

## **Killing ants: a clarification from Noam Chomsky**

Following the publication of my previous blog post - titled "[The Limits of Discourse](#)" [Discussed](#), I have received an email from Noam Chomsky. I shall reproduce it in full here:

Thanks for your comments. I see matters slightly differently. Take this passage:

“Chomsky has argued that the deaths were the result of negligence on the part of the Clinton administration, because it did not care enough about the possibility of civilian casualties to do the appropriate groundwork to discover what the true ramifications of the decision would be. He has also suggested that negligence on this scale may in fact be worse than murder, because it betrays an unwillingness on the part of the aggressor to even consider the human cost, suggesting that the very humanity of the Sudanese was unforgivably downgraded.

Chomsky refuses to be drawn into a more general inquiry about intentions.”

On the last point, there can't be a “general inquiry about intentions,” because circumstances matter. Harris refuses to consider any of the ethical questions concerning intentions, which I've discussed for 50 years.

On the first point, what I said was a bit different. No groundwork was necessary to discover that there would be massive civilian casualties from destruction of half the pharmaceutical supplies of a poor African country that could not replenish them. As I wrote, Clinton and his advisers are not imbeciles, and if they had even thought about it for one moment, would have realized this, but it was of no concern to them because they regard poor Africans the way one does walking down the street and killing ants. They also of course would have understood what was instantly apparent to the director of Human Rights Watch. That's a radical difference. And it does raise an important moral question, which Harris ignores, just as he ignores all ethical issues concerning intentions.

It is, incidentally, quite clear that they had no evidence at all about al-Shifa producing chemical weapons, which is why they failed to produce any.

Noam Chomsky

I take both of his points. While it is of course possible to draw parallels between various aggressive military and terrorist actions throughout history, an inquiry into the intentions of the aggressors should be restricted to the example being discussed - unless there is a causal or organisational link. Doing otherwise risks conflating events that may appear similar but which were born out of different times, events and minds. In other words - when dealing with *specifics* - the detail is important, so a "general inquiry about intentions" becomes meaningless.

On the subject of the 1998 US bombing of the al-Shifa pharmaceutical plant, I have had time to think a little more deeply about Chomsky's position. His observation that, "no groundwork was necessary to discover that there would be massive civilian casualties," is unarguably true. After all, why would the director of Human Rights Watch have access to better intelligence than the president of the United States? Clearly, the president needed to be seen to be taking "tough action" in the wake of the US embassy bombings, and as part of operation Infinite

Reach, he ordered the destruction of the pharmaceutical plant, which he was aware had links to Osama bin Laden. However, any such links were tenuous at best, because bin Laden had left Sudan two years earlier, having invested heavily in a number of businesses and industries - including agriculture and public works projects - in and around Khartoum.

Considering - as Chomsky has stated - no evidence has emerged to support the claim that the al-Shifa plant was producing chemical weapons, it must be assumed that there were none, and that these tenuous links to bin Laden were sufficient to seal its fate. This moves us on to his analogy of killing ants. Because, how little meaning could the lives of the Sudanese civilians have, in the minds of Clinton and his advisers, if their deaths were ranked secondary to this pointless display of military strength? They really did not enter into the equation at all, hence Chomsky's assertion that the "stance [of the Clinton administration] is 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?"

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