

Noam Chomsky on American Power: A Reply to Shalom

I conclude my book, *Chomsky's Challenge to American Power* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2014), by describing Noam Chomsky as a contradictory figure. Chomsky has been a powerful voice of outrage at morally abhorrent policies. He has provided important and valid insights into the contemporary political world, often offering perspectives and information not readily found in the work of mainstream journalists and academics. But Chomsky's single-minded determination to expose the destructiveness and criminality of American power mars the reliability of his work. It leads to oversimplification and imbalance in his political analyses. More than occasionally, he makes claims and draws conclusions that are inadequately supported by evidence.

[Stephen Shalom](#) has good things to say about the book, but he clearly feels that I have been unfairly harsh on Chomsky. The bulk of his review is devoted to attempts at refuting some of my specific criticisms. I will deal with each of his major points in very roughly ascending order of merit. (All page references will be to *Chomsky's Challenge*.)

What Chomsky and Herman say they said about Cambodia – Shalom seems to have misunderstood my point. In *Chomsky's Challenge* (pp. 52, 226) I show that Chomsky and co-author Edward Herman make false claims about what they said in their widely criticized June 1977 *Nation* article. The critical sentence by Chomsky and Herman, which both Shalom and I cite, reads as follows:

“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.'”

Now, as Shalom has acknowledged, there is in fact no admission in the *Nation* article of Khmer atrocities; the article, moreover, emphasizes the extreme unreliability of refugee reports of atrocities. The admission of substantial and gruesome atrocities, and of the usability of refugee reports, came later, in Chomsky and Herman's 1979 book *After the Cataclysm*. Shalom seems to believe that the critical sentence refers only to *After the Cataclysm*, but it clearly refers *both* to the *Nation* article and to *After the Cataclysm*. And, as far as the *Nation* article is concerned, it is undeniably false. Shalom highlights the phrase “as also subsequently,” as if those words somehow change the false claim made with respect to the *Nation* article. But the phrase “and also subsequently” does not magically erase the phrase “In that article.” This isn't about an inaccurate citation, as Shalom seems to have inferred; it's about Chomsky and Herman's attribution to the *Nation* article of ideas expressed only later, in *After the Cataclysm*.

An analogy may be helpful here. Suppose the first time I met Joe Smith I was rude to him, but I was perfectly civil to him the second time we met. Suppose I then write “At our first meeting, as also subsequently, I was perfectly civil to Joe.” Am I not falsely claiming to have been civil to him the first time? Of course I am! And, if I had incurred criticism for my rudeness, you might well suspect that in my written account I was trying to conflate the two occasions, to deflect attention from my earlier rudeness. Similarly, it is natural to suspect that Chomsky would like us to forget what he actually said in that controversial and terribly flawed *Nation* article, recalling only the modified stance taken in *After the Cataclysm*. Indeed, this wasn't the only time Chomsky made misleading statements about what he had said about Cambodia. (See pp. 51, 227 and 250n.66.)

The Alterman quote—Shalom recognizes that Chomsky misrepresented Eric Alterman's views when Chomsky cited Alterman disapprovingly as an example of joy at the death of Bin Laden. But Shalom would have us believe that this was an honest mistake: "You see an interesting quote, you write it down, and when you later use it you forget the original context of the quote..." But it was *in the very next sentence* after the one quoted by Chomsky that Alterman admonishes against joy. How could Chomsky have forgotten that? Indeed, why would Chomsky have written down the Alterman quote at all, since he could not have failed to see immediately that it did not exemplify joy? The thesis of an honest mistake is just not believable. And it doesn't help that there are other examples of Chomsky's dubious use of quotations, one of which was strikingly similar to the Alterman case. (See pages 158-159.) As for the "update": choosing not to repeat an inaccuracy after having been called out about it publicly tells us nothing about the thinking behind the original inaccuracy. Another example of a manipulation of quotations follows.

The Gaddis quote—In the book (p. 224) I point to Chomsky's citation of two sentences, separated by an ellipsis, from a work by the historian John Lewis Gaddis. Chomsky represents the sentences as expressing a view that is consistent with Chomsky's own. I described the two sentences as disparate, not only because they appear a full page apart in Gaddis's text, but because they do not represent a continuity of thought. Individually and together, they do not remotely mean what Chomsky purports them to mean; Chomsky simply cherry-picked the two sentences out of context, misrepresenting Gaddis's discussion. Shalom focuses on my observation that the two sentences were cited out of order, but he ignores the more critical point that the "passage" Chomsky has thus constructed does not represent the author's view. (Shalom has acknowledged to me that it does not.) It is hard to imagine how someone as smart as Chomsky could have

done this by accident, but in an attempt to be charitable, I suggest that Chomsky *possibly* could have misunderstood Gaddis. But, in that unlikely case, I add, "...it would constitute powerful evidence of how Chomsky's perception can be warped by his intellectual biases."

The Schlesinger memos—In memos to President Kennedy, adviser Arthur Schlesinger Jr. analyzed the bases for Fidel Castro's appeal in Latin America. Chomsky cites those memos as proof that "The fear of communism was always a total fraud." I'm not questioning Chomsky's integrity but his judgment, his readiness to draw conclusions consistent with his general views but unsupported or poorly supported by evidence. How does an analysis of the appeals of communism constitute evidence that the fear of communism is fraudulent? Shalom tries to make the connection by observing that Schlesinger doesn't invoke the specter of Soviet or Cuban armed aggression. But so what? That doesn't prove that Schlesinger, much less the American political elite more broadly, didn't genuinely fear communism. (The communist regime in China was no less fearsome for the fact that its origins owed nothing to Soviet intervention.) In any case, Schlesinger's memos represented the views of one relatively sophisticated presidential adviser at one point in time during the 40-plus years of Cold War. To generalize from such an analysis that the fear of communism was *always* a total fraud is ludicrous.

Agency vs. Complicity—Shalom challenges my contention that Chomsky frequently conflates US complicity in the crimes of others with US agency. Shalom points to the philosophic debate about whether failing to stop wrongdoing (complicity) is equally or nearly equally deserving of condemnation as actually committing the wrongdoing (agency). According to Shalom, "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."

That is a respectable (though debatable) position, but an assessment of moral responsibility cannot justify a misleading account of the facts. In his discussion of US policy in El Salvador in the 1980s, Chomsky doesn't merely say that the United States was morally responsible for massacres committed by the Salvadoran security forces; he portrays the Carter administration as the driving force behind the massacres, conducted under the "auspices" of Carter and the figurehead Salvadoran leader Duarte. The result is "Carter's war against the peasantry," an absurd characterization of the Carter administration's inconsistent and feckless stance toward the Salvadoran terror.

Starvation in Afghanistan—In mid-October 2001 Chomsky charged that the United States in initiating its war in Afghanistan was engaging in a "silent genocide" because US military operations were preventing the delivery of food aid critical to preventing the starvation of millions of Afghans. He repeated that assertion in books published in the next two years. In fact, no mass starvation did occur, and it turns out that US intervention actually facilitated the delivery of food aid.

Shalom argues that this positive turn of events was unforeseeable at the time Chomsky made his accusation. According to Shalom, the war would have rendered practically impossible the successful delivery of food aid until the Taliban were ousted from power. He demonstrates that US military planners expected this to take many months, so he concludes that they were anticipating and willing to cause mass starvation. But he seems to be wrong in his assumption that significant food aid delivery depended upon the fall of the Taliban. Kabul fell to the Americans on Nov. 12, but the UN's World Food Program [reported](#) that even in October, the agency had succeeded in providing a record volume of food aid; by mid-November, the WFP had already reached their October volume. According to one longtime humanitarian worker

interviewed by Salon in mid-November, "More aid has gone into Afghanistan in the past month than in the past year..." Chomsky was presumably unaware of these facts in mid-October, but that goes to my point: a charge of genocide is very serious; it should not be made in the absence of very compelling evidence. The evidence at the time he spoke out was murky.

I think my summary of Chomsky's comments and writings on this was perfectly fair (p. 195): "Chomsky's original accusation might be defended as a somewhat reckless but well-intended effort to raise an issue of important humanitarian concern. His subsequent iterations of the charge suggest both an unwillingness to admit error and a resolute determination to ascribe the worst possible motives and consequences to US policy."

The Judah reference—Chomsky cites the journalist Tim Judah's account that the Serbian attack on the Bosnian village of Srebrenica was effectively pre-approved by the United States and its allies. Chomsky summarizing Judah tells us that the United States "gave a green light to the Serb attack on Srebrenica, which led to the slaughter of 7000 people..." But Chomsky does not tell us that Judah also noted that the United States had no idea that the Serbian action would lead to the subsequent massacre. This is a critical omission, which allows the reader to infer that Judah said that the whole of Serb actions in Srebrenica that summer, including the massacre, were preapproved by the United States. Yes, as Shalom notes, Chomsky's language was technically correct, but with the right omissions, technically correct language can be misleading. Chomsky's omission may well have been inadvertent, but that doesn't mean it was an accident.

Whatever his conscious intent, Chomsky's account fits into his pattern of bias toward narratives emphasizing American culpability, downplaying or ignoring contravening evidence.

Iraq's helicopters—At the close of the First Gulf War Saddam Hussein brutally crushed internal regional revolts against his

rule. Shalom argues that the US failure to prevent Saddam from using armed helicopters against the rebels strengthens Chomsky's claim that the United States authorized Saddam to crush the revolt. The explanation for that failure is more complicated than Chomsky or Shalom suggests.

There were many good reasons, which Chomsky ignores, for the United States to stay out of an incipient Iraqi civil war.

The Bush administration's less than coherent response to the revolts reflected ambivalence and internal contention. Suffice it to say that once the US intention not to intervene was clear, it is highly doubtful that Saddam would have responded to a simple word of recision from Norman Schwarzkopf. (President Bush did, indeed, admonish the Iraqis against the combat use of the helicopters, but was not prepared to back up his warning with action.) No one can seriously argue that Chomsky's claim of authorization reflects a reasonably full and balanced consideration of the relevant issues. My conclusion stands: Chomsky reduced a problematically complex situation to a straightforward illustration of unambiguously evil US motives.

Duarte and the churchwomen's murder—Shalom got this one right: I attributed to Chomsky an assertion that he apparently did not intend. Chomsky's language wasn't altogether clear, but I should have recognized that it was at worst ambiguous. After he pointed it out to me, I investigated and acknowledged my error to Shalom.

Shalom's final, overarching defense of Chomsky is that we all make mistakes. He says that I have found only about a dozen errors and misinterpretations in all Chomsky's political writings. That number is debatable, depending on how we define "errors and misinterpretations." If those categories include large and small elisions of fact, blatantly tendentious arguments, and assertions inadequately supported by evidence, then careful readers of the text and notes to *Chomsky's Challenge* will note many more such errors and

misinterpretations. Of these, a relatively small number, including the misstatements and doctored quotations discussed earlier, do raise unavoidable questions of intellectual integrity. "Nothing in Greco's book demonstrates that Chomsky is worse in this regard than others..." Of course not; I would have to do similar book-length studies of "others" to demonstrate that.

But my aim in writing *Chomsky's Challenge* wasn't to compare Chomsky to others, much less to pillory him for intellectual recklessness. It was to help serious, thoughtful readers to an understanding of both the strengths and weaknesses of Chomsky's work on politics. I wouldn't have written this book if I didn't appreciate Chomsky's contributions to our political discourse. Like Chomsky and Shalom I believe that American power has inflicted a great deal of unnecessary suffering on the world. But the facts of that ugly reality are bad enough; they don't need to be overstated. Chomsky's predilection for overstatement detracts from his credibility. I sometimes get annoyed when I see commentators treat Chomsky with dismissiveness or condescension or worse, but unfortunately, he does give them pretext. I think I have made a case for Chomsky's value and importance that is all the more credible because it is entirely up front about his shortcomings.