

Intellectual Self-Defense by Noam

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On Staying Informed and Intellectual Self-Defense

By Noam Chomsky

There's no way to be informed without devoting effort to the task, whether we have in mind what's happening in the world, physics, major league baseball, or anything else. Understanding doesn't come free. It's true that the task is somewhere between awfully difficult and utterly hopeless for an isolated individual. But it's feasible for anyone who is part of a cooperative community — and that's true about all of the other cases too. Same holds for "intellectual self-defense." It takes a lot of self-confidence — perhaps more self-confidence than one ought to have — to take a position alone because it seems to you right, in opposition to everything you see and hear. There's even evidence about this: under experimental conditions people deny what they know to be true when they are informed that others they have reason to trust are doing so (Solomon Asch's classic experiments in social psychology, which were often held to show that people are conformist and irrational, but can be understood differently, to indicate that people are quite reasonable, and using all the information at hand).

More important than any of this is that a community — an organization — can be a basis for action, and while understanding the world may be good for the soul (not meant to be disparaging), it doesn't help anyone else, or oneself very much either for that matter, unless it leads to action. There are also many techniques for penetrating the veil of propaganda that should become second nature in dealing with the output of doctrinal institutions (media, journals of opinion, scholarship). For example, it is quite common for the basic framework of an article or news report to be hopelessly misleading, conforming to doctrinal requirements. But within it one can often discover hints that something else is going on. I often recommend reading the mainstream press beginning with the final paragraphs. That's no joke. The headline, the framing, the initial paragraphs, are designed (consciously — you learn these things in journalism school) to give the general picture, and the whole story for almost all readers, who aren't going to take the trouble to look at the small print, to think much about it, and to compare it with yesterday's tales. One discovers this all the time.

To illustrate, I happen to have just read Sunday's NY Times. There's an interesting article in the Week in Review section by Ralph Blumenthal called "Comparing the Unspeakable to the Unthinkable." It summarizes his long article (with Judith Miller) on March 4, concerning Japan's horrendous World War II record of biological warfare, both experimentation and use, quite comparable to Mengele as the

articles correctly points out. They discuss the horrifying Unit 731 and General Ishii, who ran it. The framework is "how could such evil exist?," "Japan rebuffs requests for information," "how could the Japanese be so awful?," etc., a familiar and useful genre, which I've often discussed, comparing it with self-examination, a useful and revealing exercise.

The original article condemns Japan for refusing inquiries from the US Justice Department, which is seeking to expose these terrible crimes, and to bar suspected (Japanese) participants from entering the US.

A careful reader, who has been following all of this for years, will notice hints about something else, carefully sanitized in the article and review, and properly hidden. Here are a few examples, keeping mostly to today's summary article.

The article states that "in the early 1980s, American and British scholars and journalists rediscovered the germ war issue, adding new details of American involvement in covering up the crimes." Shows how wonderful and fearless "American and British scholars and journalists" are. The truth, as Blumenthal can hardly fail to know, is that the US government (and mainstream scholars and journalists) were NOT covering the story (and arguably, covering it up), including the nature and extent of US involvement — and that he and his colleagues are continuing along that path. The facts were revealed not "in the early 1980s" by "American and British scholars and journalists," but in October-Dec. 1980, in the Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars. That is one of the journals that grew out of '60s dissidence and critique of mainstream scholarship and ideology, and this article is one example of its success in exposing material that the mainstream — surely the NY Times — wanted hidden. The author of that article, who provided extensive detail, was John Powell, who had been hounded by congressional committees, denied employment, indicted for sedition, his China journal closed, etc. This is highly relevant to the Blumenthal/Miller stories, but to tell the truth, which they surely know, would not help create the proper image of adulation of our free institutions and the courage and integrity of its leaders and participants.

The Times article states that the "delay" in recognizing Japanese war crimes "illustrates the West's Eurocentric view of wartime suffering as well as striking differences in the willingness of the two former Axis allies to come to terms with their past," and throws a "harsh light on cold-war rivalries." The "delay" in fact illustrates something radically different: it resulted from the fact that the US took over the whole hideous operation and protected the Mengeles who it now claims to be so eager to reveal, and used their work as the basis for the huge US biological and bacteriological warfare program. By 1949 the Joint Chiefs had incorporated the results into "first strike" plans, and that was given official authorization in 1956.

As for the lame reference to the "cold war," that's a standard — virtually reflexive — device for covering up past crimes; it's being invoked right now in the case of Central America, in ways that are as cowardly as they are shameful. One should always look more closely when the ritual phrase "cold war" is invoked. But crucially, the "delay" has little to do with what is mentioned, and a great deal to do with what is VERY conveniently ignored.

The Times article states that Soviet trials of Japanese for biological war crimes were "largely ignored or dismissed in the West as Communist propaganda," and that the US prosecuted no one for these crimes. True, and a true picture of the New York Times for example (as might have been pointed out in an honest report), but far from the whole story. The Soviet trials of Japanese Mengeles were ridiculed as part of the need to cover up the protection the US was offering them and its takeover of their criminal activities. One finds a hint of what the Times knows full well in the phrase, towards the end, that the US was able to "snare General Ishii's data." The fuller story is as just indicated.

And that's only a small part of it. As the Times can hardly fail to know, a year ago Indiana University press published a scholarly study of all of these matters, based on newly available Chinese and US archives (Endicott and Hagerman, "The US and Biological Warfare"). The story goes far beyond what I've just mentioned, which is bad enough. The Times article refers to new evidence from Chinese researchers about the victims of Japanese biological/bacteriological warfare. True, but as the Times also must know, and Endicott-Hagerman document, these Chinese researchers are also bringing out evidence about the victims of UNITED STATES use of what it learned from Ishii and Unit 731, in North Korea and China in the early '50s. Furthermore, what's appearing in Chinese documents and by Chinese researchers has disturbing correlations with information from US archives, as Endicott-Hagerman discuss. In the past, I'd always dismissed charges of US bacteriological/biological warfare in North Korea/China. It's less easy now. In fact, this is one of the few nontrivial revelations coming out from newly released Communist archives and research, a fact that also merits headlines. The charges are not proven, but they surely merit a much closer examination, and can no longer simply be dismissed as Communist propaganda (as I'd done myself, in fact).

The Times articles do cite scholarly research, but studiously omit what they know to be the most recent and most important study, the only one to use recently available Chinese archives and Chinese research as well as newly declassified US archives. It would take remarkable incompetence to have investigated this topic and to have "failed to discover" the most important and most recent scholarly work, not to speak of the original breakthrough, unmentionable for reasons that are not hard to guess.

The true story, surely known to those who are presenting it, continues along these lines. An honest report would not only have emphasized all of this instead of concealing hints here and there and telling a very different tale up front. It would also have drawn the obvious implications concerning current matters: e.g., US fulmination about the dangers of "weapons of mass destruction" — a category that does not exist, according to official US policy from the early postwar period, perhaps still operative — and the horrors of biological/bacteriological weapons and their potential use by terrorists and rogue states. Very much on the front pages, and surely worth discussing — including its origins in Unit 731, the US takeover and development of all of this (including possible experimentation in the field), and the way the whole story has been handled, and is being handled.

And will be handled. It's likely that some day the Times will run a long article on all

of this, after it has had time to frame the story the right way. It will be framed by official denials, irrelevant but useful apologetics about the Cold War, much ranting on the (inevitable) errors that appear in the scholarly work that has revealed what has long been suppressed, etc. (no doubt they are there, but it will be surprising if they amount to a fraction of the revelations about what is considered highly respectable history when it serves doctrinal needs. There will also be hints scattered around that the careful reader may find, which could lead them to the truth — with considerable effort.

The truth is not only ugly, but highly pertinent and timely. That's the way the story would be framed and presented in a free press, if such existed. With considerable effort, one can discern hints that will lead one to the true picture in the existing press. But it takes effort, and a little familiarity with how these things typically work.

I might add that the Boston Globe — a journal that is directed (in part) to the leading figures in the "Athens of America" — has an editorial on the topic, denouncing crimes "so despicable that no statute of limitations should ever be applied to the, and no veil of forgetfulness should be allowed to hide them away from future generations." Even the few hints scattered through the Times reports are excised from the editorial, which denounces Tokyo because it "has even refused to give the United States the names of Japanese veterans who belonged to a biological warfare unit." How dare they impede our dedication to reveal every scrap of truth about the Japanese Mengeles — and how they were received by those we are taught to worship?

That's a single example. I could have used have a dozen other examples from the same day's newspapers. I used to write regular articles about these things for a now defunct journal called "Lies of Our Times" — I presume it wasn't called "Lies of the Times" because of fear of libel suits. Many of them are collected in a book called "Letters from Lexington" (Common Courage); the title is because they were written informally, as letters. There are far more detailed analyses in print. I think they might give some hints on "intellectual self-defense," but ultimately, it's no different than physics or baseball. If you want to learn something, it'll take work. And the chances of success, or useful success, are greatly magnified by cooperative interchange and effort.