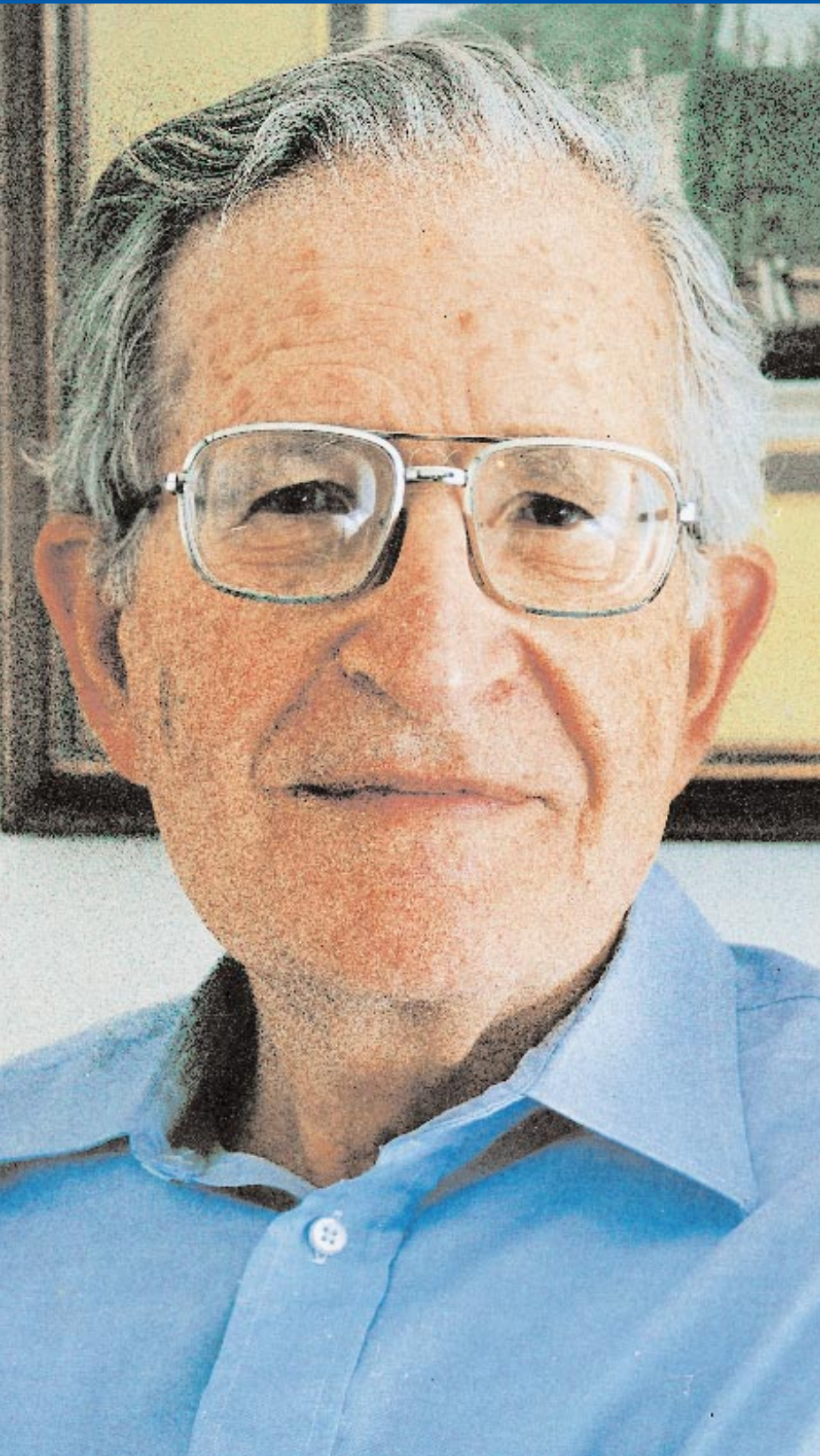


THE IMPORTANCE OF CHOMSKY'S IDEAS



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NOAM CHOMSKY is the great polymath of our age, although given his own attitude to heroes and hype, it is more or less certain that he will dissent from such characterisations. Renowned scholar, founder of the modern science of linguistics, philosopher, political and social analyst, media critic, author of many books, winner of many prizes and awards, Professor Chomsky has been described by an intellectual biographer as having “a position in the history of ideas on a par with Darwin or Descartes.” As is well known, *The New York Times* once described him as “arguably the most important intellectual alive” and on another occasion as “perhaps the clearest voice of dissent in American history.”

Chomsky is reported, in recent surveys, to be the most cited of all living authors, ranking in fact with Marx, Shakespeare and the Bible as one of the ten most quoted sources in the humanities. Raising the question “Why is Chomsky important?” Neil Smith, a linguistic theorist and author of an insightful and accessible book on his ideas and ideals, provides the following answer:

He has shown that there is really one human language: that the immense complexity of the innumerable languages we hear around us must be variations on a single theme. He has revolutionized linguistics, and in so doing has set a cat among the philosophical pigeons. He has resurrected the theory of innate ideas, demonstrating that a substantial part of our knowledge is genetically determined; he has reinstated rationalist ideas that go back centuries, but which had fallen into disrepute; and he has provided evidence that ‘unconscious knowledge’ is what underlies our ability to speak and understand. He has overturned the dominant school of behaviourism in psychology, and has returned the mind to its position of pre-eminence in the study of humankind. In short, Chomsky has changed the way we think of ourselves... And he has done this while devoting a great deal of his time to political and social analysis and activism...

The mild-mannered Institute Professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) is the polymath as great dissenter. His socio-political outlook and the specific positions he has taken over the decades on central issues are celebrated or notorious, depending on



Noam Chomsky delivering his lecture at the Music Academy in Chennai on November 10.

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which side of the fence you are on. He was one of the first among American intellectuals to take a clear and uncompromising stand against the Vietnam War. In an influential and widely admired essay on "The Responsibility of Intellectuals," which was published in *The New York Review of Books* in February 1967 and enraged the U.S. establishment, Chomsky examined the positions and arguments of a range of American intellectuals from W.W. Rostow to Henry Kissinger *vis-a-vis* the United States' war of aggression against Vietnam.

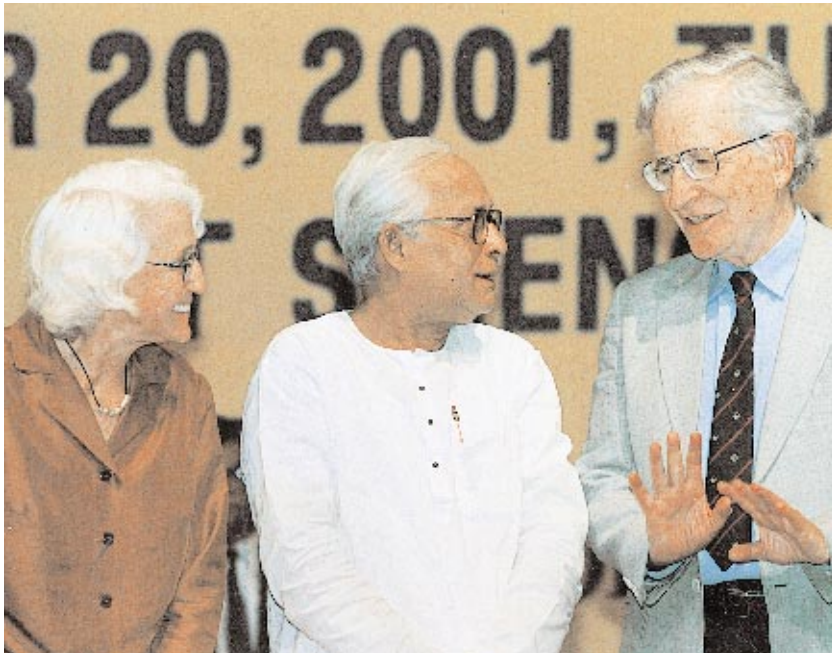
At a broader level, he looked at the role of leading American intellectuals in the construction of pro-imperialist ideologies and propaganda, their justification of the use of force by the United States to impose its writ on the rest of the world, especially the third world. He spotlighted the equanimity with which some well-known

American intellectuals countenanced, recommended or endorsed such methods as mass starvation, intensive bombing, and the extinguishing of national sovereignty. "In no small measure," observes Chomsky about such responses, "it is attitudes like this that lie behind the butchery in Vietnam, and we had better face up to them with candour, or we will find our government leading us towards a 'final solution' in Vietnam, and in the many Vietnams that inevitably lie ahead."

In his 1967 essay, which marked a watershed in the development of opposition to the Vietnam War, he offered a clear and powerful formulation in order to emphasise the great intellectual and moral imperative of truth-telling and activism in its behalf:

Intellectuals are in a position to expose the lies of governments, to analyse actions according to their causes and

motives and often hidden intentions. In the Western world, at least, they have the power that comes from political liberty, from access to information and freedom of expression. For a privileged minority, Western democracy provides the leisure, the facilities and the training to seek the truth lying hidden behind the veil of distortion and misrepresentation, ideology and class interest, through which the events of current history are presented to us... It is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth and to expose lies... it is also his duty to see events in their historical perspective... The question, 'what have I done?' is one that we may well ask ourselves, as we read each day of fresh atrocities in Vietnam – as we create, or mouth, or tolerate the deceptions that will be used to justify the next defence of freedom.



Carol and Noam Chomsky with West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee in Kolkata.

Chomsky is also the great exemplar of an intellectual being able to integrate theory with practice. He has had no hesitation in putting his dazzling academic career on the line for the sake of the intellectual, political and moral principles he has espoused. He has spent time in jail for his role in the demonstrations against the Vietnam War. Asked once why he took such risks, he replied: "It has to do with being able to look yourself in the eye in the morning."

Since the essay on the responsibility of intellectuals was published, Chomsky's vision of intellectual life in the United States and what intellectuals actually do and have done right through history has deepened and broadened. What he has presented in books such as the path-breaking *American Power and the New Mandarins* (1969) is a profound and devastating critique of the intellectual culture, the media and the academic world that he knows so well. In a way that seems to have no precedent or parallel in modern times, he has spotlighted—always in relation to critical issues—intellectual dishonesty, corruption and willing participation in a process of whitewashing and indoctrination in the service of establishment power. 'Manufacturing consent,' the propaganda function of the media, fits into what in effect is a continuum.

WHILE Chomsky's concerns in the sphere of international social and political affairs are truly universal, he has paid particular attention to four areas: South-East Asia, above all Vietnam;

Central and South America; Israel, the Palestinian liberation struggle and West Asia; and East Timor, where the Indonesian military dictatorship committed genocide with U.S. connivance and military support. We can add to this his clear and powerful analysis of the unjust character and calamitous effects of the U.S.-led Gulf War and consequent military actions and atrocities against Iraqi civilians, notably children. Since 1991, *Frontline* has been able to publish several interviews with Chomsky on this subject, with Professor V.K. Ramachandran, an economist with longstanding media experience, doing most of the interviews (we find that these run into some 27,400 words, including the present interview).

Not surprisingly, about "September 11, 2001 and its Aftermath," which have ushered in a horrifying chapter in international affairs, Chomsky has had a great deal to say. It is a chapter made up of terrorism, its roots and motivations, its 'leaderless resistance' networks and its global reach; imperialism and war; the violation of national sovereignty and international law; the bizarre application of near-futuristic weapons combined with the old-world butchery that is known as conventional ground war; 'collateral damage', virtually as a diversion from the silent genocide that is taking place in Afghanistan; and complicit silence on, or endorsement of, all this by much of the Western media and intellectual community. By addressing central and critical questions and by focussing on peo-

ple-centred concerns, Chomsky has provided a clear analytical framework for understanding what is happening on the world stage today.

A word on his method. A self-avowed believer in "Cartesian common sense," the scientific method laid out by Descartes, Chomsky applies the following methodological rules – as described in David Cogswell's *Chomsky for Beginners*—in thinking logically towards reliable conclusions: "Accept only clear and distinct ideas. Break each problem into as many parts as necessary to solve it. Work from the simple to the complex. Always check for mistakes." His analytic technique has also been described as "the classic academician's accumulation of massive documentation, relying both on standard references and on sources that are frequently ignored by mainstream commentators and historians," with the method flavoured by the use of irony.

Chomsky is also the rarest of intellectuals – one with a fan following everywhere he goes. The last time he was in India was in January 1996. The lecture tour of India and Pakistan in November 2001 exceeded all expectations in terms of the intellectual excitement generated and the overflowing public response to the lectures, and the Question and Answer sessions that followed them. The 'new war against terrorism', focused on savaging Afghanistan and committing 'silent genocide', was a major theme of his public engagements in India and Pakistan. He also covered issues relating to linguistics, militarism, democracy and people's right to know, and globalisation. In addition to giving public lectures in Delhi, Chennai, Thiruvananthapuram, Kolkata, Lahore and Islamabad, Chomsky spoke with smaller groups in open and free discussions and gave media interviews.

Chomsky's ideas, analytical framework and method, and his views on current international affairs as well as on socio-political, intellectual and media issues, need the widest possible discussion. Hence this Cover Story on "Chomsky In First Person." Ramachandran's interview with him covers terrorism and the war on Afghanistan, imperialism and its ways, the media and the role of intellectuals – offering, we believe, new insights into Chomsky's ideas and ideals. Chomsky ends the interview on a wonderful note – a qualitative update on "The Responsibility of Intellectuals," which involves pointing out "unclearities and omissions" in the old formulation, redefining the term 'intellectual', and setting out inspiring new goals. ■