

# The Blair doctrine: Blood and money

**O**n 17 October, President Bush signed a bill that legalised torture and kidnapping and effectively repealed the Bill of Rights and habeas corpus. The CIA can now legally abduct people and “render” them to secret prisons in countries where they are likely to be tortured. Evidence extracted under torture is now permissible in “military commissions”; people can be sentenced to death based on testimony beaten out of witnesses. You are now guilty until confirmed guilty. And you are a “terrorist” if you commit what George Orwell, in Nineteen Eighty-Four, called “thoughtcrimes”. Bush has revived the prerogatives of the Tudor and Stuart monarchs: the power of unrestricted lawlessness. “America can be proud,” said Senator Lindsey Graham, one of the bill’s promoters, who stood with other congressmen, clapping as Bush signed away the American constitution and the essence of American democracy.

The historic significance of this was barely acknowledged in Britain, the source of these abandoned ancient rights, no doubt because the same barbarians’ law is taking hold here. The great crime of Iraq is a moral tsunami that has left New Labour’s vassals floundering and shouting their hopeless inversions of the truth as they await rescue by Washington. “At a deeper ideological level,” wrote the American historian Alfred McCoy, “[what is happening] is a contest of power versus justice . . . Viewed historically, it is a fight over fundamental principles reaching back nearly 400 years.” Not long ago, I interviewed Dianna Ortiz, an American nun tortured by a Guatemalan death squad whose leader she identified as a fellow American. This was the time of Ronald Reagan, who was as murderous in Central America as Bush is in the Middle East. “You can’t claim to be a democracy if you practise or condone torture,” she said. “It is the ultimate test.”

The United States promised a democracy when the Civil Rights Act became law in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act the following year finally ended slavery. For the

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next decade, the civil rights movement joined the great popular movement to end the slaughter in Vietnam, and Congress legislated to restrain the CIA's secretive parallel power. It was a fleeting intermission. Under Reagan, the mythology of American democracy and "pride" was restored, perversely, when his corrupt executive ignited a lawless war in impoverished Central America, causing hundreds of thousands of deaths, which the United Nations called genocide. The United States became the only country ever to have been condemned by the International Court of Justice for terrorism (against Nicaragua). "Let's drop the bullshit," a former senior CIA officer told me recently. "What matters is our national security interests, okay?"

"National security" is the euphemism for the forbidden word, imperialism, whose despotic power has accelerated under George W Bush. Secret presidential "signing decrees" that can overturn the rare opposition of an otherwise supine Congress are now normal practice, along with a gulag of secret prisons, described approvingly by Bush as "the CIA programme". The United States today is an extension of the totalitarianism it has long sought to impose abroad. That unpalatable truth is unspoken, of course; in spite of his current "difficulties" over Iraq, corporate propaganda remains on Bush's side. The search for an "exit strategy" may make "embarrassing" headlines, but the deliberate, systematic looting of billions of dollars of Iraq's resources has been quietly achieved, with an estimated \$20bn "missing". The same silence applies to the class and race war at home, as the Bush gang kicks away the ladder that once led to the American middle class. Last January, 25,000 people applied for 325 jobs at a Wal-Mart in Chicago.

Constitutional rights are formidable American myths. The American press is often put forward as constitutionally having the freest speech on earth; and it does, theoretically. Yet during every period of internal repression, the press and broadcast journalism have played a compliant, "Pravda" role, backing imperial wars, indulging the lies of the "red baiter" Joe McCarthy, promoting phoney debates about phoney threats (Cuba, Nicaragua, the nuclear arms race) and the supercult of "anti-communism". Bush's lies on Iraq and Afghanistan were merely amplified and promoted. Seymour Hersh and a handful of others stand out as honourable exceptions.

In 1991, at the end of the one-sided slaughter known as the Gulf war, the celebrated American TV anchorman Dan Rather told his national audience, "There's one thing we can all agree on. It's the heroism of the 148 Americans who gave their lives so that freedom could live." In fact, a quarter of them had been

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killed by other Americans. Most of the British casualties were killed by the same “friendly fire”. Moreover, official citations describing how Americans had died heroically in hand-to-hand combat were fake. The hundreds of thousands of Iraqis who died during and in the aftermath of that “war” remain unmentionable – like hundreds of thousands who died as a result of the decade-long embargo; like the 655,000 Iraqi “excess deaths” since the invasion of 2003.

The war on democracy has been successfully exported. In Britain, and in other western countries, such as Australia, journalism and scholarship have been systematically appropriated as the new order's management class, and democratic ideas have been emptied and refilled, beyond all recognition. Unlike the 1930s, there is a silence of writers, with Harold Pinter almost the lone voice raised in Britain. The promoters of an extreme form of capitalism known as neo-liberalism, the supercult responsible for the greatest inequalities in history, are described as “reformers” and “revolutionaries”. The noble words “freedom” and “liberty” now refer to the divine right of this extremism to “prevail”, the jargon for dominate and control. This vocabulary, which contaminates the news and the pronouncements of the state and its bureaucracy, is from the same lexicon as *arbeit macht frei* – “work makes you free” – the words over the gates at Auschwitz.

For the British under Blair, the influence of this fake democracy has been catastrophic. Even if the convergence of the Labour party and the Tories was historically inevitable, it was Tony Blair, the most extreme British political figure in living memory, who returned Britain to a full-time violent, imperial role, converting a fictional notion, “the clash of civilisations”, into a possibility. Blair has destroyed the power of parliament and politicised those sections of the civil service and the security and intelligence services that saw themselves as impartial. He is Britain's president, lacking only the accompanying strains of “Hail to the Chief”. Last installed by little more than a fifth of the eligible population, he is the most undemocratically elected leader in British history. Poll after poll tells us he is also the most reviled.

Under President Blair, parliament has become like Congress under Bush: an ineffectual, craven talking shop which has debated Iraq only twice in two and a half years. With one important exception, regressive measure after measure has been waved through: from the Criminal Justice Act 2003 to the Prevention of Terrorism Act 2005, with their mandatory sentences and house arrests (“control orders”). A “bill to abolish parliament”, as the innocuous-sounding Legislative and Regulatory Reform Bill 2006 might be known, removed parliamentary

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scrutiny of government legislation, giving ministers arbitrary powers and Downing Street the absolute power of decree. There was no public debate. How ironic that the bill stalled in the House of Lords which, together with the judiciary, is now the loyal opposition.

In 2003, Blair worked the secretive royal prerogative – Orders in Council – to order an unprovoked, illegal attack on a defenceless country, Iraq. The following year, he used the same archaic powers to prevent the Chagos islanders from returning to their homeland, from which they were secretly expelled so that the Americans could build a huge military base there. Last May, the high court described the treatment of these British citizens as “repugnant, illegal and irrational”.

On 16 October 2005, Bush claimed that al-Qaeda was seeking to “establish a radical Islamic empire that spans from Spain to Indonesia”. This deeply cynical, calculated exaggeration – reminiscent of Washington’s warning of “mushroom clouds” following September 11, 2001 – was repeated by Blair fresh from the embrace of Rupert Murdoch, the likely source of his future enrichment.

This is the message of liberal warmongers who have sought to be Tonier-than-thou and salvage their spent reputations by

using big, specious words such as “Islamofascism”. They suppress the truth that al-Qaeda is minuscule compared with the state terrorism that kills and maims industrially and whose cost distorts all our lives. British state terrorism in Iraq has cost more than £7bn. The real cost of Trident is said to be £76bn.

The premises of the best of British life that survived Margaret Thatcher have no place in this accounting. The National Health Service and what was once the best postal service in the world are denied subsidies uncorrupted by a rigged “free market”. Whether it is the accretions of the free-loading Blairs or the sale of 72 Eurofighters to the medieval regime in Saudi Arabia, complete with “commissions”, or the government’s refusal to ban highly profitable cluster bombs, whose victims are mostly children, blood and money are the essence of Blairism and its mutant liberalism. In their 1996 new Labour manual, *The Blair Revolution: can new Labour deliver?* Peter Mandelson and Roger Liddle highlighted Britain’s “strengths” under a Blair regime. These were the multinational corporations and “aerospace” (the arms industry) and the “pre-eminence of the City of London”. Blood and money.

Of course, as in any colonial era, blood spilled is invisible; one’s faraway victims are untermenschen – that is to say, they are less than human and have no presence in our lives. On 11 June, Fiona Bruce, the BBC newsreader, announced

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that prisoners in Guantanamo Bay were committing suicide. She asked, “How damaging is it to the Bush administration?” At the recent Labour party conference, a cringe-making presidential occasion, Blair, wrote another leading television journalist Jon Snow, demonstrated “oratorical mastery and matey finesse”. Indeed, he was “a leader for his time, in a time when Britain needed exactly such leadership”.

Those who have peeled back the facades of the Blair and Bush gangs ought not to be despondent. The inspiring demonstration on 15 February 2003 may not have stopped an invasion, but the same universal power of public morality has, I believe, stalled attacks on Iran and North Korea, probably with “tactical” nuclear weapons. This moral force is undoubtedly stirring again all over the world, including the United States, and is feared by those who would contrive an “endless war”. However, if I have learned nothing else from witnessing numerous bloody contrivances, it is never to underestimate the stamina of rampant, rapacious empire and the dishonesty of its “humanitarian interventions”. Millions of us, who are the majority, need to raise our voices again, more urgently now than ever.