

The war lovers

The war lovers I have known in real wars have usually been harmless, except to themselves. They were attracted to Vietnam and Cambodia, where drugs were plentiful. Bosnia, with its roulette of death, was another favorite. A few would say they were there “to tell the world”; the honest ones would say they loved it. “War is fun!” one of them had scratched on his arm. He stood on a land mine.

I sometimes remember these almost endearing fools when I find myself faced with another kind of war lover – the kind that has not seen war and has often done everything possible not to see it. The passion of these war lovers is a phenomenon; it never dims, regardless of the distance from the object of their desire. Pick up the Sunday papers and there they are, egocentrics of little harsh experience, other than a Saturday in Sainsbury’s. Turn on the television and there they are again, night after night, intoning not so much their love of war as their sales pitch for it on behalf of the court to which they are assigned. “There’s no doubt,” said Matt Frei, the BBC’s man in America, “that the desire to bring good, to bring American values to the rest of the world, and especially now to the Middle East ... is now increasingly tied up with military power.”

Frei said that on April 13, 2003, after George W. Bush had launched “Shock and Awe” on a defenseless Iraq. Two years later, after a rampant, racist, woefully trained, and ill-disciplined army of occupation had brought “American values” of sectarianism, death squads, chemical attacks, attacks with uranium-tipped shells and cluster bombs, Frei described the notorious 82nd Airborne as “the heroes of Tikrit.”

Last year, he lauded Paul Wolfowitz, architect of the slaughter in Iraq, as “an intellectual” who “believes passionately in the power of democracy and grassroots development.” As for Iran, Frei was well ahead of the story. In June 2003, he told BBC viewers: “There may be a case for regime change in Iran, too.”

JOHN PILGER | THE WAR LOVERS

How many men, women, and children will be killed, maimed, or sent mad if Bush attacks Iran? The prospect of an attack is especially exciting for those war lovers understandably disappointed by the turn of events in Iraq. “The unimaginable but ultimately inescapable truth,” wrote Gerard Baker in the Times last month, “is that we are going to have to get ready for war with Iran. ... If Iran gets safely and unmolested to nuclear status, it will be a threshold moment in the history of the world, up there with the Bolshevik revolution and the coming of Hitler.” Sound familiar? In February 2003, Baker wrote that “victory [in Iraq] will quickly vindicate U.S. and British claims about the scale of the threat Saddam poses.”

The “coming of Hitler” is a rallying cry of war lovers. It was heard before NATO’s “moral crusade to save Kosovo” (Blair) in 1999, a model for the invasion of Iraq. In the attack on Serbia, 2 percent of NATO’s missiles hit military targets; the rest hit hospitals, schools, factories, churches, and broadcasting studios. Echoing Blair and a clutch of Clinton officials, a massed media chorus declared that “we” had to stop “something approaching genocide” in Kosovo, as Timothy Garton Ash wrote in 2002 in the Guardian. “Echoes of the Holocaust,” said the front pages of the Daily Mirror and the Sun. The Observer warned of a “Balkan Final Solution.”

The recent death of Slobodan Milosevic took the war lovers and war sellers down memory lane. Curiously, “genocide” and “Holocaust” and the “coming of Hitler” were now missing – for the very good reason that, like the drumbeat leading to the invasion of Iraq and the drumbeat now leading to an attack on Iran, it was all bullshit. Not misinterpretation. Not a mistake. Not blunders. Bullshit.

The “mass graves” in Kosovo would justify it all, they said. When the bombing was over, international forensic teams began subjecting Kosovo to minute examination. The FBI arrived to investigate what was called “the largest crime scene in the FBI’s forensic history.” Several weeks later, having found not a single mass grave, the FBI and other forensic teams went home.

In 2000, the International War Crimes Tribunal announced that the final count of bodies found in Kosovo’s “mass graves” was 2,788. This included Serbs, Roma, and those killed by “our” allies, the Kosovo Liberation Front. It meant that the justification for the attack on Serbia (“225,000 ethnic Albanian men aged between 14 and 59 are missing, presumed dead,” the U.S. ambassador-at-large David Scheffer had claimed) was an invention. To my knowledge, only the Wall Street Journal admitted this. A former senior NATO planner, Michael McGwire, wrote that “to describe the bombing as ‘humanitarian intervention’ [is] really

JOHN PILGER | THE WAR LOVERS

grotesque.” In fact, the NATO “crusade” was the final, calculated act of a long war of attrition aimed at wiping out the very idea of Yugoslavia.

For me, one of the more odious characteristics of Blair, and Bush, and Clinton, and their eager or gulled journalistic court, is the enthusiasm of sedentary, effete men (and women) for bloodshed they never see, bits of body they never have to retch over, stacked morgues they will never have to visit, searching for a loved one. Their role is to enforce parallel worlds of unspoken truth and public lies. That Milosevic was a minnow compared with industrial-scale killers such as Bush and Blair belongs to the former.

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