Chomsky: again the attacks

By Alex Mahowald

Noam Chomsky, along with the rest of MIT's once-noted radicals, has been an imposing figure on the MIT campus. Student (and faculty) interest in political affairs has tapered off, and with it has gone the attention of the media, by their writing or speaking, had sharpened the important issues for the campus. Chomsky hasn't spoken to a large audience at MIT since his speech in Krugman during the Cambodian uprising two years ago.

But Chomsky's appeal never had been limited to the MIT campus (my father first discovered him on the NBC Today Show) and early this year by invitation he went to England's Trinity College to deliver the first of the Bertrand Russell lecture series. Random House was sufficiently .. confident in the two talks in a hardcover edition.

Problems of Knowledge and Freedom, stylistically at least, strikingly resembles Chomsky's well known America Power and the New Mandarins: the loose essay form, whether delivered on paper or from the lectern, suits his method of tackling subjects, freeing him from the unity, consistency, or parallel structure a book format might enforce. But this plan of presentation can have its drawbacks; since the reader may find himself tantalized by the possibilities for further exploration of a subject only to see it pushed aside to make way for a short, biting attack in a different area.

In Problems, the first piece is an analytic philosophical piece on one of Russell's pet questions—do we know anything independent of experience? Or, to phrase the question in a manner more suited to Chomsky's thought on the subject, will two humans subjected to rather different sets of experience from different knowledge structures? Chomsky's field is linguistics and he uses examples from his and other expert's research to show that certain invariant properties exist among all human languages, properties that have no functional significance. More likely than not, some physiological property of the human mind predisposes us to these language constructions, and by extrapolating we could hypothesize that man's ability to extend his knowledge structures, and by extra-

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not only the style but the content follows Mandarins. Early in his lecture, Chomsky chooses a theme of preening for the liberation of man's creative impulse. Before too long, however, he loses track of his original perspective to lash out at American foreign and, to a lesser extent, domestic policy. As in Mandarins, he begins with the broad, sweeping charge, then follows them up with the supporting evidence, suitably foot

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