makes is that Chomsky elides the distinction between U.S. complicity in the crimes of others and direct U.S. agency. Chomsky, for example, considered the U.S. government responsible for crimes committed in El Salvador and used the phrase “Carter’s war on the peasantry,” when in fact neither Carter nor U.S. troops killed a single Salvadoran or Guatemalan peasant.

But I think there’s a moral position being argued here that one may disagree with, but that’s certainly not ludicrous. There is a longstanding debate in philosophy about whether it is just as bad to let someone die as it is to kill them. If X walks by a lake where a child is drowning and could easily save him, but chooses not to, is that as bad as having pushed the child in? Now imagine that the child is drowning because a bully is holding him under water? What is X’s moral responsibility if he could easily save the child from the bully? But let’s go a step further. What is X’s responsibility if the bully was having trouble subduing the child, so X passed him a club with which to pummel the child? And say X also told a passing police officer that it was just some stray dogs fighting, covering up the crime? I think many of us would want to scream out “X, you are responsible!”

Chomsky often cries out in this way. He lately has taken, for example, to denouncing “U.S.-hyphen-Israeli policies”—not because Israel’s settlement building or displacement of Palestinians has been directly carried out by the United States, but to remind Americans of their responsibility. Without U.S. diplomatic backing and economic and military support there is no way Israel could carry out the policies that it does. “Don’t wring your hands, Obama,” Chomsky is saying, when Israel engages in some egregious act. “If you don’t like it, you can stop it from happening, and if you let it go on, then you are morally responsible.” “Carter, when the archbishop of San Salvador pleads with you to cut off military aid that is being used to wipe out popular organizations, you can’t keep the aid flowing and then lament the atrocities. It’s on you.”

Now obviously, for some purposes it is crucial to understand the distinction between complicity and agency. But in referring to moral obligations, whether of individual citizens or of leaders, Chomsky believes that when one fails to stop atrocities that one has the power to stop then the distinction between complicity and agency doesn’t matter very much.

One of Greco’s examples on this score seems particularly unconvincing. He says that Chomsky “claims that the Bush administration authorized Saddam to crush” the post 1991 Gulf War revolts against his rule. Greco comments: “The claim that Washington authorized Saddam to crush the revolts against his rule is literally false: there was no such communication from Washington to Baghdad.” (p. 178) But in fact it is literally true that the Bush administration through its highest emissary in Iraq, General Norman Schwarzkopf, authorized—not ordered, but gave permission to—Saddam to fly armed helicopters, which he used to help crush the revolt. Schwarzkopf later claimed he was tricked, he didn’t realize how Saddam intended to use the armed helicopters, and Bush says Schwarzkopf had not been given specific instructions. Crucially, however, when it was clear what Saddam was doing with the helicopters, officials in Washington considered whether “the authority to fly the helicopters be rescinded,” and they decided not to do so.

Another of Greco’s criticisms is that Chomsky oversimplifies. Chomsky often tells us what the administration did, without referring to the views of Congress or public pressures, and so on. Now every scholarly undertaking involves simplification. When we plot the trajectory of a baseball, we ignore relativistic effects. As a first approximation it is generally sufficient to describe the baseball’s trajectory by invoking the simplifying Newtonian formula $f=ma$. Likewise it is not necessary when we condemn Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor that we describe the internal cabinet debates in Japan between the army and the navy, which, had they come out differently would have caused Japan to

have attacked the Soviet Union instead of the United States. So, yes, of course, Chomsky simplifies. We all do. The question is whether he *oversimplifies*. That is, does his failure to describe the partisan debate regarding some foreign policy issue leave out some essential information that would change our conclusions? If one were advancing a strategic plan for how we could best change U.S. foreign policy, identifying the levers of influence open to us, then indeed it might be essential to understand the precise partisan dynamics. But that's generally not what Chomsky is doing.

Greco further argues that Chomsky places too much emphasis on economic motives for U.S. policy, to the exclusion of ideology and geopolitics. I think this is probably true, but some of the examples Greco uses to make this point don't seem compelling. He notes, for example, that U.S. policy in the Philippines was more concerned with its military bases there than with any direct economic stake in the country. That's correct, but that no more undermines the claim that U.S. foreign policy has economic roots than does the fact that bankers spend some of their money on vaults instead of lending it out at interest prove that they are not motivated by profits.

I think Greco makes a solid criticism when, in his discussion of Chomsky and Kosovo, he notes that even if top policymakers had no humanitarian motives at all, if some citizens have such motives and they apply pressure to the government, that might have an impact on policy. (p. 184) After all, Chomsky sometimes acknowledges that public pressure can force governments to act in moral ways, as it did in getting Bush to finally offer protection to the Kurds who were being slaughtered by Saddam Hussein in 1991. Note, however, that whether or not this sort of public pressure makes a war just or humanitarian will depend on how well informed the public is. If the public lacks essential information—for example, it doesn't know what the Kosovo Verification Mission monitors were reporting from the ground—then public humanitarian instincts might not translate into making the war a humanitarian one.

Chomsky, argues Greco, presents one-sided arguments, for example referring to U.S. behavior as terroristic. “[T]he least meritorious of Chomsky’s attributions of terrorist behavior to the United States in the 9/11 era” involves the threat of starvation in Afghanistan. (p. 195) Greco here relies on others’ analyses, rather than doing any research himself. My own research, however, confirms that Chomsky is quite on target here. The U.S. attack went on even though humanitarian aid organizations and UN officials were calling for a pause in the bombing to enable food to get through before the winter snows made food distribution impossible. U.S. officials ignored these calls. Greco writes that “all the available evidence indicates that American intervention actually facilitated the delivery of food supplies to Afghanistan. In fact, no mass starvation occurred.” That’s true, but misses the point. At the time of the calls for the bombing halt, all U.S. officials, publicly and privately, were expecting the fighting to go on through the spring.

Allow me to quote myself (see here for footnotes):

“On October 21, General Richard Myers, the chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, stated in a television interview, ‘It may take till next spring. It may take till next summer. It may take longer than that in Afghanistan.’ Two days later, the Pentagon’s Deputy Director for Global Operations told reporters that ‘if it was a perfect world, we’d like to wrap this up before the bad weather moved in. We don’t think that that’s realistic.’

“On October 26, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz was asked if it was conceivable that the Northern Alliance could take Kabul before winter. He responded that ‘the right way for us to think is to plan on what could be a long time table.’ Warning against ‘unrealistic expectations,’ Wolfowitz pointed out that ‘people are looking, in my view, for results, dramatic results, much too early.’ No one should be surprised, Wolfowitz told the BBC on October 31, at the tenacity of the Taliban.

“In late October, Rumsfeld noted that the administration had not ruled out the possibility of sending hundreds of thousands of ground troops to Afghanistan. On November 5, he said he did not expect OEF [Operation Enduring Freedom] to go on for two years, but the next day he explained that this meant it might go on for twenty-three months.

“It is now known that policy makers were no more optimistic about the timetable in private than they were in public. According to Woodward’s account, on October 9, Cheney was asking ‘[w]here will we be in December and January’ when bin Laden ‘has not been hit, the weather has gotten bad and the operations have slowed?’ The next day, Tenet said it was possible that Kabul could fall before winter, but two weeks later, Rice asked the president, ‘I want to know if you’re concerned about the fact that things are not moving?’ To which Bush replied, ‘Of course I’m concerned about the fact that things aren’t moving!’ On October 25, the Defense Intelligence Agency prepared a highly classified report stating that ‘[t]he Northern Alliance will not capture the capital of Kabul before winter arrives... Barring widespread defections, the Northern Alliance will not secure any major gains before winter.’ Over the next several days, Colin Powell was calling for the training of the Northern Alliance over the winter, so that it could later make progress against the Taliban. On November 9, the day before the strategic city of Mazar-i-Sharif fell, the CIA finally turned optimistic, but the Pentagon still thought things were not going well, and Bush asked his advisers to prepare talking points to explain why the coming of winter did not mean that Washington had failed.

“When Mazar-i-Sharif did fall, Bush told his advisers, ‘It’s amazing how fast the situation has changed. It is a stunner, isn’t it?’ Woodward commented: ‘Everyone agreed. It was almost too good to be true.’”

If, as U.S. officials expected, the fighting had gone on into the spring, the U.S. failure to pause the bombing would have led—as the aid organizations warned—to a humanitarian disaster of major proportions. But then the unexpected happened. The Taliban fell in the first half of November, which allowed the food aid to be rushed in, averting starvation. But U.S. officials can’t be credited with having averted the famine, when it was only the unanticipated collapse of the Taliban that prevented catastrophe. An unanticipated positive outcome does not change our moral assessment of an act of reckless disregard. Say you decide to fire your gun in a crowded park. You are warned that there are many children around and that you are risking hitting one of them. Unexpectedly, your bullet hits a rabid dog that was about to attack some of the children. Would this happy but unanticipated outcome change our moral judgment that you acted with reckless disregard? And would we call on those who warned that firing the gun was reckless to admit their error?

There’s another aspect of Greco’s book that I find much less admirable than his discussion of Chomsky’s main arguments and that is his rather sharp attacks on Chomsky’s integrity.

Chomsky, says Greco, “too often fails to meet” “minimal standards of intellectual honesty and balance.” (p. 229) “It is obvious,” writes Greco, “that Chomsky’s intellectual integrity is subject to serious question.” (p. 226)

Greco cites an example of where Chomsky misrepresented Eric Alterman’s views. Clearly, what Chomsky implied about Alterman in the quote in question was untrue. But was this (as Alterman called it) “lies”—that is, intentional untruths—or careless error? Greco does not indicate that Alterman notified Chomsky of the misstatement and that Chomsky denied or refused to correct the error. How then can one call this, as Greco does, an instance of Chomsky engaging in “fabricat[ing] examples”? (I leave aside Brad DeLong, who uses this example to conclude that Chomsky is the “Stupidest and Most Dishonest Man Alive of All Time”). Anyone who’s done a good deal of writing knows how this sort of error can occur. You see an interesting quote, you write it down, and when

you later use it you forget the original context of the quote and thus may cite it inappropriately. This is an error. It is careless. But it is hardly proof of intentional misrepresentation. (Greco said in a talk that there was no way Chomsky could have gotten away with this, which is all the more reason to doubt that it was intentional.)

Chomsky is one of the most prolific writers in the country, with hundreds of books, and articles, and interviews. If he had even one tenth the rate of errors of other scholars, his total number of errors would be immense. Greco seems to feel that by identifying a dozen or so errors he has demonstrated “a reckless misuse of sources of evidence.” (p. 218) In one case he accuses Chomsky of misrepresenting John Lewis Gaddis, whose text Greco acknowledges was “neither entirely lucid nor particularly cogent.” Greco asks “Could Chomsky have misunderstood?” And he answers: “that interpretation seems rather charitable. Chomsky’s manipulation of text, piecing together a quotation out of two such disparate sentences, is not only improper; it strongly suggests conscious misrepresentation.” (p. 224)

Two such disparate sentences? The two sentences, separated by ellipses, come from two adjacent paragraphs. Greco himself uses ellipses to indicate the omission of five pages of text (p. 50). The two sentences are quoted out of order, and that is a definite error. But the order of the sentences has no bearing on the meaning as far as I can see, and Greco doesn’t suggest how the reversal changes the meaning. And again anyone who’s done a lot of scholarly writing knows that there is a simple explanation for this error without the need to invoke “conscious manipulation.” Your text has two contiguous quotations from the same source. On a second read-through, trying to streamline your text, you combine the two into one with the use of ellipses, forgetting that the quotes are not in the same order they appeared in in the original. This is an error, it is careless, but no one would do this as a “conscious manipulation” unless they thought they were gaining some advantage from doing so, and, as I’ve noted, I see no difference that the order makes and Greco doesn’t indicate why it does make any difference.

What I’d like to do is look at a few of Greco’s examples of Chomsky’s misuse of evidence. I do this for two reasons. First, to demonstrate that Chomsky’s error rate is less than Greco charges. And, second, to show that errors and misinterpretation of sources are ubiquitous intellectual hazards, from which no one is immune, including Greco.

One case Greco raises involves Salvadoran leader Jose Napoleon Duarte, who he says is charged by Chomsky with *advance* knowledge about the plans to murder a group of American churchwomen in December 1980. This spectacular accusation, says Greco, is “not documented in the pertinent endnote.” (pp. 225-26) So here’s what Chomsky (and co-author Edward Herman) say in the source cited by Greco (*Manufacturing Consent*, p. 66). After reporting the findings of journalist John Dinges, they report testimony from a Salvadoran officer (I have added red for convenience):

“In March 1984, Colonel Roberto Santiváñez, a high official in Salvadoran intelligence, agreed to ‘talk’ about the death-squad network in El Salvador, and his claims found their way onto CBS News and the front page of the *New York Times*.⁶¹ Santiváñez gave highly credible details about the murder of the four women, indicating that the act had been committed on the specific order of Colonel Oscar Edgardo Casanova, who was in charge of the zone in which the killings took place. Colonel Casanova was transferred to another assignment two weeks after the murder as part of the official cover-up. His first cousin Eugenio Vides Casanova, the minister of defense chosen by Duarte and head of the National Guard in December 1980, **knew about the murder order** by his cousin, **as did Duarte**. Although this **crushing evidence implicating** a high officer in the murder and the current minister of defense and **Duarte in the cover-up**, there was no follow-up to this story....

“In sum, the leads provided by Dinges, and the testimony of Santiváñez, strongly suggest that the killings of the women was based on a high-level decision. The evidence is even clearer that middle-level officials of the government ordered the killings, and that **the highest-level officials engaged in a continuing and systematic cover-up.**”

As is clear, Chomsky never says Duarte had “advance knowledge” but that there was evidence that Duarte was told who was responsible and thus that he was involved in the cover-up. If Chomsky were charging that Duarte had *advance* knowledge, then he wouldn’t suggest that Duarte was part of the cover-up, but that he was actually a co-conspirator. If it turns out that NJ Governor Chris Christie knew about the bridge lane closings *before* they were put into effect, we wouldn’t accuse him of just participating in a cover-up, but of being more directly responsible for the crime.

On the subject of Cambodia, Chomsky and Herman commented on their earlier writings thusly:

“He [Shawcross] cites our one article (*The Nation*, 1977), in which there is no hint of any such thesis, as there is none elsewhere. In that article we were clear and explicit, as also subsequently, that refugee reports left no doubt that the record of Khmer Rouge atrocities was ‘substantial and often gruesome,’ and that ‘in the case of Cambodia, there is no difficulty in documenting major atrocities and oppression, primarily from the reports of refugees.’¹¹²”

Greco claims (p. 235n24) that the “self-quoted phrases come not from the *Nation* article, as Chomsky and Herman claim, but from the later discussion in” *After the Cataclysm*. But look carefully at what Chomsky and Herman actually wrote:

“He [Shawcross] cites our one article (*The Nation*, 1977), in which there is no hint of any such thesis, **as there is none elsewhere**. In that article we were clear and explicit, **as also subsequently**, that refugee reports left no doubt that the record of Khmer Rouge atrocities was ‘substantial and often gruesome,’ and that ‘in the case of Cambodia, there is no difficulty in documenting major atrocities and oppression, primarily from the reports of refugees.’¹¹²”

Their footnote clearly gives a page reference to *After the Cataclysm* and then adds “For some of our comments in the article in question, see p. 290, above.” Now whether on p. 290 they adequately address the criticisms that had been raised of their *Nation* article is another matter. I don’t think they do. But Greco’s charge that they mis-cited quotes is incorrect.

Greco cites a Chomsky charge that during the Carter administration the military regime in Argentina served as a proxy for U.S. policy in training the contras. Greco says that this claim is “unsupportable.” I think Greco is right that Chomsky overstates what his sources claim, wrongly concluding that a reference to Argentina serving as a proxy covered the Carter administration as well as the Reagan administration. But I think Greco understates what *his* sources claim. Greco writes (p. 92):

“Argentine military intelligence did work with Nicaraguan exiles during 1980 to establish operations in Florida for a counterrevolutionary campaign, and there is evidence that they utilized long-standing CIA contacts in that effort.¹⁶⁰ These activities were not sanctioned by the Carter administration; both Carter and his CIA director Stansfield Turner later denied that the administration had supported or funded any of the contra groups eventually sponsored by the Reagan administration.¹⁶¹”

In footnote 160, Greco cites Ariel C. Armony, “Transnationalizing the Dirty War: Argentina in Central America,” in *In from the Cold: Latin America’s New Encounter with the Cold War*, ed. Joseph Gilbert and Daniela Spenser (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008). Armony, however, doesn’t

refer to some “long-standing CIA contacts”—as though they were rogue elements—but the CIA period. Here’s what Armony says (p. 154, footnotes omitted):

“. . . evidence indicates that U.S. intelligence knew of the anti-Communist activities of the Argentines and, according to certain sources, independently supported them—even before the Reagan administration decided, to sign on to the Argentine program in Central America. In spite of President Carter’s efforts to curtail the power and leverage of the CIA, the agency supported a hemispheric network of right-wing government officials and independent players united under a mandate of anti-Communism. The CIA collaborated with the Argentine military intelligence service as its operatives established a base of operations in Florida to coordinate the counterrevolutionary program in Central America.”

It is true that Carter and Turner denied U.S. support or funding for the contras, but they didn’t comment on whether there was U.S. knowledge of Argentine paramilitary training going on within the United States, which would be in violation of international law. If they did know about an illegal activity on American soil that they could have closed down but did not do so, then it is not so far off the mark to refer to Argentina as a U.S. proxy.

Greco says that another example of Chomsky misrepresenting someone’s views is his citing memos written by presidential adviser Arthur Schlesinger Jr. showing that “the fear of Communism was always a total fraud.” Greco writes: “There is nothing in those memos that can reasonably be interpreted as an analysis acknowledging the fraudulence of Americans’ fear of Communism.”

But Chomsky never said that Schlesinger “acknowledged” that the fear of communism was a fraud, but rather that we “have known” this “for years from the declassified internal record.” *Acknowledgment* involves self-awareness. Chomsky doesn’t claim that. He claims only that the record allows us to know how policymakers viewed the actual threat. Often, when I read an exam from one of my weaker students, I know from their analysis of a text that their claim to have mastered the material is false. But they haven’t acknowledged that they don’t know anything. They’ve just demonstrated it.

Here’s what Chomsky said. He first explained that the “pretext up until 1989 was that we had to defend ourselves from this tentacle of the Russian empire [Cuba], which was about to strangle us.” He then went on to say: “The fear of Communism was always a total fraud. We know that have known it for years from the declassified internal record. . . . Historian Arthur Schlesinger submitted secret reports to Kennedy analyzing this and they’re quite revealing.” (Chomsky, *Power & Terror*, pp. 72-73.)

Chomsky’s wording is not above reproach here—the word “analysis” is a little confusing—but in any event, the source Greco cites of Chomsky’s is the text of a talk he gave to a political organization, where wording is often imprecise and where obviously one doesn’t document claims. But Chomsky does say in that talk “I’ve written about this in my book *Profit over People*.” And Greco says that in that book (*Profit over People*) Chomsky “provided an accurate short description of the Schlesinger memos.” What did Schlesinger say in those memos? Basically he said that the threat from Cuba was “the spread of the Castro idea of taking matters in one’s own hands,” and how “the poor and underprivileged, stimulated by the example of the Cuban revolution, are now demanding opportunities for a decent living.” Regarding the Soviet Union, Schlesinger warned that “the Soviet Union hovers in the wings, flourishing large development loans and presenting itself as the model for achieving modernization in a single generation.” These quotes undermine the claim that what drove the Cold War in Latin America was the threat of Soviet or Cuban aggression. And these hardly seem like evidence of Chomsky’s failing to meet standards of intellectual integrity.

Greco alleges (p. 225) that “another example of a Chomskian misrepresentation” of someone’s views occurs in his discussion of the historical background to the Kosovo intervention. Chomsky cited respected journalist Tim Judah as suggesting “that the U.S. also gave a green light to the Serb attack on Srebrenica, which led to the slaughter of 7000 people, as part of a broader plan of population exchange. The U.S. ‘did nothing to prevent’ the attack though it was aware of Serb preparations for it.” (Chomsky, *New Military Humanism*, p. 32) Greco charges:

“Chomsky’s implication is that Judah reported that the United States in effect preapproved the infamous Srebrenica massacre of July 1994. Chomsky doesn’t tell his readers, however, that Judah at the same time observed that while the United States indeed was acquiescing in ethnic cleansing by the Serbs, no one had foreseen that the Serbs, after moving into Srebrenica, would engage in wholesale slaughter. Chomsky’s use of language here is worth noting: the word ‘attack’ surely connotes the whole of Serb actions in Srebrenica that summer—the occupation of the town and the subsequent massacre.”

But Greco’s assertion that “the word ‘attack’ surely connotes the whole of Serb actions in Srebrenica that summer—the occupation of the town and the subsequent massacre” is precisely contradicted by Chomsky’s language that Greco asks us to note. If the attack “led to the slaughter,” as Chomsky says, then the slaughter was not part of the attack.

Yes, it would have been good for Chomsky to have made clearer that neither he nor Judah thought Washington knew about the massacre in advance, but failing to do so is no misrepresentation.

In reviewing half of century of Chomsky’s political writings, Greco finds perhaps a dozen errors and misinterpretations. Even if all of these were real—and they’re not—this is an incredibly low number. But Greco invokes the cockroach principle: “when you see one or two roaches, you tend to assume there are others around that you haven’t seen.” (p. 226) Given that there is a small army of people engaged in trying to debunk every word Chomsky has written, it’s hard to imagine that there are very many hidden cockroaches. But in any event, the same cockroach principle applies to Greco’s book and to those of many other well-respected authors, all of whom have (far more) errors and misinterpretations, and who are not thereby charged with failing to meet “minimal standards of intellectual honesty and balance.”

Nothing in Greco’s book demonstrates that Chomsky is worse in this regard than others—indeed, that Greco can find so few errors in such a massive oeuvre suggests that Chomsky is rather better than most. Thus, Greco’s questioning Chomsky’s intellectual integrity seems to me extremely unfortunate, making the book much less likely to encourage the informed debate on Chomsky’s foreign policy ideas that Greco wants and that would be most welcome.

* **Update, March 24, 2014:** Lawrence Leith has pointed out that when a revised version of Chomsky’s essay on the killing of bin Laden was published in book form (*9-11: Was There An Alternative?* New York: Seven Stories Press, 2011), the reference to Alterman was reworded to eliminate any unwarranted implication. This further undermines Greco’s unsubstantiated charge that Chomsky intentionally misrepresented Alterman’s views.