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## **Without honour in his own land**

<http://www.abc.net.au/unleashed/3597268.html#>

Months before Chomsky is due in Australia as guest of the Sydney Peace Foundation, the seats for his public lecture in the Sydney Town Hall had already sold out.

Despite his near-invisibility in the US and Australian media, Chomsky is in great demand around the world as a public speaker and is the most cited living scholar, among a handful of the most cited sources of all time, beaten only by a few like Plato, the Bible, Marx, Shakespeare and Freud.

However, it is no accident that he was the only scientist or philosopher on the Nixon White House enemies list. Chomsky's political writings are undeniably disturbing and implausible on first hearing. People rightly expect evidence for statements that depart from conventional wisdom such as his remark that, if the principles of the 1945 Nuremberg war-crime trials were applied, then "every post-war American president would have been hanged," or his recent suggestion that the crimes of George Bush "vastly exceed Bin Laden's." Since the 1960s Chomsky has revealed the connection between US aid and violations of human rights through sponsorship of death squads, military coups, destruction of popular organisations and nationalist movements, torture of resisters, assassination of church leaders and general repression.

Reacting to his award of 2011 Sydney Peace Prize, critics such as Ted Lapkin and Keith Windschuttle recycle easily refuted slanders that Chomsky is a Holocaust denier and apologist for genocide whose work is "ethical perversion", "blinded by ideology" with "a sordid underside of moral depravity and intellectual dishonesty." The vilification and deceit seek to divert attention from the content of Chomsky's writings about our crimes and our culture of wilful ignorance. The same slanders were raised when Chomsky visited Australia in 1995 on behalf of East Timorese to raise public concern about the near-genocide they suffered at the hands of Indonesia. In view of our crucial role, it is understandable that some people prefer to deflect attention from these matters. Nevertheless, Chomsky's efforts have been vindicated today, just as his detractors again reveal who is an apologist for whom.

The tactic of vilification is only partially successful because members of the public pose the constant risk of thinking for themselves despite the mechanisms of thought control in free societies like our own – "manufacturing consent." From Chomsky's writing, ordinary people gain confidence to see through official mystification. He argues that there is nothing in political science or history that is beyond the intellectual capacities of an ordinary 15-year-old.

Chomsky's political writings gain their power through voluminous documentation of our crimes, often from the internal record of official government planning. But he also emphasises moral truisms such as the principle that we are responsible for the foreseeable consequences of our own actions. Furthermore, it is the responsibility of

intellectuals "to seek the truth lying behind the veil of distortion and misrepresentation, ideology, and class interest through which the events of current history are presented to us." George Orwell, too, wrote of "The servility with which the greater part of the ... intelligentsia have swallowed and repeated... propaganda... with complete disregard to historical truth or intellectual decency". We see an illustration in the commentary and media coverage of Iraq. Dwarfing the crimes of bin Laden, the toll of Iraqi dead in the first Gulf War of 1991 was around 300,000 of whom half were civilians, followed by sanctions that caused an additional 500,000 children's deaths. The war from 2003 is estimated to have cost a further million Iraqi lives and destroyed the country.

Nevertheless, much-admired by intellectuals such as Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris suggests that Muslims have "purely theological grievances" against us and hate us for what we are rather than what we have inflicted on them. Windschuttle blames Muslims for wallowing in self-pity and Harris concludes that we have attained a higher level of moral development because it is Muslims who are "standing eye deep in the red barbarity of the fourteenth century". Orwell would have been impressed. In a society where such delusion or deceit can be received with widespread acclaim it is impossible to avoid Chomsky's troubling questions in his earliest writings concerning our moral degeneration on large scale.

For his career of exposing apologists and propagandists in our own scholarship, culture and media, Noam Chomsky elicits a familiar, predictable response. Socrates was executed in 399 BC for "corrupting the youth" by refusing to recognise the official dogmas or "Gods of the State". He offended the experts and intellectuals of his day, the Sophists, who pandered to the state and subordinated seeking truth to serving power. Nineteenth Century philosopher JS Mill noted that while such dreadful mistakes astonish and horrify future generations, the people responsible shared the moral and patriotic feelings of their time.

Foremost philosopher of the 20th Century, Bertrand Russell has inspired Chomsky both with his towering achievements in logic and philosophy, but also with his tireless engagement in the moral and political concerns of his time. Of course, Russell was vilified as "unmistakably a dangerous person," "subversive," "irreverent", "untruthful, and bereft of moral fibre". However, Einstein wrote in support of Russell:

"Great spirits have always found violent opposition from mediocrities. The latter cannot understand it when a man does not thoughtlessly submit to hereditary prejudices but honestly and courageously uses his intelligence."

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