A Rejoinder to Greco on Chomsky

written by Stephen R. Shalom | April 13, 2014

Anthony Greco, in his book *Chomsky's Challenge to American Power*, charged Noam Chomsky with too often failing to meet "minimal standards of intellectual honesty" (p. 229). To prove his point he provided instances of things Chomsky wrote over the course of some fifty years that were inaccurate. In my review I noted that Greco said many things in his book that are inaccurate (including some of his claims of Chomsky's inaccuracy) and wondered why Chomsky's far lower rate of inaccuracy per book made Chomsky lacking in intellectual integrity, but not Greco.

In his reply to my review, Greco concedes one of the inaccuracies I identified in his book (regarding whether, as he erroneously charged, Chomsky had falsely made the "spectacular accusation" that Salvadoran leader José Napoleon Duarte knew in advance of the killing of four American churchwomen) . For those with lots of time on their hands, I will address the main points in Greco's reply to my review. For others, it should suffice to note that this single inaccuracy by Greco would make his inaccuracy rate greater than Chomsky's by a considerable margin.

On starvation in Afghanistan, Greco is simply wrong. His discussion in his book is based on two sources: Michael Bérubé's *The Left at War* and an article by David Horowitz and Ronald Radosh in *The Anti-Chomsky Reader* (p. 247n134). In his reply Greco cites an article from *Salon* that is also depended on by Bérubé. Greco trumpets the fact that there were record food deliveries in Afghanistan in October and November. But this has no bearing on the argument. What matters is that the food delivery target goal of the aid agencies (52,000 metric tons a month) was not met in September, was only half met in October, and was slightly exceeded in November, the month the Taliban fell. If December had matched October or even November, there would not have been enough food in the country to make up for the previous shortfall and to distribute it to the many internal communities that needed food before they were cut off by snow. However, after the unexpected fall of the Taliban, December deliveries were more than double the target figure. (See sources cited in my article Far From Infinite Justice: Just War Theory and Operation Enduring Freedom, *Arizona Journal of International and Comparative Law*, vol. 26, no. 3 [2009], p. 690.) Thus, catastrophe was averted only by the unforeseen Taliban collapse. And U.S. officials had been willing to continue with the bombing campaign despite the dire warnings from aid officials.

On the issue of agency versus complicity, Greco writes that Chomsky's phrase, 'Carter's war against the peasantry,' was "an absurd characterization of the Carter administration's inconsistent and feckless stance toward the Salvadoran terror." There are two points to note here. First, "inconsistent and feckless" is an inadequate description of Carter's policy; he was providing the arms that were being used for slaughter, over the protests of El Salvador's archbishop. Second, while one can argue about whether this warrants Chomsky's phrase, "Carter's war against the peasantry," it is not the case, as Greco says in his book, that "Chomsky asserts that the US government was actually organizing the massacres." Greco provided no quote to support this claim.

On Cambodia, Greco writes "This isn't about an inaccurate citation, as Shalom seems to have inferred…." I didn't infer it. Greco explicitly accused Chomsky of providing an inaccurate citation ("The self-quoted phrase comes not from the *Nation* article, as Chomsky and Herman claim, but from the later discussion" in *After the Cataclysm* [p. 235n24].) I wrote that this specific charge was incorrect. Chomsky and Herman's text referred to both sources, gave some quotes, and then accurately had a footnote that attributed the quotes to *After the Cataclysm* and gave a reference to where they addressed the *Nation* article. Thus, I accurately pointed to an instance of Greco making a

claim that Chomsky gave an inaccurate citation, which Chomsky did not do.

Greco states that "as Shalom has acknowledged, there is in fact no admission in the *Nation* article of Khmer atrocities." This is false. I did not acknowledge this, and could not have acknowledged this, because in the article Chomsky and Herman said the question, to which they didn't at that time (1977) claim to know the answer, is whether events in Cambodia were on the scale of the killings of Nazi Germany or on the scale of the killings of post-liberation France, where many thousands were killed. Either way, there were atrocities. What I said in my review was that I thought Chomsky and Herman did not adequately address the criticisms that were made of their *Nation* article, which is quite different from acknowledging that there was no admission of atrocities.

Greco says Chomsky and Herman did not admit the "the usability of refugee reports" in their *Nation* piece. But they said "these reports must be considered seriously," though "care and caution are necessary." The book by François Ponchaud, which "gives a grisly account of what refugees have reported to him about the barbarity of their treatment at the hands of the Khmer Rouge," they called "serious and worth reading."

On the Alterman quote, Greco can't imagine how Chomsky's error could have been unintentional:

> "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?"

But that's because he probably didn't write the quotation down as an example of joy. He wrote it down as an example of liberal intellectual endorsement of an operation in which an unarmed person who posed no danger or risk of escape was killed. And when Chomsky saw that his using the Alterman quote after a quote by Robertson on joy gave an inaccurate impression, he revised his text to remove that misimpression. That Chomsky corrected the misimpression does not lead Greco to alter his view that Chomsky intentionally misrepresented Alterman ("choosing not to repeat an inaccuracy after having been called out about it publicly tells us nothing about the thinking behind the original inaccuracy"). But then why doesn't this same logic apply to Greco's false charge about Chomsky accusing Duarte of prior knowledge of the churchwomen's murder? Couldn't one say that Greco's (somewhat hedged) concession of error may simply mean that he got publicly caught out in his original intentional misrepresentation?

On the Alterman matter, Greco goes on to say, without elaboration, that "Another example of a manipulation of quotations follows." Chomsky wrote in the revised version, that "some who held that 'The killing of Osama bin Laden was a just and necessary undertaking' expressed no joy while applauding the murder of a defenseless prisoner by an elite commando team facing no threat"? Alterman referred to this "tremendous achievement" and "the president's cool, calm decision-making and demeanor—coupled with the peerless professional execution of the operation," which "can only impress world opinion with the mature and steely determination of America's post-Bush leadership." Alterman certainly seems to have an extremely positive view of the operation, as Chomsky asserted.

On the Gaddis quote, Greco writes that it is "hard to imagine how someone as smart as Chomsky could have" misinterpreted Gaddis "by accident," but he omits in his reply what he noted in his book: that Gaddis's "writing here is neither particularly lucid nor particularly cogent." So, an instance of Chomsky misinterpreting a neither cogent nor lucid writer, leads Greco to conclude that this "strongly suggests conscious manipulation" (p. 224). Really?

On the Schlesinger memos, Greco asks how an analysis of the appeals of communism could constitute evidence that the fear of communism is fraudulent. Of course U.S. elites feared communism. But the question is whether they feared it for the reasons they tried to get the American public to fear it. If U.S. officials had come out openly and said what Schlesinger wrote in private, namely that the communist threat was that it offered an attractive model to the poor and a source of development aid, the public might well have had a very different attitude toward the Cold War. Instead of supporting a massive military budget, arms shipments, and foreign interventions, the American people might have favored a different sort of foreign policy.

On the Judah reference, Greco says that Chomsky's language was technically correct. He neglects to note, however, that in his book he had specifically drawn our attention to the precise language Chomsky used, and charged that it was this that was crucial in demonstrating the misrepresentation. Yes, I wish Chomsky had added a clarification to avoid any misunderstanding, just as I wish, for example, that Greco, when discussing Chomsky's critique of the standard analysis of Soviet motives for invading Afghanistan, had made clear that Chomsky sharply condemned that invasion (p. 214). On Judah, Greco writes in his reply, "Chomsky's omission may well have been inadvertent, but that doesn't mean it was an accident." I'm not sure what the difference between these two is, but it doesn't stop Greco from including this as another instance of Chomsky's "misrepresentation."

On Iraq's helicopters, Greco notes that there were many reasons for the United States to have stayed out of Iraq's civil war. True, but he ignores my specific criticism. Where Greco said Chomsky was wrong to have said the U.S. "authorized" Saddam Hussein to crush the Shi'a revolt against him in 1991—this is "literally false," wrote Greco (p. 178)—in fact the top U.S. official in Iraq, Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf, explicitly authorized the use of helicopters and that authorization was never rescinded. (Bush did not consider his various statements of concern regarding the helicopters to constitute a rescindment, as shown by the fact that in his memoirs, he has second thoughts about not having rescinded.) Greco says Hussein wouldn't have listened to the U.S. in any event, but then why didn't Hussein use fixed-wing aircraft against the rebels? Because the U.S. ordered him not to and had the military means to stop him from doing so.

I've been a friend of Noam Chomsky's for many years. He is mortal. He sometimes makes errors, sometimes overstates, sometimes makes wrongheaded judgments. There is nothing wrong with someone pointing these out. But Greco does more. He concludes—with no evidence—that almost every Chomsky mistake is an intentional misrepresentation. And he charges that Chomsky's "intellectual integrity is subject to serious question" (p. 226). Such claims seem particularly inappropriate coming from someone who, as I've shown, has his own share of errors.