

# Chomsky still rages over US bombing of Cambodia

Henry Kissinger would certainly be brought to trial for his role in the bombing, if the world were governed by justice, not forces

Stuart Alan Becker

PHILOSOPHER and linguist Noam Chomsky says the United States owes Cambodia not only an apology but massive reparations for the B-52 bombing campaign called Operation Menu that killed up to a million people.

The campaign lasted from March 18, 1969, to May 26, 1970, destroyed an estimated 1,000 towns and villages, displaced 2 million people and, Chomsky says, and helped bring the Khmer Rouge to power. Chomsky's comments come after the US last week ruled out a plea from Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen to forgive a US\$317 million debt to the US accrued by the Lon Nol regime during the 1970s.

In the interview, Chomsky said: "Henry Kissinger would certainly be brought to trial for his role in the bombing, if the world were governed by justice, not forces."

Considered a father of modern linguistics, Chomsky is the author of more than 100 books about language and international affairs. He's also one of the world's most-quoted living scholars. Much of what he says in speeches, interviews and scholarly works is quickly translated into scores of languages.

As Chomsky approaches his 83rd year, he is still a professor emeritus at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, Massachusetts, considered one of the best technical universities in the world.

Chomsky has taught there for more than 50 years.

His work on how the brain deals with language changed how the world's professors think about

psychology, behaviour and a whole range of studies of the human mind. Chomsky has at least 36 honorary doctor's degrees, two of the most recent of which were given by universities in China, where he travelled earlier this year to acknowledge the accolades.

The Chomsky approach to science and mind studies takes the view that humans are given remarkable genetic endowments by their parents – systems so complex they are impossible to duplicate even with a room full of computers – and that's what makes people so precious.

Chomsky's theories of universal grammar and generative grammar are now accepted by scholars around the world and encompass the idea that all human languages are based on underlying rules that every human baby is born with, which explains why children, wherever they are, quickly acquire the language that is spoken to them.

Chomsky says that if an alien visited Earth, he would observe that all humans speak the same language with only slight variation. Chomsky's approach to understanding language at MIT has enabled computer scientists and researchers in many other fields to apply mathematical-style rules to languages.

British professor Dr Niels Jerne won a Nobel Prize in 1964 by applying Chomskyan theories to the human body's immune system with a paper called 'The Generative Grammar of the Immune System.'

In addition to his linguistic and philosophical pioneering, Chomsky was an early opponent of the Vietnam War, dating back to France's reappearance in Indochina following the conclusion of the

second world war in 1945.

He was one of the intellectual forces behind the antiwar movement in the US during the 1960s and early 1970s.

Chomsky is also famous for his criticism of the foreign policies of states, especially the US, where he lives and has nationality.

He helps people practise what he calls "intellectual self-defence" by pointing out the difference between words spoken and deeds done by politicians, governments, religious or corporate officials – so that the average citizen can look at the world more accurately as it applies to him or her – rather than as part of the agenda of a state, a religion, a corporation or some other power centre, as Chomsky calls them.

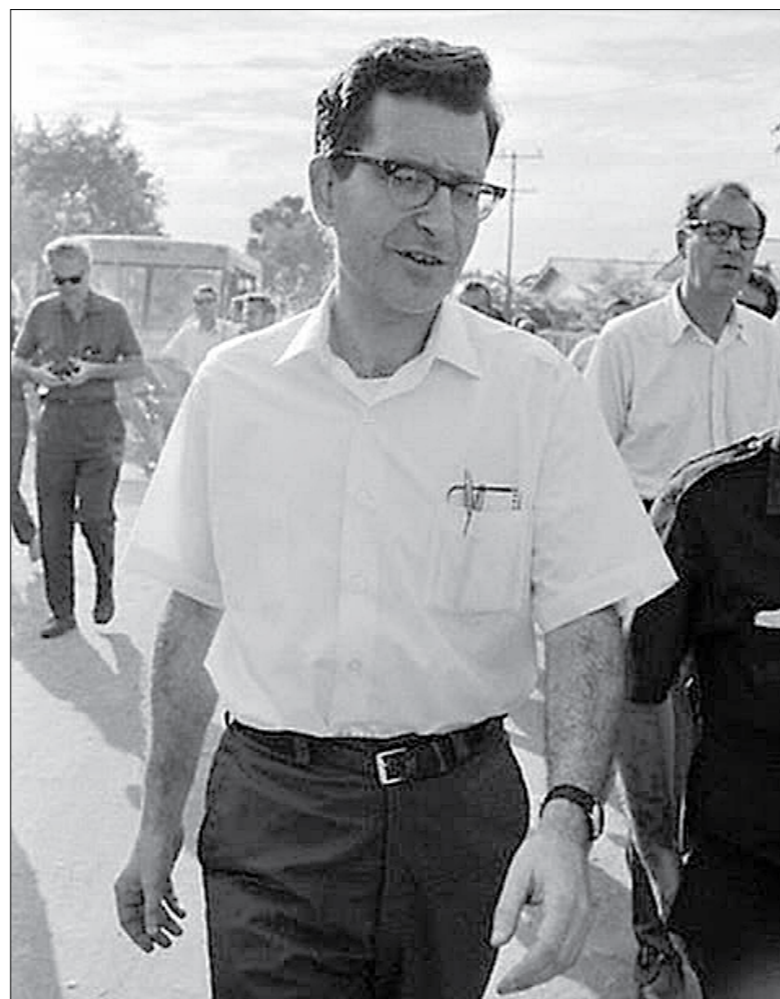
Just as in his reasoning that the Vietnam War was not in the interest of the American people, so does Chomsky reason that Israel's policies in the West Bank and Gaza are not in the interest of the Israeli people.

Though Chomsky is a Jew and a Hebrew scholar, he nevertheless criticises Israel's military actions, which he says are more dangerous to the population of Israel than they are helpful.

You could say Chomsky is an equal-opportunity critic of all groups with power, regardless of ethnicity and national origin – which is probably what makes him so popular and welcome in so many places – and so controversial.

Chomsky has been watching the events that have occurred in Cambodia since the end of the second world war.

He took time to answer some questions about significant events in the Kingdom's history that have helped shape Cambodia today.



A young Noam Chomsky during his Vietnam War protest days. PHOTO SUPPLIED

## Q&A with Noam Chomsky

**How is it that people got the idea you were soft on Khmer Rouge atrocities as a result of your 1988 book with Edward S Herman, *Manufacturing Consent*?**

In our 1988 book, Herman and I reviewed the way the horrors in Cambodia had been treated through three distinct phases: the US war before the Khmer Rouge takeover in April 1975; the Khmer Rouge period; the period after Vietnam invaded and drove out the Khmer Rouge and the US and Britain turned at once to direct military and diplomatic support for the Khmer Rouge ("Democratic Kampuchea"). By the time we wrote, it was known that the pre-1975 US war was horrendous, but it is only in the past few years that more extensive documents have been released.

We now know that the most brutal phase began in 1970, when Henry Kissinger transmitted President Nixon's orders for "massive bombing of Cambodia, anything that flies on anything that moves" (Kissinger's words, to General Haig). It is hard to find a declaration with such clear genocidal intent in the archival record of any state. And the orders were carried out. Bombing of rural Cambodia was at the level of total Allied bombing in the Pacific theatre during World War II. The Khmer Rouge, as we now know, expanded to about 200,000, largely recruited by the bombing.

During the first and third period there was quite a lot that Americans – more generally Westerners – could do. During the second period no one even had a suggestion as to what to do. The coverage is exactly the opposite of what elementary moral considerations would dictate. During the first period, there was some

protest, but coverage was slight and it was quickly forgotten. The new revelations have been almost entirely suppressed. During the third period, coverage again was very slight and the history has also been almost entirely forgotten.

Our accurate review of these facts did lead to considerable outrage, and massive lies, such as what you mention. That was even more true of our 1979 two-volume study, *Political Economy of Human Rights*, which provides extensive documentation to show that this pattern was (and is) quite generally, extending all over the world. Most of the study concerned US crimes, so it was therefore unreviewed and unread, confirming our thesis.

One chapter was about Cambodia. In it, we harshly condemned Pol Pot's crimes, and also revealed extraordinary fabrication and deceit. We wrote that the crimes were horrible enough, but commentators ought to keep to the truth, and to the most reliable sources, like State Department intelligence, by all accounts the most knowledgeable source at the time – and also largely suppressed, apart from our review, because it did not conform to the image that was manufactured. That image was important.

It was exploited quite explicitly to whitewash past US crimes in Indochina, and to lay the groundwork for new and quite awful crimes in Central America, justified on grounds that the US had to stop the "Pol Pot left". We compared Cambodia to East Timor, accurately: two huge atrocities in the same time period and same area of the world, differing in one crucial respect: in East Timor the US and its allies had primary responsibility for the atrocities, and

could have easily brought them to an end; in Cambodia they could do little or nothing – as noted, there was scarcely even a suggestion – and the enemy's atrocities could be and were exploited to justify our own.

We showed that in both cases there was massive deceit in the US and the West, but in opposite directions: In the case of East Timor, where the crimes could have easily been terminated, they were suppressed or denied; in the case of Cambodia, where nothing could be done, the fabrication and lies would, literally, have impressed Stalin.

What we wrote about East Timor was entirely ignored (except in Australia), along with the rest of what we wrote about US crimes and how they were covered up.

What we wrote about Cambodia, in contrast, elicited huge outrage and a new flood of lies, as we discussed in our 1988 book. And it continues. In general, it is extremely important to suppress our own crimes and to defend the right to lie at will about the crimes of enemies. Those are major tasks of the educated classes, as we documented at length, in these books and elsewhere.

It is a rare study that does not contain errors, but our chapter on Cambodia seems to be an exception. Despite massive effort, no one has found even a misplaced comma, let alone any substantive error. We would be more than happy to concede and correct any error, but despite Herculean efforts, none have been found. Please don't take my word for it, of course. Check and see for yourself.

**When you look at the genocide under the Khmer Rouge that occurred in Cambodia, do you put the blame on the American bombing of Cambodia for creating the conditions that brought Pol Pot to power, or is it more complex than that?**

Two leading Cambodia scholars, Owen Taylor and Ben Kiernan, point out that when the intense US bombing of rural Cambodia began, the Khmer Rouge were a small group of perhaps 10,000. Within a few years, the KR had grown to a huge army of some 200,000, deeply embittered and seeking revenge. Their recruitment propaganda successfully highlighted the US bombing. Pentagon records reveal that the tonnage of bombs released on rural Cambodia was about the same as total US bombing in the Pacific during World War II, and of course far more intense. But that was surely not the only factor.

**In your reading of history, why do leaders of states go so terribly wrong as to slaughter anyone who had ever been to school or who wore glasses? Can you imagine the intellectual or emotional basis for how perpetrators of mass killings are able to blithely live with themselves as instruments of mass killing?**

It's a good question. We can also ask similar questions about our own society, which we should be able to understand better. Just keep to Cambodia. The intense bombing began under President Nixon's orders, which Kissinger loyally transmitted to the US military with these words: "Massive bombing campaign in Cambodia. Anything that flies on anything that moves." That's the kind of call for genocide that one rarely finds in the archival record of any state. The statement was published in *The New York Times*, and there was no reaction among its mostly liberal

intellectual readers, few of whom even remember it.

**Should the perpetrators of genocide in Cambodia be tried and executed or imprisoned? Why?**

I am opposed to the death penalty, but I think they should receive fair trials and imprisonment. No one asks that question about Nixon and Kissinger, or about the rich and powerful generally.

The historic enmity between Vietnam and China goes back a millennium. In 1978-79, Cambodia was a Chinese ally and Vietnam was linked to the Russians....

**Why do you think China supported the Khmer Rouge and then attacked North Vietnam after the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia in 1979? For reasons of state? How has China changed in the past 30 years and what can we predict about things to come in China's relationship with its neighbours in Southeast Asia?**

The historic enmity between Vietnam and China goes back a millennium. In 1978-79, Cambodia was a Chinese ally, and Vietnam was linked to the Russians, China's main enemy. The Chinese invasion of Vietnam, US-backed, was explicitly intended as punishment of the Vietnamese. And as you know, the US and Britain immediately turned to military, diplomatic and ideological support for Pol Pot ("Democratic Kampuchea").

The world has changed considerably in the past 30 years. The Soviet Union has collapsed, China entered into a period of very rapid economic growth, which Vietnam is now recapitulating on a much smaller scale. Rivalries and tensions remain, but they are not taking the form they had in the days of intense China-Russia hostility.

**It seems like nationalism is a more powerful cohesive force than mere political ideology as evidenced by the anti-communist tendency of the Cold War to think that "all communists are brothers" but history has shown that definitely not to be true. Would you agree? Would it be reasonable to hope that countries like China, Vietnam, North Korea and Cuba would eventually drop communist forms of government or are those power systems "addicted" if you will?**

I dislike the use of the term "communist" for these systems, but let us put that aside. They may well take different forms in the years ahead. The idea that they were all "brothers" was a fantasy from the start. The same was true in the West. The US repeatedly overthrew capitalist democracies that were challenging US domination, and to this day adopts severe measures to punish populations that vote "the wrong way" in free elections.

**In your reading of Marxism, which is still widely taught in China, Vietnam, North Korea and Cuba in schools and universities – when you compare what Marx wrote with what actually happened in Russia, Cambodia, Cuba, North Korea and other places – what conclusions can you make about the difference between communism on paper and communism foisted on citizens. Is**

it always going to be like George Orwell's *Animal Farm*?

It is worth remembering that Marx was primarily a theorist of capitalism, and said little about post-capitalist societies. But it was clear that for him, as for the socialist movements generally, a core principle was control by working people over production, and popular control of other aspects of life. There were significant movements in this direction in Russia

after the February 1917 overthrow of the old regime, but as soon as Lenin and the Bolsheviks took power they were smashed. By this fundamental criterion even Western state capitalist societies are more "socialist" than the Bolsheviks and their successors.

**Now we're seeing US warships docking in Vietnam and the Vietnamese economy booming. Do you think the US is strengthening military ties in Southeast Asia to counter Chinese expansion? How would Cambodia or Burma fit into that, if at all, would you imagine?**

The US is surely seeking to strengthen its position in the Southeast Asia region, and the states there still have their traditional concern about Chinese power. Just how Burma and Cambodia will find their way into this nexus of conflict and cooperation it is hard to say.

**Are future relationships between states more likely to feature pragmatic, economic-based decisions and policies, perhaps regardless of their crimes and style of government, or is the future more likely to feature struggles between ideologies like we saw in the Cold War, at least on the surface?**

Cold War conflicts were not primarily ideological. If we look at the events of the Cold War, not the rhetorical framework, we see that the Cold War provided a framework for the US to use force and other means to control its vast domains, and its domestic population as well, appealing to the alleged threat of a powerful enemy; and that the Russians did much the same in their own much smaller domains. In this respect the Cold War was in part a tacit compact between the major and the minor superpower. How the future will develop we cannot know, any more than it was possible to predict with much accuracy in the past. One can easily imagine scenarios of serious conflict breaking out into major wars, perhaps even nuclear wars. Their likelihood cannot be estimated.

**If we look at the Soviet Union as an example, would it be reasonable to expect communist states like North Korea, or even China and Vietnam to collapse? Do you think they are here to stay?**

Each case is quite different from the others. I do not think that the USSR provides any particular insight into what might happen in other so-called "communist" states.

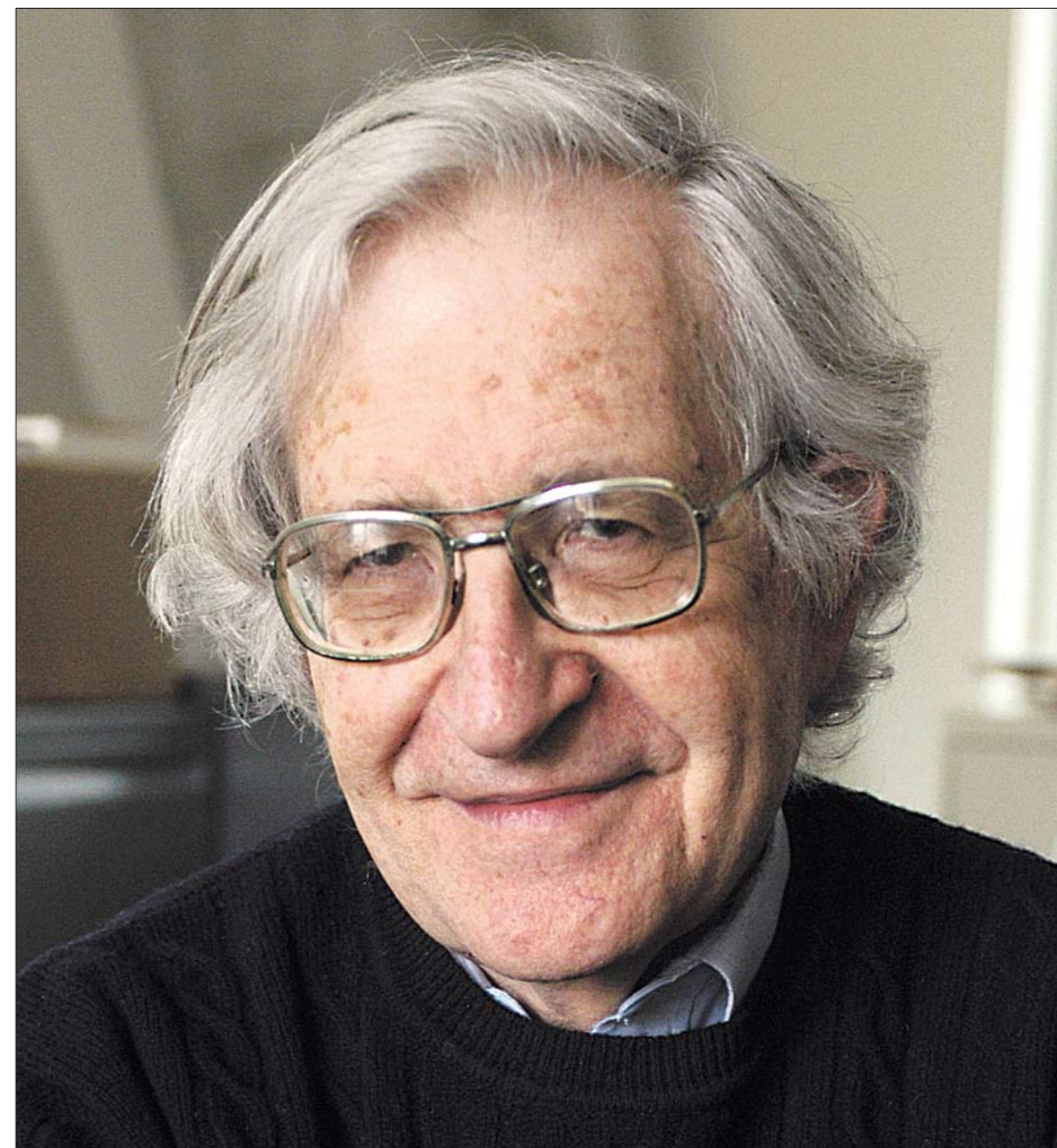
**Do you think Henry Kissinger ought to be brought to trial for the bombing of Cambodia? Do you think the Khmer Rouge would have remained a marginal force and never taken power had the US bombing of Cambodia never taken place? Does the US owe Cambodia an apology for the bombing?**

In a world governed by justice, not forces, Kissinger would certainly be brought to trial, not just for his hideous crimes in Cambodia. These, as I mentioned earlier, contributed to the rise of the Khmer Rouge, while killing unknown numbers of people and leaving vast destruction. The effects were so severe that high US officials predicted that a million would die under the best of circumstances after the war ended in 1975, and that two years of virtual slave labour would be required to at least partially restore a functioning society in Cambodia. The US owes Cambodia not just an apology but massive reparations. And that is very far from the only case.

In human affairs, is moral clarity something that you can only stab at based on complex, ever-changing information? Does that mean citizens have to take on the difficult, confusing and bitter realities they'd probably rather not think about in order to prevent horrors from happening in their lives? What happens if they don't?

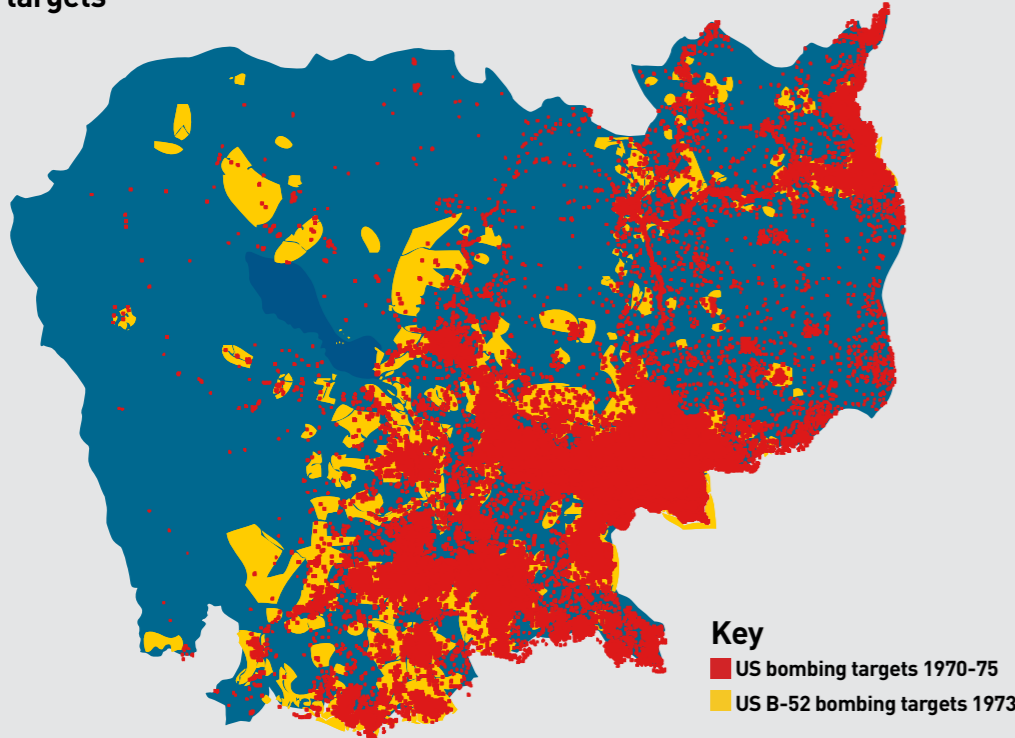
Yes, individuals have to take on these hard and often painful tasks. If they don't, the prospects for decent human survival are slim.

Stuart Alan Becker, a journalist based in Thailand, has been corresponding with Noam Chomsky for more than three years.



The octogenarian Noam Chomsky photographed earlier this year. DONNA COVENY

### Tragic targets



**Key**  
 ■ US bombing targets 1970-75  
 ■ US B-52 bombing targets 1973