

The war for truth

“**W**e had a great day,” said Sgt Eric Schrupf of the US Marines last Saturday. “We killed a lot of people.” He added: “We dropped a few civilians, but what do you do?” He said there were women standing near an Iraqi soldier, and one of them fell when he and other Marines opened fire. “I’m sorry,” said Sgt Schrupf, “but the chick was in the way”.

For me, what is remarkable about this story is that I heard almost the same words 36 years ago when a US Marine sergeant told me he had killed a pregnant woman and a child because they had “got in the way”.

That was in Vietnam, another country invaded by the US military machine, which left up to two million people dead and many more maimed and otherwise ruined. President Reagan called this “a noble cause”. The other day, President Bush called the invasion of Iraq, another unprovoked and piratical act, “a noble cause”.

In the years since Vietnam, the Americans have invaded and caused, directly and through stooges, great suffering in many other countries, but none tells us more about the current war than their enduring atrocity in Vietnam, known as the first “media war”.

Like their attack on Iraq, their invasion of Vietnam was accompanied by a racist contempt for the people. The Vietnamese were “gooks” and “slits” who would never fight, who would be crushed within weeks. As in Iraq today, the uncensored evidence of America’s killing was not shown on TV but covered up. General Colin Powell, Bush’s “liberal” Secretary of State, was promoted swiftly because he was given the job of covering up the infamous My Lai massacre. In the end, the Vietnamese defied the Hollywood script and expelled their invader, but at great cost. The Iraqis, up against two western air forces and a Disneyworld of weapons of mass destruction, are unlikely to share the same honour. And yet they, too, are not keeping to the script; and their extraordinary resistance against such overwhelming odds has required intensified propaganda in Washington and London: aimed not at them, but at us.

JOHN PILGER | THE WAR FOR TRUTH

Unlike in Vietnam, this propaganda, lying that is both crude and subtle, is now dispensed globally and marketed and controlled like a new niche product. Richard Gaisford, an “embedded” BBC reporter, said recently: “We have to check each story we have with (the military). And the captain, who’s our media liaison officer, will check with the colonel, and they will check with Brigade headquarters as well.”

David Miller, a media analyst at Stirling University, calls it “public relations genius”. It works like this. Once the official “line” is agreed and manufactured at the Coalition Press Information Centre in Kuwait and the \$1million press centre in Qatar, it is submitted to the White House, to what is known as the Office of Global Communications. It is then polished for British consumption by Blair’s staff of propagandists in Downing Street.

Truth, above all, is redundant. There is only “good” news or no news. For example, the arrival in Iraq of the British ship Sir Galahad with a miserable few hundred tons of humanitarian aid was a “good” story given wide coverage. What was missing was the truth that the Blair government continues to back Washington’s deliberate denial of \$5.4billion worth of humanitarian aid, including baby milk and medical supplies. This is “aid” which Iraq has paid for (from oil receipts) and the UN Security Council has approved.

What was also missing from such a moving tale of Britain-to-the-rescue was that, under pressure from Bush and Blair, the United Nations has been forced to close down its food distribution system in Iraq, which barely prevented famine in the pre-war period.

Blair’s lies about Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction and its alleged links with al-Qaeda have been exposed and rejected by the majority of the British people. He has since played his “conviction” card. Perhaps his last propaganda refuge is a call to support “our boys”.

On September 3, 1967, the Sunday Mirror published a dispatch of mine from Vietnam under the front page headline: “How can Britain approve a war like this?” Today’s Mirror asks the same question of the invasion of Iraq. The difference is that, unlike Blair, Prime Minister Harold Wilson denied an American president the use of British troops for his “coalition”. A poll in yesterday’s Mirror said that “78 per cent insist British forces must not be brought home until the war is over.” Polls themselves can make propaganda, with the question predetermining the answer. What if the question asked had been: “Do you support British forces being in Iraq given the absence of any ‘liberation’ and the rising number of civilian casualties?”

JOHN PILGER | THE WAR FOR TRUTH

I doubt whether it would have been anywhere near 78 per cent. There is undoubtedly a traditional reserve of support for “the troops”, no matter the dirty work they are sent to carry out. Blair’s manipulation of this should not be allowed to succeed. British troops may be better trained than the Americans; but this does not alter the fact that they are part of, indeed essential to, a criminal invasion of a country offering us no threat.

Trained in media manipulation (“public relations”), British military spokesmen lie as frequently as the Americans; if anything, their nonsense about “uprisings” is too specious by half. The truth they don’t tell is that the British siege of Basra is strangling the civilian population, causing great suffering to innocent, men, women and children in their homeland.

Imagine if Iraqi troops were doing the same to Coventry, a city of comparable size. Imagine the outrage: the popular resistance, regardless of who was in power in London. If we cannot imagine that, then we have fallen victim to a big lie that reverses right and wrong. If we cannot put ourselves in Iraqis’ shoes, in the shoes of the grieving family of the woman who was gunned down by Sgt Schrupf, “the chick who got in the way”, then we have cause indeed to worry. **JP**