On Resistance

Noam Chomsky

December 7, 1967

Several weeks after the demonstrations in Washington, I am still trying to sort out my impressions of a week whose quality is difficult to capture or express. Perhaps some personal reflections may be useful to others who share my instinctive distaste for activism, but who find themselves edging toward an unwanted but almost inevitable crisis.

For many of the participants, the Washington demonstrations symbolized the transition "from dissent to resistance." I will return to this slogan and its meaning, but I want to make clear at the outset that I do feel it to be not only accurate with respect to the mood of the demonstrations, but, properly interpreted, appropriate to the present state of protest against the war. There is an irresistable dynamics to such protest. One may begin by writing articles and giving speeches about the war, by helping, in many ways, to create an atmosphere of concern and outrage. A courageous few will turn to direct action, refusing to take their place alongside the "good Germans" we have all learned to despise. Some will be forced to this decision when they are called up for military service. The dissenting Senators, writers, and professors will watch as young men refuse to serve in the Armed Forces, in a war that they detest. What then? Can those who write and speak against the war take refuge in the fact that they have not urged or encouraged draft resistance, but have merely helped to develop a climate of opinion in which any decent person will want to refuse to take part in a miserable war? It's a very thin line. Nor is it very easy to watch from a position of safety while others are forced to take a grim and painful step. The fact is that most of the 1000 draft cards turned in to the Justice Department on October 20th came from men who can escape military service, but who insisted on sharing the fate of those who are less privileged. In such ways the circle of resistance widens. Quite apart from this, no one can fail to see that to the extent that he restricts his protest, to the extent that he rejects actions that are open to him, he accepts complicity in what the Government does. Some will act on this realization, posing sharply a moral issue that no person of conscience can evade.

On October 16th on the Boston Common I listened as Howard Zinn explained why he felt ashamed to be an American. I watched as several hundred young men, some of them my students, made a terrible decision which no young person should have to face: to sever their connection with the Selective Service System. The week ended, the following Monday, with a quiet discussion in Cambridge in which I heard estimates of the nuclear megatonnage that would be necessary to "take out" North Vietnam ("some will find this shocking, but…"; "no civilian in the Government is suggesting this, to my knowledge…"; "let's not use emotional words like 'destruction' "; etc.),

and listened to a leading expert on Soviet affairs who explained how the men in the Kremlin are watching very carefully to determine whether wars of national liberation can succeed — if so, they will support them all over the world. (Try pointing out to such an expert that on these assumptions, if the men in the Kremlin are rational, they will surely support dozens of such wars right now, since at a small cost they can confound the American military and tear our society to shreds — you will be told that you don't understand the Russian soul.)

The weekend of the Peace Demonstrations in Washington left impressions that are vivid and intense, but unclear to me in their implications. The dominant memory is of the scene itself, of tens of thousands of young people surrounding what they believe to be — I must add that I agree — the most hideous institution on this earth, and demanding that it stop imposing misery and destruction. Tens of thousands of *young* people. This I find hard to comprehend. It is pitiful but true that by an overwhelming margin it is the young who are crying out in horror at what we all see happening, the young who are being beaten when they stand their ground, and the young who have to decide whether to accept jail or exile, or to fight in a hideous war. They have to face this decision alone, or almost alone. We should ask ourselves why this is so.

Why, for example, does Sen. Mansfield feel "ashamed for the image they have portrayed of this country," and not feel ashamed for the image of this country portrayed by the institution these young people were confronting, an institution directed by a sane and mild and eminently reasonable man who can testify calmly before Congress that the amount of ordnance expended in Vietnam has surpassed the total expended in Germany and Italy in World War II? Why is it that Senator Mansfield can speak in ringing phrases about those who are not living up to our commitment to "a government of laws" — referring to a small group of demonstrators, not to the ninety-odd responsible men on the Senate floor who are watching, with full knowledge, as the State they serve clearly, flagrantly violates the explicit provisions of the UN Charter, the supreme law of the land? He knows quite well that prior to our invasion of Vietnam there was no armed attack against any State. It was Senator Mansfield, after all, who informed us that "when the sharp increase in the American military effort began in early 1965, it was estimated that only about 400 North Vietnamese soldiers were among the enemy forces in the South which totalled 140,000 at that time"; and it is the Mansfield Report from which we learn that at that time there were 34,000 American soldiers already in South Vietnam, in violation of our "solemn commitment" at Geneva in 1954.

The point should be pursued. After the first International Days of Protest in October, 1965, Senator Mansfield criticized the "sense of utter irresponsibility" shown by the demonstrators. He had nothing to say then, nor has he since, about the "sense of utter irresponsibility" shown by Senator Mansfield and others who stand by quietly and vote appropriations as the cities and villages of North Vietnam are demolished, as millions of refugees in the South are driven from their homes by American bombardment. He has nothing to say about the moral standards or the respect for international law of those who have permitted this tragedy.

I speak of Senator Mansfield precisely because he is not a breast-beating superpatriot who wants America to rule the world, but is rather an American intellectual in the best sense, a scholarly and reasonable man — the kind of man who is the terror of our age. Perhaps this is merely a personal reaction, but when I look at what is happening to our country, what I find most terrifying is not Curtis LeMay, with his cheerful suggestion that we bomb everybody back into the stone age, but rather the calm disquisitions of the political scientists on just how much force will be necessary to achieve our ends, or just what form of government will be acceptable to us

in Vietnam. What I find terrifying is the detachment and equanimity with which we view and discuss an unbearable tragedy. We all know that if Russia or China were guilty of what we have done in Vietnam, we would be exploding with moral indignation at these monstrous crimes.

There was, I think, a serious miscalculation in the planning of the Washington demonstrations. It was expected that the march to the Pentagon would be followed by a number of speeches, and that those who were committed to civil disobedience would then separate themselves from the crowd and go to the Pentagon, a few hundred yards away across an open field. I had decided not to take part in civil disobedience, and I do not know in detail what had been planned. As everyone must realize, it is very hard to distinguish rationalization from rationality in such matters. I felt, however, that the first large-scale acts of civil disobedience should be more specifically defined, more clearly in support of those who are refusing to serve in Vietnam, on whom the real burden of dissent must inevitably fall. While appreciating the point of view of those who wished to express their hatred of the war in a more explicit way, I was not convinced that civil disobedience at the Pentagon would be either meaningful or effective.

In any event, what actually happened was rather different from what anyone had anticipated. A few thousand people gathered for the speeches, but the mass of marchers went straight on to the Pentagon, some because they were committed to direct action, many because they were simply swept along. From the speakers' platform where I stood it was difficult to determine just what was taking place at the Pentagon. All we could see was the surging of the crowd. From second-hand reports, I understand that the marchers walked through and around the front line of troops and took up a position, which they maintained, on the steps of the Pentagon. It soon became obvious that it was wrong for the few organizers of the march and the mostly middle-aged group that had gathered near them to remain at the speakers' platform, while the demonstrators themselves, most of them quite young, were at the Pentagon. (I recall seeing near the platform Robert Lowell, Dwight Macdonald, Msgr. Rice, Sidney Lens, Benjamin Spock and his wife, Dagmar Wilson, Donald Kalish.) David Dellinger suggested that we try to approach the Pentagon. We found a place not yet blocked by the demonstrators, and walked up to the line of troops standing a few feet from the building. Dellinger suggested that those of us who had not yet spoken at the rally talk directly to the soldiers through a small portable sound system. From this point on my impressions are rather fragmentary. Msgr. Rice spoke, and I followed. As I was speaking, the line of soldiers advanced, moving past me — a rather odd experience. I don't recall just what I was saying. The gist was, I suppose, that we were there because we didn't want the soldiers to kill and be killed, but I do remember feeling that the way I was putting it seemed silly and irrelevant.

The advancing line of soldiers had partially scattered the small group that had come with Dellinger. Those of us who had been left behind the line of soldiers regrouped, and Dr. Spock began to speak. Almost at once, another line of soldiers emerged from somewhere, this time in a tightly massed formation, rifles in hand, and moved slowly forward. We sat down. As I mentioned earlier, I had no intention of taking part in any act of civil disobedience, until that moment. But when that grotesque organism began slowly advancing — more grotesque because its cells were recognizable human beings — it became obvious that one could not permit that thing to dictate what one was going to do. I was arrested at that point by a Federal Marshal, presumably for obstructing the soldiers. I should add that the soldiers, so far as I could see (which was not very far), seemed rather unhappy about the whole matter, and were being about as gentle as one can be when ordered (I presume this was the order) to kick and club passive, quiet people who refused

to move. The Federal Marshals, predictably, were very different. They reminded me of the police officers I had seen in a Jackson. Mississippi jail several summers ago, who had laughed when an old man showed us a bloody home-made bandage on his leg and tried to describe to us how he had been beaten by the police. In Washington, the ones who got the worst of it at the hands of the Marshals were the young boys and girls, particularly boys with long hair. Nothing seemed to bring out the Marshals' sadism more than the sight of a boy with long hair. Yet, although I witnessed some acts of violence by the Marshals, their behavior largely seemed to range between indifference and petty nastiness. For example, we were kept in a police van for an hour or two with the doors closed, and only a few air holes for ventilation — one can't be too careful with such ferocious criminal types.

In the prison dormitory and after my release I heard many stories, which I feel sure are authentic, of the courage of the young people, many of whom were quite frightened by the terrorism that began late at night after the TV cameramen and most of the press had left. They sat quietly hour after hour through the cold night; many were kicked and beaten and dragged across police lines. I also heard stories, distressing ones, of provocation of the troops by the demonstrators — usually, it seems, those who were not in the front rows. Surely this was indefensible. Soldiers are unwitting instruments of terror; one does not blame or attack the club that is used to bludgeon someone to death. They are also human beings, with sensibilities to which one can perhaps appeal. There is, in fact, strong evidence that one soldier, perhaps three or four, refused to obey orders and was placed under arrest. The soldiers, after all, are in much the same position as the draft resisters. If they obey orders, they became brutalized by what they do; if they do not, the personal consequences are severe. It is a situation that deserves compassion, not abuse. But we should retain a sense of proportion in the matter. Everything that I saw or heard indicates that the demonstrators played only a small role in initiating the violence that occurred.

The argument that resistance to the war should remain strictly nonviolent seems to me overwhelming. As a tactic, violence is absurd. No one can compete with the Government in violence, and the resort to violence, which will surely fail, will simply frighten and alienate some who can be reached, and will further encourage the ideologists and administrators of forceful repression. What is more, one hopes that participants in nonviolent resistance will themselves become human beings of a more admirable sort. No one can fail to be impressed by the personal qualities of those who have grown to maturity in the civil rights movement. Whatever else it may have accomplished, the civil rights movement has made an inestimable contribution to American society in transforming the lives and characters of those who took part in it. Perhaps a program of principled, nonviolent resistance can do the same for many others, in the particular circumstances that we face today. It is not impossible that this may save the country from a terrible future, from yet another generation of men who think it clever to discuss the bombing of North Vietnam as a question of tactics and cost-effectiveness.

I must admit that I was relieved to find people whom I had respected for years in the prison dormitory — Norman Mailer, Jim Peck, David Dellinger, and a number of others. I think that it was reassuring to many of the kids who were there to be able to feel that they were not totally disconnected from a world that they knew and from people whom they admired. It was touching to see that defenseless young people who had a great deal to lose were willing to be jailed for what they believed—young instructors from State Universities, college kids who have a very bright future if they are willing to toe the line.

What comes next? Obviously, that is the question on everyone's mind. The slogan "from dissent to resistance" makes sense, I think, but I hope that it is not taken to imply that dissent should cease. Dissent and resistance are not alternatives but activities that should reinforce each other. There is no reason why those who take part in tax refusal, draft resistance, and other forms of resistance, should not also speak to church groups or town forums, or become involved in electoral politics to support peace candidates or referenda on the war. In my experience, it has often been those committed to resistance who have been most deeply involved in such attempts at persuasion. Putting aside the matter of resistance for a moment, I think it should be emphasized that the days of "patiently explain" are far from over. As the coffins come home and the taxes go up, many people who were previously willing to accept government propaganda will become increasingly concerned to try to think for themselves.

Furthermore, the recent shift in the Government's line offers important opportunities for critical analysis of the war. There is a note of shrill desperation in the recent defense of the American war in Vietnam. We hear less about "bringing freedom and democracy" to the South Vietnamese and more about the "national interest." Secretary Rusk broods about the dangers posed to us by a billion Chinese; the Vice President tells us that we are fighting "militant Asian Communism" with "its headquarters in Peking" and adds that a Viet Cong victory would directly threaten the United States; Eugene Rostow argues that "it is no good building model cities if they are to be bombed in twenty years time," and so on (all of this "a frivolous insult to the US Navy," as Walter Lippmann rightly commented). This shift in propaganda makes it much easier for critical analysis to attack the problem of Vietnam at its core, which is in Washington and Boston, not in Saigon and Hanoi. Those who were opposed to the Japanese conquest of Manchuria a generation ago did not place emphasis on the political and social and economic problems of Manchuria, but on those of Japan. They did not engage in farcical debate over the exact degree of support for the puppet Emperor, but looked to the sources of Japanese imperialism. Now opponents of the war can much more easily shift attention to the internal reasons for their own country's aggression. We can ask whose "interest" is served by 100,000 casualties and 100 billion dollars, expended in the attempt to subjugate a small country half way around the world. We can point to the absurdity of the idea that we are "containing China" by destroying popular and independent forces on its borders. We can ask why those who admit that "a Vietnamese communist regime would probably be…anti-Chinese" (Ithiel Pool, *Asian Survey*, August, 1967) nevertheless sign statements which pretend that in Vietnam we are facing the expansionist aggressors from Peking. We can ask what factors in American ideology make it so easy for intelligent and well-informed men to say that we "insist upon nothing for South Vietnam except that it be free to chart its own future" (Citizens Committee for Peace with Freedom, *New York Times*, Oct. 26), although they know quite well that the regime we imposed excluded all those who took part in the struggle against French colonialism, "and properly so" (Secretary Rusk, 1963); that we have since been attempting to suppress a "civil insurrection" (General Stillwell) led by the only "truly mass-based political party in South Vietnam" (Douglas Pike); that we supervised the destruction of the Buddhist opposition; that we offered the peasants a "free choice" between the Saigon Government and the NLF by herding them into strategic hamlets from which NLF cadres and sympathizers were eliminated by the police (Roger Hilsman); and so on. The story is familiar.

More important, we can ask the really fundamental question. Suppose that it were in the American "national interest" to pound into rubble a small nation that refuses to submit to our will. Would it then be legitimate and proper for us to act "in this national interest"? The Rusks and the

Humphreys and the Citizens Committee say "Yes". Nothing could show more clearly how we are taking the road of the fascist aggressors of a generation ago.

Some seem to feel that resistance will "blacken" the peace movement and make it difficult to reach potential sympathizers through more familiar channels. I don't agree with this objection, but I feel that it should not be lightly disregarded. Resisters who hope to save the people of Vietnam from destruction must select the issues they confront and the means they employ in such a way as to attract as much popular support as possible for their efforts. There is no lack of clear issues and honorable means, surely, hence no reason why one should be impelled to ugly actions on ambiguous issues. In particular, it seems to me that draft resistance, properly conducted (as it has been so far), is not only a highly principled and courageous act, but one that might receive broad support and become politically effective. It might, furthermore, succeed in raising the issues of passive complicity in the war which are now much too easily evaded. Those who face these issues may even go on to free themselves from the mind-destroying ideological pressures of American life, and to ask some serious questions about America's role in the world.

Moreover, I feel that this objection to resistance is not properly formulated. The "peace movement" exists only in the fantasies of the paranoid. Those who find some of the means employed or ends pursued objectionable can oppose the war in other ways. They will not be read out of a movement that does not exist; they have only themselves to blame if they do not make use of the other forms of protest that are available.

I have left to the end the most important question, the question about which I have least to say. This is the question of the forms resistance should take. We all take part in the war to a greater or lesser extent, if only by paying taxes and permitting domestic society to function smoothly. A person has to choose for himself the point at which he will simply refuse to take part any longer. Reaching that point, he will be drawn into resistance. I believe that the reasons for resistance I have already mentioned are cogent ones: they have an irreducible moral element that admits of little discussion. The issue is posed in its starkest form for the boy who faces induction and, in a form that is somewhat more complex, for the boy who must decide whether to participate in a system of selective service that may pass the burden from him to others less fortunate and less privileged. It is difficult for me to see how anyone can refuse to engage himself, in some way, in the plight of these young men. The ways to do so range from legal aid and financial support, to such measures as assisting those who wish to escape the country, and finally to the steps proposed by the clergymen who recently announced that they are ready to share the fate of those who will be sent to prison. About this aspect of the program of resistance I have nothing to say that will not be entirely obvious to anyone who is willing to think the matter through.

Considered as a political tactic, however, resistance requires careful thought, and I do not pretend to have very clear ideas about it. Much depends on how events unfold in the coming months. Westmoreland's war of attrition may simply continue with no foreseeable end, but the domestic political situation makes this unlikely. If the Republicans do not decide to throw the election again, they could have a winning strategy: they can claim that they will end the war, and remain vague about the means. Under such circumstances, it is unlikely that Johnson will permit the present military stalemate to persist. There are, then, several options. The first is American withdrawal, in whatever terms it would be couched. It might be disguised as a retreat to "enclaves," from which the troops could then be removed. It might be arranged by an international conference, or by permitting a government in Saigon that would seek peace among contending South Vietnamese and then ask us to leave. This policy might be politically feasible; the same

public relations firm that invented terms like "revolutionary development" can depict withdrawal as victory. Whether there is anyone in the executive branch with the courage of imagination to urge this course I do not know. A number of Senators are proposing, in essence, that this is the course we should pursue, as are such critics of the war as Walter Lippmann and Hans Morgenthau, if I understand them correctly. A detailed and quite sensible plan for arranging withdrawal along with new, more meaningful elections in the South is outlined by Philippe Devillers in *Le Monde Hebdomadaire* of October 26, Variants can easily be imagined. What is central is the decision to accept the principle of Geneva that the problems of Vietnam be settled by the Vietnamese.

A second possibility would be annihilation. No one doubts that we have the technological capacity for this, and only the sentimental doubt that we have the moral capacity as well. Bernard Fall predicted this outcome in an interview shortly before his death. "The Americans can destroy," he said, "but they cannot pacify. They may win the war, but it will be the victory of the graveyard. Vietnam will be destroyed."

A third option would be an invasion of North Vietnam. This would saddle us with two unwinnable guerrilla wars instead of one, but if the timing is right, it might be used as a device to rally the citizenry around the flag.

A fourth possibility is an attack on China. We could then abandon Vietnam and turn to a winnable war directed against Chinese nuclear or industrial capacity. Such a move should win the election. No doubt this prospect also appeals to that insane rationality called "strategic thinking." If we intend to keep armies of occupation or even strong military bases on the Asian mainland, we would do well to make sure that the Chinese do not have the means to threaten them. Of course, there is the danger of a nuclear holocaust, but it is difficult to see why this should trouble those whom john McDermott calls the "crisis managers," the same men who were willing, in 1962, to accept a 50 percent probability of nuclear war to establish the principle that we, and we alone, have the right to keep missiles on the borders of a potential enemy.

There are many who regard "negotiations" as a realistic alternative, but I do not understand the logic or even the content of this proposal. If we stop bombing North Vietnam we might well enter into negotiations with Hanoi, but there would then be very little to discuss. As to South Vietnam, the only negotiable issue is the withdrawal of foreign troops — other matters can only be settled among whatever Vietnamese groups have survived the American onslaught. The call for "negotiations" seems to me not only empty, but actually a trap for those who oppose the war. If we do not agree to withdraw our troops, the negotiations will be deadlocked, the fighting will continue, American troops will be fired on and killed, the military will have a persuasive argument to escalate: to save American lives. In short, the Symington solution: the victory of the graveyard.

Of the realistic options, only withdrawal (however disguised) seems to me at all tolerable, and resistance, as a tactic of protest, must be designed so as to increase the likelihood that this option will be selected. Furthermore, the time in which to take such action may be very short. The logic of resorting to resistance as a tactic for ending the war is fairly clear. There is no basis for supposing that those who will make the major policy decisions are open to reason on the fundamental issues, in particular the issue of whether we, alone among the nations of the world, have the authority and the competence to determine the social and political institutions of Vietnam. What is more, there is little likelihood that the electoral process will bear on the major decisions. As I have argued, the issue may be settled before the next election. Even if it is not, it is hardly likely that a serious choice will be offered at the polls. And if by a miracle such a choice is offered, how

seriously can we take the campaign promises of a "peace candidate" after the experience of 1964? With the enormous dangers of escalation and its hateful character, it makes sense, in such a situation, to search for ways to raise the domestic cost of American aggression, to raise it to a point where it cannot be overlooked by those who have to calculate such costs. One must then consider in what ways it is possible to pose a serious threat. Many possibilities come to mind: a general strike, university strikes, attempts to hamper war production and supply, and so on.

Personally, I feel that disruptive acts of this sort would be justified were they likely to be effective in averting an imminent tragedy. I am skeptical, however, about their possible effectiveness. At the moment, I cannot imagine a broad base for such action, in the white community at least, outside the universities. Forcible repression would not, therefore, prove very difficult. My guess is that such actions would, furthermore, primarily involve students and younger faculty from the humanities and the theological schools as well as some scientists. The professional schools, engineers, specialists in the technology of manipulation and control (much of the social sciences) would probably remain relatively uninvolved. Therefore the long-range threat, whatever it proved to be, would be to American humanistic and scientific culture. I doubt that this would seem important to those in decision-making positions. Rusk and Rostow and their accomplices in the academic world seem unaware of the serious threat that their policies already pose in these spheres. I doubt that they appreciate the extent, or the importance, of the dissipation of creative energies and the growing disaffection among young people who are sickened by the violence and deceit that they see in the exercise of American power. Further disruption in these areas might, then, seem to them a negligible cost.

Resistance is in part a moral responsibility, in a part a tactic to affect government policy. In particular, with respect to support for draft resistance, I feel that it is a moral responsibility that cannot be shirked. On the other hand, as a tactic, it seems to me of doubtful effectiveness, as matters now stand. I say this with diffidence and considerable uncertainty.

Whatever happens in Vietnam, there are bound to be significant domestic repercussions. It is axiomatic that no army ever loses a war; its brave soldiers and all-knowing generals are stabbed in the back by treacherous civilians. American withdrawal is likely, then, to bring to the surface the worst features of American culture, and perhaps to lead to a serious internal repression. On the other hand, an American "victory" might well have dangerous consequences both at home and abroad. It might give added prestige to an already far too powerful executive. There is, furthermore, the problem emphasized by A.J. Muste: "the problem after a war is with the victor. He thinks he has just proved that war and violence pay. Who will now teach him a lesson?" For the most powerful and most aggressive nation in the world, this is indeed a danger. If we can rid ourselves of the naïve belief that we are somehow different and more pure — a belief held by the British, the French, the Japanese in their moments of imperial glory — then we will be able honestly to face the truth in this observation. One can only hope that we will face this truth before too many innocents, on all sides, suffer and die.

Finally, there are certain principles that I think must be stressed as we try to build effective opposition to this and future wars. We must not, I believe, thoughtlessly urge others to commit civil disobedience, and we must be careful not to construct situations in which young people will find themselves induced, perhaps in violation of their basic convictions, to commit civil disobedience. Resistance must be freely undertaken. I also hope, more sincerely than I know how to say, that it will create bonds of friendship and mutual trust that will support and strengthen those who are sure to suffer.

Noam Chomsky
On Resistance
December 7, 1967

Retrieved on 30th October 2020 from chomsky.info
The New York Review of Books, December 7, 1967

theanarchistlibrary.org