

# SAM HARRIS

## THE BLOG

### The Limits of Discourse

As Demonstrated by Sam Harris and Noam Chomsky

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*(Photo via [Axel Naud](#))*

For decades, Noam Chomsky has been one of the most prominent critics of U.S. foreign policy, and the further left one travels along the political spectrum, the more one feels his influence. Although I agree with much of what Chomsky has said about the misuses of state power, I have long maintained that his political views, where the threat of global jihadism is

concerned, produce dangerous delusions. In response, I have been much criticized by those who believe that I haven't given the great man his due.

Last week, I did my best to engineer a public conversation with Chomsky about the ethics of war, terrorism, state surveillance, and related topics. As readers of the following email exchange will discover, I failed. I've decided to publish this private correspondence, with Chomsky's permission, as a cautionary tale. Clearly, he and I have drawn different lessons from what was, unfortunately, an unpleasant and fruitless encounter. I will let readers draw lessons of their own.

—SH

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**April 26, 2015?**

**From: Sam Harris**

**To: Noam Chomsky?**

Noam —??I reached out to you indirectly through Lawrence Krauss and Johann Hari and was planning to leave it at that, but a reader has now sent me a copy of an email exchange in which you were quite dismissive of the prospect of having a “debate” with me. So I just wanted to clarify that, although I think we might disagree substantially about a few things, I am far more interested in exploring these disagreements, and clarifying any misunderstandings, than in having a conventional debate. ??

If you'd rather not have a public conversation with me, that's fine. I can only say that we have many, many readers in common who would like to see us attempt to find some common ground. The fact that you have called me “a religious fanatic” who “worships the religion of the state” makes me think that there are a few misconceptions I could clear up. And many readers insist that I am similarly off-the-mark where your views are concerned.

In any case, my offer stands, if you change your mind.??

Best,?

Sam

**April 26, 2015?**

**From: Noam Chomsky**

**To: Sam Harris**

Perhaps I have some misconceptions about you. Most of what I've read of yours is material that has been sent to me about my alleged views, which is completely false. I don't see any point in a public debate about misreadings. If there are things you'd like to explore privately, fine. But with sources.

**April 26, 2015?**

**From: Sam Harris**

**To: Noam Chomsky**

Noam —

Thanks for getting back.

Before engaging on this topic, I'd like to encourage you to approach this exchange as though we were planning to publish it. As edifying as it might be to have you correct my misreading of you in private—it would be far better if you did this publicly. It's not a matter of having a "debate about misreadings"; it's a matter of allowing our readers to see that conversation on difficult and polarizing topics can occasionally fulfill its ostensible purpose. If I have misread you, and you can show me where I've gone wrong, I would want my readers to see my views change in real time. It would be far less desirable for me to simply report that you and I clarified a few things privately, and that I have now changed my mind about X, Y, and Z.

Beyond correcting our misreadings, I think we could have a very interesting conversation about the ethical issues surrounding war, terrorism, the surveillance state, and so forth. I'd be happy to do this entirely by email, or we could speak on the phone and have the audio transcribed. In either case, you would be free to edit and refine your contributions prior to publication. My only request would be that you not go back and make such sweeping changes that I would have to totally revise my side of things.

While you're thinking about that, I'd like to draw your attention to the only thing I have ever written about your work. The following passages appear in my first book, *The End of Faith* (2004), which was written in response to the events of 9/11. Needless to say, the whole discussion betrays the urgency of that period as well as many of the failings of a first book. I hesitate to put it forward here, if for no other reason than that the tone is not one that I would have ever adopted in a direct exchange with you. Nevertheless, if I've misrepresented your views in writing, this is the only place it could have happened. If we're going to clarify misreadings, this would seem like a good place to start.

Best,

Sam

***Leftist Unreason and the Strange Case of Noam Chomsky***

Nevertheless, many people are now convinced that the attacks of September 11 say little about Islam and much about the sordid career of the West—in particular, about the failures of U.S. foreign policy. The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard gives these themes an especially luxuriant expression, declaring that terrorism is a necessary consequence of American "hegemony." He goes so far as to suggest that we were secretly hoping that such devastation would be visited upon us:

At a pinch we can say that they *did it*, but we *wished for it*. . . . When global power monopolizes the situation to this extent, when there is such a formidable condensation of all functions in the technocratic machinery, and when no alternative form of thinking is allowed, what other way is there but a *terroristic situational transfer*. It was the system itself which created the objective conditions for this brutal retaliation. . . . This is terror against terror—there is no longer any ideology behind it. We are far beyond ideology and politics now. . . . As if the power bearing these towers suddenly lost all energy, all resilience; as though that arrogant power suddenly gave way under the pressure of too intense an effort: the effort always to be the unique world model.<sup>40</sup>

If one were feeling charitable, one might assume that something essential to these profundities got lost in translation. I think it far more likely, however, that it did not survive translation into *French*. If Baudrillard had been obliged to live in Afghanistan under the Taliban, would he have thought that the horrible abridgments of his freedom were a matter of the United States's "effort always to be the unique world model"? Would the peculiar halftime entertainment at every soccer match—where suspected fornicators, adulterers, and thieves were regularly butchered in the dirt at centerfield—have struck him as the first rumblings of a "terroristic situational transfer"? We may be beyond politics, but we are not in the least "beyond ideology" now. Ideology is all that our enemies have.<sup>41</sup>

And yet, thinkers far more sober than Baudrillard view the events of September 11 as a consequence of American foreign policy. Perhaps the foremost among them is Noam Chomsky. In addition to making foundational contributions to linguistics and the psychology of language, Chomsky has been a persistent critic of U.S. foreign policy for over three decades. He has also managed to demonstrate a principal failing of the liberal critique of power. He appears to be an exquisitely moral man whose political views prevent him from making the most basic moral distinctions—between types of violence, and the variety of human purposes that give rise to them.

In his book *9-11*, with rubble of the World Trade Center still piled high and smoldering, Chomsky urged us not to forget that "the U.S. itself is a leading terrorist state." In support of this claim he catalogs a number of American misdeeds, including the sanctions that the United States imposed upon Iraq, which led to the death of "maybe half a million children," and the 1998 bombing of the Al-Shifa pharmaceuticals plant in Sudan, which may have set the stage for tens of thousands of innocent Sudanese to die of tuberculosis, malaria, and other treatable diseases. Chomsky does not hesitate to draw moral equivalences here: "For the first time in modern history, Europe and its offshoots were subjected, on home soil, to the kind of atrocity that they routinely have carried out elsewhere."<sup>42</sup>

Before pointing out just how wayward Chomsky's thinking is on this subject, I would like to concede many of his points, since they have the virtue of being both generally important and irrelevant to the matter at hand. There is no doubt that the United States has much to atone for, both domestically and abroad. In this respect, we can more or less swallow Chomsky's thesis whole. To produce this horrible confection at home, start with our genocidal treatment of the Native Americans, add a couple hundred years of slavery, along with our denial of entry to Jewish refugees fleeing the death camps of the Third Reich, stir in our collusion with a long list of modern despots and our subsequent disregard for their appalling human rights records, add our bombing of Cambodia and the Pentagon Papers to taste, and then top with our recent refusals to sign the Kyoto protocol for greenhouse emissions, to support any ban on land mines, and to submit ourselves to the rulings of the

International Criminal Court. The result should smell of death, hypocrisy, and fresh brimstone.

We have surely done some terrible things in the past. Undoubtedly, we are poised to do terrible things in the future. Nothing I have written in this book should be construed as a denial of these facts, or as defense of state practices that are manifestly abhorrent. There may be much that Western powers, and the United States in particular, should pay reparations for. And our failure to acknowledge our misdeeds over the years has undermined our credibility in the international community. We can concede all of this, and even share Chomsky's acute sense of outrage, while recognizing that his analysis of our current situation in the world is a masterpiece of moral blindness.

Take the bombing of the Al-Shifa pharmaceuticals plant: according to Chomsky, the atrocity of September 11 pales in comparison with that perpetrated by the Clinton administration in August 1998. But let us now ask some very basic questions that Chomsky seems to have neglected to ask himself: What did the U.S. government think it was doing when it sent cruise missiles into Sudan? Destroying a chemical weapons site used by Al Qaeda. Did the Clinton administration *intend* to bring about the deaths of thousands of Sudanese children? No. Was our goal to kill as many Sudanese as we could? No. Were we trying to kill anyone at all? Not unless we thought members of Al Qaeda would be at the Al-Shifa facility in the middle of the night. Asking these questions about Osama bin Laden and the nineteen hijackers puts us in a different moral universe entirely.

If we are inclined to follow Chomsky down the path of moral equivalence and ignore the role of human intentions, we can forget about the bombing of the Al-Shifa plant, because many of the things we did *not* do in Sudan had even greater consequences. What about all the money and food we simply never thought to give the Sudanese prior to 1998? How many children did we kill (that is, *not save*) just by living in blissful ignorance of the conditions in Sudan? Surely if we had all made it a priority to keep death out of Sudan for as long as possible, untold millions could have been saved from whatever it was that wound up killing them. We could have sent teams of well-intentioned men and women into Khartoum to ensure that the Sudanese wore their seatbelts. Are we culpable for all the preventable injury and death that we did nothing to prevent? We may be, up to a point. The philosopher Peter Unger has made a persuasive case that a single dollar spent on anything but the absolute essentials of our survival is a dollar that has some starving child's blood on it.<sup>43</sup> Perhaps we do have far more moral responsibility for the state of the world than most of us seem ready to contemplate. This is not Chomsky's argument, however.

Arundhati Roy, a great admirer of Chomsky, has summed up his position very well:

[T]he U.S. government refuses to judge itself by the same moral standards by which it judges others. . . . Its technique is to position itself as the well-intentioned giant whose good deeds are confounded in strange countries by their scheming natives, whose markets it's trying to free, whose societies it's trying to modernize, whose women it's trying to liberate, whose souls it's trying to save. . . . [T]he U.S. government has conferred upon itself the right and freedom to murder and exterminate people "for their own good."<sup>44</sup>

But we are, in many respects, just such a "well-intentioned giant." And it is rather astonishing that intelligent people, like Chomsky and Roy, fail to see this. What we need to counter their arguments is a device that enables us to distinguish the

morality of men like Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein from that of George Bush and Tony Blair. It is not hard to imagine the properties of such a tool. We can call it “the perfect weapon.”

### *Perfect Weapons and the Ethics of “Collateral Damage”*

What we euphemistically describe as “collateral damage” in times of war is the direct result of limitations in the power and precision of our technology. To see that this is so, we need only imagine how any of our recent conflicts would have looked if we had possessed *perfect* weapons—weapons that allowed us either to temporarily impair or to kill a particular person, or group, at any distance, without harming others or their property. What would we do with such technology? Pacifists would refuse to use it, despite the variety of monsters currently loose in the world: the killers and torturers of children, the genocidal sadists, the men who, for want of the right genes, the right upbringing, or the right ideas, cannot possibly be expected to live peacefully with the rest of us. I will say a few things about pacifism in a later chapter—for it seems to me to be a deeply immoral position that comes to us swaddled in the dogma of highest moralism—but most of us are not pacifists. Most of us would elect to use weapons of this sort. A moment’s thought reveals that a person’s use of such a weapon would offer a perfect window onto the soul of his ethics.

Consider the all too facile comparisons that have recently been made between George Bush and Saddam Hussein (or Osama bin Laden, or Hitler, etc.)—in the pages of writers like Roy and Chomsky, in the Arab press, and in classrooms throughout the free world. How would George Bush have prosecuted the recent war in Iraq with perfect weapons? Would he have targeted the thousands of Iraqi civilians who were maimed or killed by our bombs? Would he have put out the eyes of little girls or torn the arms from their mothers? Whether or not you admire the man’s politics—or the man—there is no reason to think that he would have sanctioned the injury or death of even a single innocent person. What would Saddam Hussein or Osama bin Laden do with perfect weapons? What would Hitler have done? They would have used them rather differently.

It is time for us to admit that not all cultures are at the same stage of moral development. This is a radically impolitic thing to say, of course, but it seems as objectively true as saying that not all societies have equal material resources. We might even conceive of our moral differences in just these terms: not all societies have the same degree of *moral wealth*. Many things contribute to such an endowment. Political and economic stability, literacy, a modicum of social equality—where such things are lacking, people tend to find many compelling reasons to treat one another rather badly. Our recent history offers much evidence of our own development on these fronts, and a corresponding change in our morality. A visit to New York in the summer of 1863 would have found the streets ruled by roving gangs of thugs; blacks, where not owned outright by white slaveholders, were regularly lynched and burned. Is there any doubt that many New Yorkers of the nineteenth century were barbarians by our present standards? To say of another culture that it lags a hundred and fifty years behind our own in social development is a terrible criticism indeed, given how far we’ve come in that time. Now imagine the benighted Americans of 1863 coming to possess chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons. This is more or less the situation we confront in much of the developing world.

Consider the horrors that Americans perpetrated as recently as 1968, at My Lai:

Early in the morning the soldiers were landed in the village by helicopter. Many were firing as they spread out, killing both people and animals. There was no sign of the Vietcong battalion and no

shot was fired at Charlie Company all day, but they carried on. They burnt down every house. They raped women and girls and then killed them. They stabbed some women in the vagina and disemboweled others, or cut off their hands or scalps. Pregnant women had their stomachs slashed open and were left to die. There were gang rapes and killings by shooting or with bayonets. There were mass executions. Dozens of people at a time, including old men, women and children, were machine-gunned in a ditch. In four hours nearly 500 villagers were killed.<sup>45</sup>

This is about as bad as human beings are capable of behaving. But what distinguishes us from many of our enemies is that this indiscriminate violence appalls us. The massacre at My Lai is remembered as a signature moment of shame for the American military. Even at the time, U.S. soldiers were dumbstruck with horror by the behavior of their comrades. One helicopter pilot who arrived on the scene ordered his subordinates to use their machine guns against their own troops if they would not stop killing villagers.<sup>46</sup> As a culture, we have clearly outgrown our tolerance for the deliberate torture and murder of innocents. We would do well to realize that much of the world has not.

Wherever there are facts of any kind to be known, one thing is certain: not all people will discover them at the same time or understand them equally well. Conceding this leaves but a short step to hierarchical thinking of a sort that is at present inadmissible in most liberal discourse. Wherever there are right and wrong answers to important questions, there will be better or worse ways to get those answers, and better or worse ways to put them to use. Take child rearing as an example: How can we keep children free from disease? How can we raise them to be happy and responsible members of society? There are undoubtedly both good and bad answers to questions of this sort, and not all belief systems and cultural practices will be equally suited to bringing the good ones to light. This is not to say that there will always be only *one* right answer to every question, or a single, best way to reach every specific goal. But given the inescapable specificity of our world, the range of optimal solutions to any problem will generally be quite limited. While there might not be one best food to eat, we cannot eat stones—and any culture that would make stone eating a virtue, or a religious precept, will suffer mightily for want of nourishment (and teeth). It is inevitable, therefore, that some approaches to politics, economics, science, and even spirituality and ethics will be objectively better than their competitors (by any measure of “better” we might wish to adopt), and gradations here will translate into very real differences in human happiness.

Any systematic approach to ethics, or to understanding the necessary underpinnings of a civil society, will find many Muslims standing eye deep in the red barbarity of the fourteenth century. There are undoubtedly historical and cultural reasons for this, and enough blame to go around, but we should not ignore the fact that we must now confront whole societies whose moral and political development—in their treatment of women and children, in their prosecution of war, in their approach to criminal justice, and in their very intuitions about what constitutes cruelty—lags behind our own. This may seem like an unscientific and potentially racist thing to say, but it is neither. It is not in the least racist, since it is not at all likely that there are *biological* reasons for the disparities here, and it is unscientific only because science has not yet addressed the moral sphere in a systematic way. Come back in a hundred years, and if we haven’t returned to living in caves and killing one another with clubs, we will have some scientifically astute things to say about ethics. Any honest witness to current events will realize that there is no moral equivalence between the kind of force civilized democracies project in the world, warts and all, and the internecine violence that is perpetrated by Muslim militants, or indeed by Muslim governments. Chomsky seems to think that the disparity either does not exist or runs the other way.

Consider the recent conflict in Iraq: If the situation had been reversed, what are the chances that the Iraqi Republican Guard, attempting to execute a regime change on the Potomac, would have taken the same degree of care to minimize civilian casualties? What are the chances that Iraqi forces would have been deterred by our use of human shields? (What are the chances we would have *used* human shields?) What are the chances that a routed American government would have called for its citizens to volunteer to be suicide bombers? What are the chances that Iraqi soldiers would have wept upon killing a carload of American civilians at a checkpoint unnecessarily? You should have, in the ledger of your imagination, a mounting column of zeros.

Nothing in Chomsky's account acknowledges the difference between intending to kill a child, because of the effect you hope to produce on its parents (we call this "terrorism"), and inadvertently killing a child in an attempt to capture or kill an avowed child murderer (we call this "collateral damage"). In both cases a child has died, and in both cases it is a tragedy. But the ethical status of the perpetrators, be they individuals or states, could hardly be more distinct.

Chomsky might object that to knowingly place the life of a child in jeopardy is unacceptable in any case, but clearly this is not a principle we can follow. The makers of roller coasters know, for instance, that despite rigorous safety precautions, sometime, somewhere, a child will be killed by one of their contraptions. Makers of automobiles know this as well. So do makers of hockey sticks, baseball bats, plastic bags, swimming pools, chain-link fences, or nearly anything else that could conceivably contribute to the death of a child. There is a reason we do not refer to the inevitable deaths of children on our ski slopes as "skiing atrocities." But you would not know this from reading Chomsky. For him, intentions do not seem to matter. Body count is all.

We are now living in a world that can no longer tolerate well-armed, malevolent regimes. Without perfect weapons, collateral damage—the maiming and killing of innocent people—is unavoidable. Similar suffering will be imposed on still more innocent people because of our lack of perfect automobiles, airplanes, antibiotics, surgical procedures, and window glass. If we want to draw conclusions about ethics—as well as make predictions about what a given person or society will do in the future—we cannot ignore human intentions. Where ethics are concerned, intentions are everything.<sup>47</sup>

**April 26, 2015**

**From: Noam Chomsky**

**To: Sam Harris**

The example that you cite illustrates very well why I do not see any point in a public discussion.

Here's the passage to which you refer:

Or take the destruction of the Al-Shifa pharmaceutical plant in Sudan, one little footnote in the record of state terror, quickly forgotten. What would the reaction have been if the bin Laden network had blown up half the pharmaceutical supplies in the U.S. and the facilities for replenishing them? We can imagine, though the comparison is unfair, the consequences are vastly



more severe in Sudan. That aside, if the U.S. or Israel or England were to be the target of such an atrocity, what would the reaction be? In this case we say, “Oh, well, too bad, minor mistake, let’s go on to the next topic, let the victims rot.” Other people in the world don’t react like that. When bin Laden brings up that bombing, he strikes a resonant chord, even among those who despise and fear him; and the same, unfortunately, is true of much of the rest of his rhetoric.

Though it is merely a footnote, the Sudan case is nonetheless highly instructive. One interesting aspect is the reaction when someone dares to mention it. I have in the past, and did so again in response to queries from journalists shortly after 9-11 atrocities. I mentioned that the toll of the “horrendous crime” of 9-11, committed with “wickedness and awesome cruelty” (quoting Robert Fisk), may be comparable to the consequences of Clinton’s bombing of the Al-Shifa plant in August 1998. That plausible conclusion elicited an extraordinary reaction, filling many web sites and journals with feverish and fanciful condemnations, which I’ll ignore. The only important aspect is that single sentence—which, on a closer look, appears to be an understatement—was regarded by some commentators as utterly scandalous. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that at some deep level, however they may deny it to themselves, they regard our crimes against the weak to be as normal as the air we breathe. Our crimes, for which we are responsible: as taxpayers, for failing to provide massive reparations, for granting refuge and immunity to the perpetrators, and for allowing the terrible facts to be sunk deep in the memory hole. All of this is of great significance, as it has been in the past.

It goes on to review the only evidence available—we do not investigate our crimes, indeed bar investigation of them—which is from quite credible sources, estimating that casualties might well have been in the tens of thousands.

Your response is interesting both for what it does not say and what it does say. What it does not do is answer the question raised: “What would the reaction have been if the bin Laden network had blown up half the pharmaceutical supplies in the U.S. and the facilities for replenishing them? We can imagine, though the comparison is unfair, the consequences are vastly more severe in Sudan. That aside, if the U.S. or Israel or England were to be the target of such an atrocity, what would the reaction be?”

Anyone who cites this passage has the minimal responsibility to give their reactions. Failure to do so speaks volumes.

Let’s turn to what you did say—a disquisition on “moral equivalence.” You fail to mention, though, that I did not suggest that they were “morally equivalent” and in fact indicated quite the opposite. I did not describe the Al-Shifa bombing as a “horrendous crime” committed with “wickedness and awesome cruelty.” Rather, I pointed out that the toll might be comparable, which turns out on inquiry (which is not undertaken here, and which apologists for our crimes ignore), turns out to be, quite likely, a serious understatement.

You also ignored the fact that I had already responded to your claim about lack of intention—which, frankly, I find quite shocking on elementary moral grounds, as I suspect you would too if you were to respond to the question raised at the beginning of my quoted comment. Hence it is simply false to assert that your “basic question” is one that “Chomsky seems

to have neglected to ask himself.” Quite the contrary, I asked myself right away, and responded, appropriately I believe, to your subsequent charges. The following is from *Radical Priorities*, 2003.

Most commentary on the Sudan bombing keeps to the question of whether the plant was believed to produce chemical weapons; true or false, that has no bearing on “the magnitude with which the aggression interfered with key values in the society attacked,” such as survival. Others point out that the killings were unintended, as are many of the atrocities we rightly denounce. In this case, we can hardly doubt that the likely human consequences were understood by US planners. The acts can be excused, then, only on the Hegelian assumption that Africans are “mere things,” whose lives have “no value,” an attitude that accords with practice in ways that are not overlooked among the victims, who may draw their own conclusions about the “moral orthodoxy of the West.”

Perhaps you can reciprocate by referring me to what I have written citing your published views. If there is anything I’ve written that is remotely as erroneous as this—putting aside moral judgments—I’ll be happy to correct it.

**April 27, 2015**

**From: Sam Harris**

**To: Noam Chomsky?**

Noam —

We appear to be running into the weeds here. Let me just make two observations, before I recommend a fresh start:

1. I have not read *Radical Priorities*. I treated your short book, *9/11*, as a self-contained statement on the topic. I do not think it was unethical or irresponsible of me to do so.
2. It still seems to me that everything you have written here ignores the moral significance of intention.

I am happy to answer your question. What would I say about al-Qaeda (or any other group) if it destroyed half the pharmaceutical supplies in the U.S.? It would depend on what they intended to do. Consider the following possibilities:

1. Imagine that al-Qaeda is filled, not with God-intoxicated sociopaths intent upon creating a global caliphate, but genuine humanitarians. Based on their research, they believe that a deadly batch of vaccine has made it into the U.S. pharmaceutical supply. They have communicated their concerns to the FDA but were rebuffed. Acting rashly, with the intention of saving millions of lives, they unleash a computer virus, targeted to impede the release of this deadly vaccine. As it turns out, they are right about the vaccine but wrong about the consequences of their meddling—and they wind up destroying half the pharmaceuticals in the U.S.

What would I say? I would say that this was a very unfortunate event—but these are people we want on our team. I would find the FDA highly culpable for not having effectively communicated with them. These people are our friends, and we were all very unlucky.

2. al-Qaeda is precisely as terrible a group as it is, and it destroys our pharmaceuticals intentionally, for the purpose of harming millions of innocent people.

What would I say? We should imprison or kill these people at the first opportunity.

While the body count might be the same, these are totally different scenarios. Ethically speaking, intention is (nearly) the whole story. The difference between intending to harm someone and *accidentally* harming them is enormous—if for no other reason than that the presence of harmful intent tells us a lot about what a person or group is likely to do in the future.

Do you agree? Your remarks thus far leave me unsure.

Sam

**April 27, 2015**

**From: Noam Chomsky**

**To: Sam Harris**

I don't circulate private correspondence without authorization, but I am glad to authorize you to send this correspondence to Krauss and Hari, who you mention.

I am sorry you are unwilling to retract your false claim that I “ignore the moral significance of intentions.” Of course I did, as you know. Also, I gave the appropriate answer, which applies accurately to you in the al-Shifa case, the very case in question.

If you had read further before launching your accusations, the usual procedure in work intended to be serious, you would have discovered that I also reviewed the substantial evidence about the very sincere intentions of Japanese fascists while they were devastating China, Hitler in the Sudetenland and Poland, etc. There is at least as much reason to suppose that they were sincere as Clinton was when he bombed al-Shifa. Much more so in fact. Therefore, if you believe what you are saying, you should be justifying their actions as well. I also reviewed other cases, pointing out that professing benign intentions is the norm for those who carry out atrocities and crimes, perhaps sincerely – and surely more plausibly than in this case. And that only the most abject apologists justify the actions on the grounds that perpetrators are adopting the normal stance of criminals.

I am also sorry that you evade the fact that your charge of “moral equivalence” was flatly false, as you know.

And in particular, I am sorry to see your total refusal to respond to the question raised at the outset of the piece you quoted. The scenario you describe here is, I'm afraid, so ludicrous as to be embarrassing. It hasn't even the remotest relation to Clinton's decision to bomb al-Shifa – not because they had suddenly discovered anything remotely like what you fantasize here, or for that matter any credible evidence at all, and by sheer coincidence, immediately after the Embassy bombings for which it was retaliation, as widely acknowledged. That is truly scandalous.

And of course they knew that there would be major casualties. They are not imbeciles, but rather adopt a stance that is arguably even more immoral than purposeful killing, which at least recognizes the human status of the victims, not just killing ants while walking down the street, who cares?

In fact, as you would know if you deigned to read before launching accusations, they were informed at once by Kenneth Roth of HRW about the impending humanitarian catastrophe, already underway. And of course they had far more information available than HRW did.

Your own moral stance is revealed even further by your complete lack of concern about the apparently huge casualties and the refusal even to investigate them.

As for Clinton and associates being “genuine humanitarians,” perhaps that explains why they were imposing sanctions on Iraq so murderous that both of the highly respected international diplomats who administered the “Oil for food” program resigned in protest because they regarded them as “genocidal,” condemning Clinton for blocking testimony at the UN Security Council. Or why he poured arms into Turkey as it was carrying out a horrendous attack on its Kurdish population, one of the worst crimes of the '90s. Or why he shifted Turkey from leading recipient of arms worldwide (Israel-Egypt excepted) to Colombia, as soon as the Turkish atrocities achieved their goal and while Colombia was leading the hemisphere by far in atrocious human rights violations. Or why he authorized the Texaco Oil Company to provide oil to the murderous Haitian junta in violation of sanctions. And on, and on, as you could learn if you bothered to read before launching accusations and professing to talk about “ethics” and “morality.”

I've seen apologetics for atrocities before, but rarely at this level – not to speak of the refusal to withdraw false charges, a minor fault in comparison.

Since you profess to be concerned about “God-intoxicated sociopaths,” perhaps you can refer me to your condemnation of the perpetrator of by far the worst crime of this millennium because God had instructed him that he must smite the enemy.

No point wasting time on your unwillingness to respond to my request that you “reciprocate by referring me to what I have written citing your published views. If there is anything I've written that is remotely as erroneous as this – putting aside moral judgments – I'll be happy to correct it.”

Plainly there is no point pretending to have a rational discussion. But I do think you would do your readers a favor if you presented your tale about why Clinton bombed al-Shifa and his grand humanitarianism. That is surely the least you can do, given your refusal to withdraw what you know to be completely false charges and a display of moral and ethical righteousness.

**April 27, 2015**

**From: Sam Harris ?**

**To: Noam Chomsky?**

Noam—

Unfortunately, you are now misreading both my “silences” and my statements—and I cannot help but feel that the peremptory and censorious attitude you have brought to what could, in fact, be a perfectly collegial exchange, is partly to blame. You appear to have begun this dialogue at (or very near) the end of your patience. If we were to publish it, I would strongly urge you to edit what you have already written, removing unfriendly flourishes such as “as you know”, “the usual procedure in work intended to be serious,” “ludicrous and embarrassing,” “total refusal,” etc. I trust that certain of your acolytes would love to see the master in high dudgeon—believing, as you seem to, that you are in the process of mopping the floor with me—but the truth is that your emotions are getting the better of you. I’d rather you not look like the dog who caught the car.

Despite your apparent powers of telepathy, I am not “evading” anything. The fact that I did not address every point raised in your last email is due to the fact that I remain confused about how you view the ethical significance of intentions—and I answered your central question in such a way as to clarify this point (I had hoped). I was not drawing an analogy between my contrived case of al-Qaeda being “great humanitarians” and the Clinton administration. The purpose of that example was to distinguish the ethical importance of intention (given the same body count) as clearly as possible. The case was not meant to be realistic (how would an “as you know” read here?).

On the topic of there being a “moral equivalence” between al-Shifa and 9/11, I’m afraid that what you have written is hard to understand. Despite your insistence that you drew no moral equivalence whatsoever between the two cases, you call Clinton’s actions an “atrocious” the consequences of which were “vastly more severe” than if the same had been done to the U.S., and you say that any comparison with the consequences of 9/11 is, if anything, “an understatement.” You then appear to be upbraiding me for not immediately detecting an important difference between a “horrendous crime” and an “atrocious.” Is there one? You are, of course, the famous linguist, but I believe that the editors of the OED will be nonplussed by this discovery. Perhaps you can just state it plainly: What is the moral difference between al-Shifa and 9/11?

Please don’t interpret my silence on any other matter as a sign of my unwillingness to discuss it further or to have my views changed by a proper collision with evidence and argument. You have raised many interesting historical and ethical points which I would sincerely like to explore (Hitler, Japan, and so forth). But I am reluctant to move forward before I understand how you view the significance of intention in cases where the difference between altruism (however inept), negligence, and malevolence is absolutely clear.

Sam

**April 27, 2015**

**From: Noam Chomsky**

**To: Sam Harris**

Your effort to respond to the question that you had avoided in your published article is, I'm afraid, indeed embarrassing and ludicrous. The question was about the al-Shifa bombing, and it won't do to evade it by concocting an outlandish tale that has no relation whatsoever to that situation. So you are still evading that question. It takes no telepathy to perceive that.

So let's face it directly. Clinton bombed al-Shifa in reaction to the Embassy bombings, having discovered no credible evidence in the brief interim of course, and knowing full well that there would be enormous casualties. Apologists may appeal to undetectable humanitarian intentions, but the fact is that the bombing was taken in exactly the way I described in the earlier publication which dealt the question of intentions in this case, the question that you claimed falsely that I ignored: to repeat, it just didn't matter if lots of people are killed in a poor African country, just as we don't care if we kill ants when we walk down the street. On moral grounds, that is arguably even worse than murder, which at least recognizes that the victim is human. That is exactly the situation. And we are left with your unwillingness to address the very clear question that opened the passage you cite is, instead offering evasions that are exactly as I described. And your unwillingness to address the crucial ethical question about intentions.

To adopt your terms, the matter of "altruism (however inept), negligence, and malevolence is absolutely clear" in the case of the al-Shifa bombing. There wasn't even a hint of altruism, inept or not, so we can dismiss that. There was clear negligence – the fate of probably tens of thousands of African victims did not matter. As to whether there is malevolence, that depends on the ethical question I raised, which you seem not to want to consider: to repeat, how do we rank murder (which treats the victim as a human) with quite consciously killing a great number of people, but not caring, because we treat them as we do ants when we walk down the street: the al-Shifa case?

And a further question. How do we regard citizens of the country that carried out this atrocity who seek to provide some justification in terms of clearly non-existent altruistic intentions.

As you know (apologies for the accuracy), I described 9/11 as a "horrendous crime" committed with "wickedness and awesome cruelty." In the case of al-Shifa, I said nothing of the sort. I described it as an atrocity, as it clearly is, and merely stated the unquestionable facts. There is no "moral equivalence," the term that has been regularly used, since Jeane Kirkpatrick, to try to undercut critical analysis of the state one defends.

As for intentions, there is nothing at all to say in general. There is a lot to say about specific cases, like the al-Shifa bombing, or Japanese fascists in China (who you should absolve, on your grounds, since there's every reason to suppose that their intention to bring an "earthly paradise" was quite real), and other cases I've discussed, including Hitler and high Stalinist officials. So your puzzlement about my attitude towards intentions generally is quite understandable. There can be no general answer. Accordingly, you give none. Nor do I.

I'm glad that you are interested in looking at the other cases I've discussed for 50 years, addressing exactly the question you claim I ignored. These cases shed great light on the ethical question of how to evaluate "benign intentions". As I've discussed for many years, in fact decades, benign intentions are virtually always professed, even by the worst monsters, and

hence carry no information, even in the technical sense of that term. That's quite independent of their "sincerity," however we determine that (pretty easy in the Japanese case, and the question doesn't even arise in the al-Shifa case).

We are left as we were. You made a series of accusations that were quite false, and are unwilling to withdraw them. You refuse to consider, let alone answer, the very simple and straightforward question posed in the passage you cited. And you still refuse to reciprocate as I have properly requested several times.

That means, clearly, that there is no basis for a rational public interchange.

I'll skip the rest.

**April 27, 2015**

**From: Sam Harris**

**To: Noam Chomsky?**

Well, let's chalk some of this up to the well-understood problem of email. I doubt that we would have achieved this level of cantankerousness in a face-to-face exchange.

To the point about my refusing to "reciprocate" by referring to places where you have written about me or my work: I'm unaware of your having done so. I have seen a video or two in which, when asked to comment about my views, or about the "new atheism" generally, you have said something disparaging. As I mention in my initial email, you have, on at least one occasion, referred to me as a "religious fanatic" who "worships the religion of the state." You may have been talking about both Christopher Hitchens and me, given the way the question was posed. The history is unimportant. It makes much more sense to deal with what we each say in this exchange.

Here is my assumption about the al-Shifa case. I assume that Clinton believed that it was, in fact, a chemical weapons factory—because I see no rational reason for him to have intentionally destroyed a pharmaceutical plant in retaliation for the embassy bombings. I take it that you consider this assumption terribly naive. Why so?

**April 27, 2015**

**From: Noam Chomsky**

**To: Sam Harris**

Easy to know why you're unaware of my having written about your work. I haven't done so. In contrast, you've written about my work, with crucial false accusations that you evidently have no interest in correcting. As to my "misconceptions" about you, I'm interested to see that there is no credible source.

Turning to the more important question of al-Shifa. Why so? For exactly the reasons I mentioned.

The bombing of al-Shifa was an immediate response to the Embassy bombings, which is why it is almost universally assumed to be retaliation. It is inconceivable that in that brief interim period evidence was found that it was a chemical weapons factory, and properly evaluated to justify a bombing. And of course no evidence was ever found. Plainly, if there had been evidence, the bombing would not have (just by accident) taken place immediately after the Embassy bombings (along with bombings in Afghanistan at the same time, also clearly retaliation).

There's no rational way to explain this except by assuming that he intentionally bombed what was known to be Sudan's major pharmaceutical plant, and of course he and his advisers knew that under severe sanctions, this poor African country could not replenish them – so it is a much worse crime than if al-Qaeda had done the same in the US, or Israel, or any other country where people matter.

I do not, again, claim that Clinton intentionally wanted to kill the thousands of victims. Rather, that was probably of no concern, raising the very serious ethical question that I have discussed, again repeatedly in this correspondence. And again, I have often discussed the ethical question about the significance of real or professed intentions, for about 50 years in fact, discussing real cases, where there are possible and meaningful answers. Something clearly worth doing, since the real ethical issues are interesting and important ones.

**April 27, 2015**

**From: Sam Harris**

**To: Noam Chomsky?**

Noam—

I am hard pressed to understand the uncharitable attitude—really bordering on contempt—conveyed by almost everything you have written thus far. What is it adding to the discussion? If you want some disinterested feedback, we might pass this exchange along to Lawrence and Johann, as you suggested below. I believe they will echo my concern and tell you that you are not doing yourself any favors here.

Your latest email is as strangely prickly as the others. If you haven't written about my work, why not just say so, rather than act like you've sprung a trap on me? I never assumed you *had* written about me. In fact, I assumed you hadn't. So what was the point of this “reciprocation” business?

And really, you're “interested to see that there is no credible source” for my claim that you have called me a religious fanatic who worships the religion of the state? Is your *own mouth* a credible source? Watch this video and behold yourself speaking the very words I attributed to you:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zt9QCAUPPeY>



I have a question that I would like you to ponder for at least 5 seconds before responding to this email: Is it possible for you to enter into a discussion on these topics with me in the spirit of genuine curiosity and goodwill?

Contrary to your repeated allegation, I have not “refused” to correct my “false accusations” about you. I’m still struggling to understand in what sense they *are* false. Your dismissal of an idealized thought experiment as “embarrassing and ludicrous,” and your insistence upon focusing on real-world cases about which our intelligence is murky is not helping to clarify things. With respect to al-Shifa, for instance, you draw some very confident (and, I suspect, unwarranted) inferences from the timing of events. (Is it really “inconceivable” that the government already believed it to be a chemical weapons factory?) Do I have to accept to all your assumptions in order to discuss the underlying ethics?

And your ethical position is still unclear (to me). You say that you are NOT claiming that “Clinton intentionally wanted to kill thousands of victims.” Okay. But you seem to be suggesting that he had every reason to expect that he would be killing them by his actions (and just didn’t care). And you seem disinclined to distinguish the ethics of these cases.

Perhaps we can rank order the callousness and cruelty here:

1. al-Qaeda wanted and intended to kill thousands of innocent people—and did so.
2. Clinton (as you imagine him to be) did not want or intend to kill thousands of innocent people. He simply wanted to destroy a valuable pharmaceutical plant. But he *knew that he would be* killing thousands of people, and he simply didn’t care.
3. Clinton (as I imagine him to be) did not want or intend to kill anyone at all, necessarily. He simply wanted to destroy what he believed to be a chemical weapons factory. But he *did* wind up killing innocent people, and we don’t really know how he felt about it.

Is it safe to assume that you view these three cases, as I do, as demonstrating descending degrees of evil?

Sam

**April 27, 2015**

**From: Noam Chomsky**

**To: Sam Harris**

Let’s review this curious non-interchange.

It began with you suggesting a public debate because of “The fact that you have called me “a religious fanatic” who “worships the religion of the state” makes me think that there are a few misconceptions I could clear up. And many readers insist that I am similarly off-the-mark where your views are concerned.”

It turns out that you have published version of my views that are completely false, and that the only source you have for “the fact” that you cite is something on Youtube in which, as you wrote, that I “may have been talking about both Christopher Hitchens and [you], given the way the question was posed,” or maybe about Hitchens, whose views I know about, whereas in your case I only know about your published falsifications of my views, which readers of yours have sent to me, and which I didn’t bother to respond to. Therefore, the only meaningful debate could be about your published falsifications.

These, as we have reviewed, are quite extreme. Your primary charge is that I neglected to ask “very basic questions” about intentions. As we have now established, I asked and responded to exactly those basic questions in this case and in other cases, while you have completely failed to address “the basic questions” about the significance of professed intentions (about actual intentions we can only guess). There are two important questions about these: (1) how seriously do we take them? (2) on moral grounds, how do we rank (a) intention to kill as compared with (b) knowledge that of course you will kill but you don’t care, like stepping on ants when you walk.

As for (1), I have been discussing it for 50 years, explaining in detail why, as we all agree, such professed intentions carry little if any weight, and in fact are quite uninformative, since they are almost entirely predictable, even in the case of the worst monsters, and I have also provided evidence that they may be quite sincere, even in the case of these monsters, but we of course dismiss them nonetheless. In contrast, it seems that you have never discussed (1).

As for (2), I posed the question, the one serious moral question that arises in the case at issue, and though I didn’t give a definite answer I suggested what I think: that one might argue that on moral grounds, (b) is even more depraved than (a). Again, it seems that you have never even considered (2), let alone discussed it.

To summarize, then, you issue instructions about moral issues that you have never even considered to people who have considered and discussed these issues for many decades, including the very case you cite. And when this is explained to you in detail, you have nothing to say except to repeat your initial stance.

As if that’s enough, you evaded the question asked in the passage you cite, and when I asked for a response, you did give a response – or so I assumed.

To be crystal clear, either that response was irrelevant to the question, or you intended it to seriously, that is, to be relevant to Clinton’s bombing of al-Shifa. I assumed the latter. In that case, it follows at once, as I wrote, that the claim is ludicrous and embarrassing. You now say that it was only a “thought experiment.” That leaves us where we were. Either it is irrelevant, or it is ludicrous and embarrassing, or else you are refusing to answer the question. All of that is straightforward enough so that I need not spell it out any further.

Let’s turn finally to your interpretation of al-Shifa: Clinton “did not want or intend to kill anyone at all, necessarily. He simply wanted to destroy what he believed to be a chemical weapons factory. But he *did* wind up killing innocent people, and we don’t really know how he felt about it.”

I’m sure you are right that Clinton did not want or intend to kill anyone at all. That was exactly my point. Rather, assuming that he was minimally sane, he certainly knew that he would kill a great many people but he simply didn’t care: case (2)

above, the one serious moral issue, which I had discussed (contrary to your charge) and you never have.

As for the rest, you may, if you like, believe that when Clinton bombed Afghanistan and Sudan in immediate reaction to the Embassy bombings (and in retaliation, it is naturally assumed), he had credible information that he was bombing a chemical factory – which also was, as publicly known, the major pharmaceutical factory in Sudan (which, of course, could not replenish supplies), and he judged that the evidence was strong enough to overlook the human consequences. But, oddly, he was never able to produce a particle of credible evidence, as was widely reported. And when informed immediately (by HRW) that a humanitarian catastrophe was already beginning he ignored it, as he ignored the subsequent evidence about the scale of the casualties (as you incidentally did too).

?On your assumptions, he's quite clearly a moral monster, and there's no need to comment further on people who seek to justify these crimes – your crimes and mine, as citizens of a free society where we can influence policy.

It seems to me clear what your response should be on elementary moral grounds. I'm not holding my breath.

**April 30, 2015**

**From: Sam Harris**

**To: Noam Chomsky?**

Noam —

I'm sorry to say that I have now lost hope that we can communicate effectively in this medium. Rather than explore these issues with genuine interest and civility, you seem committed to litigating all points (both real and imagined) in the most plodding and accusatory way. And so, to my amazement, I find that the only conversation you and I are likely to ever have has grown too tedious to continue.

Please understand that this is not a case of you having raised important challenges for which I have no answer—to the contrary, I would find that a thrilling result of any collision between us. And, as I said at the outset, I would be eager for readers to witness it. Rather, you have simply convinced me that engaging you on these topics is a waste of time.

Apologies for any part I played in making this encounter less enlightening than it might have been...

Sam

**April 30, 2015**

**From: Noam Chomsky**

**To: Sam Harris**

Very glad to see that we are terminating this interesting non-interchange with a large measure of agreement. I agree with you completely that we cannot have a rational discussion of these matters, and that it is too tedious to pretend otherwise. And I agree that I am litigating all points (all real, as far as we have so far determined) in a “plodding and accusatory way.” That is, of course, a necessity in responding to quite serious published accusations that are all demonstrably false, and as I have reviewed, false in a most interesting way: namely, you issue lectures condemning others for ignoring “basic questions” that they have discussed for years, in my case decades, whereas you have refused to address them and apparently do not even allow yourself to understand them. That’s impressive.

There’s also no other way to pursue your various evasions of the “basic question” that arises right at the outset of the passage of mine that you quoted. No need to run through this again, but the plodding review makes it clear that you simply refuse to answer the question, perhaps not surprisingly.

I’ll put aside your apologetics for the crimes for which you and I share responsibility, which, frankly, I find quite shocking, particularly on the part of someone who feels entitled to deliver moral lectures.

And I’ll also put aside your interesting feeling that you see no challenge when your accusations are refuted point by point, along with a demonstration that you are the one who refuses to address the “basic questions” that you charge me with ignoring, even after you have learned that I had dealt with them quite specifically before you wrote, and in fact for decades.

It would also be interesting if, someday, you decide actually to become concerned with “God-intoxicated sociopaths,” most notably, the perpetrator of by far the worst crime of this millennium who did so, he explained, because God had instructed him that he must smite the enemy.

**April 30, 2015**

**From: Sam Harris**

**To: Noam Chomsky**

Noam —

I’m afraid I won’t take the bait, apart from asking the obvious question: If you’re so sure you’ve acquitted yourself well in this conversation, exposing both my intellectual misconduct with respect your own work and my moral blindness regarding the actions of our government, why not let me publish it in full so that our readers can draw their own conclusions?

Sam

**April 30, 2015**

**From: Noam Chomsky**

**To: Sam Harris**

The idea of publishing personal correspondence is pretty weird, a strange form of exhibitionism – whatever the content. Personally, I can't imagine doing it. However, if you want to do it, I won't object.

**April 30, 2015**

**From: Sam Harris**

**To: Noam Chomsky**

Understood, Noam. I'll let you know what I do.

Sam

**May 1, 2015**

**From: Sam Harris**

**To: Noam Chomsky**

Noam—

I've now read our correspondence through and have decided to publish it ([www.samharris.org](http://www.samharris.org)). I understand your point about "exhibitionism," but I disagree in this case.

You and I probably share a million readers who would have found a genuine conversation between us extremely useful. And I trust that they will be disappointed by our failure to produce one, as I am. However, if publishing this exchange helps anyone to better communicate about these topics in the future, our time won't have been entirely wasted.

Sam

## **Postscript**

May 3, 2015

The response to my exchange with Chomsky has been extraordinarily heated. Many people appear confused both about its contents and about my motives for publishing it.

It would not be productive—or, I think, fair to Chomsky—for me to argue my case in great detail after the fact. But I would like to close the door on a few common misconceptions:

1. I did not publish this exchange because I believe that I "won" a debate with Chomsky. On the contrary, I spent the entire time struggling to begin a conversation that never got started. I remain confused about Chomsky's position on several important issues and would sincerely have liked to discuss them.

2. It is now clear to me that I did (in a very narrow way) misrepresent Chomsky in *The End of Faith*. Obviously, he had asked himself “very basic questions” about what the U.S. government intended when it bombed the al-Shifa pharmaceutical plant. Rereading that text, along with the relevant section of his book *9/11*, I can see that my point was not that he *literally* hadn’t asked these questions but that the answers he arrived at are, in my opinion, scandalously wrong. Perhaps Chomsky didn’t literally “ignore the role of human intentions,” but he *effectively* ignored it, because he did not appear to give intentions any ethical weight. I now see that to the extent that he does weigh intentions, he may do so differently than I would (for instance, he says that Clinton’s bombing al-Shifa without thinking about the consequences is “arguably even worse than murder, which at least recognizes that the victim is human”). This would have been interesting terrain to explore. I consider his related claims that virtually everyone professes benign intentions, and that such professions are generally meaningless, to be false. Professions aside, there can be vast ethical differences between sincerely held beliefs about what is “good,” and these differences are often very easy to discern. To pretend otherwise is to risk destroying everything we are right to care about.

In any case, I can now see that I was using rather rhetorical language in my book and that Chomsky was entitled to reject my characterization of him on literal (if pedantic) grounds. He *had* asked the questions I said he hadn’t; I just didn’t like the answers. Conceding this doesn’t render the views he expressed in *9/11* easier to digest. But given the umbrage that Chomsky took over the offending phrases, it would have been helpful if I had admitted that they were sloppily written and, in a narrow sense, untrue. Nevertheless, all our real work would still have lain ahead of us.

3. Chomsky’s charge that I misrepresented him on the topic of “moral equivalence” is far less credible. Judging from what he wrote in *9/11* (as well as in our exchange) he may view the bombing of al-Shifa to be ethically *worse* than the attack on the Twin Towers.

4. Because my aim was to have a productive dialogue, I ignored most of Chomsky’s initial accusations in the hopes of establishing some basic principles and a spirit of mutual goodwill. He viewed this as evasive—or as conceding points that I would not, in fact, have conceded. This contributed greatly to the sense that we were talking past each other. I agree with readers who feel that I might have done more to get the conversation on track. Still, I was quite bewildered by the level of hostility I met in Chomsky, and I did the best I could at the time.

5. Certain readers saw my focus on Chomsky’s tone as an abject attempt to dodge hard questions. I can only reiterate that it wasn’t. I had ready answers to most of the points Chomsky raised, and where I didn’t I was genuinely interested in discovering what I thought in conversation with him. For instance, his observation that my view of intentions requires that I count certain sincerely motivated horrors as “ethical” (albeit within the context of a mistaken worldview) is something I discussed in the very excerpt from *The End of Faith* provided (see footnote 47). Whether such a charitable view can reasonably be applied to Hitler and Japan during WWII (I think not) is something that I would have been happy to discuss, had we ever got there.

What would the reaction have been if al-Qaeda had blown up half the pharmaceuticals in the U.S.? I’m sure it would have been considered a terrorist atrocity, and rightly so. Where is my published attack on the religious motivations of George Bush? It’s in my book *The End of Faith* and in many subsequent articles. I wasn’t dodging these questions. I just viewed them as distractions from the necessary work of our first agreeing about basic ethical principles. Nothing I said or didn’t say should have been construed as an unwillingness to criticize the U.S. government or to discuss any of its specific actions that may, in fact, constitute atrocities. As to whether we can trust Chomsky’s account of the al-Shifa bombing, I have my [doubts](#)

In each of my emails I was merely attempting to *begin* an exchange that would be worth reading—having considered the preceding volleys both unproductive and unpublishable. In the end, I decided to publish the whole mess to demonstrate how difficult it can be to have a conversation on these important topics, in the hopes that some good might come of showing what that effort looks like on the page. I'm not sure I made the right decision, but I am certain that what I published bears little resemblance to any debate that Chomsky and I would have had if we had formally engaged each other in print. Needless to say, I agree that a person's tone, however contemptuous, isn't relevant to the substance of a debate. Had this been a debate, I'd have been happy to have Chomsky at his angriest.

Finally, I can only say that I was greatly disappointed by my encounter with Chomsky. I had truly hoped to have a productive conversation with him. —SH

## Notes

40. J. Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, trans. C. Turner (New York: Verso, 2002).

- It may seem strange to encounter phrases like “our enemies,” uttered without apparent self-consciousness, and it is strange for me to write them. But there is no doubt that enemies are what we have (and I leave it for the reader to draw the boundaries of “we” as broadly or narrowly as he or she likes). The liberal fallacy that I will attempt to unravel in the present section is the notion that we *made* these enemies and that we are, therefore, their “moral equivalent.” We are not. An analysis of their religious ideology reveals that we are confronted by people who would have put us to sword, had they had the power, long before the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization were even a gleam in the eye of the first rapacious globalizer.
- N. Chomsky, 9–11 (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001), 119.
- P. Unger, *Living High & Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996).
- A. Roy, *War Talk* (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 2003), 84–85.
- J. Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1999), 58.
- *Ibid.*, 62.
- Are intentions really the bottom line? What are we to say, for instance, about those Christian missionaries in the New World who baptized Indian infants only to promptly kill them, thereby sending them to heaven? Their intentions were (apparently) good. Were their actions ethical? Yes, within the confines of a deplorably limited worldview. The medieval apothecary who gave his patients quicksilver really was trying to help. He was just mistaken about the role this element played in the human body. Intentions matter, but they are not all that matters.

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