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We are All Complicit

Noam Chomsky

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I turned with interest to Oliver Kamm's critique of the "crude and dishonest arguments" he attributes to me (Prospect, Nov. 2005), hoping to learn something. And I did, though not quite what he intended; rather, about the lengths to which some will go to prevent exposure of state crimes and their own complicity in them. His substantive charges are as follows.

To demonstrate "a particularly dishonest handling of source material," Kamm alleges that "[Chomsky] manipulates a self-mocking reference in the memoirs of the then US Ambassador to the UN...to yield the conclusion that Moynihan took pride in Nazi-like policies." Kamm wisely evades the statements of Moynihan that I quoted from his 1978 memoirs. The topic is Indonesia's 1975 invasion of East Timor, condemned by the Security Council, which ordered Indonesia to withdraw. But the order had no effect. Moynihan explains why: "The United States wished things to turn out as they did, and worked to bring this about. The Department of State desired that the United Nations prove utterly ineffective in whatever measures it undertook. This task was given to me, and I carried it forward with no inconsiderable success." He then refers to reports that within two months some 60,000 people had

been killed, “10 percent of the population, almost the proportion of casualties experienced by the Soviet Union during the Second World War” – at the hands of Nazi Germany, of course. His comparison, not mine, as Kamm pretends. And his clearly expressed pride: there is not the slightest hint of self-mockery, and the only “manipulation” is Kamm’s, in his desperate effort to deny truly horrendous crimes of state; his state, hence his complicity.

Far more Timorese had been killed by the time Moynihan’s memoirs appeared in 1978, thanks to immediate US military and diplomatic support (or as Kamm prefers, Ford’s “indolence, at best”), joined by the UK in 1978 as atrocities were peaking, and continuing through the final paroxysm of violence in August-September 1999, until Clinton finally ordered a halt a few weeks later, under great international and domestic pressure. Indonesia instantly withdrew, making it crystal clear who bears responsibility for one of the closest approximations to true genocide of the post-war period.

A noteworthy performance on the part of someone who condemns the “amoral quietism” of those who do try to expose and terminate the terrible crimes of their own state, where their actions can have the greatest effect.

According to Kamm, I “deployed fanciful arithmetic to draw an equivalence” between 9–11 and Clinton’s destruction of the al-Shifa pharmaceutical plant, which produced half of Sudan’s supplies. The equivalence is, again, his fanciful construction. Discussing the “horrendous crime” committed on 9–11 with “wickedness and awesome cruelty,” I mentioned that the toll may be comparable to the consequences of Clinton’s bombing of the Sudan, about which I said nothing further. This single phrase was a considerable understatement, judging by the “fanciful arithmetic,” which Kamm again scrupulously ignores, and which, as he surely knows, I reviewed in detail in response to Kamm-style fabrications about this phrase. The review includes the assessment of the German Ambassador to Sudan in the Harvard International Review that “several tens of thousands” died as a result of the

from his own standard reaction of tacit acquiescence to horrendous crimes and his dedicated efforts, failing with impressive consistency, to find something to criticize in the efforts to terminate state crimes for which he and I share responsibility, particularly so in a free society, where we cannot plead fear in extenuation for silent complicity.

bombing and the similar estimate in the Boston Globe by the regional director of the respected Near East foundation, who had field experience in Sudan, along with the immediate warning by Human Rights Watch that a “terrible crisis” might follow, reporting very severe consequences of the bombing even in the first few weeks. And much more.

One might wonder whether Kamm would react with his customary “amoral quietism” if al-Qaeda had carried out a comparable act in a country where people mattered. And if some enthusiastic supporter of al-Qaeda then resorted to sheer deceit to dismiss it as insignificant.

It is instructive that none of the reports I cited aroused Kamm’s ire when they appeared, and that he also fails to refer to prominently published conclusions that go well beyond the equivalence he fabricates, charging that the US bombing had “appalling consequences for the economy and society” of Sudan (Christopher Hitchens, *Nation*, June 10, 2002). The crimes of 9–11 were appalling enough, but plainly did not have such consequences.

Kamm claims that I provided no evidence to support the judgment that the US was bombing Afghanistan with the knowledge that it might lead to the death of millions of people. It takes real talent to miss the extensive evidence cited in the few pages I devoted to these matters.

The citations include the New York Times report three weeks before the bombing that Washington “demanded [from Pakistan] the elimination of truck convoys that provide much of the food and other supplies to Afghanistan’s civilian population,” and the Times report that the numbers at risk of starvation were estimated to have risen by 50% a month later, to 7.5 million. Also cited are reports in the Times of the bitterness of fleeing aid workers who said that “The country was on a lifeline and we just cut the line” by threatening to bomb; the report by the UN World Food Program that the threat forced them to reduce food supplies to 15% of what was needed and later that the bombing itself caused them to terminate

it entirely; warnings by major relief agencies of a likely “humanitarian crisis of epic proportions in Afghanistan with 7.5 million short of food and at risk of starvation”; and a great deal more. Also included was the urgent plea by 1000 Afghan leaders in late October to terminate the “bombing of innocent people” and to adopt other means to overthrow the hated Taliban regime, a goal they believed could be achieved without slaughter and destruction; and the denunciation of the bombing by one of the anti-Taliban leaders who was most respected by Washington and Hamid Karzai, Abdul Haq, who described the bombing as “a big setback” for efforts to overthrow the Taliban from within, carried out because Washington “is trying to show its muscle, score a victory and scare everyone in the world” but “don’t care about the suffering of the Afghans or how many people we will lose.” I could not include the later warnings by Harvard’s leading Afghan specialist that the bombing was leaving “millions of Afghans...at grave risk of starvation” (International Security, Winter 2001–02), though I did later, as Kamm doubtless knows.

Once again, much more instructive than the transparent falsification is Kamm’s cold indifference to the reports he claims do not exist.

Kamm next refers to my critique of some of the arguments offered to give a retrospective justification for the bombing of Kosovo, which, as anticipated, led to shocking atrocities. The critique was based on a simple and accurate *reductio ad absurdum*: exactly the same logic should have led those who advanced these arguments to call for the bombing of Washington. For Kamm, this “gives an indication of the destructiveness of Chomsky’s advocacy,” because I failed to consider that some reader might call for bombing of Washington – someone with brain damage so severe as to be unable to comprehend an elementary *reductio*, perhaps.

To demonstrate further how my “political judgments have only become more startling over the past decade,” Kamm cites my state-

ment that the situation in Bosnia is “not so simple.” For Kamm, it must be simple, contrary to mainstream scholarship; by doctrinal necessity, apparently. I deteriorated further as a “prophet of the amoral quietism of the Major government,” in Kamm’s rendition, by “depicting Milosevic’s regime as a wronged party”: namely, by documenting the fact that NATO “moved at once to violate” the agreements it had signed to end the Kosovo conflict. He again wisely avoids argument, knowing that what he quotes is fully accurate. Another illustration he gives of my “dubious arguments leavened with extravagant rhetoric” is my correct statement that Bush’s “pretenses for the invasion [of Iraq] are no more convincing than Hitler’s.” He does not try to refute the statement, but rather offers it to show that I “liken America’s conduct to that of Nazi Germany” and that my “judgment of the US” is that it is comparable to Nazi Germany, a “diagnosis [that is] central to Chomsky’s political output.” The inference is too ridiculous for comment, and he does not tell us of his objection to the actual, and radically different, statement.

Proceeding further to demonstrate my “central” doctrine, Kamm misquotes my statement that “We have to ask ourselves whether what is needed in the United States is dissent – or denazification.” The context, which he again omits, is a 1968 report in the New York Times of a protest against an exhibit at the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry where children could “enter a helicopter for simulating firing of a machine gun at targets” in Vietnam, with a light flashing when a hit was scored on a hut – “even though no people appear,” revealing the extremism of the protestors. This was a year after the warning by the highly respected military historian and Vietnam specialist Bernard Fall that “Vietnam as a cultural and historic entity...is threatened with extinction ...[as]... the countryside literally dies under the blows of the largest military machine ever unleashed on an area of this size.”

Apart from misquoting and omitting the crucial context, Kamm also fails to tell us how one should react to this performance, apart