

Academia (kind of) Goes to War: Chomsky and His Children

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Abstract: It does not seem far-fetched to imagine such a collaboration between the policy inclined and the academically inclined. American foreign policy could certainly use it. A future war would probably not resemble either Vietnam or Iraq. But we need to bring together the two worlds of expertise they rendered asunder.

Key words: Academia; war; Chomsky

中图分类号: G0

文献标识码:

Speaking to a receptive audience before the Veterans of Foreign Wars in August 2007, George W. Bush, for the first time in his presidency, drew an explicit parallel between the Iraq War and America's entanglement in Vietnam. "Then as now," the president declared, "people argued the real problem was America's presence, and that if we would just withdraw, the killing would end."

His remarks set off a flurry of commentary among opponents of both wars. Any comparison between Vietnam and Iraq, in their telling, should conclude that entanglements in civil wars almost never work, predicted threats of disaster following an American withdrawal are always exaggerated, and notions of Islamofascism are just as far-fetched as earlier ideas of a worldwide Communist conspiracy. The point of the comparison is to leave as soon as possible, not to stay in as long as necessary.

Parallels between U.S. involvement in these two wars do exist. But on one important point, the experiences of Vietnam and Iraq could not be more different. In Vietnam, the U.S. government acted on the expertise of well-placed academics. In Iraq, the administration distrusted all experts, not only those located in universities but even those employed by America's intelligence agencies. Yet whether the problem was too much expertise or too little, the results turned out to be depressingly similar: whiz kids gave us Vietnam, ideologues gave us Iraq.

Not that one thing necessarily had that much to do with the other, but the war in Vietnam took place during a remarkable period of expansion in American higher education. Throughout the 1960s and beyond, the baby boomers began to attend college. To meet the demand, states opened new campuses and elite private colleges and universities transformed themselves into meritocracies. As early as 1964, before the war in Vietnam began to fully engage the attention of student protesters, the "multiversity," as Clark Kerr of the University of California called it, had become a term of derision among the Berkeley students who flocked into Sproul Plaza to register their feelings about their own educations.

Such rapid academic expansion could not have taken place without significant help from the federal government. The new university would be a research university in which faculty would be judged primarily on their record of publication, graduate education would be emphasized, and undergraduates would help pay the bills. The research university, in turn, would be one that placed particular emphasis on the natural sciences. Some universities, such as MIT and Cal Tech, already had significant science departments, which grew dramatically with the influx of funding associated with the National Defense Education Act of 1958 and the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency. Others, such as Stanford, transformed themselves into top-tier institutions through the funds they gained in areas such as electronics and material sciences. By the end of the 1960s, what Senator J. William Fulbright called the “military-industrial-academic complex” had been fully formed.

At the same time, federal spending sparked, and then influenced, the study of politics and society. It was not just that the social sciences would emulate the natural sciences, emphasizing the rigorous testing of hypotheses and collecting massive amounts of data. Social scientists would also be encouraged to apply their techniques and methods to the policy world. For those primarily interested in foreign policy, the Center for International Studies at MIT, which began in 1952 and quickly became a home for scholars interested in third world political and economic development, was the place to be. If you wanted to know more about Turkey, you read Daniel Lerner’s *The Passing of Traditional Society*. Should China be the source of your interest, there was always Lucien Pye. MIT, along with Harvard, made Cambridge the center of the academic–national security complex; whether the subject was nuclear deterrence, the balance of payments, or Western European security, here one could always find a suitable expert. Aspiring presidents such as Nelson Rockefeller hired scholars such as Henry Kissinger. Newly elected ones such as John F. Kennedy turned to McGeorge Bundy. Political science received only a fraction of the federal dollars that went to physics, but for a discipline that was once all but indistinguishable from history, these were heady days indeed.

No sooner did American involvement in Vietnam begin to spur opposition on campuses than attention turned to the links between the university and the national security state. The individual most responsible for calling attention to those links was a Cambridge dissenter from the policy wonks surrounding him: the MIT linguist Noam Chomsky. In the 1960s, Chomsky was not the marginalized figure he is today, discredited in many quarters for his defense of the French Holocaust denier Robert Faurisson and for his slowness in responding to the unfolding disaster in Cambodia. Chomsky’s essays appeared in respectable publications such as the *New York Review of Books* and his books came out with the imprint of prestigious New York publishers. His fame as a linguist and his affiliation with a university at the center of American scientific life guaranteed that his thoughts on academic complicity in Vietnam would receive widespread attention.

Two of Chomsky’s essays from the 1960s are especially noteworthy. One of them, “Objectivity and Liberal Scholarship,” was first given as a lecture in 1968 and then published in Chomsky’s 1969 book, *American Power and the New Mandarins*. Chomsky looked at the scholarship in political science being supported by the federal government and saw evil. “When we strip away the terminology of the behavioral sciences,” he wrote,

“we see revealed . . . the mentality of the colonial civil servant, persuaded of the benevolence of the mother country and the correctness of its vision of world order, and convinced that he understands the true interests of the backward peoples whose welfare he is to administer.” His targets included fellow Cambridge academics Ithiel de Sola Pool (MIT) and Samuel P. Huntington (Harvard). Pool in particular had written a 1966 essay on “The Necessity for Social Scientists Doing Research for Governments,” whose title alone sufficed to draw Chomsky’s fire. “In no small measure, the Vietnam war was designed and executed by these new mandarins,” Chomsky wrote of men such as Pool and Huntington. By playing a role in planning the war, “the university has, to a significant degree, betrayed its public trust.”

Another of Chomsky’s essays published at roughly the same time was titled “The Responsibility of Intellectuals.” Their responsibility, in his view, could not have been clearer: they should always tell the truth. But we no longer had the kind of intellectuals willing to expose the machinations of the French generals during the Dreyfus affair; our academics lie because they are in the pay of the state. Because genuine intellectuals—Chomsky clearly had himself in mind—spurn power and its temptations, they have to be marginalized. The way this happens, according to Chomsky, is that the media and other protectors of power make a distinction between “experts,” who are viewed as dispassionate and trustworthy, and critics, who are dismissed as “hysterical” or “emotional.” “The ‘hysterical critics’ are to be identified, apparently, by their irrational refusal to accept one fundamental political axiom,” Chomsky wrote, “namely, that the United States has the right to extend its power and control without limit, insofar as it is feasible.” You could argue that the United States was using the wrong tactics in Vietnam and still be treated as respectable. Argue instead that we had no business imposing our will there and you would be treated as a heretic.

Although some of Chomsky’s targets were, or would become, conservatives, most of them were liberals. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., for example, was about as liberal as they came; indeed, the longer Schlesinger lived, the more liberal he became. But for Chomsky, Schlesinger had lied to defend John F. Kennedy’s actions in the Bay of Pigs fiasco, and for that Chomsky compared him to Nazi sympathizer Martin Heidegger. Schlesinger’s corruption was the corruption of America’s entire academic community, Chomsky believed. “It is of no particular interest that one man is quite happy to lie in behalf of a cause which is known to be unjust; but it is significant that such events provoke so little response in the intellectual community—no feeling, for example, that there is something strange in the offer of a major chair in the humanities to a historian who feels it his duty to persuade the world that an American-sponsored invasion of a nearby country is nothing of the sort.”

I recall reading Chomsky as a graduate student and as a beginning assistant professor and responding to these two essays as if visiting the oracle at Delphi. (The fact that I went to the same high school as Chomsky, one also attended by former Under Secretary of Defense Douglas Feith, influenced my sympathies.) How many others had the same reaction at the time I cannot say. But the relationship he described between the academy and the national security establishment supplied powerful fuel to radicals, as I fancied myself at the time.

My radicalism eventually ended. So, as it happens, did the collaboration Chomsky did his best to expose. Conservative critics were not incorrect when they invented the term “tenured radicals” to summarize what happened to the American university in the 1980s and 1990s. Neil Gross of Harvard and Solon Simmons of George Mason University released their study “The Social and Political Views of American Professors” in the fall of 2007, and no matter how you interpret the data, there is no denying that the academy leans left. The American university today would not accept what Chomsky took for granted in the 1960s. Anthropologists tend to be wary of working with the U.S. military in Iraq or Afghanistan. Sociologists are more inclined to identify with critics of American foreign policy than with its architects. MIT is more likely to teach courses in sustainable development than political development. There are precious few old mandarins left in the discipline of political science, let alone emerging new ones. One half of the evil axis identified by Chomsky is gone: work for any government agency, particularly the Central Intelligence Agency, and your chances of getting tenure will diminish with more than deliberate speed.

If academics are not especially willing to give their advice to governments, governments are even less willing to seek it from academics. The federal funding that once bolstered social science research has long evaporated. The CIA no longer plucks up the best and brightest Yalies based on the recommendations of sympathetic faculty. The Ford Foundation, which had once partnered with government to support academic work, now gives less money to universities supporting global ambitions and more to third world activists resisting them. If a military-industrial-academic complex once existed, by the start of the twenty-first century, it existed no longer.

Even without generous financial assistance from government and well-endowed foundations, academics nonetheless continued to study areas of the world that might some day be of interest to foreign policy-makers, including the Middle East. Still, when the Bush administration decided to take military action against Iraq, it relied largely on the writings of three people, Bernard Lewis, Fouad Ajami, and Kanan Makiya, all distinguished scholars, but also, as avid supporters of the administration’s goals, anything but disinterested experts. It is possible that the administration chose to ignore other academic experts on the Middle East because it believed universities were occupied by leftists whose views made them untrustworthy. But the administration also paid little attention to experts working at the CIA, State Department, or any other governmental agency not under the direct control of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. When you know what you want, you do not need people telling you what you should know.

Vietnam failed because the experts gave the wrong advice. The Sino-Soviet alliance observed by Cold War theoreticians did not account for the emerging rivalry between China and Russia. Nor did the many plans for counter-insurgency warfare, strategic hamlets, or other techniques help much. The failure of the intellectuals was not that they had sold their soul to government. The failure was that they gave bad information.

U.S. policy in Iraq, by contrast, ran into trouble because the experts gave no advice at all. The irony, especially in contrast to Vietnam, was that they had plenty to give. Academic specialists on the Middle East possessed all kinds of information the administration could have used profitably, analyzing the tensions between the Shia and

Sunnis, the problems with previous Western efforts to create a viable state in Iraq, and the nature of the Turkish-Kurdish rivalry. Compared with what academics knew about Vietnam, what they knew about Iraq was impressive and nuanced.

Too bad, then, that so little of that wisdom was put to use. America's problems in Iraq have many causes, but one of the most important is surely the refusal of policymakers even to attempt to understand the country, its leadership, its people, and the military requirements of victory. All too late, the Bush administration acknowledged the price paid for its lack of expertise, eventually turning to someone with a Princeton doctoral degree, General David Petraeus, who in turn was known to rely on anthropologists with real knowledge of the country. Unsurprisingly, anthropologists in the academic world rose up in protest.

Despite the upended relationship between advice-givers and advice-consumers, critics of American involvement in Iraq write as if we still live in the Vietnam era. The world has changed, but they have not. Consider the work of one of the most prominent critics of the war in Iraq, the blogger Glenn Greenwald. In July 2007, two foreign policy experts, Michael O'Hanlon and Kenneth Pollack, wrote an op-ed article for the *New York Times* reflecting on a trip they had recently made to Iraq. Describing themselves as critics of the Bush administration, they argued that, after many false starts, the U.S. presence in Iraq was beginning to show results. In particular, they said, the "surge" of U.S. forces put into place by President Bush had resulted in "the potential to produce not necessarily 'victory' but a sustainable stability that both we and the Iraqis could live with." It would be wrong, they concluded, for Americans to panic. Congress should continue to support the surge until well into 2008.

From his Web site, Greenwald launched a barrage of criticism against O'Hanlon and Pollack. His critique echoed Chomsky's attack on the new mandarins in two important ways. First, the experts being criticized were, like those against whom Chomsky directed his fire, liberals and Democrats, not conservatives and Republicans. For Greenwald, their claims to be critics of the war were fatuous, if not downright deceitful, because both had been cheerleaders of the war from the start. There was some truth in Greenwald's assertion, as O'Hanlon would later acknowledge, and it was also true, as Greenwald suggested, that conservatives would cite the liberal credentials of both men as reasons to credit their views with special significance. Yet it is also true that liberal supporters of the war in Iraq were more likely to be singled out by the left than conservative ones. Greenwald wrote that he had no problem with a Joseph Lieberman or a John McCain traveling to Iraq and engaging in boosterism. But O'Hanlon and Pollack, he added, were "scholars"—he put the term in quotation marks—and from people claiming the scholarly mantle, more honest analysis should have been forthcoming.

Greenwald used quotation marks around "scholar," of course, because he did not really believe they were scholars. And here is the second point of comparison with Chomsky. Chomsky informed us that policymakers considered people like himself hysterical rather than responsible. Greenwald makes the same point by relying, rather tendentiously, on the word "Serious," which he always capitalizes. No matter what the issue—the Bush surge, the testimony of General Petraeus, the failure, in Greenwald's view, of the Democrats to challenge either one—the blogger, dripping with sarcasm,

deploys the term Serious to mean people who are not only habitually wrong, but are identified by the media, uncritically, as experts. Here is vintage Greenwald: "The Foreign Policy Community is more secretive than the Fight Club. They believe that all foreign policy should be formulated only by our secret 'scholar' geniuses in the think tanks and institutes comprising the Foreign Policy Community and that the American people need not know anything about it short of the most meaningless platitudes. They are the Guardians of Seriousness. 'Serious' really means the extent to which one adheres to their rules and pays homage to their decrees."

There exists one important point of difference between Greenwald and Chomsky, and it concerns the affiliation O'Hanlon and Pollack have with the "liberal" Brookings Institution. (The quotation marks around liberal once again belong to Greenwald.) Whether Brookings is viewed as liberal, it cannot be viewed as a university. Its fellows do not endure the same kind of tenure process that political scientists at Harvard or MIT do. The professionals who work for it do not spend much time publishing articles in peer-reviewed journals. Brookings is located in Washington, not Cambridge. One of its purposes is to prepare people to work in government. Although some of the D.C. think tanks have endowed chairs and other titles that resemble those of the academic world, there is no conspiracy here. Washington think tanks are known as intensely political places filled with intensely political people. They do not make claims to be objective or to be bound by the conventions of academic freedom. The whole point of their existence is to influence policy.

Think tanks filled the vacuum created when universities and the government, in the aftermath of the Vietnam debacle, went their separate ways. If you had just received a doctorate in political science and had a special interest in, say, the Middle East, and you did not want to spend your life teaching in a remote college but wanted to apply your knowledge to the world around you, it made far more sense to find work in a think tank than to become an assistant professor. And if you were a presidential candidate or a newly-elected member of Congress or even a newly-elected president, it made far more sense to turn to people for advice who had considerable Washington experience and insider connections than it did to court some fickle academic. Governments will always need experts and some experts will always want to work for the government. Why not bring them together in a city where they can keep an eye on one another?

Although Noam Chomsky's rhetoric could be excessive, he was an MIT professor and could be viewed as engaged in an attempt to defend a certain vision of the university. Neither Greenwald, nor, for that matter, O'Hanlon and Pollack, are academics. It is therefore difficult to understand the over-the-top sarcasm Greenwald employs in discussing their ideas. It is no secret that his targets have ambitions to work for a future Democratic president. Nor is it revealing anything newsworthy to note that they write op-eds and books and articles with an eye to who will read them and how they ought to position themselves. They can properly be criticized for being wrong, which, on many occasions, (every single one of them documented by Greenwald) they have been. But it makes little sense to criticize them for not being scholars. That is like criticizing the Boston Red Sox for not being a good football team.

A related, and much more serious, problem is that the division of expert labor between universities and think tanks serves the nation poorly. To be sure, the divide

allows academics to avoid compromising their objectivity by working for the government, just as it allows think tank experts to avoid the tentativeness and obscurantism typical of so much academic scholarship. But academic research would be strengthened if it had more real-world attachments. And think tank policy recommendations would have more depth if they contained more academic distance.

Say this much for scholars such as Daniel Lerner, Lucien Pye, and Samuel P. Huntington: they produced books of lasting value. The best example is the man who had a longer post-Chomsky career than any of them. Think what you will of his work, Samuel Huntington, in the years since Vietnam, wrote a major book on American political culture, an extremely influential account of the clash of cultures, and a somewhat sour diatribe against Mexican immigration. All of these books either enriched public understanding or stimulated much-needed debate, and at least part of the reason was that Huntington engaged the world around him. For example, Huntington's best book, *The Soldier and the State*, first published in 1957, could only have been written by someone who sympathized with, rather than denounced, the U.S. military.

There continue to be political scientists writing in the Huntington vein, but too much contemporary political science is devoted to abstract model-building with little relevance. Success comes not to those who advise policymakers, but to those who publish in barely read academic journals. The academics who do such work cannot be accused, in Chomsky-like fashion, of collaborating with evil. But they can be indicted for the abstruseness of their concerns and the dreadfulness of their prose. If a choice must be made, American life is better enriched by those who write books of great significance even while advising policymakers on mistaken policies.

Does this mean that academics ought to overcome their long-standing opposition to working with the CIA? They should. The war in Iraq proves why intelligence matters, as does the broader interest the United States maintains in combating terrorism. Are terrorists primarily motivated by religious convictions? Is it possible to understand their psychology? Why does moving from a third world country to Western Europe seem to fuel religious belief? What will the lives of second and third generations of immigrants in the West resemble? Despite the prevalence of model building in the social sciences, academic specialists can still help answer such questions. Decisions about how to do so must be made on a case-by-case basis, and there will be cases in which academics would risk forfeiting valuable sources of information if it became known that they were collaborating with an intelligence agency. At the same time, there are scholars in American universities who possess important information about religion, immigration, ethnic conflict, and generational mobility. It is not so clear that one assumes the moral highground in refusing to share information with intelligence agencies, particularly information that could save lives.

For the same reason, scholars in think tanks would do well to engage more fully with their academic critics. Part of the neoconservative failure to anticipate the future in Iraq occurred because so many neoconservatives only associated with like-minded colleagues; it is significant, in this regard, that the most prominent neoconservative who broke ranks, Francis Fukuyama, taught at Johns Hopkins University. If the experts who work in think

tanks are to advise policymakers properly, they ought to get out of Washington from time to time and engage in the give-and-take of the lecture and conference circuit.

Real life may soon offer a test of whether this division of labor can be overcome. There now exists considerable speculation about possible U.S. military action against Iran, just as five years before similar talk could be heard about Iraq. Surely it would not be amiss for think-tankers to communicate with people who actually know something about Iran. Conversely, our academic experts might consider taking a leave of absence for a year, moving to Washington, and trying to influence the national debate.

It does not seem far-fetched to imagine such a collaboration between the policy inclined and the academically inclined. American foreign policy could certainly use it. A future war would probably not resemble either Vietnam or Iraq. But we need to bring together the two worlds of expertise they rendered asunder.

教授参战：乔姆斯基和他的孩子们

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摘要：假设倾向政策的专家和倾向学术研究的专家进行合作并非天方夜谭，美国外交政策当然能利用这样的合作。未来的战争很可能不同于越南战争也不同于伊拉克战争，但我们需要把两场战争拆散的两个专业知识世界结合起来。

关键词：教授；战争；乔姆斯基

收稿日期：2008-3-1