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## *Praise For America's Second Leading Intellectual*



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“If you’re not first, you’re last”

—Ricky Bobby’s father, Talladega Nights

“It’s hard to hate from up close”

—Michelle Obama

“The beauty of our system is that it isolates everybody. Each person is sitting alone in front of the tube, you know. It’s very hard to have ideas or thoughts under those circumstances. You can’t fight the world alone.”

—Noam Chomsky

It was all very well to say “Drink me,” but the wise little Alice was not going to do that in a hurry. “No, I’ll look first,” she said, “and see whether it’s marked ‘poison’ or not.”

—Lewis Carroll, Alice In Wonderland

Hours after almost everything I write (or even think), I come to detest the person who wrote the words. I do not often correct myself explicitly, although I try to overload what I do with the opposite from then on, until a happy liberal medium is struck. But this time I felt truly out of bounds in my criticism of the great Noam Chomsky, a man worthy of admiration and one of America’s greatest heroes.

Yes, Chomsky may only be second place in American intellectualism, but that by no means makes him worthy of the attacks I put upon him. Originally I had penned a piece that just proclaimed my praise for Mertz. But openly declaring love for someone (let alone another man like Mertz) seemed all too radical for me, even as I pretended to be the most radical person in the room. I therefore buried my love in useless hate and sarcasm that took away from what could have been a pure love ballad for Mr. Mertz.

First off, let me again proclaim my sincere love for Mertz. I am a heterosexual white male (very boring, especially for 2018). Every woman I have fallen for has driven me mad. One moment I am dreamy and nearly tripping over myself, the next, I am heartbroken and vow to never go near her again. Oddly enough Mertz has the same effect on me. I don’t know how to explain it, but when someone has that sort of effect on you, you must give them credit.

Actually, I do know how to explain it. In these very simple and reactionary times I revel in someone who is restless and curious. There is something so reassuring about the skeptic in this day and age. As far as love is concerned, I see marriage as the ultimate tyranny. Being owned by another human being seems most cruel! Therefore, I am most likely to fall for the women who are least likely to marry me (and believe me, most likely this has little, if anything, to do with that backward institution of marriage). Likewise, in the time of have and have-nots, in the time of insiders and outsiders, in the times of the American and the foreigner, it is most comforting to be close to an intellectual mind who refuses to limit the ways he thinks of people or ideas, even if the guy confuses the hell out of you (pun intended).

Taking a dollop of Chuck (advised weekly, not daily) is a cross between Alice In Wonderland and Go Ask Alice. In other words, the best damn high of your life. Chuck takes you into his death chamber of doom—with a sensation most similar to tickling. Tickling is very strange, isn't it? You are laughing, and loving it. But you always tell the person doing it to stop. And I think that is because you can't control it. Your laugh is automatic—and even surprising. Note that you can never make yourself laugh via tickling. Chuck's show is a trip that will make you give a dark laugh every time. A laugh that you can't control, as it rises, not from the abdomen, but from the heart. It becomes the moment when you realize that you are living in hell, that everything you have ever heard is a lie, and that for a moment, it is funny, because you know better now, and for this moment, you are better. And yet it is this biting sense of irony that levels the listener—as she becomes the master of reality as soon as she becomes the servant of thought.

But the real reason why Chuck is a trip is because this show is just far out, dude. It's like the Johnny Depp version of Willy Wonka. Just take a quote from urban dictionary's definition of acid: "Lily took acid yesterday for the first time and realized that her entire conception of herself was a bunch of bullshit, and that she was a mean girl, and had her world fucking shattered, but it was a ton of fun in the process and now she is a better person for it." This is literally the exact feeling you have after four hours on Chuck. Note: urban dictionary can be trusted because it's the only dictionary that didn't vote for Trump. The basic breakdown of the high (as a warning, or an enticement) goes like this: Mertz will woo you in with traditional anti-capitalist propaganda (the only kind worth believing!). But he then takes you much farther. Not only do you become opposed to capitalism and the treacherous forces behind it, you begin to disapprove of everything around you! It's important to understand that the premise of the show is that we are literally in hell right now (not sure if Mertz is a fundamentalist, but he is a very close reader). That means that while capitalism is hell, shit, so is everything else! History is hell, art is hell, even this acid you are taking right now, a construction of hell! Hellish figures all around. And suddenly the world takes on a new filter—not yet replicated by Snapchat—that casts everything in a coat of red.

And believe it or not, for the first time, it all starts to make sense! This whole time, where life had a meaning (and you no meaning if you aren't part of how life defines you), well that all comes crashing down. And suddenly, you aren't alone. There is a chance that, well, this is all bullshit! And now, you, with all your chips, stains, and splotches, now you belong.

And that claim that we are living in hell, while originally pessimistic, becomes liberating in a transformative way. Now, you—who they call the devil—has a home. And them, those mighty capitalists and policeman of the world who call themselves angels—who the hell are they?

I would be remiss if I did not mention the Moment of Truth featuring Jeff Dorchen. More performative and ridiculous than even Chuck himself, Jeff takes you straight to the pearly gates of hell—a grand cameo resembling Cosmo Kramer in its large strokes.

Mertz is a serious interviewer (I think), but he is always looking for irony. He will guide his guests to the heart of their conclusion—as if he knows their minds better than they do (kinda creepy, eh?). But the man has such an ability to nuzzle his way into the mind of each of his guests we find that, like truth serum, the guests begin to pour out radical assertions that shake everything you were ever told.

Things get a little goofier when the guests leave as we are left to wonder: what the hell was that? And are we now exiting political hell and just going to hell proper? Worth sticking around for the random and grating solo ballads from Mertz and co.

I was so bothered by this fear of sincere love and positivity that I felt the need to reflect on American culture, internet culture, the left's role, Trump's role, and even my own role in a very competitive mean-spirited ad hominem atmosphere.

Why must everything, in America, be a contest? It's our capitalist imperialist ethos. Our desire to judge, to gossip and to degrade. Donald Trump unleashes these forces on the most vulnerable. But for those of us opposed to him we often find ourselves replicating his language and tactics, even if it is on more worthy subjects.

Why must it matter who the “leading” intellectual is? Even if the winner is clear. All intellectuals, especially the honest and left-leaning kind, add to the richness of human thought. The very act of thinking confronts the labels of fascism head-on. The very act of thinking proclaims that life is not just a road to greater pleasure and greater profit but greater understanding and truth.

I have noticed that in the age of Trump (but also before and beyond) we have become more and more cemented in these tendencies. The internet creates a platform of relative anonymity. You can be an anonymous commenter, or be yourself talking to a stranger, or even be talking to a friend (but never anywhere near them). It's the same reason we all honk from our cars but say excuse me in the street. If you have to face the person you are being mean to, you become a lot nicer.

And as a variety of emails came in berating my treatment of the professor I came to realize two things at once: 1. that being treated this way felt horrible and 2. that I was only spreading this culture of hate through ad hominem takedowns on those I wished were “rivals” of some sort, whether that be friends on Facebook or public figures.

The question soon became: why? Why must we treat each other this way? And I think that while it is very positive that (on the internet at least) there has become a concern for justice and for right and wrong, we also are at risk of losing sight of what society we might like to have if we ever come out of that mess. So yes, the stakes are high. But let’s say we win. Will we really want a society where we attempt to discredit each other for every disagreement or personality trait?

The other thing I was thinking about was that the schism over differences in public opinions these days relates highly to the goals of the branding of the individual under capitalism. Everyone now must have a personal brand that is perpetually in competition with others. Therefore what replaces political organizing is replaced with political hierarchy.

And then I began to think about what was easy. Finding something to hate about yourself or your neighbor is remarkably easy (and perhaps proves Mertz’ theory about hell correct). Finding something to love, well that takes time and effort. One has to think about that. And the goal when one searches for that is completely rewarding. For whatever reason I have tried to do that with Trump several times (I like a challenge!). I must confess, I have found nothing that I like about Trump, but the very process of searching for love was so rewarding that you are immediately taken to a higher place.

We see the culture of degrading and humiliating others—almost for bloodsport—go viral under Trump. The goal is to ruin your foe and make them your victim. Once you conquer them you leave their corpse hanging on the public square. The internet acts as a public forum to embarrass and judge each other while never being honest about ourselves. It’s the celebrity and sport and war and porn culture taking over the mainstream imagination.

Finding a winner then in intellectual thought is a paradox. Unlike the hyper-competitive culture of capitalism, intellectualism, like love, wins when it spreads. The more thinkers we have, the better we will all be off. For this reason, finding a winner only negates the importance of conversation, of give-and-take, and of the journey itself, which relies entirely on the interaction, rather than the competition of human minds. Of course I am not suggesting “talking” to Trump supporters as some sort of solution—it’s hardly better than punching them, as the rest of us may like to do. If the goal of a group is to destroy thinking

itself then we must reevaluate what it means to debate their ideas. I would argue that the change in our society must go far deeper than the social science issues that the mainstream media presents to us. We must again radically assert that thinking will be the only way to free us, as long as we have brains left to use. There is no such thing as a free billionaire in this sense. Money can buy everything but peace with one's own self.

With that all in mind, why not link the minds of Mertz and Chomsky as compliments, rather than competition. Mertz brings the beer, Chomsky the hot chocolate. Mertz brings the acid, Chomsky brings the sweaters. Or something like that. Obviously I don't really know what I'm talking about. An image resembling Bound 2 of Chuck and Noam forms in my mind. Two minds on a motorcycle, feeling out each other's vulnerabilities, the give and take of conversation, the styles bumping up against each other, at first awkwardly, but as each side gives, each side strips down the facade of our neoliberal reality, we find ourselves naked, but not afraid, for the warm touch of another human, that pulse that tells us—this is real, you are here, I am here, we are here—that becomes the only way we know that any of this even matters, it is the only way we can know that any of this will go on. The courage to stand naked, with only your truth in hand, with only who you really are in hand, and knowing at this moment, someone, anyone, will take this person, hear this person, hold this person. One time doing that means more than a million fake moments in our capitalist construct of a reality where we shied ourselves from the vulnerabilities of us and perhaps even more cruelly—of those we love. Mertz. Chomsky. In conversation. Not sure how well that all works on radio, but whatever.

I find that I am most happy when I find a place for radical compassion in these days. Not as an excuse for hate, but as an panacea to it. We become so blinded by our consumed by our hatred for Trump, that we have no space left to confront the hatred by Trump.

So, in closing, my sincere apologies to Professor Chomsky. You are a brave man in indecent times and many readers more mature than I came to your defense. If any lessons are to be learned, it is that as long as the goal of the left is to become the "most left", rather than the most kind and open-hearted, we will remain as exclusive as the 1% we despise, but instead of sipping fine wine, we will be sipping polluted water, as Donald Trump uses hate to distract us from his dismantling of environmental regulations. With that, a promise, in hopes to be kept by writing it down, that time will no longer be wasted on personal attacks, especially on America's (second) smartest human.