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Understanding Power: The Indispensable Chomsky



Synopsis

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

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Customer Reviews

Understanding Power is a wide-ranging collection of transcribed and previously unpublished discussions and seminars (from 1989 to 1999) with sociopolitical analyst Noam Chomsky. The chapters, each covering discrete sessions with Chomsky, arrive in a question-and-answer format

that at times becomes delightfully contentious. Chomsky holds forth on such disparate topics as American third-party politics, the stifling of true dissent, the illusion of a muscular media, heavy-handed American imperialism (from Southeast Asia to Mexico), a dysfunctional and self-destructing United States political left, the gilding of the Kennedy and Carter administrations, and the impotent state of labor unions. The relatively accessibility of *Understanding Power* is a welcome balance to Chomsky's often formidable scholarly writings. This is a book best taken in doses: a sort of bedside reader. --H. O'Billovitch

For the past several decades, Noam Chomsky has become more famous for his trenchant critiques of U.S. foreign policy than for his groundbreaking linguistic theories. In this collection of material from his lectures and teach-ins, public defenders Mitchell and Schoeffel put his challenging, controversial opinions on display. The discussions a format that allows Chomsky to present his views in a conversational, accessible style confirm his wide-ranging engagement with world affairs. Whether the topic is Cambodia (he all but holds the United States responsible for the mass deaths under the Khmer Rouge) or the Middle East (where he sees the peace process as analogous to South Africa's creation of apartheid), he consistently blasts the United States for what he sees as its guiding principle of maintaining its own power while claiming to fight for freedom and democracy. Chomsky, who has published more than 30 books but is best known for his contribution to *Manufacturing Consent*, a critique of the way public opinion is formed, often excoriates the press for what he sees as a willingness to reflect the views of the "elites" rather than challenge them. But while he maintains a gloomy view of U.S. policies, he preserves a surprising optimism about Americans, arguing that the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements have made citizens more critical of the mass media. Some readers will appreciate the views articulated here and others will be infuriated; but for anyone with an opinion of Chomsky would be wise not to ignore this collection, which provides a useful and wide-ranging introduction to his analysis of power and media in the West. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

Do you really need a review of Prof. Chomsky's works? This sums up most, if not, all of Chomsky's ideas and stances. After all, the book is called the *Indispensable Chomsky*. From media corruption to racism, to the basics of Western imperialism, this book is a goldmine of knowledge. Check out his other books if you haven't, as they go way deeper than what's presented here.

This is the best single source of Chomsky's work I've come across. A triumph of editing, this book is

made up of excerpts of talks Chomsky gave throughout the 80s and 90s. Loosely organized by topic, the book is highly flowing and readable. It includes an encyclopedic reference section available online that is longer than the main text of the book. This is where I recommend anyone not familiar with Chomsky's work to begin; it's the most comprehensive and accessible compilation of his thoughts. Many of the discussions quoted within were in question and answer format. The audience participation is included in the text. Many of the audience questions are obvious questions anyone unfamiliar with the subject matter would have, and the opportunity to read Chomsky's detailed responses to a huge range of questions offers much deeper understanding than simply reading one of his books by yourself. *Understanding Power* is a glimpse into the mind of one of the most brilliant, profound, and insightful social critics of our time. He touches on virtually every influential issue in US history, and readers are bound to walk away with a much deeper appreciation for how power functions in society, and how divergent American standard explanations of the world are from reality.

One of the reasons you don't hear about Noam Chomsky on mainstream media is because they could never keep up with him. His mental prowess; his deep research; his heavily-cited (and credible, because I check citations of all books I read) works; all come together to present to us one of the great thinkers and writers of our time. Instead of the pablum and poop we are fed from the agendaed TV personalities and ghost written ideological pamphlet books we get, Chomsky takes thinking to read it. I highly recommend him to anyone who really wants to know what's really going on.

In this book Chomsky covers a wide variety of topics that all are related to power in some way or another. The style is interesting, it is basically a book full of transcripts from various talks he has given. Unlike a lot of books in this genre it is very easy to read and understand. He also provides a lot of citations and sources to back up his information. I learned quite a bit from this book, but at times I wished that there was interactions between Chomsky and those that may disagree with him. At one point he talks about how he doesn't want people to look to him for answers, but that is difficult to do, and in a way this book doesn't help. It seems like he is there providing the answers for you. He certainly has some good analysis, but I think we should also follow his advice and look into these things ourselves. This is certainly worth reading again. On a slightly unrelated note, I read this with my kindle and was kind of disappointed by the organization of the book. It didn't seem to know where the chapters started and began, which made it difficult for me to determine how much time I

had left in a given chapter. However, this didn't really take away from the content.

I think this is a great look at how power is manipulated towards a small group of people with tons of money. Chris Hedges and Noam Chomsky have both said in their books that power is controlled by those with the most violence. In understanding power Noam Chomsky says that the powerful will allow the people to play around the edges and protest as long as the actual power isn't threatened. Look at Zuccatti Park, the people were allowed to stay there until it started to actually affect the minds of the average person. Then the violence broke out. Look at any peaceful group get together, it always ends in violence, violence created by the state. Until people are willing to stand their ground against the violence it will only escalate just like in the 60's when the government gunned down their own unarmed citizens. "Ohio, Kent State, Everything was so great". There are interviews with the military that you can watch where they talk about the reason they ended the Vietnam war was to make sure they had enough troops on the ground in the U.S. to fight its own people in case they tried to take over and change the government. Anyone who wants to be a dissident, this book is a must read. It makes you think about things that you may not consider such as the alienation by friends and family because when you don't tow the line it makes people very uncomfortable and they don't want to be around you. It's a tough life, I know. Read the book, you decide.

I find it difficult to use Chomsky as a source because he is feeding the readers an analysis from his own laborious, tedious research. But, Understanding Power provides a whole list of citations and footnotes that Chomsky references and bases his conclusions upon. The reader can dig deeper into these issues and draw conclusions similar to Chomsky's, which is why I love this guy. He understands that speaking in terms that the layman may not understand will not amount to any progress, and this is seen in Noam's clarity. Also, like Foucault, Chomsky does not have an agenda or "side

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