



# Understanding Power: The Indispensable Chomsky

*Noam Chomsky , Peter R. Mitchell (Editor) , John Schoeffel (Editor)*

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A major new collection from "arguably the most important intellectual alive" (*The New York Times*). Noam Chomsky is universally accepted as one of the preeminent public intellectuals of the modern era. Over the past thirty years, broadly diverse audiences have gathered to attend his sold-out lectures. Now, in *Understanding Power*, Peter Mitchell and John Schoeffel have assembled the best of Chomsky's recent talks on the past, present, and future of the politics of power. In a series of enlightening and wide-ranging discussions, all published here for the first time, Chomsky radically reinterprets the events of the past three decades, covering topics from foreign policy during Vietnam to the decline of welfare under the Clinton administration. And as he elucidates the connection between America's imperialistic foreign policy and the decline of domestic social services, Chomsky also discerns the necessary steps to take toward social change. With an eye to political activism and the media's role in popular struggle, as well as U.S. foreign and domestic policy, *Understanding Power* offers a sweeping critique of the world around us and is definitive Chomsky. Characterized by Chomsky's accessible and informative style, this is the ideal book for those new to his work as well as for those who have been listening for years.

## Understanding Power: The Indispensable Chomsky Details

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## From Reader Review Understanding Power: The Indispensable Chomsky for online ebook

### Bryan says

Intentions Good, Views Dangerous: Understanding Power is, without question, the most comprehensive and compelling presentation of Noam Chomsky's ideas. Reading this book will change the way you see the world. If you are interested in Chomsky, it is likely that you are a noble person who genuinely cares for others and yearns for a better world. Beware, reader, and make sure you choose the right vehicle for your hope. While his intentions are for a peaceful, safe, and healthy world, Chomsky's political writings systematically assume conscious malevolence without evidence, ignore context, and romanticize Third World struggles, regardless of their goals.

Let's briefly examine some of his convictions on a pressing topic: the War on Terror. Following the September 11th attacks, Chomsky immediately presented them as our fault: the result of U.S. Middle East policy, and equally evil U.S. Cold War efforts (training Mujahadeen to oust the Soviets from Afghanistan). His presumption here is that if the United States changes its behavior, that terrorist attacks will then cease. Islamic terrorists, in fact, want a pan-world government under Taliban-esque repressive sharia law, a vision that mandates the overthrow of all free nations beginning with ours. These facts are easily learned by reading about the historical development of Islamic radicalism, which is rooted in reinterpretations of the Qur'an's dictates for action, NOT in wishes to live peacefully in a U.S.-free Middle East. These facts, however, do not enter into the Chomskyan world-view, which romanticizes Third World underdogs as brave and legitimized no matter what they stand for.

The linguist also described the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan as a conscious "silent genocide," predicting wrongly that millions would be severed from food supplies. As is typical, Chomsky here focused solely on the negative aspects of the situation, those for which the U.S. deserved his bitter recrimination. For a man who lives prosperously in America and is supposedly the voice of the downtrodden, Chomsky certainly did not put himself into the shoes of the Afghan women. For them, whose existence was akin to slavery, the liberation was a cause for great joy. Actual sentiments were fully antithetical to Chomsky's condemnatory remarks to his villainous U.S. government, which he and he alone believed was consciously bent on killing as many innocent Afghans as possible. Omitting what is significant (the liberation of people living under tyranny, in this case) to emphasize his often ludicrous misperceptions about American motives and motivations is a constant in Chomsky's writings. His Cold War depictions are even more stunning, as Understanding Power's abundant examples attest.

In the case that you are already entrenched in his manner of thinking, at least admit that Noam Chomsky MIGHT be wrong, and see if his positions hold up under review: read Chomsky's articulate, sane critics. If he is perfect, then you have nothing but gain to achieve from this exercise; it will only serve to strengthen your ability to effectively argue and implement Chomsky's ideas in the world. After clear-eyed reassessment of his political writings, if you STILL think he's on-point, then all the best to you. If, however, you reevaluate his "wisdom," you will have saved yourself from much needless confusion and despair.

Were Chomsky's views simply false, there would not be need for this posting. They become perilous, however, in their blind, wholesale demonization of the United States. Chomsky's own fear and anger about the state of our world are projected, with great urgency: anger at and fear of U.S. "elites" is the Chomsky program. The result is often flat-out hatred. What would Chomsky do were he President? We do not know; he avoids that inconvenient question by telling us that were he to run (which he admits he would never do), the first thing he would do is tell us not to vote for him. Furthermore, why does Professor Chomsky not include himself in the "elites" so prominent in his analyses? Does he not pay taxes, and drive a BMW, and

teach at a cushy, prestigious university? The questions may seem too simplistic, but they point to a core issue: if Chomsky cannot look into the mirror regarding his own status and societal position, then how much more impaired must his assessments be of things outside of himself? On paper, it is unclear exactly what Chomsky IS calling for, and putting aside the constant onslaught of judgment-filled writings and audio programs, neither does his life provide us an example of what he conceives to be right-action. Those who want an idea of who believes IN Chomsky, however, need look no further than Hugo Chavez, who recently proclaimed allegiance and military support to his "brother" Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Ahmadinejad, for anyone who needs reminding, daily denies the Holocaust, and calls for the destruction of Israel and the United States. Is it a coincidence that those who love Chomsky also embrace a world-view rooted in blame, anger, and vilification?

Good and evil do exist in this world, but Noam Chomsky is not capable of distinguishing between the two. The U.S.A. is not perfect, and never will be. Nevertheless, if we fail to recognize the good that IS here, we may soon lose our nation. Chomsky's writings are little more than a good reminder that appearance is not essence. It is worth noting as well, that Chomsky is an avowed atheist, and believes that life is meaningless. If we bear in mind that evil is in the eye of the beholder, then Chomsky--an American, an Israelite, a millionaire--is instantly unmasked in all of his self-revulsion. Understanding Power should be retitled as "Understanding Blame." Steer clear and take heart, reader; there is hope in this world, and your country is good, but you will discover neither in Avram Noam Chomsky.

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### **Todd says**

Want to understand international politics? Want to know how to read between the lines of the daily headlines? Want to know where to start with Noam Chomsky? The answer to all those questions is: Understanding Power: The Indispensable Chomsky.

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### **Szplug says**

Chomsky is one of the critical deans of American political history: ironic and pessimistic; forever probing and analyzing the decrepitude, deceit, and delusion rife within the ready presentation and understanding of the United States as an exceptional force of good in the world, and a constant decrier of the various means and manipulations the government and media undertake to stoke this view; content in generally limiting himself to pointing out the flaws in the system, the hypocrisy and moral failures and falsehoods, in order to heighten the reader's awareness in lieu of offering any realistic or practical solutions, while displaying a certain naïveté of functioning politics, a somewhat idealistic (or at least selective) view of the world, though whether as a cause or an effect is not clear to me. His analysis of the *problems* is acute and convincing; his conclusions never seem of the real world in which we are all forced to live. I respect Chomsky and his unwavering commitment to presenting what he believes to be an unvarnished and necessary antidote to a rampant American Exceptionalism; but I find that I am often left feeling immensely helpless in the wake of his endless detailing and criticism, bereft of any workable solutions and suspecting that, in his pursuit of the darkness inherent in the American Dream (as filtered through the Military-Industrial Complex), he has become quite blind to the sides and shapes of it that are positive and bright, as well as increasingly morally obtuse whenever the perpetrator(s) of the policies, actions, and propaganda that he abhors is(are) not of the first world. Perhaps a case of a prolonged peering into the Nietzschean abyss, with all of its attendant perils.

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## Nikolay says

Not assembled by Chomsky, but by some genius editors who organized and very precisely cut pieces of many interviews with him. I loved the format. The covered a much broader range of topics than I expected and the more conversational style made it a lot easier to swallow.

Now, to the more complicated part of the review – the content itself. Based on knowing a little bit about Chomsky, my approach to listening the book was to pay closer attention to the facts and explanations how and why the works and tactfully let his ideas about how the world *should* go in one ear and out the other. This strategy worked marvelously.

Some of the topics covered are: US foreign policy and its brutal aggression, capitalism and how capital effectively governs the country, media/education/intellectualism and how they are mostly used as propaganda tools, dissent and how they had an actual effect on US government actions.

My two main takeaways:

- After learning more about how the world works, the only way to deal with the imminent depression and being overwhelmed is to stick to the things we can change and enjoy and work on changing them day after day, putting one foot in front of the other, until we see an improvement.
  - While flawed, the current system works reasonably well – we live longer, violence is minimal compared to the past, with a little bit of luck one can lead a decent life. Not to say we should accept the status quo, but amount our regular rage about how fucked up the world is, let's at least for a second acknowledge the current complex (and surprising, to me) balance.
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## Adam Roan says

*Propaganda is to democracy what violence is to totalitarianism.* - Noam Chomsky

After reading five or six Chomsky books - this is without a split-second of thought his best, most highly honored and important texts assembled to date.

I'm not sure who(m)ever edited this book, it seems to be cut with precise trimming. The rhetoric speaks with a strong appeal (fulfilling pathos, ethos and logos) to help engage the reader indefinitely. Yes, Chomsky's monologues can be a bit dry because they are so factually inclusive; but this book does capture Chomsky's emotional sense of self-identity... in particular, his rhetoric isn't fluff, it doesn't drill into emotions too much, and it doesn't always point the finger and demonize a single individual.

The idelogue is all there, patiently waiting for you to read it and eventually surrender to much of the obscenities in the world.

It also sticks to the facts.

What I love most about the book: the frequent theme of Americans attack on foreign soil democracies. Even when a nation shows any interest in developing a real democracy, with honest people and a leader who promises to give voice to his own bourgeoisie, it's been proven repeated again and again that Americans invade and take dispose of those who show this type of mentality. (most of this happens inside latin america, for instance.)

Military-industrial complex is a oft-repeated "theme." Basically: we not only experience military-industrial

complex from a conscious, direct, and typical method of looking at the military and how it uses the government as a crux to feed itself. It's a logic that precedes our health care system and our banking system; much of our country is built on industrial institutions.

Here's a creative flow chart displaying how Chomsky explains it using five key points:

[http://3.bp.blogspot.com/\\_jgo6O\\_e8NtA...](http://3.bp.blogspot.com/_jgo6O_e8NtA...)

Certainly his ideologue about neo-conservatism is quite venerable, passionate... it's important to embrace this in a strong light. He argues that neo-liberalism (which represents the entire spectrum of popular political thought) is dangerous, so dangerous in fact that he puts conservatives in their proper place when speaking of Adam Smith's "Wealth Of Nations." Many neo-cons, when given the criteria of "Wealth of Nations," completely botch the text with their own private agenda. They might read the text to only charm themselves with a taste of what the book really has to offer... they don't actually recognize what Smith was aiming at: division of labor is not the solution but actually symptomatic of itself.

I must mention this: the text is not for the faint-hearted. This is not a Zeitgeist-lets-exploit-sensationalism. It's purely, from an insider-looking-out perspective, a text to be absorbed at only an intellectual depth (deductive reasoning.)

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## Safat says

Cautionary tale: If you are a conscientious liberal person believing in human rights, reading this book will fill you up with unbridled rage.

It's a collection of Chomsky's talks with general public over two decades or so. Chomsky basically reveals things what nobody else will tell you, because the media tells you only what the power wants it to tell. He will tell you how the big corporations run the 'military -industrial complex' for their own profit, and keep the public soothed by framing their opinions in every fucking perspective. We do not live in the good old fashioned world where kings dictated everything as agents of God, but in a much more subtle and covert world where media dictates everything we should think and feel, and big money dictates media. We basically live in Aldous Huxley's drug induced sedated world. The difference is that we are working our ass off.

I have quite a few American friends in my friendlist. I especially recommend that they read this book. There's just too much corrupt power centralized in US which affects the world in a bad way. The only way to remedy this is to make more Americans make aware of how the system works.

Then someone like Bernie Sanders would be US President instead of a centrist like Obama or a corrupt warmonger like Hillary. Not to say anything of Trump.

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## Ted says

This really is the indispensable Chomsky. It's a summary of his views on just about everything.

Many of Noam's views are very left wing, progressive, anti-American policy, anti-Israel policy ... so a lot of people care not much for him. He is to me the most rational, truth seeking person I've read.

The book is not "writings" of Chomsky's. Rather it is edited transcriptions of Q&A sessions from a great number of teach-ins and college talks that he has given over the years. The editing has been done to add footnotes, and of course to make both questions and answers read better and be more succinct in their wording and give greater depth to the answers (I would guess) than was done on the fly. In that sense, they are closer to writings than most Q&A transcriptions would be.

Ch 1. Weekend Teach-In: Opening Session (primarily Rowe Mass., April 1989)

Ch 2. Teach in: Over Coffee (ditto)

Ch 3. Teach-In: Evening (ditto)

Ch 4. Colloquy (primarily Fort Collins CO, April 1990)

Ch 5. Ruling the World (discussions in NY, MA, MD, CO, IL and Ontario, 1990 and 93-96)

Ch 6. Community Activists (discussions in British Columbia, MA, IL, MD and WY, 1989 and 93-96)

Ch 7. Intellectuals and Social Change (discussions at Woods Hole and Rowe MA, 93-96)

Ch 8. Popular Struggle (discussions in MA, MD, Ontario, CA and WY, 1989, '94 & '94)

Ch 9. Movement Organizing (discussions at Woods Hole MA, 93-96)

Ch. 10. Turning Point (discussions in IL, NJ, MA, NY and MD, 94-96 & '99)

Each of these chapters is in turn divided into 10-20 subtopics (all given in the TOC)

For example, Chapter 7 has the following subtopics:

- The Leninist/Capitalist Intelligentsia
- Marxist "Theory" and Intellectual Fakery
- Ideological Control in the Sciences and Humanities
- The Function of the Schools
- Subtler Methods of Control
- Cruder Methods of Control
- Forging Working-Class Culture
- The Fraud of Modern Economics
- The *Real* Market
- Automation
- A Revolutionary Change in Moral Values

The footnotes are not in the book itself. They are downloadable from a web-site as a PDF document. This I have done. It is 1.7 MB, 450 pages long - the footnotes. These footnotes are not only references but additional explanatory information.

The book has a pretty good index.

The book is more wide ranging than many of Chomsky's other publications, hence is not what you want if you only want his views on Media, or U.S. Foreign Policy. But making up for this, it probably gives a pretty good sample of his views on a full range of topics.

I use the word "views" here to try to be non-argumentative. But for a vast amount of this stuff, the evidence that Chomsky present qualifies the positions he outlines not as simply his views, but as flat out *the truth*. But it's a truth that the average American (unlike in many cases the average European) has no idea about - because the mainstream U.S. Media just refuses to print *factual news* which runs contrary to the U.S. **exceptionalist view** which we have of ourselves - news which commonly appears in the British, French, German, even Israeli press.

Rather than try to give any sort of summary of Chomsky's *insights* (there, a better word than "views"), I'll just conclude by quoting a paragraph from the back cover of the book.

In a series of enlightening and wide-ranging discussions ... Chomsky radically reinterprets the events of the past three decades [the last decades of the 20th century] covering topics from foreign policy during the Vietnam War to the decline of welfare under the Clinton administration. And as he elucidates the connection between America's imperialistic foreign policy and social inequalities at home, Chomsky also discerns the necessary steps to take toward social change. With an eye to political activism and the media's role in popular struggle, as well as U.S. foreign and domestic policy, (the book) is definitive Chomsky.

That it is.

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### David M says

First read Chomsky as a teenager. At first I couldn't believe what he was saying.

I never wanted to be a radical; it's just that when I started checking the footnotes I couldn't stop.

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### Thomas Ray says

Noam Chomsky, *Understanding Power: The Indispensable Chomsky*, 2002, based on talks he gave 1989–1999. 401 pages. isbn 1565847032. 449 pages of footnotes at [understandingpower.com](http://understandingpower.com)

Real power is not in the political system. It's in the private economy: that's where the decisions are made about what's produced, how much is produced, what's consumed, where investment takes place, who has jobs. Political changes can make only a minor difference. So long as power remains privately concentrated, everybody has to make sure the rich are happy. If they're happy, they'll invest, the economy will work, things will function, maybe something will trickle down to you. If they're not happy, everything grinds to a halt.

Suppose Massachusetts were to increase business taxes. Most of the population is in favor of it. Business would run a public relations campaign, saying, truthfully, "Raise taxes on us, capital will flow elsewhere, you'll have no jobs, you'll have nothing. You make us happy or you'll have nothing. You live here, but we own the place." [p. 63]

For me, this is the indispensable insight Chomsky clearly states and illustrates in this book. Understanding it, we lose our unrealistic expectations of politicians.

Until there's popular control of industry—workers' control, community control, extending democracy to economic power—unless that happens, political power will be feeble. [p. 64] Real democracy will require that corporate capitalism be dismantled. You have to build up alternative popular institutions, which could allow control over society's investment decisions to be moved to working people and communities. A participatory economy. [p. 140] [The U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives, [usworker.coop](http://usworker.coop) is a few people making a start.]

Build community. Organize. When people get together, all sorts of things are possible. If you're isolated, you're going to break. [pp. 121, 185]

If you could get to the point where a reformist candidate had a chance, you'd already have won; you'd already have done the main thing—build mass support. [p. 139] Power was never in popular hands. [p. 267] But there's progress. Keep fighting. [p. 268]

And yet—a century ago, governments were revoking corporate charters when corporations didn't live up to the public interest. [p. 347]

Every form of authority and domination and hierarchy, has to prove that it's justified. [p. 201]

States are not moral agents. They're vehicles of power, working in the interests of particular internal power structures in their societies. [p. 163]

The product of the media is audiences! Their market is advertisers! [p. 14] “I asked an editor why coverage of Palestine is so awful. He laughed, ‘How many Arab advertisers do you think we have?’” [p. 22] Mainstream press portrays a uniformly pro-corporate world. A New York Times columnist says angrily, “Nobody tells me what to write!” True. He already knew what to write. That's why he's a New York Times columnist. [p. 112] Warner Communications closed a publisher to keep a Chomsky book from being distributed. [p. 209] Universities, corporate-funded, select for obedience and conformity, punish independence. [pp. 236, 265] Chomsky can teach in any department except political science. [p. 244]

In communities with listener-supported community radio and other alternative media, the mood is strikingly different. [p. 180]

In economically weak countries around the world, the U.S. prevents the rise of independent governments—to keep siphoning wealth from the global poor to the global rich—through corporate control of land and resources, low wages, industry-friendly policies. [p. 64] The United States arms foreign militaries, so they can and do overthrow their own governments that don't pursue the welfare of multinational corporations. [p. 7] Noriega was our thug in 1985. In 1989 he was getting independent. [p. 152] Around the world, the countries that developed economically are those that weren't colonized by the West. [p. 65] The U.S. government spends some \$10 billion a year to maintain U.S. domination of Central America—probably exceeds the profits banks and corporations plunder there. [p. 67]

Free-market capitalism led to the Great Depression. Every economically successful country is near-fascist—massive government intervention in the economy. Every industrial economy has a massive state sector. In the U.S. it's mainly through the military. The government funds corporate research and development; if something profitable comes out of it, the corporations take the profit. The parts of the American economy that are competitive internationally get massive government subsidies: agriculture, high-tech, pharmaceuticals. The U.S. prevents third-world countries from doing as we've done. [pp. 72–73] Military spending goes to the rich. Social spending goes to the poor. The rich have the power, so that's where we spend it.

Violence or its threat empowers authoritarianism. [pp. 11, 70, 90]

Cuba's “crime” is successfully caring for its people: a virus that could spread, and interfere with corporate plunder. [p. 149] Vietnam was fought to prevent Vietnam from becoming a successful model of economic and social development for the third world. So far we've won. [p. 91]

Chomsky is, I think, wrong about some things:

Chomsky is right that *mostly*, the boot of wealth is on everyone's neck. Mostly. "Pursuit of self-interest helps everybody" is *mostly* a lie. But since owners haven't *yet* vacuumed up *all* wealth and power, they sometimes have to give some of the rest of us something for their gains in wealth.

So it's not enough to simply destroy capitalism, have all business decisions made by worker co-ops. Permitting people to make a profit, *when* it also benefits the nonwealthy, *can* be a good thing.

Chomsky's right that wealth will *always* fight hard to eat our lunch. We have to win that fight, *muzzle* not kill the beast. With progressive taxation of corporate and individual wealth and income; regulation; and, public-interest research-and-lobbying groups on *every* issue that wealth lobbies on (in the Citizens' Utility Board mold).

Chomsky is right that, to curb wholesale environmental destruction, enserfment, and rampant authoritarianism, the power of the rich to get richer at everyone's cost must be destroyed. It's true that worker co-ops replace dictatorial owner power, serving wealth concentration—at any cost to workers and community—with workplace democracy, with goals of business survival, decent pay, and service to community. Yet majority rule doesn't mean fairness. (Ask any minority!) Longtime co-op workers vote themselves higher pay for the same work as newcomers—far above any claimed greater productivity. A co-op can degenerate to rule by popular clique.

Chomsky is a bit of a free speech fundamentalist. You can forgive him, in that, if public opinion had not shifted so fast and strongly to antiwar in 1968, Chomsky would have been sentenced to many years in prison for criticizing the government's prosecution of the war.

But there must be limits on speech. Not just "you don't have the right to yell fire in a crowded theater," but also:

You have no right to say, "Do what I want or I will hurt you." That's felony assault or felony extortion.

You have no right to say to a public official, "I bought you. I own you. You work for me." That's graft.

You have no right to say, "Here, try this!" when "this" will harm you and take away your ability to choose not to do it. In my view, *advertising* is the *only* truly criminal act of the illegal drug trade. And neither should nicotine, alcohol, and gambling advertising be permitted. (John Warren Kindt, "College and Amateur Sports Gambling: Gambling away our Youth" online here (33 pages):

[paperity.org/p/81539170/college-and-a...](http://paperity.org/p/81539170/college-and-a...)

Legal gambling's socioeconomic costs, including addictions, crime, corruption, and bankruptcies, exceed costs of illegal drugs.)

You have no right to present lies as news.

Chomsky feels we can't trust the government to censor speech. He has good reason to feel that way. Yet we have to trust the government to evaluate safe foods and drugs, keep snake-oil salesmen from making false ads.

"Too much competition" Chomsky sees as a very bad thing—and it is, for the profiteers. For the rest of us, "too much competition" is the Econ 101 world, "many buyers, many sellers, no one has control over price"—and if anyone who wants to produce and sell, can do so, then the best anyone can do is recover long-run marginal cost—and if they do, they can stay in business forever, all the employees, supervisors, managers, and suppliers getting paid, the customers getting a fair price. The only people who don't get paid are the investors, and why should they? Why should they expect to keep getting more and more wealth, for

doing nothing, merely because they started with more money than they needed to spend?

But Chomsky is wrong that “excess competition” causes depressions. What causes depressions is insufficient aggregate demand—which happens when many people, who need lots of stuff, have too little money and can’t buy it—because a few people, who already have everything they could use and then some, have hoarded all the wealth. [pp. 72, 74]

Chomsky thinks boycotts are not much use. [p. 337] To the contrary, as Howard Zinn said, to live, today, as we think people should live, is itself a great victory. As much as we can deny exploiters profit by our participation in their system, we should.

Chomsky thinks there’s no evidence the CIA isn’t under White House control. [p. 349] To the contrary. The CIA does what the CIA wants. Sometimes that’s the same as what the white house wants. Sometimes not. Thoroughly documented in, for example, Legacy of Ashes by Tim Weiner, and JFK and the Unspeakable: Why He Died and Why It Matters by James W. Douglass.

Chomsky cites many worthwhile authors, including:

Mishel, Lawrence  
Rothstein, Richard  
Carnoy, Martin  
Bivens, Josh  
McQuaig, Linda  
Sellers, Charles Grier  
Noble, David F.  
Ware, Norman  
Sklar, Holly  
Medoff, Peter  
Collins, Chuck  
Stockwell, John  
Hertsgaard, Mark  
Parenti, Michael  
Bagdikian, Ben H.  
Herman, Ed  
Postman, Neil

Mishel, Lawrence  
Rothstein, Richard  
Carnoy, Martin  
Bivens, Josh  
McQuaig, Linda  
Sellers, Charles Grier  
Noble, David F.  
Ware, Norman  
Sklar, Holly  
Medoff, Peter  
Collins, Chuck  
Stockwell, John  
Hertsgaard, Mark  
Parenti, Michael  
Bagdikian, Ben H.

Herman, Ed  
Postman, Neil

Mishel, Lawrence  
Rothstein, Richard  
Carnoy, Martin  
Bivens, Josh  
McQuaig, Linda  
Sellers, Charles Grier  
Noble, David F.  
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Sklar, Holly  
Medoff, Peter  
Collins, Chuck  
Stockwell, John  
Hertsgaard, Mark  
Parenti, Michael  
Bagdikian, Ben H.  
Herman, Ed  
Postman, Neil

And if you've ever seen a video of him speaking, you know it's almost all without notes. Chomsky is mind-bogglingly well-informed about precisely the things the powers that be don't want us to know. Thank you, Noam.

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## **Mat says**

This book is a feat of editing. It condenses aspects of Chomsky's talks from across decades and references them at a separate website, [understandingpower.com](http://understandingpower.com). Here are some favourite quotes:

You should not expect an institution to say, "Help me destroy myself," that's not the way institutions function. And if anybody inside the institution tried to do that, they wouldn't be inside it much longer.

If you're getting accepted in elite circles, chances are very strong that you're doing something wrong - I mean, for very simple reasons. Why should they have any respect for people who are trying to undermine their power? It doesn't make any sense.

Part of the whole technique of disempowering people is to make sure that the real agents of change fall out of history, and are never recognized in the culture for what they are. So it's necessary to distort history and make it look as if Great Men did everything - that's part of how you teach people they can't do anything, they're helpless, they just have to wait for some Great Man to come along and do it for them.

If power is actually rooted in large parts of the population - if people can actually participate in social planning - then they will presumably do so in terms of their own interests, and you can expect the decisions to reflect those interests. Well, the interest of the general population is to preserve human life; the interest of corporations is to make profits-those are fundamentally different interests.

Either control over these matters is left in the hands of existing power interests and the rest of the population just abdicates, goes to the beach and hopes that somehow their children will survive - or else people will become sufficiently organized to break down the entire system of exploitation, and finally start putting it under participatory control. One possibility will mean complete disaster; the other, you can imagine all kinds of things. For example, even profitability would no longer be all that important - what would be important is living in a decent way.

As the first Secretary of the Air Force, Stuart Symington, put the matter very plainly back in 1948, he said: "The word to use is not 'subsidy,' the word to use is 'security.'"

The world does not reward honesty and independence, it rewards obedience and service. It's a world of concentrated power, and those who have power are not going to reward people who question that power.

If you look at the results of human nature, you see everything: you see enormous self-sacrifice, you see tremendous courage, you see integrity, you see destructiveness, you see anything you want. That doesn't tell you much.

When someone comes along claiming a scientific basis for some social policy or anything else having to do with human beings, I'd be very skeptical if I were you.

For people to have the opportunity to live full and rewarding lives they have to be in control of what they do, even if that happens to be economically less efficient.

The idea of developing the kind of society that Orwell saw and described in I think his greatest work, *Homage to Catalonia* - with popular control over all the institutions of society - okay, that's the right direction in which to move, I think.

The ones who are ruthless and brutal and harsh enough to seize power are the ones who are going to survive. The ones who try to associate themselves with popular organizations and help the general population itself become organized, who try to assist popular movements in that kind of way, they're just not going to survive under these situations of concentrated power.

Notions like Marxism and Freudianism belong to the history of organized religion. So part of my problem is just its existence: it seems to me that even to discuss something like "Marxism" is already making a mistake. Like, we don't discuss "Planckism." Why not? Because it would be crazy.

It's extremely rare, outside of the natural sciences, to find things that can't be said in monosyllables.

Eighty percent of Americans literally believe in religious miracles. Half the population thinks the world was created a couple thousand years ago and that fossils were put here to mislead people or something - half the population. You just don't find things like that in other industrial societies.

If we ever had a popular reform candidate who actually achieved some formal level of power: there would be disinvestment, capital strike, a grinding down of the economy. And the reason is quite simple. In our society, real power does not happen to lie in the political system, it lies in the private economy: that's where the

decisions are made about what's produced, how much is produced, what's consumed, where investment takes place, who has jobs, who controls the resources, and so on and so forth. And as long as that remains the case, changes inside the political system can make some difference - I don't want to say it's zero - but the differences are going to be very slight.

Look, G.A.T.T. is something of major significance. The idea that it's going to be rammed through Congress on a fast track without public discussion just shows that anything resembling democracy in the United States has completely collapsed.

There is never any point in getting some person into office unless you can continue forcing them to be your representative, and they will only continue to be your representative as long as you are active and threatening enough to make them do what you want, otherwise they're going to stop being your representative.

There are parts of philosophy which I think I understand, and it's most of classical philosophy. And there are things that I don't understand, because they don't make any sense - and that's okay too, these are hard questions. I mean, it's not necessarily a criticism to say that something doesn't make sense: there are subjects that it's hard to talk sensibly about. But if I read, say, Russell, or analytic philosophy, or Wittgenstein and so on, I think I can come to understand what they're saying, and I can see why I think it's wrong, as I often do. But when I read, you know, Derrida, or Lacan, or Althusser, or any of these - I just don't understand it. It's like words passing in front of my eyes: I can't follow the arguments, I don't see the arguments, anything that looks like a description of a fact looks wrong to me. So maybe I'm missing a gene or something, it's possible. But my honest opinion is, I think it's all fraud.

Anybody who wants to be President, you should right away say, "I don't want to hear that guy any more." You should say, "I don't want to listen to that person any more." Anybody who wants to become your leader, you should say, "I don't want to follow." That's like a rule of thumb which almost never fails.

People should not be asking me or anyone else where to turn for an accurate picture of things: they should be asking themselves that. So someone can ask me what reflects my interpretation of the way things are, and I can tell them where they can get material that looks at the world the way I think it ought to be looked at - but then they have to decide whether or not that's accurate. Ultimately it's your own mind that has to be the arbiter: you've got to rely on your own common sense and intelligence, you can't rely on anyone else for the truth.

I think the smartest thing to do is to read everything you read - and that includes what I write, I would always tell people this - skeptically. And in fact, an honest writer will try to make it clear what his or her biases are and where the work is starting from, so that then readers can compensate - they can say, "This person's coming from over here, and that's the way she's looking at the world, now I can correct for what may well be her bias; I can decide for myself whether what she's telling me is accurate, because at least she's making her premises clear." And people should do that. You should start by being very skeptical about anything that comes to you from any sort of power system - and about everything else too. You should be skeptical about what I tell you - why should you believe a word of it? I got my own ax to grind. So figure it out for yourself.

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## Jack says

Having only read Chomsky in snippets here and there, I thought this book was a broad, accessible introduction to Chomsky's thoughts on the issues for which he is best known in pop culture (those relating to politics and power). Regardless of what one ultimately thinks of Chomsky's opinions (and he reiterates constantly that his intent is to provoke discussion, not to provide all the answers), the man is at least important to understand for modern democratic citizens. His knowledge of global current events (political, social, economic, military) is prolific and unparalleled, and his analyses of these phenomena are valuably thought-provoking. Chomsky does tend, in my opinion, to err on the side of the conspiratorial at times; though he constantly claims to be simply describing "how things work" in government, he often imputes nefarious motives and disingenuity to individuals and institutions without giving any consideration to their actual guiding principles. Chomsky (perhaps unintentionally, and I think to his detriment) creates an air of lofty malevolence around institutions and arrangements of power, thus alienating the reader from such groups and arrangements. Political change requires an intimate understanding of one's opposition, and the dark picture Chomsky paints is, though sometimes accurate from a certain moral democratic standpoint, ultimately obscuring of the powers-that-be.

That said, it was an extremely informative read, written in an entertaining and engaging conversational style. Chomsky's thoughts on the media are the transcendently valuable core of the book, and his thoughts on global politics and power are original and merit careful consideration. If Chomsky aims to provoke critical thought and discussion, then he achieves his aim here.

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## Kaelan (Κ??λαν) says

### \*\*\*\*\* The Future Of History \*\*\*\*\*

I believe this to be the ultimate way to understand and experience Chomsky's work. It strikes the perfect balance. For those who find his lectures / talks too dry and dull, yet struggle with his written work due to its academic nature, this provides an excellent compromise. By transcribing many conversations the Professor has had over the years, we as readers are able to read - in a relatively informal language - dozens of topics discussed by the man.

My attention never wavered at any time reading the 401 pages of this book, and despite having listened to the Professor talk on YouTube many times (and once in person) I still came away having learned an incredible amount about the world we inhabit. What's more, despite the fact that the transcriptions in this text are between the 80's and 90's and no further, this could easily read as if it were printed today. Chomsky's predictions of the future and mastery of knowledge about the past are uncanny (and slightly scary if im being honest), and make for an engrossing page turner.

I hope, fellow book lovers, that even if you haven't heard of Chomsky before, you pick this up (or other more recent transcripts like *Who Rules The World* or *Global Discontents*) and really give it a go. Once you've opened your eyes to how our societies function, you'll really struggle to close them again.

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## Eric says

I'm always afraid of reading political things (A) because I'm scared of it being completely over my head and

(B) because I'm aware that I have a tendency to uncritically accept what people say [which makes for a lot of fun if you read different points of views because everything everybody says (even the contradictory stuff) sounds 100% right:].

This book was very conversational (partly due to format, transcribed Q&A sessions and I imagine partly due to Chomsky's dislike of the idea of an 'intellectual' class apart from common folks), so it didn't run into the over my head problem.

Good interesting stuff, very grounded (it seems), very sane. This is extremely different from the sort of attitudes I got from socially conscious types I met at University. I'd always reacted a bit badly to them (while largely agreeing) because it felt like they were attacking Big Evil Names (I dunno, the IMF is EVIL or something) without putting things into perspective, seeing the big picture etc. Now it turns out that they were most likely the ones who knew what they were talking about and I was the ignorant one, but [and forgive me for committing this sin of stupid debating:] there was always something about their /tone/ that rubbed me the wrong way, something kind of well-meaning-but-stupid. Anyway point is that this sort of tone is totally absent from the book. Well-meaning-and-tremendously-well-informed (and now makes me feel a bit guilty for my negative reaction to the dreadlocked vegans of my past).

I particularly like the idea that it's not so much that certain individuals or organisations are evil, but about institutions that reinforce/encourage/perpetuate evil behaviours (eg. CEO of BP is probably a perfectly nice chap, but...). It's also a bit uncomfortable to see how clueless I am about the kind of stuff that goes on in the world. Oh well.

It'd be nice to see what happens when smart right wing friends read this.

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## **Robb Seaton says**

Look, you don't need to read this book. Here's how Chomsky works:

1. Identify an authority.
2. Is it necessary? If not, dismantle it.

How do you identify an authority? Watch when someone gets fired, put in prison, forced to resign, etc. What aren't you allowed to say or do? What happens when you push something too far?

Now, I'm partial to this algorithm, but it's not at all obvious that it's a good idea, for all the same reasons that it's not obvious that it's a good idea to eradicate an unnecessary animal.

Plus, the book is decidedly useless when it comes to, you know, understanding power. "Because they're evil" is not analysis, and I wasn't at all impressed with Chomsky's scholarship, unlike many other reviewers. Chomsky draws almost no connections between his own narrative and work in other disciplines. Economists, he says, are brainwashed, so why listen to them? Very convenient.

If you're on the left and want to listen to someone agree with you, sure, then read this. Or if you're interested in the history of activism, read it -- that's essentially what Chomsky is, a historian specializing in activism. Otherwise, I'd recommend just watching the movie \*Manufacturing Consent\*.

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## Zach Cohen says

This is the best single source of Chomsky's work I've come across. A triumph of editing, this book is made up of excerpts of talks Chomsky gave throughout the 80s and 90s. Loosely organized by topic, the book is highly flowing and readable. It includes an encyclopedic reference section available online that is longer than the main text of the book. This is where I recommend anyone not familiar with Chomsky's work to begin; it's the most comprehensive and accessible compilation of his thoughts. Many of the discussions quoted within were in question and answer format. The audience participation is included in the text. Many of the audience questions are obvious questions anyone unfamiliar with the subject matter would have, and the opportunity to read Chomsky's detailed responses to a huge range of questions offers much deeper understanding than simply reading one of his books by yourself.

Understanding Power is a glimpse into the mind of one of the most brilliant, profound, and insightful social critics of our time. He touches on virtually every influential issue in US history, and readers are bound to walk away with a much deeper appreciation for how power functions in society, and how divergent American standard explanations of the world are from reality.

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## Thomas says

If you haven't read Chomsky, this is a good place to start. It's a well-edited collection of Chomsky's talks, so it's rather wide-ranging, but it always circles back to the same themes so it doesn't seem scattered. I started this a few days after the presidential election, hoping it could help me with the universal question: "What the Fuck?" It did, sort of. Take this, for example:

*I think that the United States has been in kind of a pre-fascist mood for years -- and we've been very lucky that every leader who's come along has been a crook. See, people should always be very much in favor of corruption -- I'm not kidding about that. Corruption's a very good thing, because it undermines power. I mean, if we get some Jim Bakker coming along -- you know, this preacher who was caught sleeping with everybody and defrauding his followers -- those guys are fine: all they want is money and sex and ripping people off, so they're never going to cause much trouble. Or take Nixon, say: an obvious crook, he's ultimately not going to cause that much of a problem. But if somebody shows up who's kind of a Hitler-type -- just wants power, no corruption, straight, makes it all sound appealing, and says, "We want power" -- well, then we'll all be in very bad trouble.*

Yay for corruption! The pieces in this book are a little bit out of date, but let's hope that Noam is right, on this count at least. We're about to find out.

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## BeeQuiet says

I have strong feelings moving in both ways on this book, as whilst Chomsky does make very good points on multiple issues, his attempts at modesty occasionally fall flat as it becomes apparent that he thinks he understands the whole world order more than he does. I do feel that his analysis of the media is by and large correct - if one is funded by advertisers, those advertisers must be pleased and they will not be pleased if you run the wrong messages. I know plenty of people who simply swallow assumed 'common sense' knowledge without questioning it and this is in part indoctrination. As Chomsky notes, governments have in the past been relatively open about the need for propaganda to keep the public doing what they should and keep them

from interfering in politics.

I do not believe Chomsky is the be all and end all - he over-generalises and he writes off some theorists as being ridiculous because they are not directly useful for campaigning, whilst showing in a similar example that the 'hard sciences' work in the same way entirely with his support. This is just one example, but my overall view is that anyone who follows the 'bible of Chomsky' without critically engaging and coming up with their own version has made a big mistake. But then that is something on which both Chomsky and I would wholeheartedly agree upon.

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### **Evelyn says**

An eye-opening book which is accessible for almost everyone to read without too much trouble and a great introduction to many topics surrounding the politics of Power. Packed within these 400 pages, Chomsky discusses US foreign policy & US politics in general, Israel, Palestine & the Middle East, histories of labour and social movements, propaganda techniques of the mainstream media, the military-industrial complex and the UN to name just a few. He also talks about activism and the need for people to get together and mobilize for change (I found Chapter 6 especially interesting for this). Chomsky doesn't offer answers to the difficult questions, only suggestions as it's up to people to decide what they want for themselves and their futures - no-one should ever make those decisions for you, and I really admired that.

I would recommend this to anyone who wants to find out what's really going on in the world and why.

P.S The extensive footnotes that are online which accompany the book are also incredibly useful and thorough.

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### **waitsforsleep says**

Literally changes your world view. I've seen a lot of people mention how they became disillusioned at mainstream media and even stopped following politics and news in general because this book showed them how hopeless the status quo is. But I arrived at the exact opposite conclusion. Chomsky reads between the lines, and breaks down events in a lucid and satisfying way. You need not give up on news altogether, just need to learn how to process it. 10/10 highly recommended for anyone

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### **Tara says**

*Understanding Power* is quite brilliant. Chomsky is a damn intelligent and refreshingly frank human being; I simply can't recommend this enough.

Here are some of the choicest points Mr. Chomsky made:

"Look, every government has a need to frighten its population, and one way of doing that is to shroud its workings in mystery. The idea that a government has to be shrouded in mystery is something that goes back to Herodotus [ancient Greek historian]. You read Herodotus, and he describes how the Medes and others won their freedom by struggle, and then they lost their freedom when the institution of royalty was invented to create a cloak of mystery around power. See, the idea behind royalty was that there's this other species of

individuals who are beyond the norm and who the people are not supposed understand. That's the standard way you cloak and protect power: you make it look mysterious and secret, above the ordinary person—otherwise why should anyone accept it? Well, they're willing to accept it out of fear that some great enemies are about to destroy them, and because of that they'll cede their authority to the Lord, or the King, or the President or something, just to protect themselves. That's the way governments work—that's the way any system of power works—and the secrecy system is part of it."

"Remember that the media have two basic functions. One is to indoctrinate the elites, to make sure they have the right ideas and know how to serve power. In fact, typically the elites are the most indoctrinated segment of a society, because they are the ones who are exposed to the most propaganda and actually take part in the decision-making process. For them you have the New York Times, and the Washington Post, and the Wall Street Journal, and so on. But there's also a mass media, whose main function is just to get rid of the rest of the population—to marginalize and eliminate them, so they don't interfere with decision-making. And the press that's designed for that purpose isn't the New York Times and the Washington Post, it's sitcoms on television, and the National Enquirer, and sex and violence, and babies with three heads, and football, all that kind of stuff."

"...the qualifications that I have to speak on world affairs are exactly the same ones Henry Kissinger has, and Walt Rostow has, or anybody in the Political Science Department, professional historians—none, none that you don't have. The only difference is, I don't pretend to have qualifications, nor do I pretend that qualifications are needed. I mean, if somebody were to ask me to give a talk on quantum physics, I'd refuse—because I don't understand enough. But world affairs are trivial: there's nothing in the social sciences or history or whatever that is beyond the intellectual capacities of an ordinary fifteen-year-old. You have to do a little work, you have to do some reading, you have to be able to think but there's nothing deep—if there are any theories around that require some special kind of training to understand, then they've been kept a carefully guarded secret.

In fact, I think the idea that you're supposed to have special qualifications to talk about world affairs is just another scam—it's kind of like Leninism [position that socialist revolution should be led by a 'vanguard' party]: it's just another technique for making the population feel that they don't know anything, and they'd better just stay out of it and let us smart guys run it. In order to do that, what you pretend is that there's some esoteric discipline, and you've got to have some letters after your name before you can say anything about it. The fact is, that's a joke."

"Look, part of the whole technique of disempowering people is to make sure that the real agents of change fall out of history, and are never recognized in the culture for what they are. So it's necessary to distort history and make it look as if Great Men did everything—that's part of how you teach people they can't do anything, they're helpless, they just have to wait for some Great Man to come along and do it for them."

"The job of mainstream intellectuals is to serve as a kind of secular priesthood, to ensure that the doctrinal faith is maintained. So if you go back to a period when the Church was dominant, the priesthood did it: they were the ones who watched out for heresy and went after it. And as societies became more secular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the same controls were needed: the institutions still had to defend themselves, after all, and if they couldn't do it by burning people at the stake or sending them to inquisitions anymore, they had to find other ways. Well, over time that responsibility was transferred to the intellectual class—to be the guardians of the sacred political truths, hatchet-men of one sort or another."

"So Marxism, Freudianism: any one of these things I think is an irrational cult. They're theology, so they're whatever you think of theology; I don't think much of it. In fact, in my view that's exactly the right analogy: notions like Marxism and Freudianism belong to the history of organized religion."

"What's valued here is the ability to work on an assembly line, even if it's an intellectual assembly line. The important thing is to be able to obey orders, and to do what you're told, and to be where you're supposed to

be. The values are, you're going to be a factory worker somewhere – maybe they'll call it a university – but you're going to be following somebody else's orders, and just doing your work in some prescribed way. And what matters is discipline, not figuring things out for yourself, or understanding things that interest you – those are kind of marginal: just make sure you meet the requirements of the factory.”

“Incidentally, part of the genius of this aspect of the higher education system is that it can get people to sell out even while they think they're doing exactly the right thing. So some young person going into academia will say to themselves, 'Look, I'm going to be a real radical here'—and you can be, as long as you adapt yourself to these categories which guarantee that you'll never ask the right questions, and that you'll never even look at the right questions. But you don't feel like you're selling out, you're not saying, 'I'm working for the ruling class' or anything like that—you're not, you're being a Marxist economist or something. But the effect is, they've totally neutralized you.”

“Look, the ways in which issues are framed for us in the media and in the mainstream culture typically involve so many assumptions and presuppositions that you're kind of trapped as soon as you get into a discussion of them—you're trapped in a discussion you don't want to be in. And I think you have to start by taking apart the assumptions.”

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