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expose lies.  
Noam Chomsky**

With a new preface by the author

## **The Responsibility of Intellectuals**

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# The Responsibility of Intellectuals

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## **The Responsibility of Intellectuals** Noam Chomsky

Selected by Newsweek as one of “14 nonfiction books you’ll want to read this fall”

Fifty years after it first appeared, one of Noam Chomsky’s greatest essays will be published for the first time as a timely stand-alone book, with a new preface by the author

As a nineteen-year-old undergraduate in 1947, Noam Chomsky was deeply affected by articles about the responsibility of intellectuals written by Dwight Macdonald, an editor of *Partisan Review* and then of *Politics*. Twenty years later, as the Vietnam War was escalating, Chomsky turned to the question himself, noting that “intellectuals are in a position to expose the lies of governments” and to analyze their “often hidden intentions.”

Originally published in the *New York Review of Books*, Chomsky’s essay eviscerated the “hypocritical moralism of the past” (such as when Woodrow Wilson set out to teach Latin Americans “the art of good government”) and exposed the shameful policies in Vietnam and the role of intellectuals in justifying it.

Also included in this volume is the brilliant “The Responsibility of Intellectuals Redux,” written on the tenth anniversary of 9/11, which makes the case for using privilege to challenge the state. As relevant now as it was in 1967, *The Responsibility of Intellectuals* reminds us that “privilege yields opportunity and opportunity confers responsibilities.” All of us have choices, even in desperate times.

## **The Responsibility of Intellectuals Details**

Date :

ISBN :

Author : Noam Chomsky

Format :

Genre : Politics, Nonfiction, Philosophy, Writing, Essays

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# From Reader Review **The Responsibility of Intellectuals for online ebook**

## **Timothy says**

This was a good article but the content was not what I was expecting at all. The thesis of course is that intellectuals (meaning people who are well informed and in a position where their opinions hold some weight in the public eye e.g. professors) have a responsibility to speak up when they see injustice occurring and to use their privilege and status to help inform those who otherwise might not have access to criticisms of the status quo.

Most of the article was just criticisms of specific intellectuals for their failure to do this and things of that nature. The context in which these people were being criticised (during American involvement in the Vietnam war) is something that I know almost nothing about so I didn't find those very interesting.

I was hoping for more of an abstract "this is the power that intellectuals have. This is how they can use it. This is why some fail to do so." type of deal, but it was still good writing and some interesting points that transcend the historical context.

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## **Randall Wallace says**

Ever thought something fishy about Bin Laden being killed, elderly, unarmed, and alone and then dumped in the ocean, oops... no trial and no autopsy? Noam says, "Abraham Lincoln ...condemned the call for assassination as 'international outlawry', 'an outrage' in 1863". Fast forward to the "international outlawry" of Bin Laden's extra-judicial murder and nobody in the press raises any concern. Noam found that US analysts find their biggest problem is how "with considerable armed force but little political power, [to] contain an adversary who has enormous political force but only modest military power." Noam finds the real "damage" caused by the Japanese was the closing of the business door to China. That directly led to financing of the Pacific War just as the later Communist Closing of China to US business led to further war hysteria. In this reprint of an old piece, Noam explains why intellectuals must take the side of the people, and not power. Noam explains the WWI attacks of Woodrow Wilson on Bourne, Debs, and Veblen. He explains the extraordinary importance of Vatican II. He shows you that in "The Cambridge History of the Cold War" you read that "from 1960 to the Soviet collapse of 1990, the numbers of political prisoners, torture victims, and executions of nonviolent political dissenters in Latin America vastly exceeded those in the Soviet Union and its East European satellites." Herein you will learn the strange tale of Yale University's own Professor David Rowe, who published his "testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs" wherein he showed how to create mass starvation/genocide in China by denying wheat, while callously ignoring the human element because of the political outcome. Rowe is still a professor at Yale - what a great role model to any future sociopathic Kissinger or Cheney advanced enough to take his class!

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## **Roger Green says**

This is a little collection largely made up of two essays by Chomsky on the responsibility of intellectuals. One from the late 1960s on Vietnam and one more recently. It echoes well with the anniversary of the "Beyond Vietnam" speech written by Vincent Harding and delivered by Martin Luther King Jr. 50 years ago.

Chomsky is still able to cut through the ideological veneer of conformist intellectualisms.

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### **Brian Miko?ajczyk says**

Chomsky argues that throughout the modern era intellectuals have either used their power to prop up horrible policies and acts (Kennedy-Reagan in Latin America, Reagan's anti Nelson Mandela policy, Kissinger in Vietnam, Soviets in Eastern Bloc, Obama's extrajudicial assassination of bin Laden, etc.) whereas those who are actually fighting for what is right, "dissenters" are left to die for their views.

He argues "...the responsibility of intellectuals, there does not seem to me to be much to say beyond some simple truths. Intellectuals are typically privileged—merely an observation about usage of the term. Privilege yields opportunity, and opportunity confers responsibilities. An individual then has choices."

A great read.

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### **Francesca Calarco says**

After admiring Noam Chomsky's social critiques as he's communicated in interviews, I was excited to finally read one of his printed works. Overall, there were both good and bad elements in The Responsibility of Intellectuals, but I mostly found it to be disappointing.

Writing this review in 2018, current events has had me looking back to the Nixon years and Vietnam. Partly why I was interested in this book was that it included Chomsky's essay from that period, and in the second half touches upon the War in Iraq. I found the second half of the book to be much stronger than the first, especially when it came to (younger) Chomsky's criticisms of foreign powers in Asia. For someone who is so good at the self reflection of his own country, his one dimensional characterizations of Asian countries left much to be desired.

What the book does do well though, is emphasize the importance of truth-telling, even if it means critiquing what is popular. Chomsky clearly defines who he means by "intellectuals" as individuals who should utilize their privilege to tell the truth as a moral imperative. He expands, "It seems to be close to a historical universal that conformist intellectuals, the one who support official aims and ignore or rationalize official crimes, are honored and privileged in their own societies, and the value-oriented punished in one or another way" (122).

This is definitely true, though I do wish he would expand on HOW intellectuals could utilize privilege to critique the powerful. Not every country has a First Amendment. While I wholeheartedly agree with the central thesis of this volume, I would have liked to have seen the surrounding argument better developed. Otherwise, it just read like someone in a (secure) porcelain tower preaching to others in their own porcelain towers.

It also probably does not help that I read Naomi Klein's The Shock Doctrine this year, which touches upon many of the themes introduced in The Responsibility of Intellectuals, but is much better researched and argued. Overall, I didn't really like this one (sorry Chomsky), but read it for yourself and decide.

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## **Keaton Quinlan says**

Although it contains many of Chomsky's trademark and adored acerbic takedowns of Political and intellectual Hackery on the part of public intellectuals, it nevertheless feels unfocused and lacks the straightforward punch of some of his later works. But Irregardless is still an important work of Chomsky's early catalogue.

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## **Zoe says**

3.5/5 stars. My main "complaint" of Chomsky is that he assumes that his readers are well-versed on international history, which is honestly a problem of our uninformed society.

I will always appreciate Chomsky for his radical views that challenge authority: a value-based intellectual that speaks the truth with no fear of the establishment. Clearly demonstrates the authoritative and exploitative ways of the intellectual elite and the education system itself.

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## **mwpm says**

TWENTY-YEARS AGO, Dwight Macdonald published a series of articles in Politics on the responsibility of peoples and, specifically, the responsibility of intellectuals. I read them as an undergraduate, in the years just after the war, and had occasion to read them again a few months ago. They seem to me to have lost none of their power or persuasiveness. Macdonald is concerned with the question of war guilt. He asks the question: To what extent were the German or Japanese people responsible for the atrocities committed by their governments? And, quite properly, he turns the question back to us: To what extent are the British or American people responsible for the vicious terror bombings of civilians, perfected as a technique of warfare by the Western democracies and reaching their culmination in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, surely among the most unspeakable crimes in history. To an undergraduate in 1945-46—to anyone whose political and moral consciousness had been formed by the horrors of the 1930s, by the war in Ethiopia, the Russian purge, the "China Incident," the Spanish Civil War, the Nazi atrocities, the Western reaction to these events and, in part, complicity in them—these questions had particular significance and poignancy.

With respect to the responsibility of intellectuals, there are still other, equally disturbing questions. Intellectuals are in a position to expose the lies of governments, to analyze actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions. In the Western world, at least, they have the power that comes from political liberty, from access to information and freedom of expression. For a privileged minority, Western democracy provides the leisure, the facilities, and the training to seek the truth lying hidden behind the veil of distortion and misrepresentation, ideology and class interest, through which the events of current history are presented to us. The responsibilities of intellectuals, then, are much deeper than what Macdonald calls the "responsibility of people," given the unique privileges that intellectuals enjoy.

The issues that Macdonald raised are as pertinent today as they were twenty years ago. We can hardly avoid asking ourselves to what extent the American people bear responsibility for the savage American assault on a largely helpless rural population in Vietnam, still another atrocity in what Asians see as the "Vasco da Gama era" of world history. As for those of us who stood by in silence and apathy as this catastrophe slowly took shape over the past dozen years—on what page of history do we find our proper place? Only the most

insensible can escape these questions. I want to return to them, later on, after a few scattered remarks about the responsibility of intellectuals and how, in practice, they go about meeting this responsibility in the mid-1960s.

IT IS THE RESPONSIBILITY of intellectuals to speak the truth and to expose lies. This, at least, may seem enough of a truism to pass over without comment. Not so, however. For the modern intellectual, it is not at all obvious. Thus we have Martin Heidegger writing, in a pro-Hitler declaration of 1933, that “truth is the revelation of that which makes a people certain, clear, and strong in its action and knowledge”; it is only this kind of “truth” that one has a responsibility to speak. Americans tend to be more forthright. When Arthur Schlesinger was asked by *The New York Times* in November, 1965, to explain the contradiction between his published account of the Bay of Pigs incident and the story he had given the press at the time of the attack, he simply remarked that he had lied; and a few days later, he went on to compliment the *Times* for also having suppressed information on the planned invasion, in “the national interest,” as this term was defined by the group of arrogant and deluded men of whom Schlesinger gives such a flattering portrait in his recent account of the Kennedy Administration. It is of no particular interest that one man is quite happy to lie in behalf of a cause which he knows to be unjust; but it is significant that such events provoke so little response in the intellectual community—for example, no one has said that there is something strange in the offer of a major chair in the humanities to a historian who feels it to be his duty to persuade the world that an American-sponsored invasion of a nearby country is nothing of the sort. And what of the incredible sequence of lies on the part of our government and its spokesmen concerning such matters as negotiations in Vietnam? The facts are known to all who care to know. The press, foreign and domestic, has presented documentation to refute each falsehood as it appears. But the power of the government’s propaganda apparatus is such that the citizen who does not undertake a research project on the subject can hardly hope to confront government pronouncements with fact.

The deceit and distortion surrounding the American invasion of Vietnam is by now so familiar that it has lost its power to shock. It is therefore useful to recall that although new levels of cynicism are constantly being reached, their clear antecedents were accepted at home with quiet toleration. It is a useful exercise to compare Government statements at the time of the invasion of Guatemala in 1954 with Eisenhower’s admission—to be more accurate, his boast—a decade later that American planes were sent “to help the invaders” (*New York Times*, October 14, 1965). Nor is it only in moments of crisis that duplicity is considered perfectly in order. “New Frontiersmen,” for example, have scarcely distinguished themselves by a passionate concern for historical accuracy, even when they are not being called upon to provide a “propaganda cover” for ongoing actions. For example, Arthur Schlesinger (*New York Times*, February 6, 1966) describes the bombing of North Vietnam and the massive escalation of military commitment in early 1965 as based on a “perfectly rational argument”:

so long as the Vietcong thought they were going to win the war, they obviously would not be interested in any kind of negotiated settlement.

The date is important. Had this statement been made six months earlier, one could attribute it to ignorance. But this statement appeared after the UN, North Vietnamese, and Soviet initiatives had been front-page news for months. It was already public knowledge that these initiatives had preceeded the escalation of February 1965 and, in fact, continued for several weeks after the bombing began. Correspondents in Washington tried desperately to find some explanation for the startling deception that had been revealed. Chalmers Roberts, for example, wrote in the *Boston Globe* on November 19 with unconscious irony:

[late February, 1965] hardly seemed to Washington to be a propitious moment for negotiations [since] Mr. Johnson...had just ordered the first bombing of North Vietnam in an effort to bring Hanoi to a conference table where the bargaining chips on both sides would be more closely matched.

Coming at that moment, Schlesinger's statement is less an example of deceit than of contempt—contempt for an audience that can be expected to tolerate such behavior with silence, if not approval.

Read the full text here: <https://chomsky.info/19670223/>

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## Daniel Lomax says

Although comparatively unfocused, Chomsky's essay is reminiscent of Bertrand Russell's *Outline of Intellectual Rubbish*, in that its key theme is the nonsense which "intellectuals" and "experts" regularly propound. However, Chomsky's piece pertains specifically to the spheres of policy-making and social and political science, and is more serious; and it goes a step further than Russell by offering an explanation, in terms of class interest, for what he perceives to be the vacuity and pseudo-intellectualism of those professions.

This work has been widely interpreted as a case that intellectuals should take responsibility, although (if we didn't know anything else of his career) it could as easily be read as a prescription for intellectuals to quiet down a bit. It might just as well have been titled *The Irresponsibility of Intellectuals*, and it's not clear to me whether Chomsky endorses Dwight Macdonald's ideas, for which this essay is named.

The early Chomsky was a polemical force with which to be reckoned, and some good early criticism of the Vietnam War is provided, as well as broader points about whether policy should be analysed in terms of its makers' intentions, and whether analysts resort sufficiently to empirical evidence. It constitutes the most damning critique of *Realpolitik* I know of (but see also *Realpolitik in the Gulf* by Christopher Hitchens). To give you a sample of the sharpness Chomsky's essay employs, I conclude with this excerpt:

...one of Kahn's basic assumptions is that

an all-out surprise attack in which all resources are devoted to counter-value targets would be so irrational that, barring an incredible lack of sophistication or actual insanity among Soviet decision makers, such an attack is highly unlikely.

A simple argument proves the opposite. Premise 1: American decision-makers think along the lines outlined by Herman Kahn. Premise 2: Kahn thinks it would be better for everyone to be red than for everyone to be dead. Premise 3: if the Americans were to respond to an all-out countervalue attack, then everyone would be dead. Conclusion: the Americans will not respond to an all-out countervalue attack, and therefore it should be launched without delay. Of course, one can carry the argument a step further. Fact: the Russians have not carried out an all-out countervalue attack. It follows that they are not rational. If they are not rational, there is no

point in “strategic thinking.” Therefore,....

Of course this is all nonsense, but nonsense that differs from Kahn’s only in the respect that the argument is of slightly greater complexity than anything to be discovered in his work.

QED, right?

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### **Dean says**

A fantastic review of the Vietnam war, it's motives and the truth behind it. Noam has a fantastic way of cutting through the propaganda to the truth, which is continually inspiring and hopeful. It was a quick read, and delightful - I decided to not give it 5 stars because the main content is about Vietnam, which although helpful for historical context and a great demonstration of him consistently being correct, is fairly dated in the extremely fast pace of the 2010s.

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### **Jacob Harris says**

The first part of this book contains an essay written by Chomsky in 1967 with an additional essay reflecting on the modern relevance of the initial work, post 9/11 reflections particularly. He argues essentially that it is the responsibility of intellectuals, those privileged in society to have the means of education and influence, to “speak the truth and to expose lies.” Particularly, here, he is referring to the US state propaganda machine and it’s apologists regarding the US’s history and continual guilt of war crimes and human rights violation.

In sum, it is the responsibility of the privileged intellectuals in society to challenge the unquestionable authority to and assumed morality of US imperialism. The US is not, by default, a moral authority; rather it is more often an amoral force that needs its intentions and actions interrogated and, ultimately, to be held accountable for its international terrorism. It is the responsibility, at least, of the privileged intellectuals in society to facilitate this.

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### **Karol Ujueta Rojas says**

My favorite quote from this "The long tradition of naiveté and self-righteousness that disfigures our intellectual history, however, must serve as a warning to the third world, if such a warning is needed, as to how our protestations of sincerity and benign intent are to be interpreted".

Good essay about the responsibility that people with information and knowledge face when acting as "journalists".

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### **Anthony says**

Most, most highly recommended reading! "Privilege yields opportunity, and opportunity confers responsibilities." In this sense we are all intellectuals and we all share the responsibility "to follow the path



of integrity, wherever it may lead." To "expose the lies of governments, to analyze actions according to their motives and often hidden intentions." Simply to "see what is right under you nose - and to have the simple honesty to tell it as it is."

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## **Bryce Cai says**

Chomsky is most well-known, I think, in two fields. His presence in linguistics is undeniable - his "Syntactic Structures" and other works are the foundations of modern linguistics.

The other field, as most are aware, and where he is more prominent to the general public, is in the political/economic/society sphere, and if there can be said to be a book that established him in that area, i.e. his "Syntactic Structures" of this area, it is this one. Chomsky's most famous works, I would say, include "Manufacturing Consent" and "The Fateful Triangle", but I consider this his magnum opus.

The book (essay, really) is very short - I finished it in a few hours. Actually understanding it, however, requires much more time, as is the case with all of his books. It seems that Chomsky derives some of his inspiration (standing on the shoulders of giants) from Orwell, and this book seems to be so. The parallels certainly seem to be present - the willful complicity of people like Syme - an intellectual, no doubt, in producing lies - Chomsky references the idea of Doublethink frequently in many of his works.

The R of I is written in response to the Vietnam War, but it includes extensive historical examples, such as the Dreyfus Affair. The book refers to the actions and subservience of the intellectual class - technocrats and experts, to justify even the most atrocious of crimes, whereas opposition came from unlikely sources - on moral grounds, from "mathematicians, chemists, and psychologists". I note that this is the case not only in the US, but also within the Soviet Union. Like all of Chomsky's books, it is filled with sources and information for historical parallels. To anyone seeking to understand the current state of affairs in the US (everyone), I fully recommend this book.

A final note:

From Wikipedia:

The topic was inspired by articles of Dwight Macdonald published after the Second World War who "asks the question: To what extent were the German or Japanese people responsible for the atrocities committed by their governments? And, quite properly, ... turns the question back to us: To what extent are the British or American people responsible for the vicious terror bombings of civilians, perfected as a technique of warfare by the Western democracies and reaching their culmination in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, surely among the most unspeakable crimes in history."

In this sense, Chomsky refers not merely to the Responsibility of Intellectuals with this book, but to the general public as well.

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## **Alex says**

Excellent short read. This book is split into two parts. Part one is Chomsky's original essay published in 1967 which focuses on the Vietnam war. He spends a good amount of time talking about specific public intellectuals of that time period, many of which I have never heard of. This section was a bit dry for me.

I enjoyed part two the most. Part section was originally written in 2011 and appears in his book "Who Rules the World". Here, Chomsky explains the two types of intellectuals and gives many examples dating back to biblical times. He also comments on more current events such as 9/11 and the assassination of Bin Laden. This part also contains a classic Chomsky summary of intervention into Central and South American countries, although a much more detailed talk on this subject can be found in other books such as "Understanding Power" and "How the World works".

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