



The Chomsky Thread

November 24, 2013

By Michael Uhl

The long stream of commentary and observations which follows was prompted by a series of staccato exchanges on email between Professor Noam Chomsky and me, Michael Uhl. In the first exchange I received some unanticipated support from Chomsky about my critique of Nick Turse's book, *Kill Anything That Moves*. But it is the second exchange that I would really wish to bring to the attention of a larger, albeit highly specialized, readership. In responding to my review of a book by Penny Lewis, Chomsky took the position that the antiwar movement during the Iraq war was more effective than the Vietnam antiwar movement, which, in part, is the subject of Lewis' book.

I found Chomsky's position so remarkable that I felt compelled to share it with my blog mates on InTheMindField, the now ill-attended platform for the occasional voices of, in addition to mine, John Grant, Thomas Brinson, Mike Wong and Chuck Rossi. It is their four voices that dominate the meandering and speculative discussion posted below; I have kept out of most of it. The inquiry, while informal, is serious, and thought provoking in its own right. In the course of these exchanges we sometimes shared a few personal details on our lives. I have left in some of this chatter, all the more to anchor the narrative in the quotidian, and give some flesh to the disembodied voices.

As a student of graduate linguistics in a doctoral program at NYU, I was immersed in Chomsky's theories of language, and, through them, transported to Chomsky's politics, notably at first his essay on *The Responsibility of Intellectuals*, and articles like, *After Pinkville*. I worked with Noam directly on a number of occasions during the late stages of the Vietnam antiwar movement, when war veterans like me were drawn to radical antiwar activism. That he would take the position he has taken here, I find stunningly counter-intuitive. And hardly from the vantage point of the side lines, but as an active protagonist in both movements.

I now find myself in dogged opposition to Chomsky's position, and understand, of course, that anyone can be wrong. But I for one cannot presume to dismiss out of hand the theses of perhaps the greatest teacher of our times on the nature and implications of American power. In the end, the words that echo in my ears are Chomsky's own that the issue in dispute is "an empirical question." As always it is the facts that we dispute.

Post 1: Michael Uhl to Noam Chomsky April 29, 2013/29

An Infant Terrible Stumbles Upon the Vietnam War...

Noam: I struggled over this for reasons that will be obvious.. then was traveling for the past three weeks.. thus the delay.

<http://www.inthemindfield.com/2013/04/05/an-enfant-terrible-stumbles-upon-the-vietnam-war/>

I send it as a companion piece to what I had written re. Schell.

<http://www.inthemindfield.com/2013/01/22/deja-vu-all-over-again-notes-on-jonathan-schells-review-of-kill-anything-that-moves/>

I hope it's the last discouraging word I will feel compelled to say on the subject. On a more immediately relevant track a bunch of the old vet crowd are stirring to mobilize push-back against the Pentagon's official VN Commemoration should developments offer the opportunity to do so. For some reason I grabbed Orwell's *On the Road to Wigan Pier* to read on our trip.. I wondered if he was an influence on your prose style? I thought I heard some echoes here and there. Regards, Michael

Post 2: Noam Chomsky to Michael Uhl April 29, 2013

Re: An Infant Terrible Stumbles Upon the Vietnam War...

Excellent and powerful piece. One question though. I think it was perfectly possible to report from the Vietnamese side if journalists and major media had wanted to. American journalists have no problems at reporting - in fact exclusively reporting - from the side of the victims when that fits the propaganda line. Russian invasion of Afghanistan for example. Remember Katsuichi Honda's *Voices from the Villages*? If an Asahi Shimbun reporter could do it, an American reporter could have. Plenty of examples. And even with my very limited experience I could see why. When I was in Vientiane, Fred Branfman took me to refugee camps right outside the city where I spent

many hours finding out what was happening to the victims of the “secret bombing,” which he later exposed in depth. Reporters flooding Vientiane after a Nixon speech about how North Vietnamese tanks were surround the city, poised to strike. They all reported the official story, while ridiculing it in the hotel bar. I saw a lot more like that in Laos. And also in southern Colombia, West Bank in Palestine, southeastern Turkey, lots of other places where reporters just refused to go, except sporadically. Wrong story.

But that’s minor. A great piece. Noam

Post 3: Michael Uhl to Noam Chomsky April 29, 2013

Re: An Enfant Terrible Stumbles Upon the Vietnam War...

Here’s my thinking, no doubt flawed in many ways: The consensus of the national security managers [state within a state?] to invade Vietnam was great. Doubters don’t get promoted or listened to. American journalists at the time were properly indoctrinated in cold war ideology. For Neil Sheehan to have reported what you suggest he could have, he wouldn’t have been Neil Sheehan the Timesman. We had [Wilfred] Burchett, and several like him. Hell, the Tribunal: your and others’ magnificent effort through Russell - the Times called it Hanoi and Moscow inspired commie propaganda. If I’m not mistaken, if you’re a reporter for the NYT or the WSJ, you’re not hired to write what you think if it deviates from your editorial parameters. Of course you can say whatever you want about soufflé or the latest Arnold Schwarzenegger block buster. I think of Kevin Buckley and that very late expose on Speedy Express [in Newsweek]. Kevin complained but he didn’t quit over the fact that his editor held the piece for six months, then gutted it of any attempt by Buckley to show a pattern of similar civilian slaughter throughout the war. Kevin moved smoothly over to GEO, where I knew him, then on the Playboy, glamour and fortune. What always strikes me as more interesting than those who went along predictably to protect their careers and privileges, are those who stood up and shouted out the truth. I like to think that during the long slog of the VN War, some of that message got out. You, Fred, and perhaps tens of thousands of others, most known only in their own small circles, are the magnificent exceptions. It’s almost as if there are two separate species... such are the mysteries on what it takes to transform one into the other. I’m glad you found my piece of value. I feared it may not have been.. that I was killing the messenger, etc., as several of my critics have suggested. But my critics are few, since my work hardly circulates.. so I’d appreciate it if you could again pass my piece along. Michael

Post 4: Chuck Rossi to ITMF May 28, 2013

New History of antiwar movement

Folks:

Here's a post from the Web site of Corey Robin, an interesting guy who wrote a good book on conservatism called *The Reactionary Mind*; here he is plugging a new book *Hardhats, Hippies, and Hawks: The Vietnam Antiwar Movement as Myth and Memory* by a friend of his. The book sounds interesting; I tried to get the article Robin cites by the author Penny Lewis in *Chronicle of Higher Education*, but it's firewalled and the journal charges \$60+ for a subscription. However, Robin includes in his post a longish quote from the article about the book. The book disputes the common opinion that the movement was an elite creation of discontented professors and student swells from the best schools. I checked Amazon and there is a chapter on GIs and Veterans entering the movement. I'm thinking of requesting a copy from the publisher so that I can review it for the Vets for Peace newsletter, but I thought it might also fit well with the revived ITMF as a countercommemoration to the Pentagon's attempt to bring out the VN war zombie and tart it up to make it palatable to the militarized 2010s. If I can get the book, are any of you interested in reviewing it? If not, I'll do it. I've been doing some research lately on memory, especially historical memory and its representation and what Nassim Taleb (the guy who wrote *The Black Swan*) calls the narrative fallacy; the book seems to be an analysis of just that notion. One of the best quotes about historical memory I've found is from William Faulkner's great short novel *The Hamlet* in which one of the characters (some Snopes or other) says "Only thank God that men have done learned how to forget quick what they ain't brave enough to cure._ Think Vietnam; Christ, think Iraq.

<http://coreyrobin.com/2013/05/16/everything-you-know-about-the-movement-against-the-vietnam-war-is-wrong/>

I hope all is well. Chuck

Post 5: Michael Uhl to ITMF May 29, 2013

Re: New History of antiwar movement

Chuck, All.. Sounds like meat for My-Col (my secret Kryptonian handle). Though I'm not sure I can carve the time. I can probably get a copy from Cornell if I decide to take it on.. In the meantime, I've written to the author, Penny Lewis, who is on the faculty in NY of the Center For Labor Studies (CUNY), where I once taught as an Adjunct. I sent

her my review of Turse, with the Chomsky exchange, in the hope I may induce a dialogue. We'll see if she responds. I will be in NYC over this next weekend, and might even suggest a meeting if she gets back to me.

In the meantime, I am playing catch up on the grounds and garden surrounding our house; it's virtually a full time job this time of year, and work is much delayed by the constant rain descending on us for the better part of a week. I am also working with local climate activists here on a potential campaign to increase household energies efficiencies in our county. And planning a course for our mid-coast Senior College for the fall, something like, How Should the Vietnam War Be Commemorated? Added to these distractions, we are in the midst of preparing for Susan's son's wedding, and the arrival of half her family at the end of June.

Thomas: Fraternal regards around the sad passage you are about to undertake. Michael

Post 6: Michael Uhl to Noam Chomsky August 6, 2013

Review of Penny Lewis

Noam - FYI - Michael

<http://www.inthemindfield.com/2013/07/21/the-problematic-penny-lewis-repairs-some-misconceptions-about-the-vietnam-war/>

Post 7: Noam Chomsky to Michael Uhl August 7, 2013

Re: Review of Penny Lewis

Looks like an interesting book. And most interested to get to the "work in progress."

I think it's a little misleading to say that the Iraq war movement faded. It was vastly greater than the Vietnam war movement *at any comparable time*. And though we don't have documentary evidence yet, I think there's good reason to suspect that it had a large impact. The US didn't even dare to do the kinds of things that Kennedy and Johnson managed easily in Vietnam B as you say, until the latter part of the '60s, when the war had gone far beyond anything in Iraq or Afghanistan. Noam

Post 8: Michael Uhl to Noam Chomsky August 8, 2013

Re: Review of Penny Lewis

I can't think of the antiwar movement during Vietnam – Lewis's "6 million activists" – outside the context of the "25 million close sympathizers." And that was just here. I was on a speaker's platform in Athens on that amazing day – Feb. 18th? - in 2003 when (they say) 30 million people took to the streets throughout the world to protest the US invasion of Iraq. It's odd to have to conclude that the movement peaked before the war even began. I was closely involved in the leadership circle of Veterans For Peace, which underwent a resurgence during the early days of the war in Iraq. We created the Bring Them Home Now campaign, and, through the magic of the Internet, actually sustained dialogues in the early days with soldiers in the war zone. And then, of course, embedding took the media out of it. From where I witnessed these event, the movement not only faded – perhaps gradually – even as the war intensified, but, more importantly, never mobilized that "25 million close sympathizers," the empowering base behind the movement in the Vietnam period. Thus without the base of loud, semi-activist public opposition, no sustained mass movement, and public opposition, while widespread, was passive. VFP today is much reduced, and the politics increasingly that of the individual heroic style. Also, reflecting on 'individual actions,' Ellsberg and Russo were protected by the atmosphere of mass opposition during their trial (I know they got off on technicalities, but the underlying point remains valid), whereas Manning and Snowden are completely unprotected in that sense.

The work in progress is a very strange bird. But it has a disinterested scholarly purpose, in that I am well aware that it may never be of any interest to anyone but a scholar who is happy to find such a closely told account of a "representative" New Left entity to a very large extent based on a documentary record. It's a 'seen through the keyhole' narrative of day to day activities, much of it very personal, and full of the squabbles of New Left sectarianism. It may read in part like a diary, in that it is relentlessly – though not entirely – chronological, but there is also ample commentary and reflection from the present day narrator. It will likely find no interest among traditional publishers and end up in some digital form. I've completed just over 400 Ms. pp thus far, and will likely go on for several hundred pages more, posting it for the moment on my own site as I write. I continue to edit and re-post as I go. Michael

Post 9: Noam Chomsky to Michael Uhl August 9, 2013

Re: Review of Penny Lewis

As I wrote, I don't see it that way. The anti-Iraq war movement was far stronger than the anti-VN war movement at any comparable stage, and I think was quite influential in restricting US actions, leading to a severe US defeat, unlike Vietnam, where the US won a partial victory, gaining its major objectives.

It's true that a huge popular movement finally developed when more than half million US troops were in SVN and the war had spread to all of Indochina, with vast destruction. There's no similar movement today, or any comparable crimes to elicit it. Hence the difference between the Ellsberg-Russo and Snowden-Manning cases B such as it is. In fact there wasn't all that much support for Ellsberg-Russo, very little articulate support in the mainstream.

Glad to hear about the work in progress, and look forward very much to seeing it.

Noam

Post 10: Michael Uhl to Noam Chomsky August 12, 2013

Re: Review of Penny Lewis

Well, I'd love to hear that argument. I remember reading your view that the US did not lose in Vietnam, and I can wrap my mind around that nuance. But the anti-Iraq war movement being stronger than the movement during Vietnam? Just to clarify: please note that the word "faded" came from Penny Lewis, who is herself a determined anti-war activist, and engaged against US military aggression in Afghanistan and Iraq. She also provided the stats on numbers of VN era activists and close sympathizers, based on Mel Small's book, which I have never seen. I've ordered that and DiBenedetti's book so I can examine their sources. Lewis depends primarily on secondary sources. I, of course, echoed Lewis' conclusions, based on my own activism during both periods, as, apparently did her interlocutors and mentors among the older comrades, like Flacks and Aronowitz. I have never heard the position you expressed, and would welcome further detail and clarification.

Wasn't there a time, at least in more or less unified Christendom, when those who broke the peace – in accordance with Augustinian principles of "just wars" – had to publish their casus belli? They may have been deceptions, but at least they had to state some plausible specifics. You say "severe US defeat in Iraq." One of the problems with that statement for me is that modern war makers never define their true objectives, beyond – defense of our interests. Not knowing their more obscure strategic objectives, even assuming such strategies are coherent, it's hard – certainly for me – to judge what, in this case, victory or defeat look like. Is it just to maintain the internecine divisions among the Muslims? In which case it would be victory. Did or do we imagine we can exercise control by installing liberal democracy? Seems like when you spread chaos, control is hardly achievable, in which case, defeat? Wouldn't it have been more sensible then for those who depend on stability to manage the tyrants than overthrow them? These questions are probably so fundamental that their answers are self-evident

to those better informed than I. So I'm in the dark about whether or not the US was defeated or victorious in Iraq. On the question of the effectiveness of the Iraq antiwar movement over that of VN, I am intrigued but can't imagine how that argument can be made. Michael

Post 11: Noam Chomsky to Michael Uhl August 12, 2013

Re: Review of Penny Lewis

I already gave the outline of the argument. When JFK was authorizing use of napalm and chemical warfare to destroy crops and ground cover, and beginning programs to drive peasants into concentration camps ("strategic hamlets") to "protect" them from the guerrillas the government knew they were supporting, protest was zilch. And so it continued. In October 1965, with South Vietnam virtually destroyed, hundreds of thousands of troops rampaging, the war extended to the North and also Laos and Cambodia, the first international day of protest was called. Boston's a pretty liberal city, so we thought we could arrange a rally on the Boston Common, the standard site. We did. I was supposed to be one of the speakers. It was impossible to be heard because the rally was broken up by counter-demonstrators, mostly students, only reason we escaped was a huge State Police presence - hated what we were doing but didn't want to see bloodshed on the Common. The next day the Boston Globe, probably the most liberal paper in the country, devoted most of the front page to denouncing the demonstrators as traitors. Congressional doves (Mansfield, etc.) did the same.

The next International Day of Protest was March 1966. Don't have to tell you what was happening in VN at the time. We realized that we couldn't have an outdoor rally, so arranged for it inside the Arlington Street Church B which was attacked and defaced by raging counterdemonstrators.

Compare Iraq. I suggested before comparing it at any comparable stage of the war. But that was wrong, because Iraq never reached even close to any comparable stage.

The only question that remains, I think, is how effective the huge anti-Iraq war protest movement was in constraining US actions to the level where they weren't all that visible - except to Iraqis. To nail that down we'd need internal documents. But the indirect evidence is quite strong. The war was awful enough, but Bush et al never even tried to do what JFK and LBJ did without detectable protest, US casualties were kept low, reporters were embedded and independent ones rarely could publish in the US, even those of considerable renown. And note that to this day it's being suppressed, not

just here. Thus in England, “Srebrenica” is a Holy Word, ranked right next to “Holocaust,” particularly in leftish circles (Guardian types). Fallujah was quite similar, but worse. Not a word about it, and even the basic facts about the horrendous consequences, until today, are scarcely reported. Unlike VN, where at least basic facts couldn’t be kept off the front pages.

I think “severe defeat” is appropriate. As the scale of the defeat was looming, the Bush administration did state its objectives explicitly (though the press didn’t report it much). In an official November 2007 declaration, reinforced in a January 2008 signing statement. Cited it at the time, and in subsequent books. They demanded military bases that could be used for combat and privileged access by US energy corporations. Both were rejected. That it was a defeat is recognized by serious analysts, like Jonathan Steele (his book *Defeat*) and David Gardner, ME analyst for the Financial Times. And others. Vietnam was quite different. The major goals were attained – by 1965, McBundy recognized in retrospect.

Sure, in earlier times they announced objectives sometimes. The Crusades, the greatest wars of the day, a violent bloody assault to save Jerusalem from the pagans. Noam

Post 12: Michael Uhl to ITMF August 13, 2013

Chomsky thread

All – Chomsky sent a long reply, and frankly, I haven’t the time to wrap my mind around it just now. I feel we’re just talking past each other, and that there is a strong need to step back and define the terms we are discussing. Terms like ‘movement’, and ‘defeat,’ etc. I’ve ordered the email chronologically, rather than in descending order for ease of reading and continuity. I’m not sure I’ll respond, other than perhaps to thank him for his time. So I’ve got to give this a bit more thought when time permits. Advice welcome.

Incidentally, by placing a link to my w-i-p within the Lewis review, I’ve advanced my site location on google (under my name) to position # 1, but ITMF has all but disappeared- which is a bummer. I’m happy about the traffic to my site, however, because it means that my primary objective for the Lewis review – to get some of her crowd to look at my w-i-p – has apparently borne fruit. I’ve asked the guy who manages my site to now include a link to ITMF... an oversight long in need of addressing.

Michael

Post 13: Mike Wong to ITMF August 13, 2013

Re: Chomsky thread

Hmmm....Let me read it over a few more times and think about it for a couple of days, then I'll try to formulate whatever I come up with. Mike

Post 14: John Grant to ITMF August 14, 2013

Re: Chomsky thread

I'm going to look thru this stream later. Now I'm curious to read Noam, the man. In the meantime, I think we have to look at ITMF as dormant, as far as websites go at least, since we have not — cannot — devote the time & energy to it that is needed to make it live and be an active, well-publicized and energized site on the web. It's relatively easy to get a thing like that up — but the real test is in the long-term devotion and publicizing of the thing. Hey, none of us can be all things to all people and be everywhere at once. The way it is. Now on TCBH, thanks to Dave Lindorff's constant efforts on the site and out there in the web ether and his stable's pumping out pieces the thing is alive and moving up the list of hundreds of thousands of blogs. It is a slog and hard work and devotion pay off in the long haul. John

Post 15 Chuck Rossi to ITMF August 17, 2013

Re: Chomsky thread

Dear Gang of Four:

My first response to Chomsky's reply to Michael's questions was the same as Mike Wong's: hmmm. Actually, it after a few readings seems to me to be a very Chomsky-like response: clear, analytical, self-critical, and in my humble opinion (stress the humble) wrong in one major way. I don't think I agree with John's and Thomas's view that Chomsky's response is the result of a kind of "cohort effect," that the WWII and Vietnam era critics can't quite assimilate the new way of war that the military spent the 30 years post Vietnam developing. I don't get Chomsky's notion of a partial victory in Vietnam because the US achieved some of its war aims (I assume he means splitting Russia and China, delaying the North's victory in the South). I think the US lost in Vietnam, what Chomsky says of Iraq "a severe defeat"; it was in my view worse than a severe defeat; it was an embarrassment. To say otherwise almost puts Chomsky in league with Lewis Sorley and some other dead-enders, even though he puts a significantly different value on the partial victory. This goes back to my agreement

with David Rieff that Chomsky sometimes lacks nuance. He is, in my view, an extraordinary theoretician of power relations who misses some of the subtlety of the Vietnamese view that not only power but also time affects war aims (see the new book: *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* by Lien-Hang T. Nguyen). Chomsky seems to me a kind of mirror image of (god forgive me for writing this) Henry Kissinger with very different value attached to particular outcomes. American has objectives A, B, C, D, E, F. If at time "t" three of these six objectives have been attained, America at time "t" is 50% successful—partial victory. But outside of the Western time frame, America has achieved little or nothing. And at some certain time (e.g., 1975), America's achievement of three short-time objectives has been abrogated. Objectives are not additive. It's not a draw: we lose they win.

I was very pleased to see Chomsky gave up the notion of a "comparative stage of the war" in Vietnam and Iraq. There was certainly, at least in my view although I'm open to correction, nothing in VN at all comparable to the time of shock and awe when American military force essentially destroyed organized Iraqi military resistance. What Tommy Franks called in his ridiculous memoir *American Soldier* (which I've threatened to review for ITMF) "unequaled in its excellence by anything in the annals of war." This was something we never did in Vietnam. Iraq was an ancient civilization but also a modern society; Vietnam was in my view an ancient civilization but not a modern society. Despite the awful firepower expended in Vietnam, some of the productive capacity of the land remained. Also, the will of the people in Vietnam greatly exceeded that in Iraq, to some extent because we did destroy a modern society. Modern societies are especially vulnerable. (As an aside, it's interesting that in 2000 there were basically four stable, secular, and functional states in North Africa and the Middle East: Iraq, Libya, Egypt, and Syria. They were all run by dictators who were easily caricatured as Hitler redux, and were security states, but at least, they was some broad service sector, with state-run education and health care, some women's rights, and especially in Syria, religious tolerance [some Sunnis and even some Christians are in Assad's government]. Iraq is now a mess, Libya no longer exists as a state, Syria is on its way to control by the worst of the Islamists if Assad falls, and Egypt is a ?).

Chomsky states that "(t)he only question that remains, I think, is how effective the huge anti-Iraq war protest movement was in constraining US actions to the level where they weren't all that visible B except to Iraqis." This I think is critical. It seems to focus only on American dissent as a constraint on American action. One of the things that view neglects and that many Americans miss is the effect of Islam on Iraqi resistance. A modern state can be destroyed, and the one thing that remains in Muslim societies is Islam, a terribly divided religion (much like Christianity) that can galvanize the resistance. I think US dissent was nugatory and Bush cared not a whit about it. Bush,

Inc. turned the potential sources of resistance; the US media was overwhelming not just not skeptical of the war but excitedly in favor of it. The whole new genus of “liberal hawks,” banged the drum quickly and urged on our great humanitarian adventure to modernize the Middle East, guarantee our access to energy sources, and bring the benighted peoples of the Islamic world into the 21st century. Bush and the military had a genius for PR. In Bush’s 2003 State of the Union speech, just weeks before the invasion, he said that we will bring the Iraqi people “food, and medicines, and supplies, and [here he flashed that lipless smile and shook his head in honor of our sacrifice for a distant people] freedom” The crowd roared. Bush as usual spun the neoconservative line and coated it with smarm. I don’t think any of the awful stuff that Bushwar executed was in any way affected by the few folks in the street. Maybe things were different in Cambridge. I’m not quite sure what referring to Srebrenica has anything to do with this. I think, and I’m sad to say this, that the Iraq war was mostly a popular war until it became a boring war. Even the liberal hawks who have repented mostly regret trusting in the competence of Bush and Co, rather than in the wisdom of the enterprise. I hope to get some stiff criticism about any of this from the gang. Chuck

Post 16: Mike Wong to ITMF August 17, 2013

Re: Chomsky thread

OK, let me go paragraph by paragraph through Chomsky’s argument and if I can make sense of it and respond one piece at a time. Note that even with all this time to think about it, it still boggles my mind, so how coherent this all will be is debatable. But here goes, my first attempt at a response.

His first paragraph talks about his initial experiences in protesting the war. He right, of course, that compared to the first huge protests in the run-up to the war, the difference is night and day. The night being the overwhelming counter-protests he saw during the first anti-Vietnam war protests compared to the day of the huge anti-Iraq war protests. OK, I’ll give him that.

The second paragraph echoes the first.

The third paragraph drops the “comparable stage” argument but says that’s because the Iraq war never reached the advanced stages of Viet Nam. It’s true that we didn’t do carpet bombing, but we did a hell of a lot of bombing in general. It’s true we didn’t bomb supply routes and invade nearby countries during the Iraq war, but that’s because as far as I’ve heard there weren’t any supply routes to bomb. But was that due

to the Iraq anti-war movement? I more inclined to think it had more to do with the terrain, the nature of the enemy forces, and the nature of the war.

In the fourth paragraph he makes two key points: (1) the US actions were constrained by the protest movement, and (2) that the US media was much more effective in keeping bad stuff out of the news. Point 2 is, of course, well established and I don't think any of us would contest that. The first point, that US actions were constrained by the anti-war movement, is a tricky one. It's true that the elite learned from the Vietnam war and planned their moves with one eye on public perception and media presentation. In some ways, that might actually be attributed more to the success of the Viet Nam anti-war movement than to the actual performance of the Iraq anti-war movement. In other words, they saw what triggered massive protest during Viet Nam and strived to avoid similar media events. That's why, for example, Bradley Manning's release of the "Collateral Murder" video raised such an alarm with the government and media. This is exactly the kind of bad publicity that turned the Viet Nam era public against that war. But how much their constraint was due to the actual performance of the Iraq anti-war movement, and how much was due to the elite's fear of triggering a repeat of the Vietnam anti-war movement is debatable. As Chomsky himself said, we'll have to wait for documents to be released, perhaps years after all of us are dead. So I would consider point (1) to be an unknown at this point. Maybe Chomsky's right, maybe he's not.

In the fifth paragraph he talks about the "severe defeat" of the Iraq war. It seems to me that both the Vietnam and Iraq wars were severe defeats for the US, as well they should. In both wars, we invaded and tried to conquer a small nation that was not a threat to us and had not attacked us. In both wars, we were driven out and were completely defeated, in my view. I fail to see that we accomplished any of our goals in Vietnam. In Iraq, we did get more oil deals, which were one of our goals. But we also strengthened Iran's hand and destabilized the entire Middle East.

What was the role of the anti-war movement in all this and how effective were we? I'd say the jury is still out. Analytical as Chomsky is, I'd say he's flying by his gut here. His arguments are possible but not convincing. But let's not dismiss his gut, he's been around a long time and seen a lot of things. I say this with my own bias; I too think that we may have been more effective than we think. But this is just a hunch, I would not go so far as to say it's true. If you are interested, I can talk more about little things I've noticed (such as the quote about 3,000 calls a month to the GI Rights Hotline) that point in that direction, and the fact that during and in the years right after the Vietnam war we also thought we weren't very effective, yet later documents come out saying that we actually were.

But right now it's late and I need to go to bed. My best wishes to everyone.

And a movie plug – go see “The Butler.” I’m not so happy about Obama, but there’s lots of good stuff there. And try to bring a couple of younger people – kids – to see it with you. They need to see what it was like in those days, and what price people paid to get those rights we have today. Mike

Post 17: Mike Wong to ITMF August 19, 2013

Re: Chomsky thread

I had another thought: If both the Vietnam and Iraq wars ended in US defeat, why was this? In particular, why did the US lose the Iraq war? I can’t believe it was because the insurgents were better organized or better fighters than the VC & NVA. On the contrary, they were divided among themselves, in some cases (such as Al Qaeda in Iraq) even lost the support of the local people, and had shifting political alliances. But...if it wasn’t the effectiveness of the insurgents, then...could it have been the American anti-war movement? That seems equally hard to believe. Was it the elite’s fear of a prolonged war triggering a Vietnam era size anti-war movement? Was it the elite’s seeing (based on their Vietnam era experience) that this road is a dead end? I don’t have any clear answers.

I do recall reading about low morale in the military, about troops and officers becoming disillusioned with the war, many middle level officers getting out of the military, and the military have trouble recruiting new soldiers. That was the reason for the massive use of stop-loss, for example. Soldiers that I talked to during the war commonly said the majority of soldiers in their units had turned against the war, in some cases saying that 80% of their unit was against the war. And even the Army Times papers came out against Rumsfeld, if not explicitly the war (<http://www.cnn.com/2006/POLITICS/11/03/rumsfeld.resign/>).

But was this due to the effectiveness of the anti-war movement, or the plain facts on the ground that caused the soldiers to turn against the war, or the clear evidence that there was no WMD or links to Al Qaeda? Or a combination of factors? Hard to say. The soldiers that I talked to were very aware of the anti-war movement, but that’s because we had reached out to them and engaged them. Did they represent a majority of soldiers? Again, proof one way or another is not there.

So I end where I began; was the anti-war movement decisive in turning the tide against the war? Maybe, maybe not. Mike

Post 18: Michael Uhl to ITMF August 19, 2013

Re: Chomsky thread

A lot to contemplate MikeY I'm off this thread for the time being.. and back to my writing schedule.. just posted Chapter 11 on my site.. I plan to assemble all the pieces and have another go at this discussion in the not too distant future.. and I will certainly ask Noam if this is being discussed elsewhere. Michael

Post 19: John Grant to ITMF August 19, 2013

Re: Chomsky thread

Mike,

I like your ruminations following up on the Chomsky remarks about winning and/or losing the Vietnam and Iraq wars. I, too, feel it's complicated and quite confusing. In fact, that's basically the roots of any issues I have with the brilliant Noam Chomsky. That is, employing his great intellectual power, he likes to shape things into what sometimes feels to me to be a too-clear analysis. It's at that point I start talking back to him: "Yeh, OK. But wait a minute — how about this or that?" But Noam just keeps on steaming steadily forward. I'm not sure I'm that strongly attached to what Chuck calls a "cohort effect" (ie. that Chomsky is too old and stuck in a post-WWII, post-colonial imperialist moment). Though I do feel some of that may be going on. I guess, for me, the issue is not so much in suggesting Chomsky is irrevocably attached to the past while the future is unfolding like a racing freight train, but that all this talk about whether the US hegemonic military machine or the antiwar movement won or lost Vietnam or Iraq and which was worse or better (depending on one's vantage point) — that all this talk misses the real point, which is that the US hegemonic military machine is still outrageously powerful right now while the antiwar movement is on life support and there seems no suggestion of a counter political critical mass building in the wings. Americans have been so successfully atomized from each other that human concerns are reduced to the individual level and all about keeping up with the latest I-phone and keeping the corporate/consumer delusion alive. Oh, and let's not forget getting right with Jesus. Meanwhile, things I've read suggest that while everybody is distracted and thinking we're just coming out of the woods from the last financial crash, the economy may be about to fall hard again — here comes Round Two — due to the Debt Bubble, the falling dollar, China getting ready to stop financing us, etc. It could come out of nowhere and begin to cascade confidence like it did last time. And with a powerful Socially Darwinian strain in the American right on the rise things could get

really ugly very quickly. At least that's what the team that successfully predicted the 2008 crash says. They're, of course, very bearish, libertarian-style calculators, but it would not surprise me with so much delusionary and expectant thinking thriving in America that we could be caught again with our pants down. And just think — by then Lawrence Summers could be chairman of the Federal Reserve ready to “save America” like he and his pals did the last time. I guess in such a cynical and cold-blooded moment in history — with the US Military riding highest of anyone — I find it hard to see the US military war machine as losing anything. John

Post 20: Thomas Brinson to ITMF August 20, 2013

Re: Chomsky thread

Scintillating discussion as always . . .

John, I have to agree with you that regardless of who talks, talks, talks about what, cleverly dicing points with counterpoints spun endlessly out of thin air, the reality on the ground is that the American Military is today stronger, having more earth-shattering destructive power, than ever, and that's just what we know about. Who knows what new technologies are being bred deep within the top secret bowels of DARPA C Jill and I just finished watching all four of the *Alien* movies, which are a powerful metaphor for how the US corpocracy has operated since the Manhattan Project.

The truth is, as you point out, most of our population just doesn't/can't care, certainly not enough to get out into the streets, or enact a successful boycott, or rise up and shake off the shackles of elitist control. Oh, in their/our hearts they/we may go, ATsk, ts, isn't it a shame!@, but most of us are simply too comfortable and fearful of losing the considerable creature comforts we have. In a sense, we live in concentration camps and/or gulags of consumerist excess, being fed a constant stream 24-7 of propaganda extolling the wonderment of US exceptionalism: Isn't America the Great great? Aren't we the home of the free and the brave? Doesn't that grand ole red, white and blue gloriously wave through bombs and drones bursting in air, on ground, and under seas anywhere we so choose on the planet proof we're the good guys protecting the world from the bad guys?

In my darker moments I deeply believe that the whole bailiwick must come crashing down, like the Roman, Ottoman and British empires, before a new world can evolve, but then again at age 70 I can look up and see the gorgeous blue sky over evergreens, listen to birdsong, smell a rose, as I did yesterday when I successfully hiked up and

down Tillamook Head, being grateful for the full life I've been gifted to experience.
Thomas

Post 21: Chuck Rossi to ITMF August 23, 2013

Anniversary Time

Friends: Today is the 86th anniversary of the execution of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, a couple of tough old anarchists. There is still a Sacco and Vanzetti Commemoration Society and there is a march tomorrow in Boston (La Marcia del Dolore). The left did not suffer from a memory disorder in those day (it suffered from other things, however). Vanzetti's speech at the trial is one of the most eloquent defenses I've ever read; here's how it ends: *This is what I say: I would not wish to a dog or to a snake, to the most low and misfortunate creature of the earth— I would not wish to any of them what I have had to suffer for things that I am not guilty of. I am suffering because I am a radical and indeed I am a radical; I have suffered because I was an Italian, and indeed I am an Italian; I have suffered more for my family and for my beloved than for myself, but I am so convinced to be right that you can only kill me once but if you could execute me two times, and if I could be reborn two other times, I would live again to do what I have done already.* Here's John Dos Passos (before he became an apologist for a kind of strict libertarianism and a contributor to *National Review* and a shill for Goldwater and Nixon) about the execution in *The Big Money* (1936) part of his *U.S.A. Trilogy*: *they have clubbed us off the streets they are stronger they are rich they hire and fire the politicians the newspapereditors the old judges the small men with reputations the collegepresidents the wardheelers (listen businessmen collegepresidents judges America will not forget her betrayers) they hire the men with guns the uniforms the policecars the patrolwagons*

all right you have won you will kill the brave men our friends tonight

there is nothing left to do we are beaten

...they have built the electricchair and hired the executioners to throw the switch

all right we are two nations

America our nation has been beaten by strangers who have bought the laws and fenced off the meadows and cut down the woods for pulp and turned our pleasant cities into slums and sweated the wealth out of our people and when they want to they hire the executioner to throw the switch

Chuck

Post 22: Michael Uhl to ITMF August 23, 2013

Re: Anniversary Time

Lovely Chuck... I forwarded it to Chomsky, the most famous anarchist alive today I suppose. I suspect he knows all about La Marcia. Hope you don't mind. I remember being really bummed, having read the USA Trilogy, when I discovered that Dos had made that disgusting turn to the right after the Spanish Civil War

Michael

Michael Uhl to Noam Chomsky August 23, 2013

In your honor, I forward this lovely message from my blog mate Chuck Rossi B currently editor of the VFP national newsletter... about Sacco & Vanzetti.

A bunch of us have kicked around the discussion you and I have had recently about Vietnam vs. Iraq/Afghanistan. I haven't abandoned it... and hope to get back to it when I have the time. Is that conversation going on formally any place else that you know of?

Michael

Noam Chomsky to Michael Uhl August 23, 2013

Great message. Remarkable people.

I doubt that the conversation is going on anywhere. There are very fixed doctrines about these matters and about Vietnam generally.

Noam

Post 23: Mike Wong to ITMF August 25, 2013

Re: Chomsky thread

I feel like we're living in a giant Zen paradox. Is the glass half full or half empty? On the one hand, John and Michael are absolutely right that the US military / intelligence establishment is riding high and is the most powerful of any that has ever existed on earth. By any "objective" measure – sheer firepower, amounts of intelligence data gathered, variety of types of forces that can be applied, etc., etc., the US has no equal. Yet on the other hand, we just lost the Iraq war and are well on our way to

losing the Afghan war. We continue to fight small wars in the shadows around the planet, but are we winning any of them, or are they simply spreading? We're like a sledgehammer against flies.

The more I think about it, the more I think that the impact of the Viet Nam era anti-war is still being felt in ways we don't realize. For example, why was it that during the Iraq war, the military had so much trouble getting enough troops that they had to lower their standards, make massive use of stop-loss, and give gays more rights? Why did they go to large scale use of Blackwater and other private contractors? Because they don't have a draft. Why don't they have a draft? Because of the effectiveness of the Viet Nam era anti-war movement, and the establishment's knowledge that if anything would trigger a repeat of that, it would be a reinstatement of drafting thousands of young people from all over the country. That would get the teens and twenty somethings out of their apathy and into the streets!

Now they've given up on large scale conventional invasions and occupations, and have moved to drones and special forces wars. But this, too, has a cost. Such elite forces are hard to train in huge numbers, and they take a lot of support equipment and forces. There aren't enough of them, and if they lower their standards, their effectiveness will also diminish. The current extensive use of mercenaries is expensive, and their discipline and reliability is less certain.

Add to that the fragile economic situation of the US as John so accurately pointed out, the destabilizing effects of global warming, oil crisis, etc., and we are the modern Roman empire in the process of falling. The nation's immediate future looks dark, indeed.

Yet as Thomas describes at the end of his last email here, our personal situations, ironically, is bizarrely much brighter than that of the nation as a whole! Having somehow managed to live our lives more right than wrong, we are in comfortable situations and seem likely to ride out the storms in relative safety.

In the long run, America as an empire may crash (as it deserves to), but if so than hopefully someday (probably after all of us have passed), it will return to being America the nation. As a nation, America has a large land mass with strong naturally protected borders, good natural resources, an educated workforce, and the means to always re-build a strong and healthy economy. It is only our own madness that makes us an empire and dooms us to eternal war and destruction. Rome fell, but Italy today is doing just fine, thank you. It is entirely possible that in a brighter long term future, America can do the same. Mike

Post 24: John Grant to ITMF August 24, 2013

Re: Chomsky thread

Mike, I agree the old empire is in decline, but it's a decline that began 40 years ago or so and will be a long, drawn out process. The pace of decline seems to be picking up as the USA is dissed more and more as from the Egyptian military. One major problem is the revenge factor — all those people out there in the world who have a beef with the US who will be setting their sights on the US as it shows weakness. That's the view the right plays up, but I think it's also true. So we will rely more and more on robots and technology and the US population will become more socially Darwinian and decadent. Until, hopefully, there's a critical mass for a more socialistic response to problems. Then things may get really interesting. But then we all may be in our dotage or dead. A movement of sorts now made of strange bedfellows on the Left and the libertarian Right is angered by the surveillance and NSA stuff, a phenomenon that crosses over with corporate excesses of all sorts. That to me is really interesting.

Chuck, as you did, I loved the *USA* trilogy when I read it. Then found out Dos Passos ended up supporting Nixon. It would be interesting to figure out where things went wrong with Dos Passos and he began to head south. I read somewhere he was attacked by Dreiser and it somehow drove him to the right. Was it a matter of becoming fed up with the left or becoming enamored with the right? Or was he an opportunist hack from the beginning? His turn always saddened me, since I liked him so much. John

Post 25: Mike Wong to ITMF August 26, 2013

Re: Chomsky thread

John, I agree with your probable timeline, and the fact that many who have been hurt by us will be looking for payback. Drones and other robot warfare continues to make people hate us even more. We are creating enemies faster than we can kill them, another reason why we have the most powerful military yet can't seem to win wars. Yet I think of the example of Japan in relation to the rest of Asia. Since WW2, there has continued to be hatred of Japan throughout Asia because of the many war crimes and massive population losses incurred from Japan's invasions and occupations. They were if anything even more brutal than us. I grew up hearing first hand stories from new immigrants of my parents generation who were in China during that time, and seeing Chinese movies about WW2. But Japan today is doing well, and despite continuing issues, there is much commerce and cultural exchanges going on between Japan and other Asian countries. People from all Asian countries including

Japan travel back and forth as tourists all the time. The lasting hatred could be eased considerably if the Japanese government leaders would take responsibility for Japan's wartime actions, stop honoring their Class A war criminals, and accept that their WW2 "comfort women" program was immoral and apologize for it. But admitting guilt and apologizing seems to be a problem for the Japanese leadership and much of the population. By comparison, Germany hasn't hesitated to do so, and hatred for Germany today is much less than for Japan. After America loses its empire, we will be faced with the same issues. How we respond will make a huge difference in how the rest of the world responds back.

Interestingly, the peace movement here has already made a difference. Our activist leaders have met with and supported activist leaders in nations around the world, including in the Middle East. Trips by groups like Code Pink and VFP to these nations to protest US actions have been widely publicized there, and public opinion has been affected positively. I recall reading that immediately after the Mavi Marmara affair, media in the Middle East was noting that American activists put their lives on the line for Palestinians, and asking "Where were we?" meaning why weren't more people from the Middle East willing to do the same. And the visits by Viet Nam veterans to Viet Nam since the war have also been widely noted there, and has had a healing effect. Ironically, even as our movement is on the ropes, our small contributions have still been deeply meaningful to the people our country opposes. Mike

Post 26: Thomas Brinson to ITMF August 26, 2013

Re: Chomsky thread...

Thanks Mike and John — another most interesting, but also more importantly inspiring, thread on the importance of our individual acts of resistance and activism, seeking to match our behavior peacefully to the ideals of our search for peace without and within. The "Big Picture" (remember that PsyOps campaign from the US Army Signal Corps during the 50/60s?) may be bleak indeed, but the pinpoints of light demonstrating the resilience of the human spirit are always there.

What never ceases to amaze me is that despite the apparent darkness in the long-shot view, individually many, many folks are living viable lives, each of us included, full of meaning, satisfaction and accomplishment. .Thomas

Post 27: Chuck Rossi to ITMF August 26, 2013

Re: Chomsky thread

Amici:

Some good discussion. I have a few comments that are, I think, interrelated. First on Dos Passos et al. and trying to understand the abandonment of the left by some of its best and most committed thinkers. A fair number of the writers who gave intellectual heft to the rise of mid-century American conservatism that centered on the Buckleyite crowd at *National Review* were reconstructed radical leftists. Buckley purged the movement of radical libertarians, the Birchers, the anti-Semites, and other unsavory elements (although he and the magazine retained a white supremacist view for a long time). These guys left radical politics for various reasons, but I think they all lost their faith (the god that failed) in the ability of humans to construct through reason and with deliberation a liberty-enhancing polity. It's Burke's response to revolution. I think there is some truth in this assertion. Some of the apostate left had a kind of kommissar outlook even while on the left, but Dos Passos seems to me to have been a libertarian, rather than an anarchist, even while on the left and became discouraged by the awful results of the Soviet Union to build a functional collective state and by the violence and duplicity of communist parties. Dos Passos distrusted the state and in the end distrusted all collective action except in defense (thus the cozyness with the rising militarized state). I think the inability of the country and its military to create functional states on the top of existing societies is important to the question of why we just can't win anymore.

The question of the decline of the American empire, especially as seen in its lost wars in Vietnam and Iraq, is a vexing matter. Much of the discussion in this thread has been about whether the US lost (or lost completely in Vietnam) and why it lost. These might not be the right questions; it seems to me that the question is why the US thought that it could win these wars in the first place. The question is related to the old radicals' turn away from the problem of purposefully constructing a modern state, what we now call *nation building*. After some thinking about this and some help from Fredrik Logevall's wonderful book *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* and rereading the old 1968 essay by James Thompson *How Could Vietnam Happen?* that attempted to answer the question *How did men of superior ability, sound training, and high idealsC American policy-makers of the 1960sC create such costly and divisive policy?*, leaving aside the ability, training, and ideals, I think it was impossible to win in Vietnam or Iraq; in fact, it's difficult to describe what *winning* would consist of in either case. (An aside: we in the Philly vets used to go every Saturday to West Chester [birthplace of Smedley Butler] to stand with the Chester County Peace Committee as they witnessed against the war in Iraq; we were the muscle end of the business to provide a buffer against a group of goons carrying flags [including Israeli flags] and hectoring this kind group of Quakers, pacifists, and civic-minded folk. The goons were a despicable group

of people. One of them who had called me *a fucking scumbag traitor bastard* once shouted in my face that the US was going to win these wars against these ragheads. I asked him how we would know when we had won, and he said with a great trembling rage “when they’re all dead.”)

I think the US military learned the lesson of Vietnam rather well, and in the years after the war, they forgot all about jungles and small wars and insurgencies, and beefed up the force to meet the mighty Soviet army on the plains near the Fulda Gap in a great clash. Victory is possible in such a conflict. However, that war never happened, and the war in Iraq, despite Rumsfeld’s plan to win fast and on the cheap and install Ahmad Chalibi as the leader of a free and democratic Iraq, turned into Vietnam with sandstorms (I think that some in the Bush Administration, including Bush himself, believe that democracy is the default system of collective life endangered only by despots; remove the despot and democracy reigns.) It became impossible, as in Vietnam, to kill them all or to build a structure friendly to our ends on the destroyed land. The Fulda Gap was forgotten and after the fiasco of slow war, COIN came to the fore. I think COIN appeals to so many nonmilitary critics because the conservatives see it as a hard power operation, whereas, the liberally minded see it as a soft power operation. Two books and recent history have convinced me that COIN and nation-building are chimeras: *Can Intervention Work* by Rory Stewart, a Tory MP who was essentially the governor of Southern Iraq after the invasion and *Wrong Turn: America’s Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency* by Colonel Gian Gentile professor of history at West Point who commanded an infantry unit in Iraq in 2006. Gentile also participated in an interesting investigation into the topic why we lost vietnam , a panel discussion that included the redoubtable Lewis Sorley. Gentile’s answer to the question was we lost because we could not have won.

Without going into a whole big argument, I am convinced that the US could not have won in either Vietnam or Iraq if winning is arriving at an amenable political settlement by force of arms. I do believe that the antiwar movement had significant effect on the course of the war in Vietnam and little or none on the course of the war in Iraq. Chuck

Post 28: John Grant to ITMF August 29, 2013

Re: Chomsky thread

Chuck,

I like how you break it all down here. I agree that whether or not US Militarists or the Antiwar Left “won” or “lost” vis-a-vis Vietnam or Iraq is not “the right question.” This explains my wariness of the remarks made by Chomsky, who I agree can “over-abstract” things. For this reason, Mike is no doubt correct that his remarks to Michael should not be made public without consent out of courtesy, since they may have been made in a glib defensive spirit, ie. standing up for the Antiwar Movement, in which he is an icon. As Chuck’s remarks, below, suggest, I think it is the Left (whatever the fuck that is) that has “lost” in this roller-coaster of historical, ideological dialogue. And this has come about because even the most “winning” international examples of left action (China and Vietnam for example) are now becoming models of state capitalism. The Left’s big problem now is it doesn’t have teeth– no military power to back up its ideas. All we have is civil disobedience, a posture easily trumped by all the bread & circus we’re drowning in. The Left is aspirational, fueled by humanistic and hope-driven ideas based on reason and the notion of a state that functions based on fairness and dignity versus one based on the rugged individual and profit-making. I dabble in PA prison politics and recently read an article in some conservative, right-leaning journal about the need for prison reform. What amazed me was the tack taken by this character: His thrust was, on one hand, to list a host of very reasonable prison reforms, while on the other he glibly damned and ridiculed the liberal left employing the usual rightist assumptions. In other words, he was advocating a move to the left as he damned the organized left itself; he was clearing the brush of leftist authority as he advanced left ideas. I think one would call this co-opting leftist reform ideas. It’s what the Military does so well now, co-opting humanitarian reforms into the behemoth Military-Industrial Culture. It’s what some historians argue the Progressive Movement of the very early 1900s was all about: a rightist movement to moderate the political landscape to assure the right prevailed in the end. You see it with Chris Christie versus the tea baggers etc. Meanwhile, the purist left narcissistically obsesses over its usual complaints of not being heard or heeded: “You won’t listen to me, so I’ll just have to become a more strident, whining asshole.” For me, it’s pretty disgusting to witness what a great gaping hole the left is trapped in by historical circumstances. What’s truly frightening is that, personally, I can begin to understand why a Dos Passos abandoned the left and ended up circling his wagons and being cozy with Richard Nixon. The Horror! The Horror! In my view, what’s needed is less rigid intellectual adherence to any kind of ideological left line in the sand and more just looking out the window to see what the weather is doing. I think I may be assuming the philosophy of that weary gunman in *Pulp Fiction* played by Samuel Jackson, who at the end declares he will from now on “walk the Earth like Kung Fu.” Another way of saying, Walt Whitman speaks to me more these days than Karl Marx. John

Post 29 :Mike Wong August 30, 2013

Re: Chomsky thread

I agree with many of Chuck's points, particularly that we may not be asking the right questions, and his suggestion that perhaps these wars could not have been won in the first place and the question should be why the elite thought that they could win and therefore entered the wars to begin with. What's interesting is that many top brass in the military saw that they couldn't win either before the war began (Iraq) or figured out early in the war that they couldn't win (Viet Nam; see Daniel Ellsberg's book, Secrets). But in both cases, the political elite ignored and suppressed their voices because they didn't want to lose a war or not fight it, on their watch. Millions died for their political face saving.

This does bring us back to why they couldn't win in the first place, in which the anti-war movement plays some role, the size and effectiveness being debatable. But then we have to look at the whole range of factors – the tide of history, economics, politics both at home and in the attacked nation, the interplay of various nations and groups, etc., etc. While every case has its own particulars, the question is, are there any common denominators, any factors that seem to appear important across different cases? Perhaps here is where we should begin our questioning. Mike

PS – If we do post this, perhaps we might post it broken up into several chronological parts, in the order in which we emailed. But this is a discussion that could go on for a long time, and might actually spark some interesting dialogue that would pull traffic to our site as a continuing column that people follow.

Post 30: John Grant to ITMF August 30, 2013

Re: Chomsky thread

As I see it, the US has come to realize it's unable in the classic sense to militarily "win" any of these wars. The point is to use the military and violence to slow threats down or weaken them in support of the goal of keeping the USA as top dog in the world. Winning or "victory" is no longer necessary to sustain the imperial status-quo. I think that's The Lesson learned by our militarists from the Vietnam War and subsequent wars. State violence is employed, ala Clausewitz, as an extension of diplomacy & politics. It's a basic human inclination to want to establish clarity and permanence out of the confusion and constantly evolving flow of life, and this is what encourages the idea of winning and losing – as public relations or as historical narrative. All our military wants to do is keep their top-o'-the-world institution at the top while sustaining a clean image. John

Post 31: Chuck Rossi to ITMF August 31, 2013

Subject: Chomsky thread

I promise not to keep obsessing about this notion of unwinnable wars, but here is Col. Gian Gentile again on COIN/nation-building:

<http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/the-armys-learning-adapting-dogma-9070>

One of the leading proponents of the efficacy of American nation-building operations, retired Army Lt. Col. John Nagl, has acknowledged that America's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and future wars of this type are likely to be "unsatisfying wars." Nagl's point is that these wars of American foreign intervention to "change entire societies" take a long time, they cost a lot, and the results are often inconclusive, or as he says, "unsatisfying." Yet the question needs to be asked, why should America fight an "unsatisfying" war in the first place?

The American people have fought satisfying wars in their past: World War II and the American Civil War are two examples. The Civil War satisfied because it ended the greater evil of slavery. World War II defeated the evil, expansionist regimes of Nazi Germany and imperial Japan. War is ugly and brutal in the best of cases, but under Hart's definition of a successful war as one that produces a better state of peace, these were unquestionably successful.

Also on the subject of the left. I spent a good deal of my afternoon on a windy street corner in downtown Philadelphia holding a sign that said something about "no to war in Syria." I was accompanied by about 30 or so friends: a few greens, a couple young occupy guys wearing Guy Fawkes' masks, two delightful lesbian ministers, and some assorted liberals. A lot of commitment, not much energy. On the opposite street corner a similar number with a lot of commitment and a lot of energy: a group of young blacks rapping about the joys of knowing Jesus (he gonna stomp out sin; he gonna let you in; he gonna help us win). Several blocks away was a city-inspired concert called *Welcome America* (not the current thinking in Syria, I reckon) featuring Beyonce and Nine Inch Nails (I know who she is but I have no idea who he/she/they is/are) is expected to draw 100K or so. We march in the Labor Day parade on Monday. Best wishes for the holiday. Chuck

Post 32 : John Grant to ITMF August 31 2013

Re: Chomsky thread

Chuck,

I like Nagl's point about "unsatisfying" wars. That's it. It leads to a state of continuous, perpetual war, something Orwell prophesied in 1984, if I recall right. War becomes like the weather while ideologically-based institutions abide in a condition of constant maintenance and self-aggrandizement, perennially staving off the conditions of natural evolution. John

Post 33 Michael Uhl to Noam Chomsky August 31, 2013

Review of Penny Lewis

Dear Noam, I've kicked this exchange around a bit among my blog mates, all Vietnam era vets, and still active in Veterans For Peace. This thread has all of us thinking, and weighing in on where, as individual, each of us comes down on the essential points in our exchange. We would like to take this discussion out of the realm of the private, and put it in circulation B a message in a bottle basically B through our website InTheMindField. The initial posting would contain the thread between you and me.. followed by the responses of my mates. I think it might grow from there.