

Our children are learning lies

How does thought control work in societies that call themselves free? Why are famous journalists so eager, almost as a reflex, to minimise the culpability of a prime minister who shares responsibility for the unprovoked attack on a defenceless people, for laying waste to their land and for killing at least 100,000 people, most of them civilians, having sought to justify this epic crime with demonstrable lies? What made the BBC's Mark Mardell describe the invasion of Iraq as "a vindication for him"? Why have broadcasters never associated the British or American state with terrorism? Why have such privileged communicators, with unlimited access to the facts, lined up to describe an unobserved, unverified, illegitimate, cynically manipulated election, held under a brutal occupation, as "democratic", with the pristine aim of being "free and fair"? That quotation belongs to Helen Boaden, the director of BBC News.

Have she and the others read no history? Or is the history they know, or choose to know, subject to such amnesia and omission that it produces a world-view as seen only through a one-way moral mirror? There is no suggestion of conspiracy. This one-way mirror ensures that most of humanity is regarded in terms of its usefulness to "us", its desirability or expendability, its worthiness or unworthiness: for example, the notion of "good" Kurds in Iraq and "bad" Kurds in Turkey. The unerring assumption is that "we" in the dominant west have moral standards superior to "theirs". One of "their" dictators (often a former client of ours, such as Saddam Hussein) kills thousands of people and he is declared a monster, a second Hitler. When one of our leaders does the same he is viewed, at worst, like Blair, in Shakespearean terms. Those who kill people with car bombs are "terrorists"; those who kill far more people with cluster bombs are the noble occupants of a "quagmire".

Historical amnesia can spread quickly. Only ten years after the Vietnam war,

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which I reported, an opinion poll in the United States found that a third of Americans could not remember which side their government had supported. This demonstrated the insidious power of the dominant propaganda, that the war was essentially a conflict of “good” Vietnamese against “bad” Vietnamese, in which the Americans became “involved”, bringing democracy to the people of southern Vietnam faced with a “communist threat”. Such a false and dishonest assumption permeated the media coverage, with honourable exceptions. The truth is that the longest war of the 20th century was a war waged against Vietnam, north and south, communist and non-communist, by America. It was an unprovoked invasion of the people’s homeland and their lives, just like the invasion of Iraq. Amnesia ensures that, while the relatively few deaths of the invaders are constantly acknowledged, the deaths of up to five million Vietnamese are consigned to oblivion.

What are the roots of this? Certainly, “popular culture”, especially Hollywood movies, can decide what and how little we remember. Selective education at a tender age performs the same task. I have been sent a widely used revision guide for GCSE modern world history, on Vietnam and the cold war. This is learned by 14-to-16-year-olds in our schools. It informs their understanding of a pivotal period in history, which must influence how they make sense of today’s news from Iraq and elsewhere.

It is shocking. It says that under the 1954 Geneva Accord: “Vietnam was partitioned into communist north and democratic south.” In one sentence, truth is despatched. The final declaration of the Geneva conference divided Vietnam “temporarily” until free national elections were held on 26 July 1956. There was little doubt that Ho Chi Minh would win and form Vietnam’s first democratically elected government. Certainly, President Eisenhower was in no doubt of this. “I have never talked with a person knowledgeable in Indo-Chinese affairs,” he wrote, “who did not agree that . . . 80 per cent of the population would have voted for the communist Ho Chi Minh as their leader.”

Not only did the United States refuse to allow the UN to administer the agreed elections two years later, but the “democratic” regime in the south was an invention. One of the inventors, the CIA official Ralph McGehee, describes in his masterly book *Deadly Deceits* how a brutal expatriate mandarin, Ngo Dinh Diem, was imported from New Jersey to be “president” and a fake government was put in place. “The CIA,” he wrote, “was ordered to sustain that illusion through propaganda [placed in the media].”

Phoney elections were arranged, hailed in the west as “free and fair”, with

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American officials fabricating “an 83 per cent turnout despite Vietcong terror”. The GCSE guide alludes to none of this, nor that “the terrorists”, whom the Americans called the Vietcong, were also southern Vietnamese defending their homeland against the American invasion and whose resistance was popular. For Vietnam, read Iraq.

The tone of this tract is from the point of view of “us”. There is no sense that a national liberation movement existed in Vietnam, merely “a communist threat”, merely the propaganda that “the USA was terrified that many other countries might become communist and help the USSR – they didn’t want to be outnumbered”, merely that President Lyndon B Johnson “was determined to keep South Vietnam communist-free”. This proceeds quickly to the Tet Offensive of 1968, which “ended in the loss of thousands of American lives – 14,000 in 1969 – most were young men”. There is no mention of the millions of Vietnamese lives also lost in the offensive. And America merely began “a bombing campaign”: there is no mention of the greatest tonnage of bombs dropped in the history of warfare, of a military strategy that was deliberately designed to force millions of people to abandon their homes, and of chemicals used in a manner that profoundly changed the environment and the genetic order, leaving a once-bountiful land all but ruined.

This guide is from a private publisher, but its bias and omissions reflect that of the official syllabuses, such as the syllabus from Oxford and Cambridge, whose cold war section refers to Soviet “expansionism” and the “spread” of communism; there is not a word about the “spread” of rapacious America. One of its “key questions” is: “How effectively did the USA contain the spread of communism?” Good versus evil for untutored minds.

“Phew, loads for you to learn here . . .” say the authors of the revision guide, “so get it learned right now.” Phew, the British empire did not happen; there is nothing about the atrocious colonial wars that were models for the successor power, America, in Indonesia, Vietnam, Chile, El Salvador, Nicaragua, to name but a few along modern history’s imperial trail of blood of which Iraq is the latest.

And now Iran? The drumbeat has already begun. How many more innocent people have to die before those who filter the past and the present wake up to their moral responsibility to protect our memory and the lives of human beings?