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THE RESPONSIBILITY OF INTELLECTUALS: CHOMSKY AND STUDENT
OPPOSITION TO THE VIETNAM WAR

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THE RESPONSIBILITY OF INTELLECTUALS: CHOMSKY AND STUDENT OPPOSITION TO THE VIETNAM WAR

One finds in the Vietnam War a perfect exemplar of many of the themes that trace American history: a nation united by imperialism, colonialism, and anti-communism, and yet divided by dissent against those very same principles; a nation forced to choose between belief in its own ideological superiority as justification of its interventionist policies and its belief in freedom, self-determination, and isolationism; a nation fatally caught between arrogance and humility, competition and peace, crusades and questions. It is unsurprising, then, that such a large-scale war, one that consumed so much of the American population, would engender fierce support, fanaticism, and propaganda, as well as angry defiance, opposition, calls for peace and unilateral troop withdrawal. Noam Chomsky, as one of the first intellectuals to publicly criticize American involvement in the war, placed himself at the forefront of the opposition movement. Yet, in the end, his arguments served more to counter rationalizations of the opposite ideological extreme than to catalyze and create change among the war’s opposition movement.

The war began in 1955, when Ngô Đình Diệm of Vietnam announced that elections would not be held because South Vietnam had not accepted any agreement to do so.¹ He

quickly took control of the South by painting communists as enemies and then rigged the referendum on the future of Vietnam, ending with 98.2 percent of the vote; estimates had previously predicted that the communist party would end up with about 80%. American politicians supported this rigged election in Vietnam, although they had recommended a more modest margin of victory.\(^2\) They feared a ‘domino’ effect of communism in Asia: if a nation fell to the horrors of a communist government, then presumably the surrounding nations would go through similar changes, leaving an entire region of communist threats. The Eisenhower administration wanted a strongly anti-communist nation in the area, and thus supported Diem because they considered him the best of the alternatives for the area.

United States involvement in the war in Vietnam began in 1963, when Diem was overthrown by a military coup that the United States at least tacitly supported.\(^3\) South Vietnam faced a period of extreme political instability. When Lyndon B. Johnson took over the American presidency at the time of John F. Kennedy’s death, Vietnam was not a priority, but, as the political situation deteriorated, he decided to expand the United States’s military commitment. Several attacks against the USS Maddox and Turner Joy


\(^3\) The considerations that brought the about-face in United States foreign policy would become a sticking point for analyses of the war. Edwin E. Moïse, in *Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996) pointed to the unresponsiveness of Diem to “US suggestions that he reform his government.” Chomsky disagreed. See below in the text for his explanation.
were reported, although the circumstances around the events left room for questions.\textsuperscript{4} The United States Congress used these events to pass the Tonkin Gulf Resolution,\textsuperscript{5} which allowed intervention in Asia without a formal declaration of war, as long as the aim was to help a Southeast Asian ally. In turn, Johnson used this to legally justify massive military escalation in the affairs of Vietnam. United States troop involvement rose from 2,000 in 1961 to 16,500 in 1965. At the height of the war, after many escalating incidents, 536,100 troops from the United States occupied Vietnam, and ultimately more than one in ten were killed, while more than half were wounded. During that time, about three million Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian civilians were killed; the total number of fatalities due to the war was almost ten million people; and public outrage over the many accounts of injustice, massacres like that of My Lai, government deception, and other atrocities of the war began to foment in the form of various resistance movements. Of particular interest is the opposition of the students to the war, beginning at campuses such as that of the University of California at Berkeley and spreading across the nation.

As early as 1965, university campuses had participated in opposition to the Vietnam War. The first “teach-in” took place on March 24, 1965, at the University of Michigan. The teach-in was a combination of disparate elements, part protest, part moratorium on classes, part festival, part folk singing, and, most importantly, part


\textsuperscript{5} See Asia Resolution, Public Law 88-408. Available at http://www.international.ucla.edu/eas/documents/tonkin.htm.
analysis of the Vietnam War. About three thousand students attended the first teach-in at Michigan; about two months later, on May 21 and 22, more than thirty thousand attended the Vietnam Day teach-in at the University of California at Berkeley. The latter protest was not simply successful in terms of numbers: during the gathering, the Vietnam Day Committee was born; the group, representing as it did the humble beginnings of the true student opposition movement, organized major actions including the May 5, 1965 burning of draft cards and the International Days of Protest Against American Military Intervention on October 15 and 16. The latter was participated in by hundreds of thousands of anti-war protesters, including about ten thousand at Berkeley itself. Student protests such as the ones of the Vietnam Day Committee continued through 1965 and 1966. And, in early 1967, more than five thousand scientists of the United States signed a petition asking the President to stop using certain types of weapons which were said to be inhumane.

One of the people historically acknowledged to have led the intellectual opposition movement was Noam Chomsky, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. According to historians Nancy Zaroulis and Gerald Sullivan, Chomsky

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6 The paradigm of the student movement attracted considerable attention in Washington. In 1970, the President’s Commission on Campus Unrest gave a name to the pattern that had developed with the Berkeley students five years earlier: “the Berkeley invention.” It denoted an escalating movement in which students on a small scale staged a disruption of the university over some larger issue, which would involve the campus police, setting up mass arrests and eventually a full-on student strike. The commission reported that, distinctive of the Berkeley invention, “high spirits and defiance of authority that had characterized the traditional school riot were now joined to youthful idealism and to social objectives of the highest importance.” For more information, see Nancy Zaroulis and Gerald Sullivan, Who Spoke Up: American Protest Against the War in Vietnam 1963-1975 (NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984). The student movements were in some sense the most revolutionary and important part of the opposition against American involvement in the Vietnam War.
had been active in the antiwar movement since 1964, a time when none but a very few were receptive to the notion that America’s policies represented error, much less that they constituted a moral wrong. His writings on the subject became a major resource and an important part of the intellectual and moral foundation of the antiwar movement. Chomsky [was] as scornful of doves [i.e., peace advocates] who opposed the war on pragmatic grounds as he was of the successive Washington administrations that led the nation into Vietnam and kept it there… Chomsky feared that an elaborate groundwork of misinterpretation was being laid to justify a subsequent reentry of U.S. bombing and air power in the Vietnam theater of war. His letter to the New York Times [sic], expressing similar opinions… evoked little response. America wanted to forget.⁷

Of particular import are two claims: that Chomsky’s writings “became a major resource and an important part of the intellectual and moral foundation of the antiwar movement,” and that his writings were not widely accepted because “America wanted to forget.” What follows will examine those two views more closely.

Noam Chomsky graduated from Central High School in Philadelphia to attend the University of Pennsylvania, studying linguistics and philosophy. He earned his BA in linguistics in 1949, his MA in 1951, and his Ph.D four years later in 1955. That same year, he joined the faculty of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology as a professor of Linguistics, where he has maintained an academic post ever since. Chomsky is noted as an intellectual cult figure who has gained exceptional notoriety in academia for two diverging patterns of thoughts, the first concerning an idea in linguistics called generative grammar and the second concerning his political writings, which are situated in the tradition of searing critiques of United States foreign policy.

In order to consider what place Chomsky held in the opposition to the Vietnam War, especially in the student protests, one must consider in more depth the attacks that

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he laid upon social institutions such as universities and the press, to then consider whether students made use of his work in justifying their revolts against American foreign policy.

On February 23, 1967, near the crest of American involvement in Vietnam, Noam Chomsky authored a paper, published as a special selection from *The New York Review of Books*, titled “The Responsibility of Intellectuals.” The essay set out Chomsky’s views on the intelligentsia and social institutions of learning in America. He argued that educated academics hold a special place in society because they have a duty to tell the truth and expose lies, functioning as a sort of quality control, filter, or manipulator of historical events, news, and major ideas. According to Chomsky, America’s intelligentsia both was and still is subservient to the status quo of power in the United States. During the Vietnam War, the intelligentsia primarily accepted the propaganda and doctrines of government and other highly-regarded authorities. In fact, social scientists, members of educational institutions, and other academics who were supposed to be the leaders of moral fabric of the nation actually turned during the war toward providing a pseudo-scientific justification for the United States’s involvements, including claims of the imperative nature of the “defense of freedom” and the deeply held belief that the Vietnamese, Laotians, Cambodians, etc., were inferior, inhuman. Chomsky castigated this function of the intelligentsia, pointing out that it was also one of the reasons for the ideological homogeneity of America’s political landscape. The people who spoke up, according to Chomsky, were unconcerned with ideas of academic credentials or historical standards but simply made common-sense observations about fairly clear-cut issues of

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right and wrong in policy. This role, he said, was played mostly by students and scientists in opposition to the Vietnam War, rather than social scientists, historians, political scientists, and philosophers.

Noam Chomsky criticized the “liberal press” for its commentary on Vietnam post-war, noting that while it “supported the ‘doves,’ ” it did so “[b]y stressing the ‘stupidity’ of the U.S. intervention; that’s a politically neutral term. It would have been sufficient to find an ‘intelligent’ policy. The war was thus a tragic error in which good intentions were transmuted into bad policies, because of a generation of incompetent and arrogant officials. The war’s savagery is also denounced; but that too is used as a neutral category . . . Presumably the goals were legitimate—it would have been all right to do the same thing, but more humanely . . . .”9 Chomsky argued that the press offered a disturbingly homogeneous ideological approach to the war: that while commentators might have disagreed on whether the war was carried out badly or well, all disagreement took place in the sphere of methods, rather than principles; nobody was fundamentally evil for pursuing the war in principle, only ‘incompetent’ for not achieving certain goals. In response to a New York Times editorial claiming that historical analysis in the future will decide whether the war failed because it was stupid or because it was misguided, Chomsky remarked satirically, “The sphere of Clio [the goddess of history] does not extend to such absurd ideas as the belief that the United States has no unique right to intervene with force in the internal affairs of others, whether such intervention is successful or not.”10

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10 Ibid., 35.
While there might be certain extremely complicated problems that require intense training to understand, the vast majority of the important questions are the moral ones, according to Chomsky. How do the elite justify the complexity of the problems that they face? Chomsky pointed to what he called “pseudo-scientists.” Of author Herman Kahn, who designated an entire vocabulary and set of terminology to just war in an attempt to view it as a science, Chomsky said,

Of course this is all nonsense… What is remarkable is that serious people actually pay attention to these absurdities, no doubt because of the facade of tough-mindedness and pseudo-science. I would simply like to emphasize that, as is no doubt obvious, the cult of the experts is both self-serving, for those who propound it, and fraudulent. … In particular, if there is a body of theory, well-tested and verified, that applies to the conduct of foreign affairs or the resolution of domestic or international conflict, its existence has been kept a well-guarded secret. In the case of Vietnam, if those who feel themselves to be experts have access to principles or information that would justify what the American government is doing in that unfortunate country, they have been singularly ineffective in making this fact known. To anyone who has any familiarity with the social and behavioral sciences…, the claim that there are certain considerations and principles too deep for the outsider to comprehend is simply an absurdity, unworthy of comment.\footnote{Chomsky, “The Responsibility of Intellectuals” 3.}

Chomsky’s views on how and why fake scientific theories are used to justify certain actions and policy decisions became key in his eventual claim that public debate over the issue was fundamentally skewed, an issue that he would eventually take on through the medium of his writings.

Chomsky later developed a more substantial support for his view that the intelligentsia bear much of the responsibility for the Vietnam War in a book titled
It set out the argument that the aim of United States policy in Vietnam was actually to destroy nationalist movements like that of South Vietnam (which the United States had originally supported), rather than to defend the South Vietnamese people from the aggression of the North and to uphold the ideals of anti-communism. This, he said, was actually accomplished fairly well, but it had to be placed at the expense of the ostensible goal of the time, to protect the South. Chomsky’s critique found its logical conclusion with the idea that American motives could not include the protection of South Vietnam’s own interests; rather, the only imaginable goal of the United States’ government must have been to crush the nationalist movements of South Vietnam, whatever their form. He criticized the view of Ithiel Pool for “ruling out of consideration… a large range of viable political settlements,” most significantly any that would imply “the inclusion of the Viet Cong in a coalition government or even the persistence of the Viet Cong as a legal organization in South Vietnam…[however,] the Viet Cong is too strong to be simply beaten or suppressed.”

Pool’s view was that even a nationalistic movement that might deserve its own right of autonomy could not be just if Americans did not like its principles. Chomsky argued that the Viet Cong could very well be a legal representative of the South Vietnamese people, not simply because it was “too strong to be simply beaten” as Pool suggested. Moreover, the fact that the United States was so stubborn in its refusal to recognize rights for the Viet Cong meant that the States must have had an ulterior motive for doing so, and this Chomsky took to be the destruction of South Vietnamese nationalism.

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13 Ibid., 49.
The tenor of student opposition to United States involvement in the Vietnam War crescendoed from 1967 onward. Two main events demonstrate different paradigms of landmarks in opposition to the Vietnam War after the beginning of 1967. The first occurred on March 12, 1967, when a three-page advertisement appeared in the New York Times, consisting of signatures from 6,766 teachers and professors across the country. This constituted the first main marshaling of American intellectual force against the war. The second began on May 3, 1970 and brought the deaths of four unarmed students at Kent State University in Ohio, shot by police. In response, on May 8, students across the country shut down colleges and universities in what was called the National Student Strike of 1970, marching on the nearest military offices and leaving about thirty of the offices completely destroyed. But first, in order to understand the contrast between student opposition before 1967 and opposition after it, the primary example of early (pre-1967) student opposition to the war will be considered.

The Vietnam Day Committee occupies an interesting place in the history of opposition to the Vietnam War. Chronologically prior to most of the largest and most recognized landmarks of the movement, the committee marked the beginning of a rolling stone of anger and fear that gathered far more moss than its organizers could have imagined, sparking draft card burnings, nationwide protests, and organized student oppositions. But what reasoning lay underneath the committee’s protests? The Vietnam Day Committee gave a straightforward account of the reasons for protesting against the Vietnam War. In preparation for the October 15 and 16, 1965 International Days of Protest Against American Military Intervention, the committee released a statement detailing its plans to its own organizational partners and to any interested layperson:
The United States government is stepping up its actions against the Vietnamese people. Every day now U. S. planes drop 100 or more tons of bombs on the South Vietnamese peasant villages and countryside. North Vietnamese constructions are daily bombed, from hospitals to hydroelectric plants. In the U. S. attacks on the peace movement are becoming sharper and sharper as the war intensifies. We must not be silenced in the face of these attacks. A massive international protest on October 15 and 16 thus becomes all the more vital as a step in building a movement against American intervention in Vietnam.  

Fascinatingly, this was the only justification of protest that the entire statement gave. More importantly, there was no argument about justified or unjustified war, weapons that were humane or inhumane, violations of sovereignty or just self-determination, or anything of the sort. The claim was simply that people were dying, innocent people, and that it had to stop. One is tempted to dismiss this statement as that of a naïve, peaceful group that had little understanding of the realities of war. That would be a mistake. The statement lacks, undeniably, the sophisticated justification of later arguments against the war. Yet it is fascinating exactly for that reason: righteousness pervades the statement so deeply that only the smallest of moments is spared to justify or explain the group’s own actions, signifying essentially that the group’s members were utterly convinced that they were in the right. In other words, without justification or argument, without complicated theories of pseudo-science and press manipulation, the deeply held intuition taking root in the student movement said that the Vietnam War had to be opposed on grounds of justice. Anything else would be inconceivable.

Teachers and scholars began to unite across the country in opposition to the war in Vietnam during the years of 1967-1969. On March 12, 1967, the New York Times published a three-page advertisement consisting of a statement and signatures from 6,766

teachers and professors across the country. The *New York Times*’s Douglas Robinson wrote,

> A large group of teachers and educators across the country appealed yesterday for an end to the Vietnam war and accused the Government [sic] of withholding information about the conflict from the American people… The statement contends that the Vietnam war continues ‘because vital facts about its origin and development have been deliberately glossed over, distorted and withheld from the American people.’ It asks the American people to join in urging that the Government [sic] take the following step…[a]dopt the ‘realistic’ position that the National Liberation Front is the representative of a ‘substantial portion’ of the South Vietnamese people… [there are] more than 7,500 [American youth] already dead protecting a corrupt military dictatorship against the wishes of the Vietnamese people… The statement continues, ‘…And as teachers, we feel a particular responsibility to the youth and children of our nation—and of all nations.’\(^{15}\)

This anomalous advertisement’s claim of “withheld information” was unsurprising, considering the repeated exposure of falsehoods that would later culminate in the leaked Pentagon Papers and other journalistic expositions. More unexpected are two of the other claims made by the alliance of teachers. One is that the insurgent National Liberation Front, the Viet Cong, “is the representative of a ‘substantial portion’ of the South Vietnamese people.”\(^{16}\) As Chomsky pointed out, most Americans at the time were unwilling to recognize questions about the legitimacy of the war in principle. Many were reluctant to believe that United States foreign policy, rather than being simply a failure of correct practice given the ideology of justice, had actually been dictated by a completely

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\(^{16}\) The teachers’ point here does not come directly from Chomsky, as his expanded theory on Southern Vietnamese nationalism was not published until several years later. Rather, the widened debate sphere created by Chomsky’s article allowed for the point to be made.
different and contrary ideology to stated policies of protecting South Vietnam. Yet the teachers of the advertisement, riding on the back of Chomsky’s “The Responsibility of Intellectuals,” acknowledged that to do as the United States had been doing, backing the South Vietnamese government against the North Vietnam and the Vietcong, supported injustice, because the Vietcong were a legitimate representative of the general will of South Vietnam, representation being a principle of legitimation that Americans take to be of the highest importance. The other remarkable claim was that “as teachers, we feel a particular responsibility to the youth and children of our nation—and of all nations.” It is no coincidence that the statement ended with a claim about intellectual responsibility transcending nations and boundaries, patriotism and economic self-interest. Yet, as one may reasonably point out, this advertisement of 6,766 teachers was published only seventeen days after Chomsky’s “The Responsibility of Intellectuals.” Speaking purely in terms of chronology, it seems impossible to suggest that Chomsky’s essay catalyzed this outpouring of intellectual opposition to the war in Vietnam. Moreover, as the analysis of the Vietnam Day Committee statement demonstrated, much of the fervor and righteousness in the intellectual opposition to the Vietnam War existed well before Chomsky’s essay was published. The more appropriate understanding is that Chomsky

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17 It is worth noting that the teachers did not clearly ascribe a particular motive (i.e., mistaken justice or self-interested attempts to destroy nationalism) to the government, though the language used to describe the actions of the government (“corrupt,” “dead,” “against the wishes”) certainly implies a value judgment. Thus, it may be said that the writers of this statement occupied a middle ground between (1) the public sphere debate over the war, framed in terms of pragmatism and success, not questioning the justice of the actions or intent of the government, and (2) the radical interpretation of the debate, exemplified by Chomsky, framed exactly in terms of right and wrong, not only of the actions but more importantly of the motives of governmental policymakers, to whom Chomsky in American Power and the New Mandarins explicitly ascribed the motive to destroy South Vietnamese nationalist movements, an unjust goal.
did not create this particular marshalling of force but rather helped shape its justification, its language, its logic and the frames of its debate. His essay did not cause more than six thousand teachers to sign a petition in two weeks. But it did affect the way that the people took the signatures and added a petition and a statement of ideas. A wider framework of debate, and a language of responsibility in academia and teaching: these were the true manifestations of the impact of “The Responsibility of Intellectuals.”

Two years later, a very different kind of protest swept college campuses across the nation. It began with the April 30, 1970 announcement by President Richard Nixon that America was set to begin invading Cambodia. The given reasoning was that the North Vietnamese military received supplies through Cambodia, which it then transmitted to troops on the offensive in the South. At Kent State, students burned down the ROTC building in protest. But the real trouble came almost a week later. On May 3, as Kent State announced its participation in the nationwide protests over the decision to invade, police forced students into their rooms for the night. The next day, students began to gather in protest, both against their treatment the previous night and also against the

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18 While not strictly a protest or event, the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars in 1969 released a statement with similar language, saying, “We first came together in opposition to the brutal aggression of the United States in Vietnam and to the complicity or silence of our profession with regard to that policy. Those in the field of Asian studies bear responsibility for the consequences of their research and the political posture of their profession.” The full founding resolution may be found at http://criticalasianstudies.org/about-us/bcas-founding-statement.html. Again, note the reference to responsibility versus complicity in aggression that dominates the tone of this statement. It seems that such language was not at all an isolated event, which further supports the idea of how the Chomskyian theory of responsibility infiltrated standards of proper social science work.

President’s news. The National Guardsman who had been posted to the school carried tear gas and M-1 rifles in the loaded position as they prepared for confrontation. Tear gas canisters were fired on the students, and when some did not explode, students responded by throwing them back at the Guardsmen. Students taunted the Guardsmen, attempting to throw rocks and other objects at the guards, who were mostly out of arm-range. At some point, gunfire erupted, and sixty-one bullets were fired. Four Kent State University students were killed, and nine more were wounded. The United States university system ground to a halt. More than half of the colleges in the country staged some sort of protest, and all in all more than four million students participated. Hundreds of colleges canceled class; more than fifty did not reopen that semester.

Because the reaction to the Kent State ‘massacre’ was so swift and severe, there is little writing of justification for the protests; sheer outrage, far stronger than words, dominated the political atmosphere. The most oft-cited memorial of the shootings is not any piece of writing or spoken account but rather a photograph, taken by John Filo, of fourteen-year-old Mary Ann Vecchio kneeling over the body of Jeffrey Miller after he was shot in the mouth. The photograph won a Pulitzer Prize and came to represent the civil war that accompanied United States involvement in Vietnam. A study by the Urban Institute pointed to the Kent State massacre as the single factor leading to the strike across the nation’s college campuses, the largest student protest in United States

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history.\textsuperscript{21} The outrage that precipitated the nationwide college shutdown was not rational or in need of justification in the philosophical, moral, or argumentative sense. It was complete reactionary anger, something that no essay in the world could either have created or destroyed once it existed. That is, the protests following the Kent State massacre represented a fundamentally different type of opposition from the paradigm of the signature-supported petition like the \textit{New York Times} advertisement. They were non-deliberative, and because of that, required no framework, language, or clarifying reasons.

Because Noam Chomsky’s political work often contains strong criticisms of foreign policy far outside the scope of normal objections to government practices (he is a self-described anarchist), he is, more so than perhaps any other figure in United States history, a public intellectual, one whose political accomplishments have been aimed at widening the scope of a private, academic dispute over politics into the public sphere for anyone with common sense and logic to critique. Public reaction to Noam Chomsky’s political work has been correspondingly ambivalent. Some have claimed him to be a desperate manipulator of political evidence. As Kate Windschuttle from the \textit{New Criterion} wrote,

\begin{quote}
Chomsky was well aware of the degree of violence that communist regimes had routinely directed at the people of their own countries. At the 1967 New York forum he acknowledged both ‘the mass slaughter of landlords in China’ and ‘the slaughter of landlords in North Vietnam’ that had taken place once the communists came to power. His main objective, however, was to provide a rationalization for this violence, especially that of the National Liberation Front then trying to take control of South Vietnam.\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{21} As referenced in Alan Canfora, \textit{Historical Impact of Kent State and the National Student Strike—May, 1970} (accessed 16 February 2011); available from http://alancanfora.com/?q=node/8; Internet.
Windschuttle claimed that the National Liberation Front could never be considered a legitimate representative of the South Vietnam people, considering its penchant for violence. On the other hand, Chomsky is often seen as an intellectual hero, voted the greatest living intellectual figure by the magazine *Prospect*, and ranking seventh in the *New Statesman*’s “Heroes of Our Time” poll. Anthony Flint of *The Boston Globe* framed the debate as follows:

Ask this intellectual radical why he is shunned by the mainstream, and he'll say that established powers have never been able to handle his brand of dissent… It was not surprising that Chomsky's radical critique met with indignant resistance. For every convert, it seemed, there was at least one nonbeliever who saw him as a lunatic leftist, a brewer of conspiracy theories, an annoyance, a one-note tune. He went from huddling with newspaper editors and bouncing ideas off them to being virtually banned… [F]or the most part, mainstream outlets shunned him. In the intellectual circles of Cambridge and beyond, many of the left-leaning thinkers who would seem to be his natural allies also turned away. A chief complaint seemed to be his tireless promotion of an omni-applicable analysis.23

The key observation by Flint is that Chomsky wins “converts” and “nonbelievers” in equal measure; while the reason for this is still up for debate, within the context of opposition to the Vietnam War it supports the point that Chomsky was, ultimately, not inflaming the passions of the masses of students, causing them to rise up against the injustices of the system. He simply was not that persuasive, and it is not clear that any intellectual, public or otherwise, has the ability to manipulate public action purely through rational argumentation.24 Indeed, Chomsky’s role in the opposition movement

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24 There are, of course, obvious examples of speakers who were able to combine rational argumentation with fiery eloquence to create something extraordinary that far
seems, ironically, to have played a counterweight to the role of pseudoscientific racism and imperialism in the support of the war: that is, it provided an ideological *justification* rather than acting as an ideological *catalyst*. Sometimes, that justification proved useful in framing the debate, as Chomsky’s “The Responsibility of Intellectuals” and *American Power and the New Mandarins* helped shape the intuitions of intellectual movements like the Vietnam Day Committee, the mass of signatures in the *New York Times* advertisement, into reasoned argumentation. This parallels exactly the way that social scientists shaped and rationalized support of the Vietnam War through claims of freedom and anti-communism in the other side of debate. In other situations, that sort of justification proved to be unnecessary on both sides, as the Kent State-inspired protests were argumentless and emotional, needing no intellectual framework, just as were reactions to the attacks on the USS *Maddox* and *Turner Joy* by the government of the United States. Perhaps Chomsky could have been more effective, more “mainstream,” if he changed his approach to intellectualism, tried to passionately rally his radical side of the debate instead of relying on mountains of facts and rational argumentation to make his point. In the end though, Noam Chomsky seems to be happy occupying the space that he does, acting as a balance against many of the extreme right-wing claims of politics, neither winning nor losing the debate but simply allowing the debate to continue as it must.

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transcended the limits of pure intellectualism (contemporary Martin Luther King, Jr. comes to mind). But, in the end, that does not seem to have been Chomsky’s goal.