

FERMENT

Vol IX,#3

May 1 1995

**The Cambridge, Massachusetts
Pseudo-Science Tournament:**

*Transformational Grammars ride out to joust with
Statistical Control*

OR

Demonization in the service (?) of truth.

<p>(1)“<i>Rethinking Camelot</i>”:Noam Chomsky / South End Press ,1993</p> <p>(2)“<i>In Retrospect</i> ”: Robert S. McNamara / Times Books, 1995</p>
--

“Blood lust has its merits, but money talks even louder.”

-Noam Chomsky, in Rethinking Camelot

*“Statistics”, he smiled, “McNamara dotes on statistics,
but I’ve never been able to make head nor tail of them*

“...Sam Adams, in War of Numbers

I begin by invoking an image, utterly fantastic of course, no doubt scientifically impossible yet which , given the utterly incredible character of all the things that we do know about the

planning, execution and aftermath of the Kennedy assassination, is no more improbable:

In the days following the events of November 22, 1963, a team of doctors from some neurological research institute , secretly funded by the CIA , are dispatched to Bethesda Memorial Hospital and to Dealey Plaza. Mission: to sweep up, collect or confiscate as many fragments of the grey matter one sees on the Zapruder film, extruding from JFK's skull at the moment of impact. These bits of his brain are carried back to the institute, cleaned in chemical baths , reconstructed with the help of computer enhancements with meticulous care, and so forth. The ultimate purpose of this macabre paleontology? : to determine, from the suggestions of the remaining thought traces , which of these two words is inscribed in the residual pulp : "*Withdrawal!*" , or "*Escalation!*" .

Thirty years later we find this very question at the center of a storm of uniquely quaint academic irrelevance. Journalists, writers, politicians and scholars heatedly engage in the lists, swinging their maces, lances, chains, battle-axes at one another under the opposing banners, "withdrawal" versus "escalation", as if the very survival or demolition of the age-old Yankee dream pivoted on this single issue.

For Noam Chomsky the question is so serious that he has devoted an entire book to its resolution, although only a small portion of its pages really focus on the matter at hand. The rest of it is filled with hysterical shrieking, name-calling, accusation, rant, and other staples of Chomskian rhetoric. In addition, most of that

part of the book which supposedly deals with this pressing concern is given over to snide attacks on John Newman's exhaustive research effort on the same issue, (*JFK and Vietnam*, Warner Books).

Newman concludes that JFK would have pulled us out of Vietnam, and darkly suggests that his resisting to the pressures put upon him to commit ground troops was one of the key factors in the decision to assassinate him.

Chomsky's thesis is that - but before I present his thesis I want to say a few words about his peculiar rhetorical style. Although Noam Chomsky has gambled (*and won!*) his scientific career on the dogmatic insistence that a sentence must have a clear, unambiguous meaning to be acceptable as true English, his own writing conjures up whirlwinds of irrelevancies, almost always in the accusative mode, from which it is often impossible to extract any coherent meaning.

To take one example out of many: in two short pages of "Rethinking Camelot" (28,29), he rambles on, in series and in parallel with scarcely any discursive connection, about:

(1) Andrew Jackson's genocidal war against the Seminole Indians.

(2) The evil soul of the historian Tacitus, who made the mistake of communicating the very astute observation that "*Crime once exposed has no refuge but in audacity.*" Chomsky labels this "The Tacitus Principle". In some places he calls it, "*The vile maxim of the masters of mankind*".

(3) The POW/MIA smoke screen

(4) The re-arming of the Khmer Rouge in 1980's

(5) The corruption of Thailand by the West

(6) France's insistence in the 19th century that Haiti pay a huge indemnity for the crime of winning its revolution.

(7) The suppressed accounts of brutal treatment of Italian and German POW's during WWII by the US and Britain. None of this has anything at all to do with the thesis of Rethinking Camelot. It takes a bit of work to discover what this thesis is, but by pasting together bits and pieces scattered through the book, it seems to go something like this:

(i) In 1492, Europe launched a 500 year long genocidal war against the human race.

(ii) The Vietnamese war was the most recent and the most horrible chapter of that war.

(iii) It really ought to be called "Kennedy's War", because JFK pursued it with an insane zeal second only to Hitler's hatred of the Jews.

(iv) JFK was a right-wing fanatic, which is why he enthusiastically supported a terror state in Vietnam up to 1961.

(v) The decisive escalation of the war from indirectly supported state terror to direct naked aggression was done by JFK in August of 1961.

In addition to these 5 points, there are several buzz-words, some of which we have already seen. They reiterate through the text like the Leitmotifs of Wagner's operas: the 500 year conquest; the Columbian era; Kennedy's war; Kennedy's escalation; the

masters of mankind; the cultural managers; the merchant warriors; the Kennedy cult, etc.

It is easy to parody of this style, which I dub "*academic neo-Maoism*". Here is an example:

" Invoking the Tacitus Principle, the masters of mankind have instructed the cultural managers of the 'liberal' academy and the Free Press to delude the oppressed victims of the 500 year European war on mankind as to the well-laid conspiracies of the military-industrial complex and the Tri-Lateral Commission....."

You can say anything you want with this style of writing; it is neither literature, journalism or scholarship. It is more like a "*vile, nefarious, conspiratorial blood-bath , an infamous assault on language! and truth !!* ", which should not surprise anyone who knows how his linguistic theories achieve the same ends by other means.

Once in awhile, Chomsky does manage to state his thesis in a reasonable way. On page 33 he writes: "*As Kennedy took office, the US position seemed to face imminent collapse. Kennedy therefore escalated the war in 1961-62.*"

We now look through the book to discover what this initial escalation consisted of. On page 23, he tells us: "*On October 11.1961, Kennedy ordered [...] 12 planes especially equipped for counter-insurgency warfare.*"

This, which Chomsky would have us believe is a massive escalation, did not occur in August, but in October. What then does he mean when he states in several places that this

fundamental rupture of the threshold 'twixt peace and war occurred in August? Examining the record, available from many independent sources, we realize that what he's talking about wasn't devised by Kennedy at all. Instead he's alluding to the infamous Taylor-Rostow recommendations, prepared for and approved by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. These called for:

- (1) Helicopters manned by American pilots
- (2) Airforce units manned by Americans
- (3) 10,000 combat troops
- (4) Contingency planning for US air strikes, in

both the South and the North .

From this amazing shopping list, Kennedy approved only (1) and (2). In fact, as Newman tells us , Kennedy stunned the Joint Chiefs of Staff in his memo of November 22, 1961, (NSAM#111) with his firm refusal to commit ground combat troops.

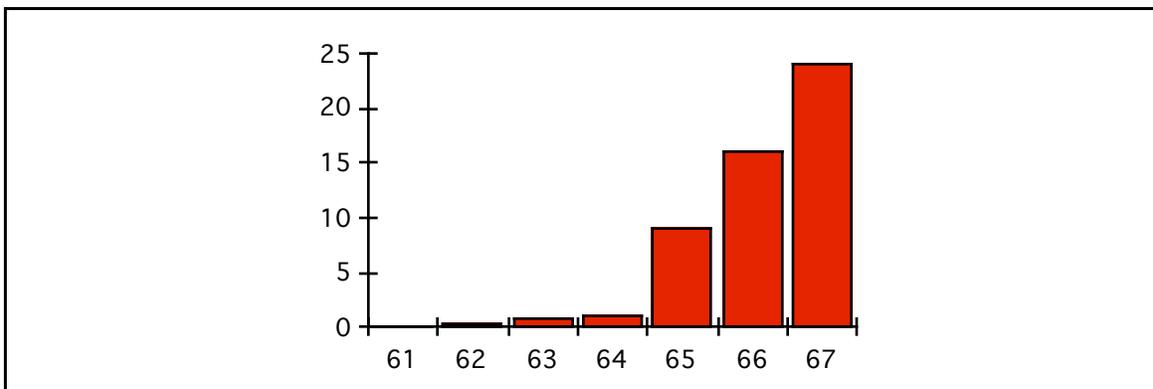
This doesn't sound like escalation: if anything one gets the picture of an embattled man trying to keep a hoard of rabid dogs at bay by throwing them a few airplanes!

When we speak of escalation, we want to use the word in a reasonable way: The extreme right wing of the anti-abortion movement tells us that any contraceptive device is a "murder weapon" ! One of the very important features of the Vietnamese war is that, when seen from the inside, it appears like a series of blunders made by lots of people with a wide range of intentions through idealism, patriotism, fanaticism, greed, stupidity, incompetence, delusion, and so on.

Seen from the outside, that is to say in much the same way as the Vietnamese themselves saw it, it looks more like the explosion of a supernova, or the collapsing of a Black Hole: A natural phenomenon unfolding in a manner that clearly follows deterministic physical laws, although we may never be able to write them down or even know what they are.

This undeviating chain of events goes right from the withdrawal of the French in 1955 to the departure of the Americans in 1975, through Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon.

I therefore propose that we, in order to determine what we mean by an 'escalation', draw a graph representing the official figures for the numbers of American military personnel in Vietnam from 1960 to 1968.* This graph doesn't give us any information about the intensity of the bombings, the loss of life, the destruction of the countryside and so on, but it does provide a very rough index on which to pin the mounting intensity of the war:



* This chart has been put together from data supplied by The Encyclopedia of the American Military, Vol II, Scribner's, 1994, and "The Limits of Intervention", Townsend Hoopes, Murray 1970

VIETNAM: ESCALATION IN UNITS OF 20,000 TROOPS

Notice the regularity of the curve from 1960 to 1964: were Chomsky to content himself with the argument that JFK was something different from the peace-loving humanitarian that certain people like to imagine him as being, he would certainly have a case. It is true that the number of military advisors sent to Vietnam rose from less than 800 in 1960 to 16,000 by the time Kennedy was killed. This is an escalation of sorts, and it comes down to what one means by escalation. It also implies that we must be careful not to smudge the line of demarcation between "Kennedy" and the "Kennedy Administration" too much, a nicety that never phases Chomsky. Although if these terms were freely interchangeable it is unlikely that Kennedy would have been assassinated. Nor do I think that JFK ought to be excused for his part in precipitating the eventual catastrophe.

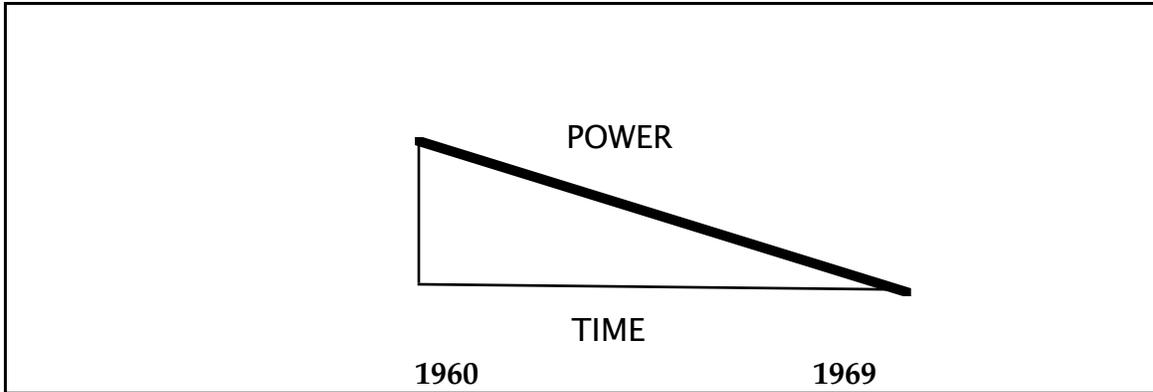
However the number of troops in Vietnam jumps from about 40,000 at the beginning of 1965 to over 180,000 by the end of the year ! The slope of the Kennedy engagement is 5,000 soldiers per year; that of the Johnson engagement after the Tonkin Bay resolution is 150,000 soldiers per year, a 30-fold increase.

Is abortion murder? Did Kennedy escalate? I've the impression that the abuse of language is at about the same level.

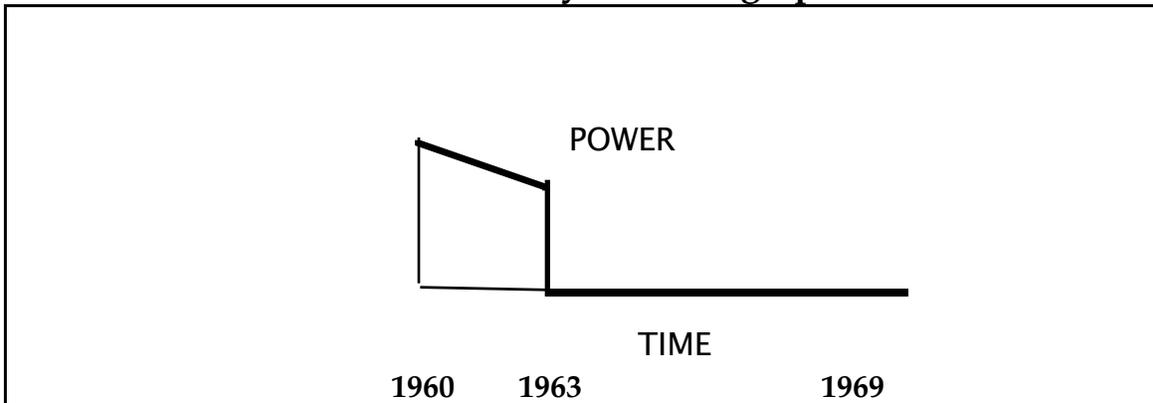
The most balanced view out of all those I've encountered in the literature seems to me to be that of Arthur Schlesinger ,Jr. In his biography of Robert F. Kennedy, in which he writes: (*Robert*

Kennedy and his times” Arthur M. Schlesinger, 1978, Vol II, pg758)“... **Kennedy’s Vietnam legacy was dual and contradictory. He had left on the public record the impression of a major national stake in the defense of South Vietnam against communism. He had left steadily enlarging programs of military and economic assistance. He had left national security advisors who for three years had been urging an American expeditionary force and a total commitment to the salvation of South Vietnam. On the other hand, he had consistently refused to send such a force or make such a commitment. He had left a formal plan, processed successfully through the Pentagon, for the withdrawal of advisors by the end of 1965. He had left a public campaign, belatedly begun, to instill the idea that American involvement must be limited in a war that only the South Vietnamese could win. And he had left private opposition, repeatedly and emphatically stated, to the dispatch of American ground forces.”**

This graph of the escalation is a natural lead into our analysis of the Robert S. McNamara memoir; for he too presents a graph. McNamara, as he tells us, minored in mathematics when he studied at Berkeley. That he did so appears to be one of our national tragedies. McNamara drew a picture for Kennedy as a kind of lesson to him on the wise use of power. “This”, he said, “shows what I think your administration should look like” :



As in so many of McNamara's projections, this would only come to demonstrate once more his incompetence in the design and interpretation of mathematical images for the understanding of the real world. The historically accurate graph is this one :



Robert S. McNamara's major contribution, (of which he is quite proud) , to the advance of science and civilization, lies in the application of a subject called "statistical control theory" to problems of higher management. It is a methodology which he and a team of like-minded geniuses at the Harvard School of Business Administration developed in 1945. They were then able to sell it and themselves to the Ford Motor Company where they became known as the 'Whiz Kids'. It is a mystery to me why Ford is still in business.

Statistical Control of an enterprise begins with drawing up a (finite) list of 'vital signs', numerical variables that are judged to be reliable indicators of success or failure. Records on them are kept up to date and diligently monitored. Their increase is taken as evidence of your institutional health. If they begin to fall you see what has to be done to reverse the trend, so that they once again begin to rise (*is it indelicate to use the word, 'inflate'?*)

Let us give McNamara the opportunity to explain "statistical control" in his own words,(Page 237):

" Since my years at Harvard, I had gone by the rule that it is not enough to conceive of an objective and a plan to carry it out; you must monitor the plan to determine whether you are achieving the objective.... I was convinced that....we could find variables that might indicate our success or failure. So we measured the targets destroyed in the North, the traffic down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the weapons seized, the enemy body count, etc..... Critics point to the use of the body count as an example of my obsession with numbers.."This guy McNamara" they say, " he tries to quantify everything". Obviously there are things you cannot quantify: honor and beauty for example. But things you can count you ought to count. Loss of life is one when you are fighting a war of attrition."

One doesn't know where to begin in response to this astonishing confession. Clearly his degree from Berkeley in economics with a minor in math gave him a familiarity with statistics but no notion of how to use them correctly. If you chose

a variable which you intend to monitor , you must try to determine if :

(1) This variable is a reliable measure of progress or defeat. A variable such as "body count" was in fact very effective in the context of Nazi Germany in which the objective was genocide. The Germans kept close tabs on the numbers of Jews being exterminated. But when the objective is "to thwart the morale of dedicated Communists", body counts are ridiculous.

(2) That the methods used in gathering data are giving you accurate numbers; in particular, that your yourself are not biasing your data by virtue of your expectations . Collecting accurate figures for the 'death toll of the enemy' under battle conditions, and in a situation in which one could not distinguish friend from foe, was simply impossible. The officers of the ARVN would then inflate whatever figures they obtained several times, because they knew that the Americans wanted high body counts. Another inflation would occur when the Americans transmitted what they had been given to the upper command, because they knew that McNamara was obsessed with statistics.

But the ugliest part of this farce came when, as anyone can discover through a little research, is that McNamara wasn't even honest with these figures, that he himself scorned his greatest discovery in the history of pseudo-mathematics!

There happens to be another book standing right now on the shelves of the bourgeois bookstores, which tells us a great deal about McNamara's contempt for the American people and for his own methods: "The War of Numbers: An Intelligence

Memorandum", by Sam Adams (*Steerforth Press 1994*) Adams was, (he died in 1988 of a mysterious heart attack) the ex-CIA agent who, on January 23,1982, went public on CBS with detailed information on the extent to which the Pentagon was systematically falsifying the official figures on VC casualties and the Order of Battle (OB). This led to General Westmoreland's libel suit against CBS and the long stream of public revelations that came out during the trial.

Here are the relevant passages from Adam's book, (page 212) :

“ MACV [Military Assistance Command, Vietnam] discovered its vast underestimate of Vietcong numbers in late 1966....At this point, the main resistance against one came from the Pentagon, including the office of the secretary of defense, Robert S. McNamara. As McNamara explained to an aide in late January, he realized that the official OB was all wrong, but that he was not yet prepared to tell Congress . He meant what he said. On 6 March 1967, he briefed a Congressional committee using the official numbers, the same ones he knew to be low.....

One morning, shortly before the start of the scheduled conference, a colonel from J-2 stopped by Lynn's desk with the suggestion that the strengths at which Lynn was carrying his six VC units were 'way too high' . Lynn denied it, at which the colonel simply picked up Lynn's strength sheet, crossed out the numbers by each regiment, and penciled in new ones, on the average one-third lower. To Lynn's amazement, a unit which he had carried with 3,100 men became 1,900 instead....Gorman

remarked that by early September, “You could march a VC regiment down the hall, and they wouldn’t put it in the OB.....

An order arrived (Sept 1967) from Secretary McNamara’s office saying that McNamara wanted the newly agreed upon OB number of some 240,000 to be “retroactively readjusted”.....

“The ‘retroactive readjustment’ took place in the third week of September...the readjustment was simple. A J-2 officer chalked a curve on a blackboard. On the right hand end of the curve he wrote the number agreed upon at the Saigon conference 241,000 ...He stepped back to look at the curve from a distance, then returned to the board to write

285,400 next to August 66 and 204,700 next to August 65.”

It is possible to establish a connection between McNamara and Chomsky, in that their contributions to pseudo-science were both concocted and developed in that cradle of American day-dreams in the name of science, Cambridge, Massachusetts. It is my conviction that our future historians will come to recognize that the twin presence of Harvard and M.I.T. in the same place made Cambridge the most dangerous city in the whole United States, more than New York, Chicago, Miami or even Washington, D.C. It is ideas , ultimately, that restore or ruin the world, and in terms of the density of sinister thinking, much of which has been actualized in our own day, there are few places that compete with Cambridge : *Pragmatism, Skinner boxes, Behavioral Modification, Cybernetics, Artificial Intelligence, Statistical Control, Transformational Grammar, strategic hamlets, Sociobiology, apologetics for nuclear power, electronic battlefields, Bean-*

Bayogian Psychotherapy , etc., etc. Cambridge is decidedly not for the timid.

Quite apart from his theories and their 'retroactive readjustment', the problem with all of McNamara's memoir is that he is one of those persons whose professional careers have so conditioned them to compulsive lying , that they actually become incapable of formulating true statements. Were McNamara to be injected with a truth serum, sodium pentathol for example, nothing about him would change: his sincere state is one in which he is relentlessly speaking in falsehoods.

Despite all the apologetics and disclaimers in the memoir, McNamara was a ferocious, even demented, hawk all through the Vietnamese war, and if he did express some reservations from time to time, it must only have been because he was afraid of the possible reckoning to come. It was certainly no accident that he was the person charged, on August 6th, 1964 , by the Johnson administration to recount that monstrous fabrication of half-truths, fantasies and lies, the Vietnamese attack on the destroyer Maddox, that led to the Tonkin Bay resolution and the real escalation of the war.

On page 95 McNamara finds time to contribute his own opinions to the grey matter debate. He adds nothing new to what is already known and, as usual, is primarily concerned with covering his own ass:

“ What would John F Kennedy have done if he had lived? I have been asked that question countless times over the last

thirty years. Thus far, I have refused to answer for two reasons: Apart from what I have related, the president did not tell me what he planned to do in the future....

...But today I feel differently. Having reviewed the record in detail, and with the advantage of hindsight, I think it highly possible that , had President Kennedy lived, he would have pulled us out of Vietnam. He would have concluded that the South Vietnamese were incapable of defending themselves, and that Saigon's grave political weaknesses made it unwise to try to effect the limitation of South Vietnamese forces by sending U.S. combat troops on a large scale. I think that he would have come to that conclusion even if he reasoned, as I believe he would have, that South Vietnam and, ultimately, Southeast Asia, would then be lost to Communism.....

.... So I conclude that John Kennedy would have eventually gotten out of Vietnam rather than more deeply in. I express this judgment now because, in light of it, I must explain how and why we - including Lyndon Baines Johnson - who continued on in policy-making roles after President Kennedy's death made the decisions leading to the eventual deployment to Vietnam of half a million US combat troops.”

It should come as no surprise to anyone that he finishes this passage by throwing the blame onto the shoulders of LBJ who, it could be argued, was only responding to the dubious statistics that McNamara was feeding him.

There is, in this entire book, only one passage that one can trust as being reasonably truthful. This is a transcription, on page

65 , of a private memo sent by Kennedy to Henry Cabot Lodge in Saigon on September 17, 1963, the eve of the coup that ousted Diem and Nhu. I don't think that even McNamara would dare to tamper with the historical record, so we can assume that Kennedy really wrote the things that are presented here:

" CAP 63516

EYES ONLY PERSONAL FOR AMBASSADOR LODGE. DEPT. PASS IMMEDIATELY. DELIVER ONLY COPY. NO OTHER DISTRIBUTION IN DEPT. WHATEVER, FROM THE PRESIDENT.

1. Highest level meeting today has approved broad outline of an action.....program designed to obtain from GVN if possible, reforms and personnel necessary to maintain support of Vietnamese and US opinion in war against Viet Cong.....

2. We see no good opportunity for action to remove present government in near future.

[...]

4. (a). Diem should get everyone back to work and get them to focus on winning the war....A real spirit of reconciliation could work wonders on the people he leads; a punitive, harsh or autocratic attitude could only lead to further resistance.

(b). Buddhists and students . Let them out and leave them unmolested. This more than anything else would demonstrate the return of a better day and the refocussing on the main object at hand - the war

[.....]

(d) Secret and combat police - Confine its role to operations against the VC - and abandon operations against non-Communist

opposition groups thereby indicating clearly that a period of reconciliation and political stability has returned.

5. Elections - These should be held, should be free, and should be widely observed.

6. Specific reforms are apt to have little impact without dramatic, symbolic move which convinces Vietnamese that reforms are real.... this we think would require Nhu's departure from Saigon and preferably Vietnam at least for extended vacation. We recognize the strong possibility that these and other pressures may not produce this result, but we are convinced that it is necessary to try.

9. Meanwhile there is increasing concern here with strictly military aspects of the problem, both in terms of actual progress of operations and of need to make effective case with Congress for continued prosecution of the effort.....

This memo is quite interesting, because it does lend some credence to Chomsky's view that Kennedy would not have pulled out the troops, but definitively refutes the notion that he supported the structure of a 'terror state' and had no concern for human rights. The phrases highlighted in sections 5 and 6 are striking exercises in black humor. Either they are a coded message to 'dump the Diems', or it shows that Kennedy was living in a kind of cloud cuckoo land, quite typical of the American establishment which believes that, no matter what the realities of the situation, some naive application of 'democracy' is a cure for all ills.

To conclude this comparison of the views of Chomsky and McNamara as to what really happened in Vietnam, I ought to state why I think that Chomsky's bitterness is to some degree understandable. This indeed gives his ideas some merit:

Chomsky is really angry at Kennedy because, being the kind of conceited preppy and self-styled liberal that he was, JFK didn't have the good sense to choose people like Chomsky for his Brain Trust, that group of intellectuals, (largely associated with Boston and Cambridge), who were given the privileged taste of real power for a short time as advisors to the president.

I agree with Chomsky in this matter. Who can seriously argue that an intelligent pseudo-scientist like Chomsky would not have been a better choice for Secretary of Defense than an utter dumbbell like McNamara? Or that a dedicated anarchist radical like Howard Zinn would not have forged a better foreign policy for us than a fatuous creep like McGeorge Bundy?

There exists in Boston and Cambridge, (and in some other university circles), even today, a groaning, grumbling underground of embittered intellectuals, all mad as hell because the American government has never understood that they have to be mollified and ought to at least be listened to. Look at Mitterand's France, with its *Pouvoir Intellectuel* !

Among these we may count Chomsky, Zinn, Robert Coles, Seymour Mellman, Robert Jay Lifton, etc., etc.....and, in the younger generation, myself - all of us so many guilt-ridden prophets of doom.

You might call us the *Jeremiahs of the coffee table* !
