

News from behind the facade

When I lived in the United States in the late 1960s, my home was often New Orleans, in a friend's rambling grey clapboard house that stood in a section of the city where civil rights campaigners had taken refuge from the violence of the Deep South. New Orleans was said to be cosmopolitan; it was also sinister and murderous. We were protected by the then District Attorney, Jim Garrison, a liberal maverick whose investigations into the assassination of John Kennedy were to make powerful enemies behind The Facade.

The Facade was how we described the dividing line between the America of real life – of a poverty so profound that slavery was still a presence and a rapacious state power that waged war against its own citizens, as it did against black and brown-skinned people in faraway countries – and the America that spawned the greed of corporatism and invented public relations as a means of social control; the “American Dream” and the “American Way of Life” began as advertising slogans.

The wilful neglect of the Bush regime before and after hurricane Katrina offered a rare glimpse behind The Facade. The poor were no longer invisible; the bodies floating in contaminated water, the survivors threatened with police shotguns, the distinct obesity of American poverty – all of it mocked the forests of advertising billboards and relentless television commercials and news sound-bites (average length 9.9 seconds) that glorify the “dream” of wealth and power. A word long expropriated and debased – reality – found its true meaning, if briefly.

As if by accident, the American media, which is the legitimising arm of corporate public relations, reported the truth. For a few days, a selective group of liberal newspaper readers were told that poverty had risen an amazing 17 per cent under Bush; that an African-American baby born within a mile of the White

JOHN PILGER | NEWS FROM BEHIND THE FACADE

House had less chance of surviving its first year than an urban baby in India; that the United States was now ranked 43rd in the world in infant mortality, 84th for measles immunisation and 89th for polio; that the world's richest oil company, ExxonMobil, would make 30 billion dollars in profits this year, having received a huge slice of the 14.5 billion dollars in "tax breaks" which Bush's new energy bill guarantees his elite cronies.

In his two elections, Bush has received most of his "corporate contributions" – the euphemism for bribes totalling 61.5 million dollars – from oil and gas companies. The bloody conquest of Iraq, the world's second biggest source of oil, will be their prize: their loot.

Iraq and New Orleans are not far apart. On 13 April, 2003, Matt Frei, the BBC's Washington correspondent, reported the bloodbath of the American invasion with these words: "There's no doubt 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's apologies for the Bush regime from in front of the White House, and specifically for the architect of the slaughter in Iraq, Paul Wolfowitz, were consistent with his reporting from New Orleans, which was vivid. On 5 September, he described battle-ready troops of the 82nd Airborne trudging through the streets of New Orleans as the "heroes of Tikrit". Most of the killing in Tikrit and elsewhere in Iraq has been done not by "insurgents" but by such "heroes": a fact almost never allowed in the "coverage", whether it is on Fox or the BBC. Shaking his head in New Orleans, Frei wondered why Bush had done so little. Reality's intrusion was complete.

Before the moment passes, and Bush's atrocities and lies in Iraq are again allowed to proceed, it is worth connecting his disregard for the suffering in New Orleans with other truths behind The Facade. The unchanging nature of the 500-year western imperial crusade is exemplified in the unreported suffering of people all over the world, declared enemies in their own homes. The people of Tal Afar, a northern Iraqi town now in the news as "an insurgent stronghold", refused to be expelled from their homes, and as you read this, are being bombed and shelled and strafed, just as the people of Fallujah were, and the people of Najaf, and the people of Hongai, a "stronghold" in Vietnam, once the most bombed place on earth, and the people of Neak Loeung in Cambodia, one of countless towns flattened by B-52s. The list of such places consigned to notoriety, then oblivion, is seemingly endless. Why?

The answer largely is that so much of western scholarship has taken the humanity out of the study of nations, of people, congealing it with jargon and

JOHN PILGER | THE DEMOCRATIC POLICE STATE

reducing it to an esotericism called “international relations”, the grand chess game of western power that scores nations as useful or not, expendable or not. (Listen to British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw talk about “failed nations”: the pure invention of Anglo-American IR zealots.) It is this rampant orthodoxy that determines how power speaks and how its historians and reporters report.

Such orthodoxy, says Richard Falk, professor of International Relations at Princeton and a distinguished dissenter, “which is so widely accepted among political scientists as to be virtually unchallengeable in academic journals, regards law and morality as irrelevant to the identification of rational policy.” Thus, western foreign policy is formulated “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 political violence...” This is the filter through which most people get their serious news. It is the reason why the most obvious truths, such as the dominance of western state terrorism over the minuscule al-Qaeda variety, is never reported. It is the reason why America’s destruction of 35 democracies in 30 countries (historian William Blum’s latest count), is unknown to the American public.

More urgently, it is the reason why the historic implications of Bush’s and Blair’s assaults on our most basic freedoms, such as habeas corpus, are rarely reported. On 9 September, the American federal appeals court handed down a judgement against Jose Padilla, an alleged witness to an alleged “plot” inmate of Guantanamo Bay, allowing the US military to hold him without charge, indefinitely. Even though there is no case against him, the Supreme Court is unlikely to overturn this travesty, which means the end of the Bill of Rights and of the “very core of liberty ... freedom from indefinite imprisonment at the will of the Executive”, as an American jurist once famously wrote.

This was hardly news in Britain, just as Lord Hoffmann’s remarks passed most of us by. A Law Lord, he said that Blair’s plans to gut our own basic rights were a greater threat than terrorism. Indefinite imprisonment for those innocent before the law and the intimidation of a minority community and of dissenters – these are the goals of Blair’s “necessary measures”, borrowed from Bush. Who challenges him? His Downing Street press conference is an august sheep pen, the baa-ing barely audible. In India, the other day, reported the London Guardian’s political editor, “Mr Blair stood his ground when challenged over the Iraq war” – by Indian reporters, that is. The Guardian described neither their challenges nor Blair’s replies.

Behind The Facade, the destruction of democracy has been a long-term project.

JOHN PILGER | NEWS FROM BEHIND THE FACADE

The millions of poor, like most of the people of New Orleans, have no place in the American system, which is why they don't vote. The same is happening under Blair, who has achieved the lowest voter turnouts since the franchise. Like Bush, this is not his concern, for his horizons stretch far. Selling weapons and privatisation deals to India one day, preparing the ground for attacking Iran the next. Under Blair, the Secret Intelligence Service, MI6, ran Operation Mass Appeal, a campaign to plant stories in the media about Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction. Under Blair, young Pakistanis living in Britain were trained as jihadi fighters and recruited for the first of his wars – the dismemberment of Yugoslavia in 1999. According to the Delhi-based Observer Research Foundation, they joined this terrorist network “with the full knowledge and complicity of the British and American intelligence agencies.”

In his classic work, *The Grand Chessboard*, Zbigniew Brzezinski, the godfather of American policies and actions in Afghanistan and Iraq, writes that for America to dominate the world, it cannot sustain a genuine, popular democracy because “the pursuit of power is not a goal that commands popular passion ... Democracy is inimical to imperial mobilisation”. He describes how he secretly persuaded President Carter in 1976 to bankroll and arm the jihadis in Pakistan and Afghanistan as a means of ensuring America's Cold War dominance. When I asked him in Washington, two years ago, if he regretted that the consequences were al-Qaeda and the attacks of 11 September, he became very angry and did not reply; and a crack in *The Facade* closed. It is time those of us paid to keep the record straight tore it down completely.