

THE JOHN
PILGER
READER

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Pilger's first cinema documentary, **The War on Democracy**, recently opened in London

Excerpts from some of these books, and previous columns, are available for downloading in pdf format at <http://www.coldtype.net/pilgerbooks.html>

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13 JUNE 2007

Latin America: The genesis of 'The War on Terrorism'

I**N THE 1960S**, when I first went to Latin America, I travelled up the cone of the continent from Chile across the Altiplano to Peru, mostly in rickety buses and single-carriage trains. It was an experience my memory stored for life, especially the spectacle of the movement of people.

They moved through the dust of a snow-capped wilderness, along roads that were ribbons of red mud, and they lived in shanties that defied gravity. "We are invisible," said one man; another used the term *abandonados*; an indigenous woman in Bolivia unforgettably described her poverty as a commodity for the rich.

When I later saw Sebastiao Salgado's photographs of Latin America's working people, I recognised the people at the roadside, the gold miners and the coffee workers and the silhouettes framed in crosses in the cemeteries. Perhaps the idea for a cinema film began then, or when I reported Ronald Reagan's murderous assault on Central America; or when I first read the words of Victor Jara's ballads and heard Sam Cooke's anthem *A Change Is Gonna Come*.

The *War On Democracy* is my first film for cinema. It follows more than 55 documentary films for television, which began with *The Quiet Mutiny*, set in Vietnam. Most of my films have told stories of people's struggles against rapacious power and

of attempts to subvert and control our historical memory. It is this control, this organised forgetting, that has always intrigued me both as a film-maker and a journalist. Described by Harold Pinter as a great silence unbroken by the incessant din of the media age, it assures the powerful in the west that the struggle of whole societies against their crimes is merely "superficially recorded, let alone documented, let alone acknowledged... It never happened. Even while it was happening it never happened. It didn't matter. It was of no interest".

This was true of Nicaragua in the early 1980s, when a popular revolution began to turn back poverty and bring literacy and hope to a country long dismissed as a banana republic. In the United States, the Sandinista government was successfully portrayed as communist and a threat, and crushed. After all, Richard Nixon had said of all of Latin America: "No one gives a shit about the place." The *War On Democracy* is meant as an antidote to this.

Modern fictional cinema rarely seems to break political silences. The very fine *Motorcycle Diaries* was a generation too late. In this country, where Hollywood sets the liberal boundaries, the work of Ken Loach and a few others is an honourable exception. However, the cinema is changing as if by default. The documentary has returned to the big screen and is being embraced by the

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public, in the US and all over. They were still clapping Michael Moore's Fahrenheit 9/11 two months after it opened in this country. Why? The answer is uncomplicated. It was a powerful film that helped people make sense of news that no longer made sense. It did not present the usual phoney "balance" as a pretence for presenting an establishment consensus. It was not riddled with the cliches, platitudes and power assumptions that permeate "current affairs". It was realist cinema, as important as *The Grapes of Wrath* was in the 1930s, and people devoured it.

The War On Democracy is not the same. It comes out of a British commercial television tradition that is too often passed over: the pioneering of bold factual journalism that treated other societies not as post-imperial curios, as useful or expendable to "us", but extraordinary and important in their own terms. Granada's *World in Action*, where I began, was a prime example. It would report and film in ways that the BBC would not dare.

These days, with misnamed "reality" programmes consuming much of television like a plague of cane toads, cinema has been handed a timely opportunity. Such are the dangers imposed on us all today by a rampant, neo-fascist superpower, and so urgent is our need for uncontaminated information that people are prepared to buy a cinema ticket to get it.

The War On Democracy examines the false democracy that comes with western corporations and financial institutions and a war waged, materially and as propaganda, against popular democracy. It is the story of the people I first saw 40 years ago; but they are no longer invisible; they are a mighty political movement, reclaiming noble concepts distorted by corporatism and they are de-

fending the most basic human rights in a war being waged against all of us.

Cinema and television production are closely related, of course, but the differences, I have learned, are critical. Cinema allows a panorama to unfold, giving a sense of place that only the big screen captures. In *The War On Democracy*, the camera sweeps across the Andes in Bolivia to the highest and poorest city on earth, El Alto, then follows Juan Delfin, a priest and a taxi driver, into a cemetery where children are buried. That Bolivia has been asset-stripped by multinational companies, aided by a corrupt elite, is an epic story described by this one man and this spectacle. That the people of Bolivia have stood up, expelled the foreign consortium that took their water resources, even the water that fell from the sky, is understood as the camera pans across a giant mural that Juan Delfin painted. This is cinema, a moving mural of ordinary lives and triumphs.

Chris Martin and I (we made the film as a partnership) used two crews and two very different cinematographers, Preston Clothier and Rupert Binsley. They shot in high-definition stock, which then had to be converted to 35mm film – one of cinema's wonderful anachronisms.

The film was backed by the impresario Michael Watt, a supporter of anti-poverty projects all over the world, who had told producer Wayne Young that he wanted to put my TV work in the cinema. Granada provided additional support, and ITV will broadcast the film later in the year. The extra funding also allowed me to persuade the late Sam Cooke's New York agents to license *A Change Is Gonna Come*, one of the finest, most lyrical pieces of black music ever written and performed. I was in the southern United States when it was released. It

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was the time of the civil-rights movement, and Cooke's song spoke to and for all people struggling to be free. The same is true of the ballads of the Chilean Victor Jara, whose songs celebrated the popular democracy of Salvador Allende before Pinochet and the CIA extinguished it.

We filmed in the National Stadium in Santiago, Chile, where Jara was taken along with thousands of other political prisoners. By all accounts, he was a source of strength for his comrades, singing for them until soldiers beat him to the ground and smashed his hands. He wrote his last song there and it was smuggled out on scraps of paper.

These are the words:

*What horror the face of fascism creates
They carry out their plans with
knife-like precision ...
For them, blood equals medals ...
How hard it is to sing
When I must sing of horror ...
In which silence and screams
Are the end of my song*

After two days of torture, they killed him. The War On Democracy is about such courage and a warning to us all that "for them" nothing has changed, that "blood equals medals".

8 AUGUST 2007

Good ol' Bill, the liberal hero

ON 14 AUGUST, you are invited to “an audience” with Bill Clinton in London. You have a choice. You can attend the “breakfast and speech” or the “brunch buffet and speech”. These will take place in the white elephantine Millennium Dome, where a place in the “Kings’ Row” will cost you £799. Last year, Clinton made more than £5m granting “audiences”. Not only the usual corporate types attend. A few years ago, I watched a conga line of writers, journalists, publishers and others of liberal reputation shuffling towards his grotesquely paid presence at the Guardian Hay Festival.

The Clinton scam is symptomatic of the death of liberalism – not its narcissistic, war-loving wing (“humanitarian intervention”), which is ascendant, but the liberalism that speaks against crimes committed in its name, while extending rungs of the economic ladder to those below. It was Clinton’s promotion of the former and crushing of the latter that so inspired new Labour’s “project”. Clinton, not Bush, was Cool Britannia’s true Mafia godfather. Keen observers of Tony Blair will recall that during one of his many farewell speeches, the sociopath did a weird impersonation of Clinton’s head wiggle.

Clinton is able to make a shedload a money because he is contrasted with the despised Bush as the flawed good guy who

did his best for the world and brought economic boom to the US – the fabled American dream no less. Both notions are finely spun lies. What Clinton and Blair have most in common is that they are the most violent leaders of their countries in the modern era; that includes Bush. Consider Clinton’s true record.

In 1993, he pursued George H W Bush’s invasion of Somalia. He invaded Haiti in 1994. He bombed Bosnia in 1995 and Serbia in 1999. In 1998, he bombed Afghanistan; and, at the height of his Monica Lewinsky troubles, he momentarily diverted the headline writers to a major “terrorist target” in Sudan that he ordered destroyed with an onslaught of missiles. It turned out to be sub-Saharan Africa’s largest pharmaceutical plant, the only source of chloroquine, the treatment for malaria, and other drugs that were lifelines to hundreds of thousands. As a result, wrote Jonathan Belke, then of the Near East Foundation, “tens of thousands of people – many of them children – have suffered and died from malaria, tuberculosis and other treatable diseases”.

Long before Shock and Awe, Clinton was destroying and killing in Iraq. Under the lawless pretence of a “no-fly zone”, he oversaw the longest allied aerial bombardment since the Second World War. This was hardly reported. At the same time, he imposed and tightened a Washington-led eco-

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nomic siege estimated to have killed a million civilians. “We think the price is worth it,” said his secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, in an exquisite moment of honesty.

Clinton’s economic “legacy” – like Blair’s – is the most unequal society Americans have known. In his last presidential year, 1999, I walked along the ocean front at Santa Monica in California and was struck by the number of middle-class homeless, “bag gents” who had lost executive jobs and families thanks largely to Clinton’s North American Free Trade treaty. As for working Americans, the boasted high employment figures concealed a reversion to real wage levels of the 1970s. It was Clinton, not Bush, who wiped out the last of Roosevelt’s New Deal. Back in Santa Monica the other day, I noted the bag gents had multiplied.

These days, you see Good Ol’ Bill, or the Comeback Kid, as he is variously known, wiggling his head on the TV news, cam-

paing for his wife, Hillary, among Americans who, terminally naive, still believe the Democratic Party is theirs and that “it’s time to vote a woman into the White House”. Together, the Clintons are known as “Bil-lary” and rightly so. Like Good Ol’ Bill, his wife has no plans to address the divisions of a society that allows 130,000 Americans to claim the wealth of millions of their fellow citizens. Like GOB, she wants to continue Iraq’s torment for perhaps a decade. And she has not “ruled out” attacking Iran.

Those settling down in the Kings’ Row at the Millennium Dome on 14 August for breakfast or brunch with GOB, having transferred another swag to the Clinton bank account, are unlikely to reflect on the blood spilt and the epic suffering caused, or on the moral corruption of the liberal ideology that courted and acclaimed Clinton, along with the criminal Blair.

But we should.

24 AUGUST 2007

Israel: An important marker has been passed

FROM A limestone hill rising above Qalandia refugee camp you can see Jerusalem. I watched a lone figure standing there in the rain, his son holding the tail of his long tattered coat. He extended his hand and did not let go. “I am Ahmed Hamzeh, street entertainer,” he said in measured English. “Over there, I played many musical instruments; I sang in Arabic, English and Hebrew, and because I was rather poor, my very small son would chew gum while the monkey did its tricks. When we lost our country, we lost respect. One day a rich Kuwaiti stopped his car in front of us. He shouted at my son, “Show me how a Palestinian picks up his food rations!” So I made the monkey appear to scavenge on the ground, in the gutter. And my son scavenged with him. The Kuwaiti threw coins and my son crawled on his knees to pick them up. This was not right; I was an artist, not a beggar . . . I am not even a peasant now.”

“How do you feel about all that?” I asked him.

“Do you expect me to feel hatred? What is that to a Palestinian? I never hated the Jews and their Israel . . . yes, I suppose I hate them now, or maybe I pity them for their stupidity. They can’t win. Because we Palestinians are the Jews now and, like the Jews, we will never allow them or the Arabs or you to forget. The youth will guarantee us

that, and the youth after them . . .”.

That was 40 years ago. On my last trip back to the West Bank, I recognised little of Qalandia, now announced by a vast Israeli checkpoint, a zigzag of sandbags, oil drums and breeze blocks, with conga lines of people, waiting, swatting flies with precious papers. Inside the camp, the tents had been replaced by sturdy hovels, although the queues at single taps were as long, I was assured, and the dust still ran to caramel in the rain. At the United Nations office I asked about Ahmed Hamzeh, the street entertainer. Records were consulted, heads shaken. Someone thought he had been “taken away . . . very ill”. No one knew about his son, whose trachoma was surely blindness now. Outside, another generation kicked a punctured football in the dust.

And yet, what Nelson Mandela has called “the greatest moral issue of the age” refuses to be buried in the dust. For every BBC voice that strains to equate occupier with occupied, thief with victim, for every swarm of emails from the fanatics of Zion to those who invert the lies and describe the Israeli state’s commitment to the destruction of Palestine, the truth is more powerful now than ever. Documentation of the violent expulsion of Palestinians in 1948 is voluminous. Re-examination of the historical record has put paid to the fable of heroic David in the Six Day War, when Ahmed

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Hamzeh and his family were driven from their home. The alleged threat of Arab leaders to “throw the Jews into the sea”, used to justify the 1967 Israeli onslaught and since repeated relentlessly, is highly questionable.

In 2005, the spectacle of wailing Old Testament zealots leaving Gaza was a fraud. The building of their “settlements” has accelerated on the West Bank, along with the illegal Berlin-style wall dividing farmers from their crops, children from their schools, families from each other. We now know that Israel’s destruction of much of Lebanon last year was pre-planned. As the former CIA analyst Kathleen Christison has written, the recent “civil war” in Gaza was actually a coup against the elected Hamas-led government, engineered by Elliott Abrams, the Zionist who runs US policy on Israel and a convicted felon from the Iran-Contra era.

The ethnic cleansing of Palestine is as much America’s crusade as Israel’s. On 16 August, the Bush administration announced an unprecedented \$30bn military “aid package” for Israel, the world’s fourth biggest military power, an air power greater than Britain, a nuclear power greater than France. No other country on earth enjoys such immunity, allowing it to act without sanction, as Israel. No other country has such a record of lawlessness: not one of the world’s tyrannies comes close. International treaties, such as the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, ratified by Iran, are ignored by Israel. There is nothing like it in UN history.

But something is changing. Perhaps last summer’s panoramic horror beamed from Lebanon on to the world’s TV screens provided the catalyst. Or perhaps cynicism of Bush and Blair and the incessant use of the inanity, “terror”, together with the day-by-day dissemination of a fabricated insecurity in all our lives, has finally brought the atten-

tion of the international community outside the rogue states, Britain and the US, back to one of its principal sources, Israel.

I got a sense of this recently in the United States. A full-page advertisement in the New York Times had the distinct odour of panic. There have been many “friends of Israel” advertisements in the Times, demanding the usual favours, rationalising the usual outrages. This one was different. “Boycott a cure for cancer?” was its main headline, followed by “Stop drip irrigation in Africa? Prevent scientific co-operation between nations?” Who would want to do such things? “Some British academics want to boycott Israelis,” was the self-serving answer. It referred to the University and College Union’s (UCU) inaugural conference motion in May, calling for discussion within its branches for a boycott of Israeli academic institutions. As John Chalcraft of the London School of Economics pointed out, “the Israeli academy has long provided intellectual, linguistic, logistical, technical, scientific and human support for an occupation in direct violation of international law [against which] no Israeli academic institution has ever taken a public stand”.

The swell of a boycott is growing inexorably, as if an important marker has been passed, reminiscent of the boycotts that led to sanctions against apartheid South Africa. Both Mandela and Desmond Tutu have drawn this parallel; so has South African cabinet minister Ronnie Kasrils and other illustrious Jewish members of the liberation struggle. In Britain, an often Jewish-led academic campaign against Israel’s “methodical destruction of [the Palestinian] education system” can be translated by those of us who have reported from the occupied territories into the arbitrary closure of Palestinian universities, the harassment and hu-

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miliation of students at checkpoints and the shooting and killing of Palestinian children on their way to school.

These initiatives have been backed by a British group, Independent Jewish Voices, whose 528 signatories include Stephen Fry, Harold Pinter, Mike Leigh and Eric Hobsbawm. The country's biggest union, Unison, has called for an "economic, cultural, academic and sporting boycott" and the right of return for Palestinian families expelled in 1948. Remarkably, the Commons' international development committee has made a similar stand. In April, the membership of the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) voted for a boycott only to see it hastily overturned by the national executive council. In the Republic of Ireland, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions has called for divestment from Israeli companies: a campaign aimed at the European Union, which accounts for two-thirds of Israel's exports under an EU-Israel Association Agreement. The UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Jean Ziegler, has said that human rights conditions in the agreement should be invoked and Israel's trading preferences suspended.

This is unusual, for these were once distant voices. And that such grave discussion of a boycott has "gone global" was unforeseen in official Israel, long comforted by its seemingly untouchable myths and great power sponsorship, and confident that the mere threat of anti-Semitism would ensure silence. When the British lecturers' decision was announced, the US Congress passed an absurd resolution describing the UCU as "anti-Semitic". (Eighty congressmen have gone on junkets to Israel this summer.)

This intimidation has worked in the past.

The smearing of American academics has denied them promotion, even tenure. The late Edward Said kept an emergency button in his New York apartment connected to the local police station; his offices at Columbia University were once burned down. Following my 2002 film, *Palestine is Still the Issue*, I received death threats and slanderous abuse, most of it coming from the US where the film was never shown.

When the BBC's Independent Panel recently examined the corporation's coverage of the Middle East, it was inundated with emails, "many from abroad, mostly from North America", said its report. Some individuals "sent multiple missives, some were duplicates and there was clear evidence of pressure group mobilisation". The panel's conclusion was that BBC reporting of the Palestinian struggle was not "full and fair" and "in important respects, presents an incomplete and in that sense misleading picture". This was neutralised in BBC press releases.

The courageous Israeli historian, Ilan Pappé, believes a single democratic state, to which the Palestinian refugees are given the right of return, is the only feasible and just solution, and that a sanctions and boycott campaign is critical in achieving this. Would the Israeli population be moved by a worldwide boycott? Although they would rarely admit it, South Africa's whites were moved enough to support an historic change. A boycott of Israeli institutions, goods and services, says Pappé, "will not change the [Israeli] position in a day, but it will send a clear message that [the premises of Zionism] are racist and unacceptable in the 21st century . . . They would have to choose."

And so would the rest of us.

15 FEBRUARY 2007

Class is still the issue

A STATE of parallel worlds determines almost everything we do and how we do it, everything we know and how we know it. The word that once described it, class, is unmentionable, just as imperialism used to be. Thanks to George W Bush, the latter is back in the lexicon in Britain, if not at the BBC.

Class is different. It runs too deep; it allows us to connect the present with the past and to understand the malignancies of a modern economic system based on inequity and fear. So it is seldom spoken about publicly, lest a Goldman Sachs chief executive on multimillions in pay or bonuses, or whatever they call their legalised heists, be asked how it feels to walk past office cleaners struggling on the minimum wage.

Just as elite power seeks to order other countries according to the demands of its privilege, so class remains at the root of our own society's mutations and sorrows. In recent weeks, the killing of an 11-year-old Liverpool boy and other tragedies involving children have been thoroughly tabloided. Interviewing Keith Vaz, chairman of the House of Commons home affairs select committee, one journalist wondered if "we" should go out and deal personally with our vile, mugging, stabbing, shooting youth. To this, the nodding Vaz replied that the problem was "values".

The main "value" is ruthless exclusion, such as the exile of millions of young people on vast human landfills (rubbish dumps) called housing estates, where they are fore-armed with the knowledge that they are different and schools are not for them. A rigid curriculum, a system devoted to testing child-ren beyond all reason, ensures their alienation. "From the age of seven," says Shirley Franklin of the Institute of Education, "20 per cent of the nation's children are seen, and see themselves, as failures . . . Violence is an expression of hatred towards oneself and others." With the all-digital world of promise and rewards denied them, let alone a sense of belonging and esteem, they move logically to the streets and crime.

And yet, since 1995, actual crime in England and Wales has fallen by 42 per cent and violent crime by 41 per cent. No matter. The "violence of youth" is the accredited hysteria. A government led for a decade by a man whose lawless deceit helped cause the violent deaths of perhaps a million people in Iraq invented an acronym – Asbo – for a campaign against British youth, whose prospects and energy and hope were replaced by the "values" expressed by Keith Vaz and exemplified by Goldman Sachs and the current imperial adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Take Afghanistan, where the irony is searing. In less than seven years, the Anglo-

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American slaughter of countless “Taliban” (people) has succeeded in spectacularly reviving an almost extinct poppy trade, so that it now supplies the demand for heroin on Britain’s poorest streets, where enlightened drug rehabilitation is not considered a government “value”.

Parallel worlds require other elite forms of exclusion. At the Edinburgh Television Festival on 24 August, the famous BBC presenter Jeremy Paxman made a much-hyped speech “attacking” television for “betray[ing] the people we ought to be serving”. What was revealing about the speech was the attitude towards ordinary viewers it betrayed. According to Paxman, “while the media and politicians feel free to criticise each other, neither has the guts to criticise the public, who are presumed never to be wrong”.

In fact, ordinary people are treated in much of the media as invisible or with contempt, or they are patronised. Two hon-

ourable exceptions were the GMTV presenters cited and mocked by Paxman for their humanity in standing up for an ex-soldier denied proper treatment by the National Health Service.

Paxman called for a more “sophisticated” and “honest” approach that accepted the public’s approval of low taxes — taxes that are not rationed when it comes to propping up hugely profitable private finance initiatives in the Health Service or squandered on waging war, regardless of the public’s objections.

Not once in his speech did Paxman refer to Iraq, nor did he tell us why Blair was never seriously challenged on that bloodbath in a broadcast interview. That the BBC had played a critical role in amplifying and echoing Blair’s and Bush’s lies was apparently unmentionable. The coming attack on Iran, led again by propaganda filtered through broadcasting, is from the same parallel world, also unmentionable.

3 OCTOBER 2007

My last conversation with Aung San Kyi

AS THE people of Burma rise up again, we have had a rare sighting of Aung San Suu Kyi. There she stood, at the back gate of her lakeside home in Rangoon, where she is under house arrest. She looked very thin. For years, people would brave the roadblocks just to pass by her house and be reassured by the sound of her playing the piano. She told me she would lie awake listening for voices outside and to the thumping of her heart. “I found it difficult to breathe lying on my back after I became ill, she said.”

That was a decade ago. Stealing into her house, as I did then, required all the ingenuity of the Burmese underground. My filmmaking partner David Munro and I were greeted by her assistant, Win Htein, who had spent six years in prison, five of them in solitary confinement. Yet his face was open and his handshake warm. He led us into the house, a stately pile fallen on hard times. The garden with its ragged palms falls down to Inya Lake and to a trip wire, a reminder that this was the prison of a woman elected by a landslide in 1990, a democratic act extinguished by generals in ludicrous uniforms.

Aung San Suu Kyi wore silk and had orchids in her hair. She is a striking, glamorous figure whose face in repose shows the resolve that has seen her along her heroic

journey.

We sat in a room dominated by a wall-length portrait of Aung San, independent Burma’s assassinated liberation fighter, the father she never knew.

“What do I call you?” I asked. “Well, if you can’t manage the whole thing, friends call me Suu.”

“The regime is always saying you are finished, but here you are, hardly finished. How is that?”

“It’s because democracy is not finished in Burma . . . Look at the courage of the people [on the streets], of those who go on working for democracy, those who have already been to prison. They know that any day they are likely to be put back there and yet they do not give up.”

“But how do you reclaim the power you won at the ballot box with brute power confronting you?” I asked.

“In Buddhism we are taught there are four basic ingredients for success. The first is the will to want it, then you must have the right kind of attitude, then perseverance, then wisdom . . .”

“But the other side has all the guns?”

“Yes, but it’s becoming more and more difficult to resolve problems by military means. It’s no longer acceptable.”

We talked about the willingness of foreign business to come to Burma, especially tour companies, and of the hypocrisy of

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“friends” in the West. I read her a British Foreign Office press release: “Through commercial contacts with democratic nations such as Britain, the Burmese people will gain experience of democratic principles.”

“Not in the least bit,” she responded, “because new investments only help a small elite to get richer and richer. Forced labour goes on all over the country, and a lot of the projects are aimed at the tourist trade and are worked by children.”

“People I’ve spoken to regard you as something of a saint, a miracle worker.”

“I’m not a saint and you’d better tell the world that!”

“Where are your sinful qualities, then?”

“Er, I’ve got a short temper.”

“What happened to your piano?”

“You mean when the string broke? In this climate pianos do deteriorate and some of the keys were getting stuck, so I broke a string because I was pumping the pedal too hard.”

“You lost it ... you exploded?”

“I did.”

“It’s a very moving scene. Here you are, all alone, and you get so angry you break the piano.”

“I told you, I have a hot temper.”

“Weren’t there times when, surrounded by a hostile force, cut off from your family and friends you were actually terrified?”

“No, because I didn’t feel hostile towards the guards surrounding me. Fear comes out of hostility and I felt none towards them.”

“But didn’t that produce a terrible loneliness ...?”

“Oh, I have my meditation, and I did have a radio . . . And loneliness comes from inside, you know. People who are free and who live in big cities suffer from it, because it comes from inside.”

“What were the small pleasures you’d look forward to?”

“I’d look forward to a good book being read on ‘Off the Shelf’ on the BBC and of course to my meditation I didn’t enjoy my exercises so much; I’d never been a very athletic type.”

“Was there a point when you had to conquer fear?”

“Yes. When I was small in this house. I wandered around in the darkness until I knew where all the demons might be . . . and they weren’t there.”

For several years after that encounter with Aung San Suu Kyi I tried to phone the number she gave me. The phone would ring, then go dead. One day I got through.

“Thank you so much for the books,” she said. “It has been a joy to read widely again.” (I had sent her a collection of T S Eliot, her favourite, and Jonathan Coe’s political romp *What a Carve Up!*.) I asked her what was happening outside her house. “Oh, the road is blocked and they [the military] are all over the street . . .”

“Do you worry that you might be trapped in a terrible stalemate?”

“I am really not fond of that expression,” she replied rather sternly. “People have been on the streets. That’s not a stalemate. Ethnic people, like the Karen, are fighting back. That’s not a stalemate. The defiance is there in people’s lives, day after day. You know, even when things seem still on the surface, there’s always movement underneath. It’s like a frozen lake; and beneath our lake, we are progressing, bit by bit.”

“What do you mean exactly?”

“What I am saying is that, no matter the regime’s physical power, in the end they can’t stop the people; they can’t stop freedom. We shall have our time.”

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Why they're afraid of Michael Moore

I**N SICKO**, Michael Moore's new film, a young Ronald Reagan is shown appealing to working-class Americans to reject "socialised medicine" as commie subversion. In the 1940s and 1950s, Reagan was employed by the American Medical Association and big business as the amiable mouthpiece of a neo-fascism bent on persuading ordinary Americans that their true interests, such as universal health care, were "anti-American".

Watching this, I found myself recalling the effusive farewells to Reagan when he died three years ago. "Many people believe," said Gavin Esler on the BBC's *Newsnight*, "that he restored faith in American military action [and] was loved even by his political opponents."

In the *Daily Mail*, Esler wrote that Reagan "embodied the best of the American spirit – the optimistic belief that problems can be solved, that tomorrow will be better than today, and that our children will be wealthier and happier than we are".

Such drivel about a man who, as president, was responsible for the 1980s bloodbath in central America, and the rise of the very terrorism that produced al-Qaeda, became the received spin. Reagan's walk-on part in *Sicko* is a rare glimpse of the truth of his betrayal of the blue-collar nation he claimed to represent. The treacheries of another president, Richard Nixon, and a

would-be president, Hillary Clinton, are similarly exposed by Moore.

Just when there seemed little else to say about the great Watergate crook, Moore extracts from the 1971 White House tapes a conversation between Nixon and John Erlichman, his aide who ended up in prison. A wealthy Republican Party backer, Edgar Kaiser, head of one of America's biggest health insurance companies, is at the White House with a plan for "a national health-care industry". Erlichman pitches it to Nixon, who is bored until the word "profit" is mentioned.

"All the incentives," says Erlichman, "run the right way: the less [medical] care they give them, the more money they make." To which Nixon replies without hesitation: "Fine!" The next cut shows the president announcing to the nation a task force that will deliver a system of "the finest health care". In truth, it is one of the worst and most corrupt in the world, as *Sicko* shows, denying common humanity to some 50 million Americans and, for many of them, the right to life.

The most haunting sequence is captured by a security camera in a Los Angeles street. A woman, still in her hospital gown, staggers through the traffic, where she has been dumped by the company (the one founded by Nixon's backer) that runs the hospital to which she was admitted. She is ill and ter-

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rified and has no health insurance. She still wears her admission bracelet, though the name of the hospital has been thoughtfully erased.

Later on, we meet that glamorous liberal couple, Bill and Hillary Clinton. It is 1993 and the new president is announcing the appointment of the first lady as the one who will fulfil his promise to give America a universal health-care. And here is “charming and witty” Hillary herself, as a senator calls her, pitching her “vision” to Congress. Moore’s portrayal of the loquacious, flirting, sinister Hillary is reminiscent of Tim Robbins’s superb political satire *Bob Roberts*. You know her cynicism is already in her throat. “Hillary,” says Moore in voice-over, “was rewarded for her silence [in 2007] as the second-largest recipient in the Senate of health-care industry contributions”.

Moore has said that Harvey Weinstein, whose company produced *Sicko* and who is a friend of the Clintons, wanted this cut, but he refused. The assault on the Democratic Party candidate likely to be the next president is a departure for Moore, who, in his personal campaign against George Bush in 2004, endorsed General Wesley Clark, the bomber of Serbia, for president and defended Bill Clinton himself, claiming that “no one ever died from a blow job”. (Maybe not, but half a million Iraqi infants died from Clinton’s medieval siege of their country, along with thousands of Haitians, Serbians, Sudanese and other victims of his unsung invasions.)

With this new independence apparent, Moore’s deftness and dark humour in *Sicko*, which is a brilliant work of journalism and satire and film-making, explains – perhaps even better than the films that made his name, *Roger and Me*, *Bowling for Columbine* and *Fahrenheit 9/11* – his popu-

larity and influence and enemies. *Sicko* is so good that you forgive its flaws, notably Moore’s romanticising of Britain’s National Health Service, ignoring a two-tier system that neglects the elderly and the mentally ill.

The film opens with a wry carpenter describing how he had to make a choice after two fingers were shorn off by an electric saw. The choice was \$60,000 to restore a forefinger or \$12,000 to restore a middle finger. He could not afford both, and had no insurance. “Being a hopeless romantic,” says Moore, “he chose the ring finger” on which he wore his wedding ring. Moore’s wit leads us to scenes that are searing, yet unsentimental, such as the eloquent anger of a woman whose small daughter was denied hospital care and died of a seizure. Within days of *Sicko* opening in the United States, more than 25,000 people overwhelmed Moore’s website with similar stories.

The California Nurses Association and the National Nurses Organising Committee despatched volunteers to go on the road with the film. “From my sense,” says Jan Rodolfo, an oncology nurse, “it demonstrates the potential for a true national movement because it’s obviously inspiring so many people in so many places.”

Moore’s “threat” is his unerring view from the ground. He abrogates the contempt in which elite America and the media hold ordinary people. This is a taboo subject among many journalists, especially those claiming to have risen to the nirvana of “impartiality” and others who profess to teach journalism.

If Moore simply presented victims in the time-honoured, ambulance-chasing way, leaving the audience tearful but paralysed, he would have few enemies. He would not be looked down upon as a polemicist and

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self-promoter and all the other pejorative tags that await those who step beyond the invisible boundaries in societies where wealth is said to equal freedom. The few who dig deep into the nature of a liberal ideology that regards itself as superior, yet is responsible for crimes epic in proportion and generally unrecognised, risk being eased out of the “mainstream”, especially if they are young – a process that a former editor once described to me as “a sort of gentle defenestration”.

None has broken through like Moore, and his detractors are perverse to say he is not a “professional journalist” when the role of the professional journalist is so often that of zealously, if surreptitiously, serving the status quo. Without the loyalty of these professionals on the New York Times and other august (mostly liberal) media institutions “of record”, the criminal invasion of Iraq might not have happened and a million people would be alive today. Deployed in Hollywood’s sanctum – the cinema – Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11* shone a light in their eyes, reached into the memory hole, and told the truth. That is why audiences all over the world stood and cheered.

What struck me when I first saw *Roger and Me*, Moore’s first major film, was that you were invited to like ordinary Americans for their struggle and resilience and politics that reached beyond the din and fakery of the American democracy industry. Moreover, it is clear they “get it” about him: that despite being rich and famous he is, at heart, one of them.

A foreigner doing something similar risks being attacked as “anti-American”, a term Moore often uses as irony in order to demonstrate its dishonesty. At a stroke, he sees off the kind of guff exemplified by a recent BBC Radio 4 series that presented hu-

manity as pro- or anti-American while the reporter oozed about America, “the city on the hill”.

Just as tendentious is a documentary called *Manufacturing Dissent*, which appears to have been timed to discredit, if not Sicko, then Moore himself. Made by the Canadians Debbie Melnyk and Rick Caine, it says more about liberals who love to face both ways and the whiny jealousies aroused by tall poppies. Melnyk tells us ad nauseam how much she admires Moore’s films and politics and is inspired by him, then proceeds to attempt character assassination with a blunderbuss of assertions and hearsay about his “methods”, along with personal abuse, such as that of the critic who objected to Moore’s “waddle” and someone else who said he reckoned Moore actually hated America – was anti-American, no less!

Melnyk pursues Moore to ask him why, in his own pursuit of an interview with Roger Smith of General Motors, he failed to mention that he had already spoken to him. Moore has said he interviewed Smith long before he began filming. When she twice intercepts Moore on tour, she is rightly embarrassed by his gracious response. If there is a renaissance of documentaries, it is not served by films such as this.

This is not to suggest Moore should not be pursued and challenged about whether or not he “cuts corners”, just as the work of the revered father of British documentary, John Grierson, has been re-examined and questioned. But feckless parody is not the way. Turning the camera around, as Moore has done, and revealing great power’s “invisible government” of manipulation and often subtle propaganda is certainly one way. In doing so, the documentary-maker breaches a silence and complicity described

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by Günter Grass in his confessional autobiography, *Peeling the Onion*, as maintained by those “feigning their own ignorance and vouching for another’s... divert[ing] attention from something intended to be forgotten, something that nevertheless refuses to go away”.

For me, an earlier Michael Moore was

that other great “anti-American” whistleblower, Tom Paine, who incurred the wrath of corrupt power when he warned that if the majority of the people were being denied “the ideas of truth”, it was time to storm what he called the “Bastille of words” and we call “the media”.

That time is overdue.

1 NOVEMBER 2007

The destruction of Britain's health service

LYING BACK in a hospital ward, the procedure done and successful, a cup of tea going down nicely with the last of the morphine, you are a spectator to the best. By the best, I mean a glimpse of society with none of the dogmatic histrionics of a media and political class determined to change the way we think. That is the worst. By the best I mean, unforgettably, the spectacle of the miners of Murton, County Durham, emerging from the mist of a cold March morning, with the women marching first, going back to the pit. No matter their defeat by superior forces, they were the best.

In a hospital ward, the best is more likely mundane, with people working routinely, listening, responding, reassuring. Their vocabulary is not corporate-speak. Their “productivity” is not a device of profit. Their commitment has no bottom line, and their camaraderie is like a presence; and you become part of it. The common thread is humanity and caring. How exotic that sounds. Turn on the ward’s television and there is a weird other-world of “news”, with famous dullards spinning the latest destruction of society.

There is the mad Blair calling for an attack on Iran and the education secretary Ed Balls peddling his dodgy diplomas, and prime minister Gordon Brown, fresh from entertaining Rupert Murdoch and Alan

Greenspan, announcing his “return of liberty” along with his latest “reforms” that are malignancies on the one institution that embodies liberty in Britain: the National Health Service. None of them has the slightest connection with the people running my ward. The divide in modern Britain is between a society represented by those who keep the Health Service going, and its mutation epitomised by Blair’s and Brown’s Labour government.

In Michael Moore’s *Sicko*, the socialist Tony Benn predicts a revolution in Britain if the NHS is abolished. But Britain’s Health Service is being destroyed by attrition, and if the latest “reforms” are not stopped, it will be too late to erect barricades. On 5 October, the Health Secretary, Alan Johnson, approved a list of fourteen companies that will advise on and take over the “commissioning” of NHS services. They will be given influence, if not eventually control, over which treatments patients receive and who provides them. They are assured multimillions in profits.

They include the US companies United-Health, Aetna and Humana. These totalitarian organisations have been repeatedly fined for their notorious role in the American health-care system. Last year, United-Health’s chief executive, William McGuire, who was paid \$125m a year, resigned following a share-option scandal. In September,

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the company agreed to pay out \$20m in fines “for failures in processing claims and responding to patient complaints”. Aetna has had to pay \$120m in damages after a California jury found it guilty of “malice, oppression and fraud”. In *Sicko*, a medical reviewer for Humana is shown testifying to Congress that she caused the death of a man by denying him care in order to save the company money. Every year, some 18,000 Americans die because they are denied health care or they cannot afford it.

These companies are the Labour government’s friends. Simon Stevens, Blair’s former health policy adviser, is now a CEO at UnitedHealth. Julian Le Grand, writing in the *Guardian* as a distinguished professor, gives his learned approval to the “reforms” – he, too, was Blair’s adviser.

In Manchester, other “reforms” are well

on the way to destroying NHS services for the mentally ill. William Scott committed suicide after losing the support of an NHS worker who had cared for him for eight years. What all this means is that the NHS is being softened up for privatisation by stealth. This is the undeclared policy of the Brown government, whose rapacious actions abroad are mirrored at home. It was Brown as treasurer who promoted the disastrous “private finance initiative” as a device to build new hospitals, while handing huge profits to favoured companies. As a result, the NHS is being bled by £700m a year. This has caused a wholly unnecessary “financial crisis” that is the catch-22 rationale for allowing more profiteers to take over what was a former Labour government’s greatest achievement. Will we allow them to get away with it?

14 NOVEMBER 2007

No tears, no remorse for the fallen of Iraq

ON REMEMBRANCE Day 2007, the great and the good bowed their heads at the Cenotaph. Generals, politicians, newsreaders, football managers and stock-market traders wore their poppies. Hypocrisy was a presence. No one mentioned Iraq. No one uttered the slightest remorse for the fallen of that country. No one read the forbidden list.

The forbidden list documents, without favour, the part the British state and its court have played in the destruction of Iraq. Here it is:

1. *Holocaust denial*

On 25 October, Dai Davies MP asked Gordon Brown about civilian deaths in Iraq. Brown passed the question to the Foreign Secretary, David Miliband, who passed it to his junior minister, Kim Howells, who replied: "We continue to believe that there are no comprehensive or reliable figures for deaths since March 2003." This was a deception. In October 2006, the *Lancet* published research by Johns Hopkins University in the US and al-Mustansiriya University in Baghdad which calculated that 655,000 Iraqis had died as a result of the Anglo-American invasion. A Freedom of Information search revealed that the government, while publicly dismissing the study, secretly backed it as comprehensive and reliable.

The chief scientific adviser to the Ministry of Defence, Sir Roy Anderson, called its methods "robust" and "close to best practice". Other senior governments officials secretly acknowledged the survey's "tried and tested way of measuring mortality in conflict zones". Since then, the British research polling agency, Opinion Research Business, has extrapolated a figure of 1.2 million deaths in Iraq. Thus, the scale of death caused by the British and US governments may well have surpassed that of the Rwanda genocide, making it the biggest single act of mass murder of the late 20th century and the 21st century.

2. *Looting*

The undeclared reason for the invasion of Iraq was the convergent ambitions of the neocons, or neo-fascists, in Washington and the far-right regimes of Israel. Both groups had long wanted Iraq crushed and the Middle East colonised to US and Israeli designs. The initial blueprint for this was the 1992 "Defence Planning Guidance", which outlined America's post-Cold War plans to dominate the Middle East and beyond. Its authors included Dick Cheney, Paul Wolfowitz and Colin Powell, architects of the 2003 invasion. Following the invasion, Paul Bremer, a neocon fanatic, was given absolute civil authority in Baghdad and in a series of decrees turned the entire future

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Iraqi economy over to US corporations. As this was lawless, the corporate plunderers were given immunity from all forms of prosecution. The Blair government was fully complicit and even objected when it looked as if UK companies might be excluded from the most profitable looting. British officials were awarded functionary colonial posts. A petroleum “law” will allow, in effect, foreign oil companies to approve their own contracts over Iraq’s vast energy resources. This will complete the greatest theft since Hitler stripped his European conquests.

3. *Destroying a nation’s health*

In 1999, I interviewed Dr Jawad Al-Ali, a cancer specialist at Basra city hospital. “Before the Gulf War,” he said, “we had only three or four deaths in a month from cancer. Now it’s 30 to 35 patients dying every month. Our studies indicate that 40 to 48 per cent of the population in this area will get cancer.” Iraq was then in the grip of an economic and humanitarian siege, initiated and driven by the US and Britain. The result, wrote Hans von Sponeck, the then chief UN humanitarian official in Baghdad, was “genocidal... practically an entire nation was subjected to poverty, death and destruction of its physical and mental foundations”. Most of southern Iraq remains polluted with the toxic debris of British and American explosives, including uranium-238 shells. Iraqi doctors pleaded in vain for help, citing the levels of leukaemia among children as the highest seen since Hiroshima. Professor Karol Sikora, chief of the World Health Organisation’s cancer programme, wrote in the *BMJ*: “Requested radiotherapy equipment, chemo-therapy drugs and analgesics are consistently blocked by United States and British advisers [to the Sanctions Committee].” In 1999, Kim Howells, then trade min-

ister, effectively banned the export to Iraq of vaccines that would protect mostly children from diphtheria, tetanus and yellow fever, which, he said, “are capable of being used in weapons of mass destruction”.

Since 2003, apart from PR exercises for the embedded media, the British occupiers have made no attempt to re-equip and resupply hospitals that, prior to 1991, were regarded as the best in the Middle East. In July, Oxfam reported that 43 per cent of Iraqis were living in “absolute poverty”. Under the occupation, malnutrition rates among children have spiralled to 28 per cent. A secret Defence Intelligence Agency document, “Iraq Water Treatment Vulnerabilities”, reveals that the civilian water supply was deliberately targeted. As a result, the great majority of the population has neither access to running water nor sanitation – in a country where such basic services were once as universal as in Britain. “The mortality of children in Basra has increased by nearly 30 per cent compared to the Saddam Hussein era,” said Dr Haydar Salah, a paediatrician at Basra children’s hospital. “Children are dying daily and no one is doing anything to help them.” In January this year, nearly 100 leading British doctors wrote to Hilary Benn, then international development secretary, describing how children were dying because Britain had not fulfilled its obligations as an occupying power under UN Security Council Resolution 1483. Benn refused to see them.

4. *Destroying a society*

The UN estimates that 100,000 Iraqis are fleeing the country every month. The refugee crisis has now overtaken that of Darfur as the most catastrophic on earth. Half of Iraq’s doctors have gone, along with engineers and teachers. The most literate so-

ciety in the Middle East is being dismantled, piece by piece. Out of more than four million displaced people, Britain last year refused the majority of more than 1,000 Iraqis who applied to come here, while removing more “illegal” Iraqi refugees than any other European country. Thanks to tabloid-inspired legislation, Iraqis in Britain are often destitute, with no right to work and no support. They sleep and scavenge in parks. The government, says Amnesty, “is trying to starve them out of the country”.

5. Propaganda

“See in my line of work,” said George W Bush, “you got to keep repeating things over and over again for the truth to sink in, to kind of catapult the propaganda.” Standing outside 10 Downing Street on 9 April 2003, the BBC’s then political editor, Andrew Marr, reported the fall of Baghdad as a victory speech. Tony Blair, he told viewers, “said they would be able to take Baghdad without a bloodbath, and that in the end the Iraqis would be celebrating. And on both of those points he has been proved conclusively right. And it would be entirely ungracious, even for his critics, not to acknowledge that tonight he stands as a larger man and a stronger prime minister as a result.” In the United States, similar travesties passed as journalism. The difference was that leading American journalists began to consider the consequences of the role they had played in the build-up to the invasion. Several told me they believed that had the media challenged and investigated Bush’s and Blair’s lies, instead of echoing and amplifying them, the invasion might not have happened. A European study found that, of the major western television networks, the BBC permitted less coverage of dissent than all of them. A second study found that the

BBC consistently gave credence to government propaganda that weapons of mass destruction existed. Unlike the Sun, the BBC has credibility – as does, or did, the Observer.

On 14 October 2001, the London Observer’s front page said: “US hawks accuse Iraq over anthrax”. This was entirely false. Supplied by US intelligence, it was part of the Observer’s staunchly pro-war coverage, which included claiming a link between Iraq and al-Qaeda, for which there was no credible evidence and which betrayed the paper’s honourable past. One report over two pages was headlined: “The Iraqi connection”. It, too, came from “intelligence sources” and was rubbish. The reporter, David Rose, concluded his barren inquiry with a heartfelt plea for an invasion. “There are occasions in history,” he wrote, “when the use of force is both right and sensible.” Rose has since written his mea culpa, including in these pages, confessing how he was used. Other journalists have still to admit how they were manipulated by their own credulous relationship with established power.

These days, Iraq is reported as if it is exclusively a civil war, with a US military “surge” aimed at bringing peace to the scrapping natives. The perversity of this is breathtaking. That sectarian violence is the product of a vicious divide-and-conquer policy is beyond doubt. As for the largely media myth of al-Qaeda, “most of the [American] pros will tell you”, wrote Seymour Hersh, “that the foreign fighters are a couple per cent, and then they’re sort of leaderless”. That a poorly armed, audacious resistance has not only pinned down the world’s most powerful army but has agreed an anti-sectarian, anti al-Qaeda agenda, which opposes attacks on civilians and calls

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for free elections, is not news.

6. *The next blood letting*

In the 1960s and 1970s, British governments secretly expelled the population of Diego Garcia, an island in the Indian Ocean whose people have British nationality. Women and children were loaded on to vessels resembling slave ships and dumped in the slums of Mauritius, after their homeland was given to the Americans for a military base. Three times, the High Court has found this atrocity illegal, calling it a defiance of the Magna Carta and the Blair government's refusal to allow the people to go home "outrageous" and "repugnant". The government continues to use endless recourse to appeal, at the taxpayers' expense, to prevent upsetting Bush. The cruelty of this matches the fact that not only has the US repeatedly bombed Iraq from Diego Garcia, but at "Camp Justice", on the island, "al-Qaeda suspects" are "rendered" and "tortured", ac-

ording to the Washington Post. Now the US Air Force is rushing to upgrade hangar facilities on the island so that stealth bombers can carry 14-tonne "bunker busting" bombs in an attack on Iran. Orchestrated propaganda in the media is critical to the success of this act of international piracy.

On 22 May, the front page of the London Guardian carried the banner headline: "Iran's secret plan for summer offensive to force US out of Iraq". This was a tract of unalloyed propaganda based entirely on anonymous US official sources. Throughout the media, other drums have taken up the beat. "Iran's nuclear ambitions" slips effortlessly from newsreaders' lips, no matter that the International Atomic Energy Agency refuted Washington's lies, no matter the echo of "Saddam's weapons of mass destruction", no matter that another bloodbath beckons.

Lest we forget.

29 NOVEMBER 2007

Exposing the guardians of power

WHAT HAS changed in the way we see the world? For as long as I can remember, the relationship of journalists with power has been hidden behind a bogus objectivity and notions of an “apathetic public” that justify a mantra of “giving the public what they want”. What has changed is the public’s perception and knowledge. No longer trusting what they read and see and hear, people in western democracies are questioning as never before, particularly via the internet. Why, they ask, is the great majority of news sourced to authority and its vested interests? Why are many journalists the agents of power, not people?

Much of this bracing new thinking can be traced to a remarkable UK website, www.medialens.org. The creators of Media Lens, David Edwards and David Cromwell, assisted by their webmaster, Olly Maw, have had such an extraordinary influence since they set up the site in 2001 that, without their meticulous and humane analysis, the full gravity of the debacles of Iraq and Afghanistan might have been consigned to bad journalism’s first draft of bad history. Peter Wilby put it well in his review of *Guardians of Power: the Myth of the Liberal Media*, a drawing-together of Media Lens essays published by Pluto Press, which he described as “mercifully free of academic or

political jargon and awesomely well researched. All journalists should read it, because the Davids make a case that demands to be answered.”

That appeared in the *New Statesman*. Not a single major newspaper reviewed the most important book about journalism I can remember. Take the latest Media Lens essay, “Invasion – a Comparison of Soviet and Western Media Performance”. Written with Nikolai Lanine, who served in the Soviet army during its 1979-89 occupation of Afghanistan, it draws on Soviet-era newspaper archives, comparing the propaganda of that time with current western media performance. They are revealed as almost identical.

Like the reported “success” of the US “surge” in Iraq, the Soviet equivalent allowed “poor peasants [to work] the land peacefully”. Like the Americans and British in Iraq and Afghanistan, Soviet troops were liberators who became peacekeepers and always acted in “self-defence”. The BBC’s Mark Urban’s revelation of the “first real evidence that President Bush’s grand design of toppling a dictator and forcing a democracy into the heart of the Middle East could work” (*Newsnight*, 12 April 2005) is almost word for word that of Soviet commentators claiming benign and noble intent behind Moscow’s actions in Afghanistan. The BBC’s Paul Wood, in thrall to the 101st Airborne,

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reported that the Americans “must win here if they are to leave Iraq . . . There is much still to do.” That precisely was the Soviet line.

The tone of Media Lens’s questions to journalists is so respectful that personal honesty is never questioned. Perhaps that explains a reaction that can be both outraged and comic. The BBC presenter Gavin Esler, champion of Princess Diana and Ronald Reagan, ranted at Media Lens emailers as “fascistic” and “beyond redemption”. Roger Alton, editor of the London Observer and champion of the invasion of Iraq, replied to one ultra-polite member of the public: “Have you been told to write in by those cunts at Media Lens?” When questioned about her environmental reporting, Fiona Harvey, of the Financial Times, replied: “You’re pathetic . . . Who are you?”

The message is: how dare you challenge us in such a way that might expose us? How dare you do the job of true journalism and keep the record straight? Peter Barron, the editor of the BBC’s Newsnight, took a different approach. “I rather like them. David Edwards and David Cromwell are unfailingly polite, their points are well argued and sometimes they’re plain right.”

David Edwards believes that “reason and honesty are enhanced by compassion and compromised by greed and hatred. A journalist who is sincerely motivated by concern for the suffering of others is more likely to report honestly . . .” Some might call this an exotic view. I don’t. Neither does the Gandhi Foundation, which on 2 December will present Media Lens with the prestigious Gandhi International Peace Award. I salute them.

4 DECEMBER 2007

Keep the record straight

THE BOOK of which I am most proud is *Tell Me No Lies: Investigative Journalism and its Triumphs*. It was a long-held ambition of mine to bring together the work of those I considered the greatest journalists of my lifetime: the “honourable exceptions” of my craft. In paying tribute to them, I wanted to demonstrate to young journalists a calibre of truth-telling to which they might aspire. There is the reporting of Martha Gellhorn, Edward R Murrow, James Cameron, Seymour Hersh, Paul Foot, Robert Fisk, Jessica Mitford and the Guardian’s Seumas Milne and Richard Norton-Taylor among others.

In celebrating those who kept and continue to keep the record straight – the basis of all good journalism – I also recognise the need to identify the example of those at the other end of the spectrum, whose work is hardly journalism at all, but who possess the power of exposure in the so-called mainstream media.

On March 28 2006 I described here a report broadcast on Channel 4 News the previous night by its Washington correspondent, Jonathan Rugman. Rugman is pretty typical of television’s Washington correspondents; he reports as if embedded, when, in fact, his work is voluntary. What distinguishes him is his reporting from Venezuela. Rugman’s brief visit last year to

Caracas, the capital of Venezuela, produced what I described here as “one of the worst, most distorted pieces of journalism I have ever seen qualifying as crude propaganda”. This was a piece, I wrote, “which might as well have been written by the US state department”. For example, he described Maria Corina Machado as a “human rights activist”.

In fact, she was a leader of Sumate, an extreme rightwing organisation, who had been welcomed to the White House by George Bush himself. He caricatured Hugo Chávez as a buffoon dictator. In fact, he is an authentic product of a popular political movement that began in 1989 who has won more democratic elections than any leader on earth. Rugman reported that Chávez was helping Iran develop a nuclear weapon.

This is laughable – see the US National Intelligence Estimate report published on December 3 2007. At the end of his performance, Rugman complained dramatically to the camera that he had been “held for 30 hours” by police in Caracas. In fact, he had walked into a military base and, surprise, surprise, was apprehended – as he would be on any Ministry of Defence establishment in Britain – and Venezuela is a country whose president two years earlier had been temporarily overthrown in a military coup. In fact, Chávez himself arranged for Rugman’s speedy release. Rugman’s “report” was so

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absurd that Channel 4 News, which maintains a reputation, was inundated with complaints and, as I was told, “embarrassed” – though not embarrassed enough to desist from sending Rugman back to Venezuela for yesterday’s important constitutional referendum.

Chávez narrowly lost the referendum. His government wanted to change a number of articles in the Venezuelan constitution that would define what he has called “socialism for the 21st century”, including allowing the president to stand in unlimited elections (which leaders in Britain, Canada, Australia and many other countries can do). But many of his own supporters were unconvinced and probably confused as to why they were being called upon to vote yet again, and 3 million of them abstained.

Ironically, the result actually reaffirmed the health of democracy in Venezuela and served to ridicule the incessant media propaganda that Chávez was a “dictator” and a “tyrant”. In a gracious speech conceding defeat, Chávez congratulated the opposition and invited them to celebrate. His tone was the antithesis of the media-led campaign. On the eve of the referendum, closeted with Venezuela’s rich minority, Jonathan Rugman allowed them to call Chávez a communist, which he isn’t. “It’s as bad that?” he contributed.

Presenting these people as victims, he said nothing about their history of rapacious privilege or that their wealth was actually increasing under Chávez. He allowed, unsubstantiated, histrionics such as, “There are Chávez supporters [who] will kill me.” His clever cameraperson filmed soldiers from the boots up at polling stations – soldiers who, according to Rugman, instead of saluting cry out “for the fatherland and socialism”. That they were guarding an elec-

tion process internationally recognised and commended was not mentioned, neither was the fact that opposition monitors had announced they were pleased with the conduct of the election. For a spot of “balance”, he toured what he called the “slums” and found “rubbish in the streets” and milk missing from otherwise abundantly stocked supermarkets. His script was crudely juxtaposed with images showing a screaming child being given an injection over which Rugman commented that “this is how Chávez is injecting his vast oil wealth just where it’s needed most”. “Chávez loyalists,” said Rugman, “will control parliament.” Imagine Channel 4 News describing Labour’s electoral majority in the Commons as “Labour’s loyalists control parliament.”

He diminished or ignored the majority of the proposed constitutional changes including those that would reduce the working week from 44 hours to 36 hours; extend social security benefits to 5 million Venezuelans who work in the “informal economy” – street vendors and the like; end discrimination on the basis of gender – unprecedented in Latin America; lower the minimum voting age from 18 to 16, also unprecedented; and recognise Venezuela’s African-Venezuelan heritage and multiculturalism as a step towards ending the rampant racism practised by a wealthy elite reminiscent of white South Africa under apartheid.

With the referendum results announced, Rugman rejoiced with a crowd of the well-off in Caracas. He declared that “the air is seeping out of the socialist revolution”. Disgracefully, he reported that “[the opposition] feared that [Chávez] would rig the ballots against them” – when the opposite was both true and confirmed.

Propaganda such as this is an accurate reflection of the Venezuela media, which is

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overwhelmingly anti-Chávez and pro-Washington and was complicit in the lawless 2002 coup. As one of the coup plotters said, “Our secret weapon was the media.” Dressed as journalism, it seeks not to inform, but to discredit – in this case, demonstrably one of the most original and imaginative and hopeful democratic experiments in the world. In doing so, it blocks real debate on issues such as those that led Chávez supporters to abstain and a definition of Venezuela’s proclaimed “socialism” as well as the natural tension between the state

and the grass roots. It is the same propaganda that has closed down debate elsewhere and helped to see off Allende in Chile, the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and Astride in Haiti, not to mention a long list of those on other continents who have tried to raise their people out of poverty and despair.

This is journalism as the agency of power, not people, unrelated in all ways to the craft of a Gellhorn, a Cameron, a Murrow, a Hersh.

13 December 2007

Tainted hands across the water

WHEN GORDON Brown spoke recently about his government's devotion to the United States, "founded on the values we share", he was echoing his Foreign Office minister Kim Howells, who was preparing to welcome the Saudi dictator to Britain with effusions of "shared values". The meaning was the same in both cases. The values shared are those of rapacious power and wealth, with democracy and human rights irrelevant, as the bloodbath in Iraq and the suffering of the Palestinians attest, to name only two examples.

The "values we share" are celebrated by an organisation that has just held its annual conference. This is the British-American Project for the Successor Generation (BAP), set up in 1985 with money from a Philadelphia trust with a long history of supporting right-wing causes. Although the BAP does not publicly acknowledge this origin, the source of its inspiration was a call by President Reagan in 1983 for "successor generations" on both sides of the Atlantic to "work together in the future on defence and security matters". He made numerous references to "shared values". Attending this ceremony in the White House Situation Room were the ideologues Rupert Murdoch and the late James Goldsmith.

As Reagan made clear, the need for the BAP arose from Washington's anxiety about

the growing opposition in Britain to nuclear weapons, especially the stationing of cruise missiles in Europe. "A special concern," he said, "will be the successor generations, as these younger people are the ones who will have to work together in the future on defence and security issues." A new, preferably young elite – journalists, academics, economists, "civil society" and liberal community leaders of one sort or another – would offset the growing "anti-Americanism".

The aims of this latter-day network, according to David Willetts, the former director of studies at the right-wing Centre for Policy Studies, now a member of the Tory shadow cabinet, are simply to "help reinforce Anglo-American links, especially if some members already do or will occupy positions of influence". A former British ambassador to Washington, Sir John Kerr, was more direct. In a speech to BAP members, he said the organisation's "powerful combination of eminent Fellows and close Atlantic links threatened to put the embassy out of a job". An American BAP organiser describes the BAP network as committed to "grooming leaders" while promoting "the leading global role that [the US and Britain] continue to play".

The BAP's British "alumni" are drawn largely from new Labour and its court. No fewer than four BAP "fellows" and one advisory board member became ministers in

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the first Blair government. The new Labour names include Peter Mandelson, George Robertson, Baroness Symons, Jonathan Powell (Blair's chief of staff), Baroness Scotland, Douglas Alexander, Geoff Mulgan, Matthew Taylor and David Miliband. Some are Fabian Society members and describe themselves as being "on the left". Trevor Phillips, chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, is another member. They object to whispers of "a conspiracy". The mutuality of class or aspiration is merely assured, unspoken, and the warm embrace of power flattering and often productive.

BAP conferences are held alternately in the US and Britain. This year's was in Newcastle, with the theme "Faith and Justice". On the US board is Diana Negroponte, the wife of John Negroponte, Bush's former national security chief notorious for his associations with death-squad politics in central America. He follows another leading necon, Paul Wolfowitz, architect of the invasion of Iraq and discredited head of the World Bank. Since 1985, BAP "alumni" and "fellows" have been brought together courtesy of Coca-Cola, Monsanto, Saatchi &

Saatchi, Philip Morris and British Airways, among other multinationals. Nick Butler, formerly a top dog at BP, has been a leading light.

For many, the conferences have the revivalist pleasures honed by American PR techniques, with management games, personal presentations, and a closing jolly revue to lighten the serious business. The 2002 conference report noted: "Many BAP alumni are directly involved with US and UK military and defence establishments."

The BAP rarely gets publicity, which may have something to do with the high proportion of journalists who are alumni. Prominent BAP journalists are David Lipsey, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown and assorted Murdochites. The BBC is well represented. On the Today programme, James Naughtie, whose broadcasting has long reflected his own transatlantic interests, has been an alumnus since 1989. Today's newest voice, Evan Davis, formerly the BBC's zealous economics editor, is a member. And at the top of the BAP website home page is a photograph of Jeremy Paxman and his endorsement. "A marvellous way of meeting a varied cross-section of transatlantic friends," says he.

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Liberalism to Murdochcracy

THE FORMER Murdoch retainer Andrew Neil has described James Murdoch, the heir apparent, as a “social liberal”. What strikes me is his casual use of “liberal” for the new ruler of an empire devoted to the promotion of war, conquest and human division. Neil’s view is not unusual. In the Murdochcracy that Britain has largely become, once noble terms such as democracy, reform, even freedom itself, have long been emptied of their meaning.

In the years leading to Tony Blair’s election, liberal commentators vied in their Tonier-than-thou obeisance to such a paragon of “reborn liberalism”. Writing in the *New Statesman* in 1995, Henry Porter celebrated an almost mystical politician who “presents himself as a harmoniser for all the opposing interests in British life, a conciliator of class differences and tribal antipathies, a synthesiser of opposing beliefs”. Blair was, of course, the diametric opposite.

As events have demonstrated, Blair and the cult of New Labour have destroyed the very liberalism millions of Britons thought they were voting for. This truth is like a taboo and was missing almost entirely from last week’s *Guardian* debate about civil liberties. Gone is the bourgeoisie that in good times would extend a few rungs of the ladder to those below.

From Blair’s pseudo-moralising assault

on single parents a decade ago to Peter Hain’s recent attacks on the disabled, the “project” has completed the work of Thatcher and all but abolished the premises of tolerance and decency, however amorphous, on which much of British public life was based.

The trade-off has been mostly superficial “social liberalism” and the highest personal indebtedness on earth. In 2007, reported the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the United Kingdom faced the highest levels of inequality for 40 years, with the rich getting richer and the poor poorer and more and more segregated from society. The International Monetary Fund has designated Britain a tax haven, and corruption and fraud in British business are almost twice the global average, while Unicef reports that British children are the most neglected and unhappiest in the “rich” world.

Abroad, behind a facade of liberal concern for the world’s “disadvantaged”, such as waffle about millennium goals and anti-poverty stunts with the likes of Google and Vodafone, the Brown government, together with its EU partners, is demanding vicious and punitive free-trade agreements that will devastate the economies of scores of impoverished African, Caribbean and Pacific nations.

In Iraq, the blood-letting of a “liberal intervention” may well have surpassed that of

the Rwanda genocide, while the British occupiers have made no real attempt to help the victims of their lawlessness. And putting out more flags will not cover the shame. “The mortality of children in Basra has increased by nearly 30% compared to the Saddam Hussein era,” says Dr Haydar Salah, a paediatrician at Basra children’s hospital.

In January nearly 100 leading British doctors wrote to Hilary Benn, then international development secretary, describing how children were dying because Britain had not fulfilled its obligations under UN security resolution 1483. He refused to see them.

Even if a contortion of intellect and morality allows the interventionists to justify these actions, the same cannot be said for liberties eroded at home. These are too much part of the myth that individual freedom was handed down by eminent liberal gentlemen instead of being fought for at the bottom. Yet rights of habeas corpus, of free speech and assembly, and dissent and tolerance, are slipping away, undefended. Whole British communities now live in fear of the police. The British are distinguished as one of the most spied upon people in the world. A grey surveillance van with satellite tracking sits outside my local Sainsbury’s.

On the pop radio station Kiss 100, the security service MI5 advertises for ordinary people to spy on each other. These are normal now, along with the tracking of our intimate lives and a system of secretive justice that imposes 18-hour curfews on people who have not been charged with any crime and are denied the “evidence”.

Hundreds of terrified Iraqi refugees are sent back to the infinite dangers of the country “we” have destroyed.

Meanwhile, the cause of any real civil threat to Britons has been identified and

confirmed repeatedly by the intelligence services. It is “our” continuing military presence in other people’s countries and collusion with a Washington cabal described by the late Norman Mailer as “pre-fascist”. When famous liberal columnists wring their hands about the domestic consequences, let them look to their own early support for such epic faraway crimes.

In broadcasting, a prime source of liberalism and most of our information, the unthinkable has been normalised. The murderous chaos in Iraq is merely internecine. Indeed, Bush’s “surge” is “working”. The holocaust there has nothing to do with “us”. There are honourable exceptions, of course, as there are in those great liberal storehouses of knowledge, Britain’s universities; but they, too, are normalised and left to natter about “failed states” and “crisis management” – when the cause of the crisis is on their doorstep.

As Terry Eagleton has pointed out, for the first time in two centuries almost no eminent British poet, playwright or novelist is prepared to question the foundations of western actions, let alone interrupt, as DJ Taylor once put it, all those “demure ironies and mannered perceptions, their focus on the gyrations of a bunch of emotional poseurs ... to the reader infinitely reassuring ... and infinitely useless”. Harold Pinter and Ronan Bennett are exceptions.

Britain is now a centralised single-ideology state, as secure in the grip of a superpower as any former eastern bloc country. The Whitehall executive has prerogative powers as effective as politburo decrees.

Unlike Venezuela, critical issues such as the EU constitution or treaty are denied a referendum, regardless of Blair’s “solemn pledge”. Thanks largely to a parliament in which a majority of the members cannot

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bring themselves to denounce the crime in Iraq or even vote for an inquiry, New Labour has added to the statutes a record 3,000 criminal offences: an apparatus of control that undermines the Human Rights Act. In 1977, at the height of the cold war, I interviewed the Charter 77 dissidents in Czechoslovakia.

They warned that complacency and silence could destroy liberty and democracy as effectively as tanks. “We’re actually better off than you in the west,” said a writer, measuring his irony. “Unlike you, we have no illusions.”

For those people who still celebrate the virtues and triumphs of liberalism – anti-slavery, women’s suffrage, the defence of in-

dividual conscience and the right to express it and act upon it – the time for direct action is now.

It is time to support those of courage who defy rotten laws to read out in Parliament Square the names of the current, mounting, war dead, and those who identify their government’s complicity in “rendition” and its torture, and those who have followed the paper and blood trail of Britain’s piratical arms companies.

It is time to support the NHS workers who up and down the country are trying to alert us to the destruction of a Labour government’s greatest achievement. The list of people stirring is reassuring. The awakening of the rest of us is urgent.

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