

# The state has lost its mind

**I**n 1987, the sociologist Alex Carey, a second Orwell in his prophesies, wrote “Managing Public Opinion: the corporate offensive”. He described how in the United States “great progress [had been] made towards the ideal of a propaganda-managed democracy”, whose principal aim was to identify a rapacious business state “with every cherished human value”. The power and meaning of true democracy, of the franchise itself, would be “transferred” to the propaganda of advertising, public relations and corporate-run news. This “model of ideological control”, he predicted, would be adopted by other countries, such as Britain.

To many who work conscientiously in the media, this will sound alarmist; it is not like that in Britain, they will say. Ask them about censorship by omission or the promotion of business ideology and war propaganda as news, a promotion both subtle and crude, and their defensive response will be that no one ever instructed them to follow any line: no one ever said not to question the Prime Minister about the horror he had helped to inflict on Iraq: his epic criminality. “Blair always enjoys his interviews with Paxo,” says Roger Mosey, the head of BBC Television News, without a hint of irony.

Blair should enjoy them; he is always spared the imperious bombast that is now a pastiche and kept mostly for official demons. “Watch George Galloway clash with Jeremy Paxman,” says the BBC News homepage like a circus barker. Once under the big top of Newsnight, you get the usual set-up: a nonsensical question about whether or not Galloway was “proud of having got rid of one of the few black women in parliament”, followed by mockery of the very idea that his opponent, an unabashed Blairite warmonger, should account for the deaths of tens of thousands of innocent people.

Seven years ago, when Denis Halliday, one of the United Nations’ most respected humanitarian aid directors, resigned from his post in Iraq in protest at

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the Anglo-American-led embargo, calling it “an act of genocide”, he was given the Paxo treatment. “Aren’t you just an apologist for Saddam Hussein?” he was mock-asked. The following year, Unicef revealed that the embargo had killed half a million Iraqi children. As for East Timor, a triumph of the British arms trade and Robin Cook’s “ethical” foreign policy, the presence of British Hawk jets was “not proved”, declared Paxo, parroting a Foreign Office lie. (A few months later, Cook came clean.) Today, napalm is used in Iraq, but the armed forces minister is allowed to pretend that it isn’t. Israel’s weapons of mass destruction are “dangerous in the extreme”, says the former head of the US Strategic Command, but that is a permanent taboo.

In the Guardian of 9 May, famous journalists and their executives were asked to reflect on the election campaign. Almost all agreed that it had been “boring” and “lacked passion” and “never really caught fire”. Mosey complained that it had been “very hard to reach out to people who are disengaged”. Again, irony was absent, as if the BBC’s obsequiousness to the “consensus of propaganda”, as Alex Carey called it, had nothing to do with people’s disengagement or with the duty of journalists to engage the public, let alone tell them things they had a right to know.

It is this right-to-know that is being lost behind a wilful illusion. Since the cry “freedom of the press” was first heard roughly 500 years ago, when Wynkyn de Worde set up Caxton’s old printing press in the yard of St Bride’s Church, off Fleet Street, there has never been more information or media in the “mainstream”, yet most of it is now repetitive and profoundly ideological, captive to the insidious system that Carey described.

Omission is how it works. Between 1 and 15 April, the Media Tenor Institute analysed the content of television evening news. Foreign politics, including Iraq, accounted for less than 2 per cent. Search the post-election comments of the most important people in journalism for anything about the greatest political scandal in memory – the unprovoked bloodbath in Iraq – and you will find nothing. The Goldsmith affair was an aberration, forced on to the election agenda not by a journalist but by an insider; and no connection was then made with the suffering and grief in Iraq.

In the middle of the election campaign, Dr Les Roberts gave a special lecture at the School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine in London. It was all but ignored. Yet this is the extraordinary man who led an US-Iraqi research team in the first comprehensive investigation of civilian deaths in Iraq. Published in the Lancet, the most highly regarded medical journal in the world, with the tightest peer-

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review procedures, the study found that “at least” 100,000 civilians had died violently, the great majority of them at the hands of the “coalition”: women, children, the elderly. He also described how American military doctors had found that 14 per cent of soldiers and 28 per cent of marines had killed a civilian: a huge, unreported massacre.

This great crime, together with the destruction of the city of Fallujah and the 40 known victims of torture and unlawful killing at the hands of the British army, as well as the biggest demonstration by Iraqis demanding the invaders get out, was not allowed to intrude on a campaign that “never really caught fire”. The airbrushing requires no conspiracy. “The thought,” wrote Arthur Miller, “that the state has lost its mind and is punishing so many innocent people is intolerable. And so the evidence has to be internally denied.”

In its ideological crusade, the Blair regime has bombed and killed and abused human rights directly or by proxy, from Iraq to Colombia, from tsunami-stricken Aceh to the 14 most impoverished countries in Africa, where the sale of British weapons has fanned internal conflict. When I asked a television executive why none of this had been glimpsed in the election “coverage”, he seemed nonplussed. “It was not relevant to the news,” he said. What is relevant in the wake of the election is a propaganda consensus promoting the “potential greatness” of Gordon Brown, as the greatness of the now embarrassing Blair was once promoted. (“My God, he will be a hard act to follow. My God, Labour will miss him when he has gone,” wrote Blair’s most devoted promoter, Martin Kettle, in the Guardian, skipping over his crimes.)

That Brown is the same ideologue as Blair is of no concern. Neither is his commitment, not to ending poverty in the world, but to the rehabilitation of imperialism. “We should be proud . . . of the empire,” he said last September. “The days of Britain having to apologise for its colonial history are over,” he told the Daily Mail. These views touch the nostalgic heart of the British establishment, which, under Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair, has recovered from its long disorientation after Hitler gave all imperial plunderers a bad name. This and the appeasement of British imperialists is rarely mentioned in the endless anniversaries of the Second World War, whose triumphalism in politics and popular culture has bred imperial wars, such as Iraq.

Thus, Blair’s foreign policy adviser Robert Cooper caused little controversy when he wrote a pamphlet calling for “a new kind kind of imperialism, one acceptable to a world of human rights and cosmopolitan views”. This is conquest redefined as liberation, evoking the same moral claims that were not questioned

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until Hitler. “Imperialism and the global expansion of the western powers,” wrote Frank Furedi in *The New Ideology of Imperialism*, “were represented in unambiguously positive terms as a major contributor to human civilisation.” That imperialism was and is racist, violent and the cause of suffering across the world – witness the ruthless expulsion of the people of Diego Garcia as recently as the 1970s – is “not relevant to the news”. Observe instead the BBC swoon at Gordon Brown’s 19th-century speeches about ending African poverty on condition that business can exploit and arm Africa’s poorest.

All this chimes in Washington, where Bush’s drivel of “democracy and liberty on the march” is swallowed by leading journalists. On both sides of the Atlantic, a vintage imperialist campaign is under way against strategic and resource-rich Arab nations: indeed, against all Muslim peoples. It is the “clash of civilisations” of Samuel Huntington’s delusions. The Arabs being Semites, it is one of the west’s greatest anti-Semitic crusades.

That, you might say, is well discussed. Perhaps. What is not discussed is a worldwide threat similar to that of Germany in the 1930s, certainly the greatest threat in the lifetime of most people. This is not news. Consider the unreported demise of the “war on terror”. In his inaugural speech in January, Bush pointedly said not a word about that which he had made his signature. No terrorism. No Osama. No Iraq. No axis of evil. Instead, he warned that America’s new targets were those living in “whole regions of the world” which “simmer in resentment and tyranny” and where “violence will gather, and multiply in destructive power, and cross the most defended borders, and raise a mortal threat”.

The monumental paranoia is almost beside the point. Bush was lowering the threshold. The American military can go anywhere, attack anything, use any kind of weapon in pursuit of its latest, most dangerous illusion: the “simmering resentment” and the “gathering violence”. Unreported is the military coup that has taken place in America: the Pentagon and its civilian militarists now control “policy”. Diplomacy is “finished . . . dead”, as one of them put it. Andrew Bacevich, soldier, conservative and professor of American military strategy at Boston University, says that Bush has “committed the United States to waging an open-ended war on a global scale”.

Britain, with its profound understanding of imperialism, is a pioneer of this new danger. In 1998, the Blair government’s Strategic Defence Review stated that the country’s military priority would be “force projection” and that “in the post-cold war world we must be prepared to go to the crisis rather than have the crisis come to us”. In 2002, Geoff Hoon became the first defence secretary to declare

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that British nuclear weapons could be used against non-nuclear nations. In December 2003, a defence white paper, *Delivering Security in a Changing World*, called for “expeditionary operations” in “a range of environments across the world”. Military force was no longer! “a separate element in crisis resolution”. Almost a third of public spending on research now goes to the military – far more than is spent on the National Health Service.

On 6 August, it will be the 60th anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima which, with the destruction of Nagasaki, stands as one of the greatest crimes. There is now a nuclear renaissance, led by the nuclear “haves”, with America and Britain upgrading their “battlefield” nuclear weapons. The very real danger is, or should be, clear to all of us. The Guardian says Blair, having won his “historic” third term, ought to be “humble”. It is truly humbling that only 20 per cent of eligible voters voted for him, the lowest figure in modern times, and that he has no true mandate. No, it is journalists who ought to be humble and do their job.