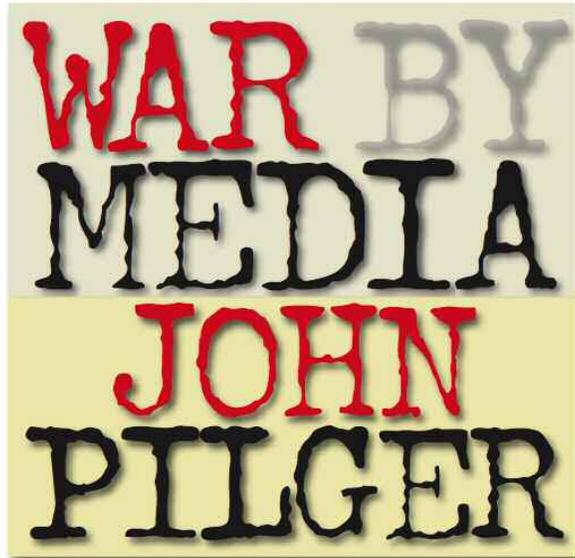


WAR BY

MEDIA

JOHN

PILGER



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The Heyman Center for the Humanities at Columbia University in New York brought together John Pilger, Seymour Hersh, Robert Fisk and Charles Glass for a discussion entitled "Breaking the Silence: War, Lies and Empire" on 14 April 2006. This is a transcript of John Pilger's address

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# DURING

the Cold War, a group of Russian journalists toured the United States. On the final day of their visit, they were asked by their hosts for their impressions. “I have to tell you,” said their spokesman, “that we were astonished to find, after reading all the newspapers and watching TV, that all the opinions on all the vital issues were, by and large, the same. To get that result in our country, we imprison people, we tear out their fingernails. Here, you don’t have that. What’s the secret? How do you do it?”

What is the secret? It’s a question now urgently asked of those whose job is to keep the record straight: who in this country have extraordinary constitutional freedom. I refer to journalists, of course, a small group who hold privileged sway over the way we think, even the way we use language.

I have been a journalist for more than 40 years. Although I am based in London, I have worked all over the world, including the United States, and I have reported America’s wars. My experience is that what the Russian journalists were referring to is censorship by omission, the product of a parallel world of unspoken truth and public myths and lies: in other words, censorship by journalism, which today has become war by journalism.

For me, this is the most virulent and powerful form of censorship, fuelling an indoctrination that runs deep in western societies, deeper than many journalists themselves understand or will admit to. Its power is such that it can mean the difference between life and death for untold numbers of people in faraway countries, like Iraq.

During the 1970s, I filmed secretly in Czechoslovakia, then a Stalinist dictatorship. I interviewed members of the dissident group, Charter 77. One of them, the novelist Zdenek Urbanek, told me, “We are more fortunate than you in the West, in one respect. We believe nothing of what we read in the newspapers and watch on television, nothing of the official truth. Unlike you, we have learned to read between the lines of the media. Unlike you, we know that that real truth is always subversive.” By subversive, he meant that truth comes from the ground up, almost never from the top down. (Vandana Shiva has called this ‘subjugated knowledge’).

A venerable cliché is that truth is the first casualty in wartime. I disagree. Journalism is the first casualty. The first American war I reported was Vietnam. I went there from 1966 to the last day. When it was all over, the magazine *Encounter* published an article by Robert

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Elegant, another correspondent who covered Vietnam. “For the first time in modern history,” he wrote, “the outcome of a war was determined not on the battlefield but on the printed page and, above all, on the television screen.” He was accusing journalists of losing the war by opposing it in their work.

Robert Elegant’s view became the received wisdom in America and still is. This official truth has determined how every American war since Vietnam has been reported. In Iraq, the “embedded” reporter was invented because the generals believed the Robert Elegant thesis: that critical reporting had “lost” Vietnam. How wrong they are.

On my first day as a young reporter in Saigon, I called on the bureaus of the main newspapers and TV companies. I noticed most of them had a gruesome photo gallery pinned on the wall – pictures of the bodies of Vietnamese and American soldiers holding up severed ears and testicles. In one office was a photograph of a man being tortured. Above the torturer’s head was a stick-on comic strip balloon with the words: “That’ll teach you to talk to the press.”

None of these pictures had ever been published, or even put on the wire.

I asked why. The response was that “New York” would reject them, because the readers would never accept them. Anyway, to publish them would be to “sensationalise”; it would not be “objective” or “impartial”. At first, I accepted the apparent logic of this: that atrocities surely were aberrations by definition. I, too, had grown up on John Wayne movies of the “good war” against Germany and Japan, an ethical bath that had left us westerners pure of soul and altruistic towards our fellow man and heroic. We did not torture. We did not kill women and children. We were the permanent good guys.

However, this did not explain the so-called “free fire zones” that turned entire provinces into places of slaughter: provinces like Quang Ngai, where the My Lai massacre was only one of a number of unreported massacres. It did not explain the helicopter “turkey shoots”. It did not explain people dragged along dirt roads, roped from neck to neck, by jeeps filled with doped and laughing GIs and why they kept human skulls enscribed with the words, “One down, one million to go.”

The atrocities were not aberrations. The war itself was an atrocity. That was the “big story” and it was seldom news. Yes, the tactics and effectiveness of the military were questioned by reporters, but the word “invasion” was almost never used. The fiction of a well-intentioned, blundering giant, stuck in an Asian quagmire, was promoted by most journalists, incessantly. It was left to whistleblowers at home to tell the subversive truth – those like Daniel Ellsberg, and mavericks like Seymour Hersh with his extraordinary scoop of the My Lai massacre. There were 649 reporters in Vietnam at the time of My Lai on March 16, 1968. Not one of them reported it.

The invasion of Vietnam was deliberate and calculated, as were policies and strategies

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that bordered on genocide and were designed to force millions of people to abandon their homes. Experimental weapons were used against civilians. Chemicals banned in the United States – Agent Orange – were used to change the genetic and environmental order in Vietnam. All of this was rarely news at the time. The unspoken task of the reporter in Vietnam, as it was in Korea, was, to normalise the unthinkable - to quote Edward Herman's memorable phrase. And that has not changed.

In 1975, when the Vietnam war just over, I witnessed the full panorama of what the American military machine had done, and I could barely believe my eyes. In the north, it seemed as if I had stumbled on some great, unrecorded natural disaster. On my office wall in London is a photograph I took of a town in Vinh province that was once home to 10,000 people. The photograph shows bomb craters and bomb craters, and bomb craters. Obliteration.

The Hollywood movies that followed the war were an extension of the journalism. The first was *The Deerhunter*, whose director Michael Cimino fabricated his own military service in Vietnam, and invented scenes of Vietnamese playing Russian roulette with American prisoners. The message was clear. America had suffered, America was stricken, American boys had done their best. It was all the more pernicious because it was brilliantly made and acted. I have to admit it remains the only time I have shouted out in protest, in a packed cinema.

This was followed by *Apocalypse Now*, whose writer, John Millius, invented a sequence about the Vietcong cutting off the arms of children. More oriental barbarity, more American angst, more purgative for the audience. Then there was the Rambo series and the “missing in action” films that fed the lie of Americans still imprisoned in Vietnam. Even Oliver Stone's *Platoon*, which gave us glimpses of the Vietnamese as human beings, promoted the invader as victim.

Even the official truth, or the liberal version, that the “noble cause” had failed in Vietnam, was a myth. From Kennedy to Ford, the American war establishment had seen Vietnam as a threat, because it offered an alternative model of development. The weaker the country, the greater the threat of a good example to his region and beyond. By the time the last US Marine had left the roof of the American embassy in Saigon, Vietnam was economically and environmentally crushed and the threat had been extinguished.

In the acclaimed movie *The Killing Fields*, the story of a New York Times reporter and his stringer in Cambodia, scenes that showed the Vietnamese as liberators of Cambodia in 1979 were filmed, but never shown.

These showed Vietnamese soldiers as the liberators they were, handing out food to the survivors of Pol Pot. To my knowledge, this censorship was never reported. The cut version of *The Killing Fields* complied with the official truth then dominant in the United States, especially in the liberal press, such as the New York Times, the Washington Post and the New

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York Review of Books. This set out to justify the crime of the Vietnam war by dehumanising the Vietnamese communists and confusing them, in the public mind, with Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge.

In the post war period, the policy in Washington was revenge, a word that officials used in private, but never publicly. Famous insider journalists, like James Reston of the New York Times, embraced it and disguised it in anti-Vietnamese disinformation. An economic embargo was imposed on Vietnam and Cambodia. Supplies of milk were cut off to the children of Vietnam. This barbaric assault on the very fabric of life in two of the most stricken societies on earth was rarely reported in the United States.

During this time, I made a number of documentaries about Cambodia. The first, in 1979, *Year Zero: the Silent Death of Cambodia* described the American bombing that had provided a catalyst for the rise of Pol Pot and showed the human effects of the embargo. *Year Zero* was broadcast in some 60 countries, but never in the United States. When I flew to Washington and offered *Year Zero* to the national public broadcaster, PBS. I received a curious reaction from PBS executives. They were shocked by the film, and they also spoke admiringly of it, even though I could see them collectively shaking their heads. One of them finally said to me, "John, we are disturbed that your film says the United States played such a destructive role in Cambodia, and we may have an issue of objectivity. So we have decided to call in a Journalistic Adjudicator."

"Journalistic Adjudicator" was straight out of Orwell. But it was real, and PBS appointed one Richard Dudman, a reporter on the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. Dudman was one of the few Westerners to have been invited by Pol Pot to visit Cambodia. His dispatches reflected none of the savagery then enveloping that country; he even praised his hosts. Not surprisingly, he turned his thumb down on my film and Americans never saw the film. Months later, one of the PBS executives, told me, "These are difficult days under Reagan. Your film would have given us problems. Sorry."

The lack of truth about what had really happened in South East Asia - the media promoted myth of an honourable "blunder" into a "quagmire" and the cover-up of the true scale of the slaughter - allowed Ronald Reagan to renew the same "noble cause" in Central America and rescue, as the Reaganites saw it, America's lost prestige in the world. The target, once again, was an impoverished nation without resources, whose threat, like Vietnam, was in trying to establish a model of development different from that of the corrupt, colonial dictatorships, backed by Washington. This was Nicaragua: population three million, one of the poorest nations on earth.

I reported the so-called Contra War from the Nicaraguan side; but it was not a war. Like all the attacks of the American superpower on small, defenceless countries, it was about murder, bribery and "perception management". A CIA-armed and trained rabble known as

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the Contra would slip across the border from Honduras and cut the throats of midwives, or blow up schools and clinics. Reagan called them the equivalent of his nation's Founding Fathers. The Iran-Contra scandal that followed produced some excellent investigative reporting in the United States, yet when it was all over, the overall impression was of a mildly embarrassed administration in Washington, not the barbarity of its actions. Thanks to journalists, Reagan emerged smiling and waving, "the great communicator". According to the American historian Greg Grandin (*Empire's Workshop*: Metropolitan Books), 300,000 people in Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador had paid with their lives.

Is Iraq different? Yes, there are many differences, but for journalists there are haunting similarities of both Vietnam and Central America: The "noble cause" of "bringing democracy to the Middle East", the promotion of a civil war and the killing of tens of thousands of invisible people. On August 24 last year, a New York Times editorial declared: "If we had known then what we know now, the invasion [of Iraq] would have been stopped by a popular outcry." This amazing admission was saying, in effect, that journalists had betrayed the public by accepting and amplifying and echoing the lies of Bush and Blair, instead of challenging and exposing them. The result is a human disaster of epic proportions, for which journalists in the so-called mainstream bear much of the responsibility; and that includes responsibility for the lives lost and destroyed.

This is true not only in America. In Britain, where I live, the BBC - which promotes itself as a nirvana of objectivity and impartiality and truth - has blood on its corporate hands. There are two interesting studies of the BBC's reporting. One of them, in the build-up to the invasion, shows that the BBC gave just two per cent of its coverage of Iraq to anti-war dissent. That was less than the anti-war coverage of all the American networks. A second study by the respected journalism school at University College in Cardiff shows that 90 per cent of the BBC's references to weapons of mass destruction suggested that Saddam Hussein actually possessed them and that, by clear implication, Bush and Blair were right.

We now know that the BBC and other British media were used by MI6, the secret intelligence service. In what they called Operation Mass Appeal, MI6 agents planted stories about Saddam's weapons of mass destruction, such as weapons hidden in his palaces and in secret underground bunkers. All of these stories were fakes. However, that is not the point. The point is that the dark arts of MI6 were quite unnecessary, because a systematic media self-censorship produced the same result.

Recently, the BBC's Director of News, Helen Boaden, was asked to explain how one of her "embedded" reporters in Iraq could possibly describe the aim of the Anglo-American invasion as "bring [ing] democracy and human rights" to Iraq. She replied with quotations from Tony Blair that this was indeed the truth, as if Blair and the truth were in any way related. This servility to state power is hotly denied, of course, but routine. It is even called "objec-

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tivity”. This is the BBC’s correspondent in Washington, Matt Frei, shortly after the invasion of Iraq. “There is no doubt,” he reported, “that the desire to bring good, to bring American values to the rest of the world, and especially now in the Middle East ... is now increasingly tied up with military power”. Last year, he lauded the architect of the invasion, Paul Wolfowitz, as “someone who believes passionately in the power of democracy and grassroots development.” This is not unusual. On the third anniversary of the invasion, a BBC news-reader described the invasion as a “miscalculation”. Not illegal. Not unprovoked. Not based on lies. Not a crime as defined by the judgment at Nuremberg. But a miscalculation. Thus, the unthinkable was normalised.

There is a new book out in Britain called “Guardians of Power”. The authors are David Edwards and David Cromwell, who edit a remarkable website called MediaLens. Their work is about the parallel worlds of unspoken truths and official lies. They have not bothered with soft targets, like the Murdoch press. They concentrate on the liberal media, which is proud of its objectivity and impartiality, its “balance” and “professionalism”. They studied the reporting of the invasions of Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq and the current build-up to an invasion of Iran. What they reveal is a pattern. In the British media, as in the United States, as in Australia, rapacious western actions are reported as moral crusades, or humanitarian interventions. At the very least, they are represented as the management of an international crisis, rather than the cause of the crisis. This truthful, bracing book has not been reviewed in a single British newspaper, even though informed people have offered to write about it.

Now consider the treatment of Harold Pinter, Britain’s greatest living dramatist. In accepting the Nobel Prize in Literature last December, Harold Pinter made an epic speech. He asked why “the systematic brutality, the widespread atrocities, the ruthless suppression of independent thought” in Stalinist Russia were well known in the west while American state crimes were merely “superficially recorded, let alone documented, let alone acknowledged.” Across the world, he pointed out, the extinction and suffering of countless human beings could be attributed to rampant American power, “but you wouldn’t know it”, he said. “it never happened. Nothing ever happened. Even while it was happening, it wasn’t happening. It didn’t matter. It was of no interest.” For the BBC, Pinter’s speech never happened. Not a word of it was broadcast. It never happened.

Pinter’s threat is that he tells a subversive truth. He makes the connection between imperialism and fascism and he describes it as a battle for history. I would add that it is also a battle for journalism. Language has become a crucial battleground. Noble words, like “democracy”, “liberation”, “freedom”, “reform” have been emptied of their true meaning and refilled by the enemies of these concepts. Their counterfeits dominate the news. “War on terror” is used incessantly, yet it is a false metaphor that insults our intelligence. We are

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not at war. Instead, American, British and Australian troops are fighting insurrections in countries where their invasions have caused mayhem and grief. And where are the pictures of “our” atrocities? How many Americans and Britons know that, in revenge for 3,000 innocent lives taken on September 11th, 2001, up to 20,000 innocent people have died in Afghanistan? How many know that the equivalent of the population of a middle-sized American city have been killed in Iraq, most of them by American firepower?

It is too easy to blame everything on Bush, and to plead, as liberal journalists do, that the “neo-cons” have hi-jacked America. Ask the Native Americans how benign the system used to be. Or listen to Richard Nixon on the Watergate tapes, talking about power and bombing. “You’re so goddamned concerned about the civilians,” Nixon said to Kissinger, “and I don’t give a damn. I don’t care .... I’d rather use the nuclear bomb ... I just want you to think big.” In the nuclear age, from Harry Truman to George W Bush, there is no evidence that Nixon was unique.

The lies told about Iraq are no different from the lies that ignited the Spanish-American war, that allowed the Vietnam and Korean wars to happen and the Cold War to endure. They are no different from the myths of World War Two that justified the atomic bombing of two Japanese cities. It is as if we journalists are being constantly groomed to swallow the fables of empire. Richard Falk at Princeton has described the process. We are indoctrinated to see foreign policy, he wrote, “through a self-righteous, one-way moral/legal screen [with] positive images of western values and innocence portrayed as threatened, validating a campaign of unrestricted violence.”

In my career as a journalist, there has never been a war on terror but a war of terror. Not long ago I walked down a leafy street in Jakarta, Indonesia, where the former dictator General Suharto is living out his life in luxury, having stolen from his people an estimated \$10 billion. A United Nations truth commission had just released a report, based on official files, that credits Suharto with the deaths of 180,000 people in East Timor. It says that the United States played a “primary role” in this terror. Britain and Australia are named as accessories to this vast suffering.

After I had filmed in East Timor in 1993, I interviewed Philip Liechty, a former CIA officer who, at his embassy desk in Jakarta, had seen the evidence of Suharto’s horrors committed with American approval and American arms. He told me that, when he retired, he had tried to alert the media to East Timor. “But there was no interest,” he said, echoing Harold Pinter. And yet the deaths in East Timor are more than six times greater than all the deaths caused by terrorist incidents throughout the world over past 25 years, according to the State Department. The “mainstream” deals with this by reporting humanity in terms of its worthy victims and unworthy victims, its good tyrants and bad tyrants. The victims of September 11, 2001, are worthy. The victims of East Timor are unworthy. Israeli victims are

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worthy; Palestinians are unworthy. Saddam Hussein was once a good tyrant. Now he is a bad tyrant. Saddam must be envious of Suharto, who has always been a good tyrant, an acceptable mass murderer.

In the 1960s, the New York Times greeted Suharto's blood-soaked seizure of power in Indonesia as "a gleam of light in Asia". After Suharto had killed off 180,000 East Timorese, Bill Clinton called him "our kind of guy". Margaret Thatcher offered similar uncton, as did the Australian prime ministers Bob Hawke and Paul Keating on a regular basis. The media both led and echoed this chorus.

If we journalists are ever to reclaim the honour of our craft, we need to understand, at least, the historic task that great power assigns us. This is to "soften-up" the public for rapacious attack on countries that are no threat to us. We soften them up by de-humanising them, by writing about "regime change" in Iran as if that country is an abstraction, not a human society. Currently, journalists are softening up Iran, Syria and Venezuela.

Hugo Chavez of Venezuela is likened to Hitler. That he has won nine democratic elections and referenda – a world record – is of no interest.

A few weeks ago, Channel 4 News in Britain - regarded as a liberal news service - carried a major item that might have been broadcast by the State Department. The reporter, Jonathan Rugman, the Washington correspondent, presented Chavez as a cartoon character, a sinister buffoon whose folksy Latin way camouflaged a man "in danger of joining a rogue gallery of dictators and despots - Washington's latest Latin nightmare." In contrast, Condaleeza Rice was afforded gravitas and Rumsfeld was allowed to call Chavez Hitler, unchallenged.

Indeed, almost everything in this travesty of journalism was viewed from Washington, only fragments of it from the barrios of Venezuela, where President Chavez enjoys 80 per cent popularity. In crude Soviet-flick style, Chavez was shown with Saddam Hussein when this brief encounter only had to do with OPEC and oil. According to the reporter, Venezuela under Chavez was helping Iran develop nuclear weapons. No evidence was given for this absurdity.

The softening-up of Venezuela is well advanced in the United States.

Ninety-five per cent of 100 media commentaries surveyed by the media watch dog FAIR expressed hostility to Chavez. "Dictator", "strongman", "demagogue" were the familiar buzz words, so that people reading and watching had no idea that Venezuela was the only oil-producing country in the world to use its oil revenue for the benefit of poor people. They would have no idea of spectacular developments in health, education, literacy. They would have no idea that Venezuela has no political jails - unlike the United States.

So that if the Bush administration launches "Operation Balboa", a mooted plan to overthrow the Chavez government, who will care, because who will know? For we shall only

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have the media version - another lousy demagogue got what was coming to him. The poor of Venezuela, like the poor of Nicaragua, like the poor of Vietnam and Cambodia, like the poor of Fallujah, whose dreams and lives are of no interest, will be invisible in their grief – a triumph of censorship by journalism.

What should journalists do? I mean, journalists who give a damn? They need to act now. Governments fear good journalists. The reason the Pentagon spends millions of dollars on PR, or “perception management” companies that try to bend the news is because it fears truth tellers, just as Stalinist governments feared them. There is no difference. Look back at the great American journalists: Upton Sinclair, Edward R Murrow, Martha Gellhorn, I.F. Stone, Seymour Hersh. All were mavericks. None embraced the corporate world of journalism and its modern supplier: the media college.

It is said the internet is an alternative; and what is wonderful about the rebellious spirits on the World Wide Web is that they often report as journalists should. They are mavericks in the tradition of the great muckrakers: those like the Irish journalist Claud Cockburn, who said: “Never believe anything until it is officially denied.” But the internet is still a kind of samidzat, an underground, and most of humanity does not log on; just as most of humanity does not own a cell phone. And the right to know ought to be universal. That other great muckraker, Tom Paine, warned that if the majority of the people were denied the truth and ideas of truth, it was time to storm what he called the “Bastille of words”. That time is now.”

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