

THE JOHN
PILGER
READER

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ColdType



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18 JANUARY 2007

Looking to the side, from Belsen to Gaza

A **GENOCIDE** is engulfing the people of Gaza while a silence engulfs its bystanders. “Some 1.4 million people, mostly children, are piled up in one of the most densely populated regions of the world, with no freedom of movement, no place to run and no space to hide,” wrote the senior UN relief official, Jan Egeland, and Jan Eliasson, then Swedish foreign minister, in *Le Figaro*. They described people “living in a cage”, cut off by land, sea and air, with no reliable power and little water and tortured by hunger and disease and incessant attacks by Israeli troops and planes.

Egeland and Eliasson wrote this four months ago as an attempt to break the silence in Europe whose obedient alliance with the United States and Israel has sought to reverse the democratic result that brought Hamas to power in last year’s Palestinian elections. The horror in Gaza has since been compounded; a family of 18 has died beneath a 500-pound American/Israeli bomb; unarmed women have been mown down at point-blank range. Dr David Halpin, one of the few Britons to break what he calls “this medieval siege”, reported the killing of 57 children by artillery, rockets and small arms and was shown evidence that civilians are Israel’s true targets, as in Lebanon last summer. A friend in Gaza, Dr Mona El-Farra, emailed: “I see the effects of

the relentless sonic booms [a collective punishment by the Israeli air force] and artillery on my 13-year-old daughter. At night, she shivers with fear. Then both of us end up crouching on the floor. I try to make her feel safe, but when the bombs sound I flinch and scream...”

When I was last in Gaza, Dr Khalid Dahlan, a psychiatrist, showed me the results of a remarkable survey. “The statistic I personally find unbearable,” he said, “is that 99.4 per cent of the children we studied suffer trauma. Once you look at the rates of exposure to trauma you see why: 99.2 per cent of their homes were bombarded; 97.5 per cent were exposed to tear gas; 96.6 per cent witnessed shootings; 95.8 per cent witnessed bombardment and funerals; almost a quarter saw family members injured or killed.” Dr Dahlan invited me to sit in on one of his clinics. There were 30 children, all of them traumatized. He gave each pencil and paper and asked them to draw. They drew pictures of grotesque acts of terror and of women streaming tears.

The excuse for the latest Israeli terror was the capture last June of an Israeli soldier, a member of an illegal occupation, by the Palestinian resistance. This was news. The kidnapping a few days earlier by Israel of two Palestinians – two of thousands taken over the years – was not news. An historian and two foreign journalists have reported

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the truth about Gaza. All three are Israelis. They are frequently called traitors. The historian Ilan Pappé has documented that “the genocidal policy [in Gaza] is not formulated in a vacuum” but part of Zionism’s deliberate, historic ethnic cleansing. Gideon Levy and Amira Hass are reporters on the Israeli newspaper Ha’aretz. In November, Levy described how the people of Gaza were beginning to starve to death ... “there are thousands of wounded, disabled and shell-shocked people unable to receive any treatment... the shadows of human beings roam the ruin... they only know the [Israeli army] will return and what this will mean for them: more imprisonment in their homes for weeks, more death and destruction in monstrous proportions.”

Amira Hass, who has lived in Gaza, describes it as a prison that shames her people. She recalls how her mother, Hannah, was being marched from a cattle-train to the Nazi concentration camp at Bergen-

Belsen on a summer’s day in 1944. “[She] saw these German women looking at the prisoners, just looking,” she wrote. “This image became very formative in my upbringing, this despicable ‘looking from the side’.”

“Looking from the side” is what those of us do who are cowed into silence by the threat of being called anti-Semitic. Looking from the side is what too many western Jews do, while those Jews who honour the humane traditions of Judaism and say, “Not in our name!” are abused as “self-despising”. Looking from the side is what almost the entire US Congress does, in thrall to or intimidated by a vicious Zionist “lobby”. Looking from the side is what “even-handed” journalists do as they excuse the lawlessness that is the source of Israeli atrocities and suppress the historic shifts in the Palestinian resistance, such as the implicit recognition of Israel by Hamas. The people of Gaza cry out for better.

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Cruelty and xenophobia shame the lucky country

THE Australian writer Donald Horne meant the title of his celebrated book, *The Lucky Country*, as irony. “Australia is a lucky country run by second-rate people who share its luck,” he lamented in 1964, describing much of the Australian elite as unfailingly unoriginal, race-obsessed and in thrall to imperial power and its wars. From Britain’s 19th century opium adventures to America’s current travesty in Iraq, Australians have been sent to fight faraway people with whom they have no quarrel and who offer no threat of invasion. Growing up here, I was assured this was a “sacred tradition”.

But then another Australia was “discovered”. The only war dead Australians had never mourned were found right under their noses: those of a remarkable indigenous people who had owned and cared for this ancient land for thousands of years, then fought and died in its defence when the British invaded. In a land littered with cenotaphs, not one honoured them. For many whites, the awakening was rude; for others it was thrilling. In the 70s, thanks largely to the brief, brave and subverted Labor government of Gough Whitlam, the universities opened their studies to these heresies and their gates to a society Mark Twain once identified as “almost entirely populated by the lower orders”. A secret history revealed

that long before the rest of the western world, Australian working people had fought for and won a minimum wage, an eight-hour working day, pensions, child benefits and the vote for women. And now there was an astonishing ethnic diversity; and it had happened as if by default; there simply were not enough Britons and “blue-eyed Balts” who wanted to come.

Australia is not often news, cricket and bushfires aside. That is a pity, because the regression of this social democracy into a state of fabricated fear and xenophobia is an object lesson for all societies claiming to be free. In power for more than a decade, the Liberal prime minister, John Howard, comes from the outer reaches of Australia’s “necons”. In 1988, he announced that a future government led by him would pursue a “One Australia Policy”, a forerunner to Pauline Hanson’s infamous One Nation party, whose targets were black Australians and immigrants. Howard’s targets have been similar. One of his first acts as prime minister was to cut \$A400m from the Aboriginal affairs budget. “Political correctness,” he said, “has gone too far.” Today, black Australians have one of the lowest life expectancies in the world, and their health is the worst in the world. An entirely preventable disease, trachoma — beaten in many poor countries — still blinds them because of appalling living conditions. The impover-

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ishment of black communities, which I have seen change little over the years, was described in 2006 by Save the Children as “some of the worst we have seen in our work all around the world”. Instead of a political respect in the form of a national lands rights law, a war of legal attrition has been waged against the Aborigines; and the epidemics and black suicides continue.

Howard rejoices in his promotion of “Australian values” — a very Australian sycophancy to the sugared “values” of foreign (American) power. The darling of a group of white supremacists who buzz around the Murdoch-dominated press and radio talk-back hosts, the prime minister has used acolytes to attack the “black armband view of history”, as if the mass killing and resistance of indigenous Australians did not happen.

The fine historian, Henry Reynolds, author of *The Other Side of the Frontier*, has been thoroughly smeared, along with other revisionists. In 2005, Andrew Jaspan, a Briton newly appointed editor of the *Melbourne Age*, was subjected to a vicious neocon campaign that accused him of “reducing” the *Age* to “another (liberal) *Guardian*”.

Flag-waving and an unctuous hand-on-heart jingoism about which sceptical Australians once felt a healthy ambivalence are now standard features at sporting and other public events. These serve to prepare Australians for renewed militarism and war, as ordained by the Bush administration, and to cover attacks on Australia’s Muslim community. Speak out and you may break a 2005 law of sedition meant to intimidate with the threat of imprisonment for up to seven years. Once described in the media as Bush’s “deputy sheriff”, Howard did not demur when Bush, on hearing this, pro-

moted him to “sheriff for south-east Asia”. Like a mini-Blair, he has sent troops and federal police to the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Papua New Guinea and East Timor. In newly independent East Timor, where Australian governments colluded with Indonesia’s 23-year bloody occupation, “regime change” was effectively executed last year with the resignation of the prime minister, Mari Alkatiri, who had the temerity to oppose Canberra’s one-sided exploitation of his country’s oil and gas resources.

However, it is one man, David Hicks, a spectacular loser in the new Australia, who now threatens Howard’s “lucky” facade. Hicks was found among the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001 and sold as bounty to the Americans by CIA-backed warlords. He has spent more than five years in Guantánamo Bay, including eight months in a cell with no sunlight. He has been tortured, and never charged with any crime.

Howard and his attorney-general, Philip Ruddock, have refused even to request Hicks’s repatriation, as is his constitutional right, because there are no Australian laws under which Hicks can be charged. Their cruelty is breathtaking. A tenacious campaign by his father, Terry, has ignited a kind of public shame that is growing. This has happened before in Australia, such as the march of a million people across Sydney Harbour Bridge demanding justice for black Australians, and the courageous direct action by young people who forced the closure of notorious outback detention camps for illegal refugees, with their isolation cells, capicum spray and beatings. Asylum seekers caught in their leaking boats by the ever-vigilant Australian Defence Force are now incarcerated behind electric fences on tiny Christmas Island more than 1,000 miles from the lucky country.

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Howard faces no real opposition from the compliant Labor party. The trade unions, facing a rollback of Australia's proud record of workers' rights and up to 43 per cent youth unemployment, have stirred, and filled the streets. But perhaps something wider and deeper is coming from a nation whose most enduring and melancholy self-image is that of disobedient larrikins

(rebels). During the recent Ashes cricket series, Ian Chappell, one of Australia's most admired captains, walked out of the commentary box when Howard walked in. After seeing for himself conditions in a refugee prison, Chappell said, "These are human beings and you can't just treat them like that ... in cricketing parlance it was like cheating. They were being cheated out of a fair go."

1 FEBRUARY 2007

Iran: A war is coming

THE United States is planning what will be a catastrophic attack on Iran. For the Bush cabal, the attack will be a way of “buying time” for its disaster in Iraq. In announcing what he called a “surge” of American troops in Iraq, George W Bush identified Iran as his real target. “We will interrupt the flow of support [to the insurgency in Iraq] from Iran and Syria”, he said. “And we will seek out and destroy the networks providing advanced weaponry and training to our enemies in Iraq.”

“Networks” means Iran. “There is solid evidence,” said a State Department spokesman on 24 January, “that Iranian agents are involved in these networks and that they are working with individuals and groups in Iraq and are being sent there by the Iranian government.” Like Bush’s and Blair’s claim that they had irrefutable evidence that Saddam Hussein was deploying weapons of mass destruction, the “evidence” lacks all credibility. Iran has a natural affinity with the Shia majority of Iraq, and has been implacably opposed to al-Qaeda, condemning the 9/11 attacks and supporting the United States in Afghanistan. Syria has done the same. Investigations by the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times and others, including British military officials, have concluded that Iran is not engaged in the cross-border supply of

weapons. General Peter Pace, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, has said no such evidence exists.

As the American disaster in Iraq deepens and domestic and foreign opposition grows, “neocon” fanatics such as Vice-President Cheney believe their opportunity to control Iran’s oil will pass unless they act no later than the spring. For public consumption, there are potent myths. In concert with Israel and Washington’s Zionist and fundamentalist Christian lobbies, the Bushites say their “strategy” is to end Iran’s nuclear threat. In fact, Iran possesses not a single nuclear weapon nor has it ever threatened to build one; the CIA estimates that, even given the political will, Iran is incapable of building a nuclear weapon before 2017, at the earliest.

Unlike Israel and the United States, Iran has abided by the rules of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, of which it was an original signatory and has allowed routine inspections under its legal obligations – until gratuitous, punitive measures were added in 2003, at the behest of Washington. No report by the International Atomic Energy Agency has ever cited Iran for diverting its civilian nuclear programme to military use. The IAEA has said that for most of the past three years its inspectors have been able to “go anywhere and see anything”. They inspected the nuclear installations at Isfahan

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and Natanz on 10 and 12 January and will return on 2 to 6 February. The head of the IAEA, Mohamed El-Baradei says that an attack on Iran will have “catastrophic consequences” and only encourage the regime to become a nuclear power.

Unlike its two nemeses, the US and Israel, Iran has attacked no other countries. It last went to war in 1980 when invaded by Saddam Hussein, who was backed and equipped by the US, which supplied chemical and biological weapons produced at a factory in Maryland. Unlike Israel, the world’s fifth military power with thermo-nuclear weapons aimed at Middle-East targets, an unmatched record of defying UN resolutions and the enforcer of the world’s longest illegal occupation, Iran has a history of obeying international law and occupies no territory other than its own.

The “threat” from Iran is entirely manufactured, aided and abetted by familiar, compliant media language that refers to Iran’s “nuclear ambitions”, just as the vocabulary of Saddam’s non-existent WMD arsenal became common usage. Accompanying this is a demonising that has become standard practice. As Edward Herman has pointed out, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, “has done yeoman service in facilitating this”; yet a close examination of his notorious remark about Israel in October 2005 reveals its distortion. According to Juan Cole, American professor of Modern Middle History, and other Farsi language analysts, Ahmadinejad did not call for Israel to be “wiped off the map”. He said, “The regime occupying Jerusalem must vanish from the page of time”. This, says Cole, “does not imply military action or killing anyone at all”. Ahmadinejad compared the demise of the Jerusalem regime to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The Iranian regime is re-

pressive, but its power is diffuse and exercised by the mullahs, with whom Ahmadinejad is often at odds. An attack would surely unite them.

The one piece of “solid evidence” is the threat posed by the United States. An American naval buildup in the eastern Mediterranean has begun. This is almost certainly part of what the Pentagon calls CONPLAN 8022, which is the aerial bombing of Iran. In 2004, National Security Presidential Directive 35, entitled Nuclear Weapons Deployment Authorisation, was issued. It is classified, of course, but the presumption has long been that NSPD 35 authorised the stockpiling and deployment of “tactical” nuclear weapons in the Middle East. This does not mean Bush will use them against Iran, but for the first time since the most dangerous years of the cold war, the use of what were then called “limited” nuclear weapons is being openly discussed in Washington. What they are debating is the prospect of other Hiroshimas and of radioactive fallout across the Middle East and Central Asia. Seymour Hersh disclosed in the New Yorker last year that American bombers “have been flying simulated nuclear weapons delivery missions . . . since last summer”.

The well-informed Arab Times in Kuwait says Bush will attack Iran before the end of April. One of Russia’s most senior military strategists, General Leonid Ivashov says the US will use nuclear munitions delivered by Cruise missiles launched in the Mediterranean. “The war in Iraq,” he wrote on 24 January, “was just one element in a series of steps in the process of regional destabilization. It was only a phase in getting closer to dealing with Iran and other countries. [When the attack on Iran begins] Israel is sure to come under Iranian missile strikes.

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Posing as victims, the Israelis will suffer some tolerable damage and then an outraged US will destabilize Iran finally, making it look like a noble mission of retribution . . . Public opinion is already under pressure. There will be a growing anti-Iranian hysteria, leaks, disinformation etcetera . . . It remains unclear whether the US Congress is going to authorize the war.”

Asked about a US Senate resolution disapproving of the “surge” of US troops to Iraq, Vice-President Cheney said, “It won’t stop us.” Last November, a majority of the American electorate voted for the Democratic Party to control Congress and stop the war in Iraq. Apart from insipid speeches of “disapproval”, this has not happened and is unlikely to happen. Influential Democrats, such as the new leader of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, and would-be presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and John Edwards have disported themselves before the Israeli lobby. Edwards is regarded in his party as a “liberal”. He was one of a high-level American contingent at a recent Israeli conference in Herzilya, where he spoke about “an unprecedented threat to the world and Israel (sic). At the top of these threats is Iran . . . All options are on the table to ensure that Iran will never get a nuclear weapon.” Hillary Clinton has said, “US policy must be unequivocal . . . We have to keep all options on the table.” Pelosi and Howard Dean, another liberal, have distinguished themselves by attacking former President Jimmy Carter, who oversaw the Camp

David agreement between Israel and Egypt and has had the gall to write a truthful book accusing Israel of becoming an “apartheid state”. Pelosi said, “Carter does not speak for the Democratic Party.” She is right, alas.

In Britain, Downing Street has been presented with a document entitled “Answering the Charges” by Professor Abbas Edalal of Imperial College, London, on behalf of others seeking to expose the disinformation on Iran. Blair remains silent. Apart from the usual honourable exceptions, Parliament remains shamefully silent.

Can this really be happening again, less than four years after the invasion of Iraq which has left some 650,000 people dead? I wrote virtually this same article early in 2003; for Iran now read Iraq then. And is it not remarkable that North Korea has not been attacked? North Korea has nuclear weapons. That is the message, loud and clear, for the Iranians.

In numerous surveys, such as that conducted this month by BBC World Service, “we”, the majority of humanity, have made clear our revulsion for Bush and his vassals. As for Blair, the man is now politically and morally naked for all to see. So who speaks out, apart from Professor Edalal and his colleagues? Privileged journalists, scholars and artists, writers and thespians who sometimes speak about “freedom of speech” are as silent as a dark West End theatre. What are they waiting for? The declaration of another thousand year Reich, or a mushroom cloud in the Middle East, or both?

15 FEBRUARY 2007

Mourning a secret Australia

How many days of mourning have I attended? Vivid in the memory are wreaths thrown on to Sydney Harbour, and men in crumpled hats and women in loose frocks standing on foreshores where their forebears saw the first ships carrying white men. On 14 February, there was a day of mourning for T J Hickey, an Aboriginal boy who was chased by police three years ago and ended up impaled on a spiked iron fence in The Block, a ghetto within sight of Sydney's banks and corporate towers. Commemorative silences were held for "TJ" and his violent death was likened to Australia's many Aboriginal deaths in custody, such as that of Mulrunji Doomadgee on Palm Island.

Palm Island is one of the most beautiful on the Great Barrier Reef, yet few outsiders take the short flight from Townsville. Established in 1918 as a detention camp for Aboriginal men, women and children convicted of the crimes of homelessness, rebelliousness and drunkenness, it has changed mostly on the surface. When I first went there in 1980, an epidemic of gastroenteritis was deemed life-threatening. Two years later, researchers discovered in the records of the Queensland Health Department that Aboriginal deaths from common, infectious diseases were up to 300 times higher than the white average, and the highest in the world. In the cemetery, overlooking waves

breaking gently on the coral reef, many of the headstones bear the names of children.

On 26 January last, a date known as Australia Day by whites celebrating their "settlement" (Aborigines call it Invasion Day), something very unusual happened. It was announced that a police sergeant, Chris Hurley, would be charged with the manslaughter of Mulrunji Doomadgee. In 2004, Hurley arrested Mulrunji for swearing and drunkenness; once in police custody, Mulrunji had his liver torn in two.

"These actions of Sergeant Hurley," said the deputy coroner, "caused the fatal injuries." However, Queensland's director of public prosecutions decided not to lay charges. This is standard practice. In 1989, a royal commission inquired into more than 100 deaths in custody, many of them demonstrably murder or manslaughter. "I had no conception," wrote the chief commissioner, Elliott Johnston, "of the degree of . . . abuse of personal power, utter paternalism, open contempt and total indifference with which so many Aboriginal people were visited on a day-to-day basis."

So spoke the voice of Australian liberalism and justice. Of the 339 recommendations made by the royal commission, not one called for criminal charges. The prosecution of Sergeant Hurley is the first of its kind, and it happened only because the Queensland government was virtually dra-

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gooned into seeking the independent opinion of a retired chief justice of New South Wales.

Of all the great Australian pastimes, silence is currently the most popular. This is largely due to a fear of speaking out, described in a rare book, *Silencing Dissent*, by Clive Hamilton and Sarah Maddison. The authors' fellow Australian academics and writers say little if anything publicly that might upset the all-controlling Bushites of John Howard's government and its inspectorate in the media. Trial by media of Australia's domestic victims, be they Aboriginal or Muslim, is standard practice. Officially approved platitudes pass as news and commentary, along with weary stereotypes of much of humanity, from heroic Aussie cricketers to whingeing Poms and mad mullahs. True Australian heroes go unrecognised, such as Arthur Murray, a former Aboriginal union organiser who has fought unremittingly for 25 years for justice for his son

Eddie, killed in police custody, and for all his people. Few white Australians will have heard of Arthur, whose dignity and courage evoke a secret history, described by the historian Henry Reynolds as the "embarrassment of bloodied billabongs" (lakes).

Australian "values" and national pride are political distractions of the moment in a nation witlessly at war in Iraq and Afghanistan – a nation with up to 43 per cent youth unemployment at home and, in some places, the majority of its black youths in custody.

"Australian patriotism," says the cultural historian Tony Moore, "should be first and foremost based on taking the piss, of laughing, not just at one's self but at the powerful . . ." He calls this "bullshit detection". Terrific idea, Tony, but I suggest you first run it by Arthur Murray and the people of The Block and Palm Island; for until we whites give back to black Australians their nationhood, we can never claim our own.

1 MARCH 2007

Australia: The 51st state

IN June this year, 26,000 US and Australian troops will take part in bombarding the ancient fragile landscape of Australia. They will storm the Great Barrier Reef, gun down “terrorists” and fire laser-guided missiles at some of the most pristine wilderness on earth. Stealth, B-1 and B-52 bombers (the latter alone each carry 30 tonnes of bombs) will finish the job, along with a naval onslaught. Underwater depth charges will explode where endangered species of turtle breed. Nuclear submarines will discharge their high-level sonar, which destroy the hearing of seals and other marine mammals.

Run via satellite from Australia and Hawaii, Operation Talisman Sabre 2007 is warfare by remote control, designed for “pre-emptive” attacks on other countries. Australians know little about this. The Australian parliament has not debated it; the media is not interested. The result of a secret treaty signed by John Howard’s government with the Bush administration in 2004, it includes the establishment of a vast, new military base in Western Australia, which will bring the total of known US bases around the world to 738. No matter the setback in Iraq, the US military empire and its ambitions are growing.

Australia is important because of a remarkable degree of servility that Howard has taken beyond even that of Tony Blair.

Once described in the Sydney Bulletin as Bush’s “deputy sheriff”, Howard did not demur when Bush, on hearing this, promoted him to “sheriff for south-east Asia”. With Washington’s approval, he has sent Australian troops and federal police to intervene in the Pacific island nations; in 2006, he effected “regime change” in East Timor, whose prime minister, Mari Alkatiri, had the nerve to demand a proper share of his country’s oil and gas resources. Indonesia’s repression in West Papua, where American mining interests are described as “a great prize”, is endorsed by Howard.

This sub-imperial role has a history. When the six Australian states federated as a nation in 1901, “a Commonwealth . . . independent and proud”, said the headlines, the Australian colonists made clear that independence was the last thing they wanted. They wanted Mother England to be more protective of her most distant colony which, they pleaded, was threatened by a host of demons, not least the “Asiatic hordes” who would fall down on them as if by the force of gravity. “The whole performance,” wrote the historian Manning Clark, “stank in the nostrils. Australians had once again grovelled before the English. There were Fatman politicians who hungered for a foreign title just as their wives hungered after a smile of recognition from the Governor-General’s wife, who was said to be a most accom-

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plished snubber.”

Australia’s modern political class has the same hunger for the recognition of great power. In the 1950s, prime minister Robert Menzies allowed Britain to explode nuclear bombs in Australia, sending clouds of radioactive material across populated areas. Australians were told only the good news of being chosen for this privilege. A Royal Air Force officer was threatened with prosecution after he revealed that 400 to 500 Aborigines were in the target zones. “Occasionally we would bring them in for decontamination,” he said. “Other times, we just shooed them off like rabbits.” Blindness and unexplained deaths followed. After 17 years in power, Menzies was knighted by the Queen and made Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports.

An undeclared maxim of Australian politics is that prime ministers become “statesmen” only when they serve imperial interests. (Honourable exceptions have been dealt with by smear and subversion). In the 1960s, Menzies connived to be “asked” to send Australian troops to fight for the Americans in Vietnam. Red China was coming, he said. Howard is more extreme; in his decade of power, he has eroded the very basis of Australia’s social democratic institutions and cast his country as the model of a Washington-style democracy, where the only popular participation is that of voting every few years for two “opposing” parties which share almost identical economic, foreign and “cultural” policies.

For “cultural”, read race, which has always been important in creating an insidious state of fear and compliance. In 2001, Howard was re-elected after manipulating the “children overboard affair”, in which his senior advisers claimed that Afghan refugees had callously thrown their children

into the sea in order to be rescued by an Australian naval vessel. They produced photographs that were proven false, but only after Howard had touched every xenophobic nerve in the white electorate and was duly re-elected. The two officials who brought the “crisis” to its fraudulent fever pitch were promoted after one of them admitted that the deception had “helped” the prime minister. In a more scandalous case, Howard claimed his defence department had been unaware of another leaking, stricken boat filled with Iraqi and Afghan refugees heading for Australia until after it had sunk. An admiral later revealed this, too, was false; 353 people were allowed to drown, including 146 children.

Above all, it is the control of dissent that has changed Australia. Rupert Murdoch’s influence has been critical, far more so than in Britain. Whenever Howard or one of his more oafish ministers want to bend an institution or smear an opponent, they carry out the task in alliance with a pack of rabid mostly Murdoch commentators.

As Stuart MacIntyre describes in a new book, *Silencing Dissent*, the Melbourne Herald-Sun columnist, Andrew Bolt, conducted a campaign of ridicule against the independent Australian Research Council which, he claimed, had fallen into the hands of a “a club of scratch-my-back-leftists” whose work was “hostile to our culture, history and institutions”, as well as “peek-in-your-pants researchers fixated on gender and race”. The then minister of education, Brendan Nelson, vetoed one project grant after another without explanation.

The National Museum of Australia, the national child benefits centre, Aboriginal policy bodies and other independent institutions have been subjected to similar intimidation. A friend who holds a senior uni-

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versity post told me: “You dare not speak out. You dare not oppose the government or ‘the big end of town’ [corporate Australia].” As embarrassing corporate crime rises, the treasurer, Peter Costello, has blithely announced a ban on moral or ethical boycotts of certain products. There was no debate; the media was simply told. One of Costello’s senior advisers, David Gazard, recently distinguished an American-run seminar in Melbourne, organised by the Public Relations Institute of Australia, at which those paying A\$595 were taught the tricks of conflating activism with “terrorism” and “security threat”. Suggestions included: “Call them suicide bombers . . . make them all look like terrorists . . . tree-hugging, dope-smoking, bloody university graduate, anti-progress . . .” They were advised on how to set up bogus community groups and falsify statistics.

Schoolteachers who do not fly the flag or music concert organisers who discourage the attendance of racist thugs wrapped in the flag are at risk of a dose of Murdoch poison. Equally, if you reveal the shame of Australia’s vassal role you are deemed “anti-Australian” and, without irony, “anti-American”. Few Australians are aware that Murdoch, who dominates the press, abandoned his own Australian citizenship so that he could set up the Fox TV network in the US. The University of Sydney is to open a United States Study Centre, backed by Murdoch after he complained about the inability of Australians to appreciate the benefits of the bloodbath in Iraq.

Having recently spoken at overflowing

public meetings in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne, I am left in no doubt that many are deeply worried that freedoms in their sunny idyll are slipping away. They were given a vivid reminder of this the other day when Vice President Dick Cheney came to Sydney to “thank” Howard for his support. The New South Wales state government rushed through a law that allowed Cheney’s 70 secret service guards to carry live weapons. With the police, they took over the centre of Sydney and closed the Harbour Bridge and much of the historic Rocks area. Seventeen-vehicle motorcades swept theatrically here and there, as if Howard was boasting to Cheney: “Look at my control over this society; look at my compliant country.”

And yet his guest and mentor is a man who, having refused to fight in Vietnam, has brought back torture and lied incessantly about Iraq, who has made millions in stock options as his Halliburton company profits from the carnage and who has vetoed peace with Iran. Almost every speech he gives includes a threat.

By any measure of international law, Cheney is a major war criminal, yet it was left to a small, brave group of protesters to uphold the Aussie myth of principled rebellion and stand up to the police. The opposition Labor Party leader, Kevin Rudd, the embodiment of compliance, called them “violent ferals”; one of the protesters was 70 years old. The next day, the headline in the Sydney Morning Herald read: “Terrorists have ambitions of empire, says Cheney.” The irony was exquisite, if lost.

14 MARCH 2007

Closing the gap between torturer and victim

IN Andrew Cockburn's new book, *Rumsfeld*, the gap between rampant power and its faraway victims is closed. Donald Rumsfeld, US secretary of defence until last year and a designer of the Iraq bloodbath, is revealed as personally directing from his office in the Pentagon the torture of fellow human beings, exploiting "individual phobias, such as fear of dogs, to induce stress" and use of "a wet towel and dripping water to induce the misperception of suffocation". Cockburn's documented evidence shows that other Bush mafiosi, such as Paul Wolfowitz, now president of the World Bank, "had already agreed that Rumsfeld should approve all but the most severe options, such as the wet towel, without restriction".

In Washington, I asked Ray McGovern, formerly a senior CIA officer, what he made of Norman Mailer's remark that America had entered a pre-fascist state. "I hope he's right," he replied, "because there are others saying we are already in a fascist mode. When you see who is controlling the means of production here, when you see who is controlling the newspapers and periodicals, and the TV stations, from which most Americans take their news, and when you see how the so-called war on terror is being conducted, you begin to understand where we are headed ... It's quite something that the nuclear threat today should be seen first

and foremost as coming from the United States of America and Great Britain."

McGovern was the author of the president's daily CIA intelligence brief. I interviewed him more than three years ago, and his prescient words are as striking today as Cockburn's revelation of Rumsfeld's secret life is illuminating. His description of fascism within a nominally free society recalls George Orwell's warning that totalitarianism does not require a totalitarian state.

The lies that have caused this extremely dangerous time are understood and rejected by the majority of humanity. This was illustrated vividly on 15-16 February 2003 when some 30 million people took to the streets of cities around the world, including the greatest demonstration in British history. It was illustrated again the other day in Latin America, which George W Bush on tour sought to reclaim for America's lost "backyard". "The distinguished visitor," noted one commentator in Caracas, "was received with fear and loathing."

There are many connections in Latin America to the suffering in the Middle East. The crushing of popular, reformist governments by the US and the setting up of torture regimes, from Guatemala to Chile, have echoes from Iran to Afghanistan. The current attacks on the Chávez government in Venezuela by the media, which Ray McGovern describes as being "domesticated by

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their wish to serve”, are essential in disclaiming the right of the poor to find another way.

Elected last December with a record landslide of votes cast by three-quarters of the eligible population – his 11th major election victory – Hugo Chávez expresses the kind of genuine exuberant democracy long ago abandoned in Britain, where the political class offers instead the arthritic pirouetting of Tony Blair, a criminal, and treasurer Gordon Brown, the paymaster of imperial adventures fought by 18-year-old soldiers who, on their return home, are so ill treated that there is no one to change their colostomy bag.

Chávez, having all but got rid of the deadly IMF from Latin America, dares to use the wealth from Venezuela’s oil to unite the Latin peoples and to expel a foreign economic system that calls itself liberal and is the source of historic suffering. He is sup-

ported by governments and by millions across South America from whom he derives his mandate.

You would not know this on either side of the Atlantic unless you studied carefully. The propaganda that converts a lively, open democracy to an “authoritarian” dictatorship is written on the rusted crosses of Salvador Allende’s comrades, of whom the same was said. It is disseminated by the embittered effete whose liberal hero was Blair, until he made an embarrassing mess, and who now claim the respectability of “the left” in order to disguise their mentoring by the likes of Wolfowitz, their promotion of Dick Cheney’s ludicrous “world Islamic empire” and, above all, their passion for wars whose spilt blood is never theirs.

“Rumsfeld: his rise, fall and catastrophic legacy” by Andrew Cockburn is published in the United States by Scribner (\$25)

29 MARCH 2007

The swimmer's journey home

MOST days, growing up, I would walk down a steep hill past blocks of Aussie Gothic with stairwells that stank of cabbage and beer and dogs, through crooked alleyways of fresh tar turned to putty in the heat and rusted iron fences, beyond which were “Bondi semis”, faithful copies of the back-to-backs of northern England. The comparison stopped there. Nowhere else was the reflected light so bright it hurt, leaving the eyes with a permanent squint. Nowhere else was the air laced with such an intoxicating smell, which came with the salt spray of the South Pacific, the greatest ocean on earth.

I am an inveterate swimmer. I learned to swim when I was very young. In flaming sunrises or hard rain, Reg Clark, a courtly, few-words Iceberger (an Iceberger swam in all seasons) taught me to swim through the white water of 30-foot waves as they broke over Bondi's ocean baths. “Reach out, reach out,” he would say, as he paced me along the barnacled wall, impervious to each great fist of water.

The stroke was freestyle, or crawl as it is known in England; breaststroke was considered, well, sissy. And when Reg said I was ready to race, he arranged for a number to be pinned on me and for the ocean to calm down. Racing was not fun because winning was too important, although when I man-

aged a second to Murray Rose, the future triple Olympic gold medallist, I imagined myself before adoring throngs at the next Olympiad and disregarded the fact that almost a lap separated us.

As a teenager, I graduated to the wonder pool, which lies spectacularly beneath the Sydney Harbour Bridge across from the other-worldly Opera House. Built in the 1930s and adorned with art-deco dolphins, it is known as the wonder pool because no fewer than 86 world records have been broken there, itself a world record. Once, a sculler and a swimmer raced over its 50 metres and the swimmer won. Those who knew about swimming cleaned out the bookies. At the wonder pool, there is a fast lane, a medium-fast lane, a medium lane and a slow lane. The swimmers are mostly men and women of indeterminate age and by the look of them, each has known a Reg Clark, though Reg, who swam like a dolphin, would not approve of their splashing. “Splashing slows you right down,” Reg would say. I try not to think of that as they pass me.

Whatever has changed in my life, swimming never has. I have swum all over the world, across rivers and lakes and oil-slicked canals and once to save my skin; and whenever I am asked about overcoming the difficulties of visiting places of upheaval, I say, “I swim”, though that is not the whole answer,

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of course. Once in the wonder pool or the superb marble Marshall Street Baths in the West End of London (now closed, scandalously), or countless lesser versions of both, it seems like the whole answer. Hindus returning to the Ganges will understand.

With all respect to the memory of Marshall Street, my Michelin-starred pools require that the ocean is close by, for the ocean brings the sky and breeze and demands a class of swimming on its own. I taught myself to body surf when the races were over and the umpires had taken their stop-watches to the pub. The great sandy crescent of Bondi Beach is benign most days, running an even, rolling surf, with each wave rising into a perfect blue-green pyra-

mid. But this is an ancient, unpredictable continent, and the sky can suddenly turn wild and a vicious undertow known as a bombara can pull you into Noah territory (a Noah is a shark). When that happens, you learn to body surf almost instantly, catching the biggest, most awesome wave and setting an unbeatable personal best back to the beach. My father once watched a shark expertly catching a wave, with a friend of his surfing the same crest, unaware of his man-eating companion. They both got away.

Unforeseen circumstances have kept me out of the water lately. The other day, with the sun visible through a curtain of mist, I returned to the wonder pool, actually to the medium-fast lane, and I am pleased to say that not every splasher passed me.

12 APRIL 2007

Iran may be the greatest crisis of modern times

THE Israeli journalist Amira Hass describes the moment her mother, Hannah, was marched from a cattle train to the Nazi concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen. “They were sick and some were dying,” she says. “Then my mother saw these German women looking at the prisoners, just looking. This image became very formative in my upbringing, this despicable ‘looking from the side.’”

It is time we in Britain and other Western countries stopped looking from the side. We are being led towards perhaps the most serious crisis in modern history as the Bush-Cheney-Blair “long war” edges closer to Iran for no reason other than that nation’s independence from rapacious America. The safe delivery of the 15 British sailors into the hands of Rupert Murdoch and his rivals (with tales of their “ordeal” almost certainly authored by the Ministry of Defence – until it got the wind up) is both a farce and a distraction. The Bush administration, in secret connivance with Blair, has spent four years preparing for “Operation Iranian Freedom”. Forty-five cruise missiles are primed to strike. According to Russia’s leading strategic thinker General Leonid Ivashov: “Nuclear facilities will be secondary targets... at least 20 such facilities need to be destroyed. Combat nuclear weapons may be used. This will result in the radioactive contamination

of all the Iranian territory, and beyond.”

And yet there is a surreal silence, save for the noise of “news” in which our powerful broadcasters gesture cryptically at the obvious but dare not make sense of it, lest the one-way moral screen erected between us and the consequences of an imperial foreign policy collapse and the truth be revealed. John Bolton, formerly Bush’s man at the United Nations, recently spelled out the truth: that the Bush-Cheney-Blair plan for the Middle East is an agenda to maintain division and instability. In other words, bloodshed and chaos equals control. He was referring to Iraq, but he also meant Iran.

One million Iraqis fill the streets of Najaf demanding that Bush and Blair get out of their homeland – that is the real news: not our nabbed sailor-spies, nor the political danse macabre of the pretenders to Blair’s Duce delusions. Whether it is treasurer Gordon Brown, the paymaster of the Iraq bloodbath, or John Reid, who sent British troops to pointless deaths in Afghanistan, or any of the others who sat through cabinet meetings knowing that Blair and his acolytes were lying through their teeth, only mutual distrust separates them now. They knew about Blair’s plotting with Bush. They knew about the fake 45-minute “warning”. They knew about the fitting up of Iran as the next “enemy”.

Declared Brown to the Daily Mail: “The

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days of Britain having to apologise for its colonial history are over. We should celebrate much of our past rather than apologise for it.” In *Late Victorian Holocausts*, the historian Mike Davis documents that as many as 21 million Indians died unnecessarily in famines criminally imposed by British colonial policies. Moreover, since the formal demise of that glorious imperium, declassified files make it clear that British governments have borne “significant responsibility” for the direct or indirect deaths of between 8.6 million and 13.5 million people throughout the world from military interventions and at the hands of regimes strongly supported by Britain. The historian Mark Curtis calls these victims “unpeople”. Rejoice! said Margaret Thatcher. Celebrate! says Brown. Spot the difference.

Brown is no different from Hillary Clinton, John Edwards and the other warmongering Democrats he admires and who support an unprovoked attack on Iran and the subjugation of the Middle East to “our interests” – and Israel’s, of course. Nothing has changed since the US and Britain destroyed Iran’s democratic government in 1953 and installed Reza Shah Pahlavi, whose regime had “the highest rate of death penalties in the world, no valid system of civilian courts and a history of torture” that was “beyond belief” (Amnesty).

Look behind the one-way moral screen and you will distinguish the Blairite elite by its loathing of the humane principles that mark a real democracy. They used to be discreet about this, but no more. Two examples spring to mind. In 2004, Blair used the secretive “royal prerogative” to overturn a high court judgment that had restored the very principle of human rights set out in Magna Carta to the people of the Chagos Islands, a British colony in the Indian Ocean.

There was no debate. As ruthless as any dictator, Blair dealt his coup de grâce with the lawless expulsion of the islanders from their homeland, now a US military base, from which Bush has bombed Iraq and Afghanistan and will bomb Iran.

In the second example, only the degree of suffering is different. Last October, 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 direct result of the Anglo-American invasion. Downing Street officials derided the study as “flawed”. They were lying. They knew that the chief scientific adviser to the Ministry of Defence, Sir Roy Anderson, had backed the survey, describing its methods as “robust” and “close to best practice”, and other government officials had secretly approved the “tried and tested way of measuring mortality in conflict zones”. The figure for Iraqi deaths is now estimated at close to a million – carnage equivalent to that caused by the Anglo-American economic siege of Iraq in the 1990s, which produced the deaths of half a million infants under the age of five, verified by Unicef. That, too, was dismissed contemptuously by Blair.

“This Labour government, which includes Gordon Brown as much as it does Tony Blair,” wrote Richard Horton, editor of the *Lancet*, “is party to a war crime of monstrous proportions. Yet our political consensus prevents any judicial or civil society response. Britain is paralysed by its own indifference.”

Such is the scale of the crime and of our “looking from the side”. According to the *Observer* of 8 April, the voters’ “damning verdict” on the Blair regime is expressed by a majority who have “lost faith” in their government. No surprise there. Polls have

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long shown a widespread revulsion to Blair, demonstrated at the last general election, which produced the second lowest turnout since the franchise. No mention was made of the Observer's own contribution to this national loss of faith. Once celebrated as a bastion of liberalism that stood against Anthony Eden's lawless attack on Egypt in 1956, the new right-wing, lifestyle Observer enthusiastically backed Blair's lawless attack on Iraq, having helped lay the ground with major articles falsely linking Iraq with the 9/11 attacks – claims now regarded even by the Pentagon as fake.

As hysteria is again fabricated, for Iraq, read Iran. According to the former US treasury secretary Paul O'Neill, the Bush cabal decided to attack Iraq on "day one" of Bush's administration, long before 11 September 2001. The main reason was oil. O'Neill was shown a Pentagon document entitled "Foreign Suitors for Iraqi Oilfield Contracts", which outlined the carve-up of Iraq's oil wealth among the major Anglo-American companies. Under a law written by US and British officials, the Iraqi puppet regime is about to hand over the extraction of the largest concentration of oil on earth to Anglo-American companies.

Nothing like this piracy has happened before in the modern Middle East, where Opec has ensured that oil business is conducted between states. Across the Shatt al-Arab waterway is another prize: Iran's vast oil fields. Just as non-existent weapons of mass destruction or facile concerns for democracy had nothing to do with the invasion of Iraq, so non-existent nuclear weapons have nothing to do with the coming American onslaught on Iran. Unlike Israel and the United States, Iran has abided by the rules of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, of which it was an original signatory, and has

allowed routine inspections under its legal obligations. The International Atomic Energy Agency has never cited Iran for diverting its civilian programme to military use. For the past three years, IAEA inspectors have said they have been allowed to "go anywhere". The recent UN Security Council sanctions against Iran are the result of Washington's bribery.

Until recently, the British were unaware that their government was one of the world's most consistent abusers of human rights and backers of state terrorism. Few Britons knew that the Muslim Brotherhood, the forerunner of al-Qaeda, was sponsored by British intelligence as a means of systematically destroying secular Arab nationalism, or that MI6 recruited young British Muslims in the 1980s as part of a \$4bn Anglo-American-backed jihad against the Soviet Union known as "Operation Cyclone".

In 2001, few Britons knew that 3,000 innocent Afghan civilians were bombed to death as revenge for the attacks of 11 September. No Afghans brought down the twin towers. Thanks to Bush and Blair, awareness in Britain and all over the world has risen as never before. When home-grown terrorists struck London in July 2005, few doubted that the attack on Iraq had provoked the atrocity and that the bombs which killed 52 Londoners were, in effect, Blair's bombs.

In my experience, most people do not indulge the absurdity and cruelty of the "rules" of rampant power. They do not contort their morality and intellect to comply with double standards and the notion of approved evil, of worthy and unworthy victims. They would, if they knew, grieve for all the lives, families, careers, hopes and dreams destroyed by Blair and Bush. The sure evidence is the British public's wholehearted

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response to the 2004 tsunami, shaming that of the government. Certainly, they would agree wholeheartedly with Robert H Jackson, chief of counsel for the United States at the Nuremberg trials of Nazi leaders at the end of the Second World War. “Crimes are crimes,” he said, “whether the United States does them or whether Germany does them, and we are not prepared to lay down a rule of criminal conduct which we would not be willing to have invoked against us.”

As with Henry Kissinger and Donald Rumsfeld, who dare not travel to certain countries for fear of being prosecuted as war criminals, Blair as a private citizen may no longer be untouchable. On 20 March, Baltasar Garzón, the tenacious Spanish judge who pursued Augusto Pinochet, called for indictments against those responsible for

“one of the most sordid and unjustifiable episodes in recent human history” – Iraq. Five days later, the chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, to which Britain is a signatory, said that Blair could one day face war-crimes charges.

These are critical changes in the way the sane world thinks – again, thanks to the Reich of Blair and Bush. However, we live in the most dangerous of times. On 6 April, Blair accused “elements of the Iranian regime” of “backing, financing, arming and supporting terrorism in Iraq”. He offered no evidence, and the Ministry of Defence has none. This is the same Goebbels-like refrain with which he and his coterie, Gordon Brown included, brought an epic bloodletting to Iraq. How long will the rest of us continue looking from the side?

10 MAY 2007

The Kennedy myth rises again

ON 5 June 1968, just after midnight, Robert Kennedy was shot in my presence at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles. He had just acknowledged his victory in the California primary. “On to Chicago and let’s win there!” were his last public words, referring to the Democratic Party’s convention that would nominate a presidential candidate. “He’s the next President Kennedy!” said the woman standing next to me. She then fell to the floor with a bullet wound to the head. (She lived.)

I had been travelling with Kennedy through California’s vineyards, along unsurfaced roads joined together by power lines sagging almost to porch level, and strewn with the wrecks of Detroit’s fantasies. Here, Latino workers vomited from the effects of pesticide and the candidate promised them that he would “do something”. I asked him what he would do. “In your speeches,” I said, “it’s the one thing that doesn’t come through.” He looked puzzled. “Well, it’s based on a faith in this country... I want America to go back to what she was meant to be, a place where every man has a say in his destiny.”

The same missionary testament, of “faith” in America’s myths and power, has been spoken by every presidential candidate in memory, more so by Democrats, who start more wars than Republicans. The as-

sassinated Kennedys exemplified this. John F Kennedy referred incessantly to “America’s mission in the world” even while affirming it with a secret invasion of Vietnam that caused the deaths of more than two million people.

Robert Kennedy had made his name as a ruthless counsel for Senator Joe McCarthy on his witch-hunting committee investigating “un-American activities”. The younger Kennedy so admired the infamous McCarthy that he went out of his way to attend his funeral. As attorney general, he backed his brother’s atrocious war and when John F Kennedy was assassinated, he used his name to win election as a junior senator for New York. By the spring of 1968 he was fixed in the public mind as a carpet-bagger.

As a witness to such times and events, I am always struck by self-serving attempts at revising them. The extract from Chancellor Gordon Brown’s book ‘Courage’: eight portraits that appeared in the *New Statesman* of 30 April is a prime example.

According to the prime-minister-to-be, Kennedy stood at the pinnacle of “morality”, a man “moved to anger and action mostly by injustice, by wasted lives and opportunity denied, by human suffering. [His were] the politics of moral uplift and exhortation.” Moreover, his “moral courage is a rarer commodity than bravery in battle or

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great intelligence”.

In truth, Robert Kennedy was known in the United States for his lack of moral courage. Only when Senator Eugene McCarthy led his principled “children’s crusade” against the war in Vietnam early in 1968 did Kennedy change his basically pro-war stand. Like Hillary Clinton on Iraq today, he was an opportunist par excellence. Travelling with him, I would hear him borrow from Martin Luther King one day, then use the racist law-and-order code the next.

No wonder his “legacy” appeals to the Washington-besotted Brown, who has sought and failed to present himself as a politician with enduring moral roots, while pursuing an immoral agenda that has privatised precious public services by stealth and bankrolled a lawless invasion that has left

perhaps a million people dead. As if to top this, he wants to spend billions on a Trident nuclear weapon.

Moral courage, Brown wrote of his hero, no doubt seeking to be associated with him, “is the one essential quality for those who seek to change a world that yields only grudgingly and often reluctantly to change”.

A man with Blair as his literal partner in crime could not have put it better. All the world is wrong, bar them and their acolytes. “I believe that in this generation those with the courage to enter the moral conflict will [walk down] the road history has marked for us... building a new world society...”. That was Robert Kennedy, quoted by Brown, celebrating a notion of empire whose long trail of blood will surely follow him to Downing Street.

22 MAY 2007

Imprisoning a whole nation

ISRAEL is destroying any notion of a state of Palestine and is being allowed to imprison an entire nation. That is clear from the latest attacks on Gaza, whose suffering has become a metaphor for the tragedy imposed on the peoples of the Middle East and beyond. These attacks, reported on Britain's Channel 4 News, were "targeting key militants of Hamas" and the "Hamas infrastructure". The BBC described a "clash" between the same militants and Israeli F-16 aircraft.

Consider one such clash. The militants' car was blown to pieces by a missile from a fighter-bomber. Who were these militants? In my experience, all the people of Gaza are militant in their resistance to their jailer and tormentor. As for the "Hamas infrastructure", this was the headquarters of the party that won last year's democratic elections in Palestine. To report that would give the wrong impression. It would suggest that the people in the car and all the others over the years, the babies and the elderly who have also "clashed" with fighter-bombers, were victims of a monstrous injustice. It would suggest the truth.

"Some say," said the Channel 4 reporter, that "Hamas has courted this [attack]..." Perhaps he was referring to the rockets fired at Israel from within the prison of Gaza which killed no one. Under international law an occupied people has the right to use

arms against the occupier's forces. This right is never reported. The Channel 4 reporter referred to an "endless war", suggesting equivalents. There is no war. There is resistance among the poorest, most vulnerable people on earth to an enduring, illegal occupation imposed by the world's fourth largest military power, whose weapons of mass destruction range from cluster bombs to thermonuclear devices, bankrolled by the superpower. In the past six years alone, wrote the historian Ilan Pappé, "Israeli forces have killed more than 4,000 Palestinians, half of them children".

Consider how this power works. According to documents obtained by United Press International, the Israelis once secretly funded Hamas as "a direct attempt to divide and dilute support for a strong, secular PLO [Palestine Liberation Organisation] by using a competing religious alternative", in the words of a former CIA official.

Today, Israel and the US have reversed this ploy and openly back Hamas's rival, Fatah, with bribes of millions of dollars. Israel recently secretly allowed 500 Fatah fighters to cross into Gaza from Egypt, where they had been trained by another American client, the Cairo dictatorship. The Israelis' aim is to undermine the elected Palestinian government and ignite a civil war. They have not quite succeeded. In response, the Palestinians forged a govern-

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ment of national unity, of both Hamas and Fatah. The latest attacks are aimed at destroying this.

With Gaza secured in chaos and the West Bank walled in, the Israeli plan, wrote the Palestinian academic Karma Nabulsi, is “a Hobbesian vision of an anarchic society: truncated, violent, powerless, destroyed, cowed, ruled by disparate militias, gangs, religious ideologues and extremists, broken up into ethnic and religious tribalism and co-opted collaborationists. Look to the Iraq of today...”

On 19 May, the Guardian received this letter from Omar Jabary al-Sarafeh, a Ramallah resident: “Land, water and air are under constant sight of a sophisticated military surveillance system that makes Gaza like The Truman Show,” he wrote. “In this film every Gazan actor has a predefined role and the [Israeli] army behaves as a director... The Gaza strip needs to be shown as what it is... an Israeli laboratory backed by the international community where human beings are used as rabbits to test the most dramatic and perverse practices of economic suffocation and starvation.”

The remarkable Israeli journalist Gideon Levy has described the starvation sweeping Gaza’s more than a million and a quarter inhabitants and the “thousands of wounded, disabled and shell-shocked people unable to receive any treatment... The shadows of human beings roam the ruins... They only know the [Israeli army] will return and they know what this will mean for them: more imprisonment in their homes for weeks, more death and destruction in monstrous proportions”.

Whenever I have been in Gaza, I have been consumed by this melancholia, as if I were a trespasser in a secret place of mourning. Skeins of smoke from wood fires hang

over the same Mediterranean Sea that free peoples know, but not here. Along beaches that tourists would regard as picturesque trudge the incarcerated of Gaza; lines of sepia figures become silhouettes, marching at the water’s edge, through lapping sewage. The water and power are cut off, yet again, when the generators are bombed, yet again. Iconic murals on walls pockmarked by bullets commemorate the dead, such as the family of 18 men, women and children who “clashed” with a 500lb American/Israeli bomb, dropped on their block of flats as they slept. Presumably, they were militants.

More than 40 per cent of the population of Gaza are children under the age of 15. Reporting on a four-year field study in occupied Palestine for the British Medical Journal, Dr Derek Summerfield wrote that “two-thirds of the 621 children killed at checkpoints, in the street, on the way to school, in their homes, died from small arms fire, directed in over half of cases to the head, neck and chest – the sniper’s wound”. A friend of mine with the United Nations calls them “children of the dust”. Their wonderful childishness, their rowdiness and giggles and charm, belie their nightmare.

I met Dr Khalid Dahlan, a psychiatrist who heads one of several children’s community health projects in Gaza. He told me about his latest survey. “The statistic I personally find unbearable,” he said, “is that 99.4 per cent of the children we studied suffer trauma. Once you look at the rates of exposure to trauma, you see why: 99.2 per cent of the study group’s homes were bombarded; 97.5 per cent were exposed to tear gas; 96.6 per cent witnessed shootings; 95.8 per cent witnessed bombardment and funerals; almost a quarter saw family members injured or killed.”

He said children as young as three faced

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the dichotomy caused by having to cope with these conditions. They dreamt about becoming doctors and nurses, then this was overtaken by an apocalyptic vision of themselves as the next generation of suicide bombers. They experienced this invariably after an attack by the Israelis. For some boys, their heroes were no longer football players, but a confusion of Palestinian “martyrs” and even the enemy, “because Israeli soldiers are the strongest and have Apache gunships”.

Shortly before he died, Edward Said bitterly reproached foreign journalists for what he called their destructive role in “stripping the context of Palestinian violence, the response of a desperate and horribly oppressed people, and the terrible suffering from which it arises”. Just as the invasion of Iraq was a “war by media”, so the same can be said of the grotesquely one-sided “conflict” in Palestine. As the pioneering work of the Glasgow University Media Group shows, television viewers are rarely told that the Palestinians are victims of an illegal military occupation; the term “occupied territories” is seldom explained. Only 9 per cent of young people interviewed in the UK know that the Israelis are the occupying force and the illegal settlers are Jewish; many believe them to be Palestinian. The selective use of language by broadcasters is crucial in maintaining this confusion and ignorance. Words such as “terrorism”, “murder” and “savage, cold-blooded killing” describe the deaths of Israelis, almost never Palestinians.

There are honourable exceptions. The kidnapped BBC reporter Alan Johnston is one of them. Yet, amidst the avalanche of coverage of his abduction, no mention is made of the thousands of Palestinians abducted by Israel, many of whom will not see

their families for years. There are no appeals for them. In Jerusalem, the Foreign Press Association documents the shooting and intimidation of its members by Israeli soldiers. In one eight-month period, as many journalists, including the CNN bureau chief in Jerusalem, were wounded by the Israelis, some of them seriously. In each case, the FPA complained. In each case, there was no satisfactory reply.

A censorship by omission runs deep in western journalism on Israel, especially in the US. Hamas is dismissed as a “terrorist group sworn to Israel’s destruction” and one that “refuses to recognise Israel and wants to fight not talk”. This theme suppresses the truth: that Israel is bent on Palestine’s destruction. Moreover, Hamas’s long-standing proposals for a ten-year ceasefire are ignored, along with a recent, hopeful ideological shift within Hamas itself that amounts to a historic acceptance of the sovereignty of Israel. “The [Hamas] charter is not the Quran,” said a senior Hamas official, Mohammed Ghazal. “Historically, we believe all Palestine belongs to Palestinians, but we’re talking now about reality, about political solutions... If Israel reached a stage where it was able to talk to Hamas, I don’t think there would be a problem of negotiating with the Israelis [for a solution].”

When I last saw Gaza, driving towards the Israeli checkpoint and the razor wire, I was rewarded with a spectacle of Palestinian flags fluttering from inside the walled compounds. Children were responsible for this, I was told. They make flagpoles out of sticks tied together and one or two will climb on to a wall and hold the flag between them, silently. They do it when there are foreigners around and they believe they can tell the world.

6 JUNE 2007

The British Army rebels against propaganda

AN experienced British officer serving in Iraq has written to the BBC describing the invasion as “illegal, immoral and unwinnable” which, he says, is “the overwhelming feeling of many of my peers”. In a letter to the BBC's *Newsnight* and *Medialens.org* he accuses the media's “embedded coverage with the US Army” of failing to question “the intentions and continuing effects of the US-led invasion and occupation”.

He says most British soldiers regard their tours as “loathsome”, during which they “reluctantly [provide] target practice for insurgents, senselessly haemorrhaging casualties and squandering soldiers' lives, as part of Bush's vain attempt to delay the inevitable Anglo-US rout until after the next US election.” He appeals to journalists not to swallow “the official line/ White House propaganda”.

In 1970, I made a film in Vietnam called *The Quiet Mutiny* in which GIs spoke out about their hatred of that war and its “official line/White House propaganda”. The experiences in Iraq and Vietnam are both very different and strikingly similar. There was much less “embedded coverage” in Vietnam, although there was censorship by omission, which is standard practice today.

What is different about Iraq is the willingness of usually obedient British soldiers

to speak their minds, from General Richard Dannatt, Britain's current military chief, who said that the presence of his troops in Iraq “exacerbates the security problem”, to General Michael Rose who has called for Tony Blair to be impeached for taking Britain to war “on false grounds” – remarks that are mild compared with the blogs of squaddies.

What is also different is the growing awareness in the British forces and the public of how “the official line” is played through the media. This can be quite crude: for example when a BBC defence correspondent in Iraq described the aim of the Anglo-American invasion as “bring[ing] democracy and human rights” to Iraq. The Director of BBC Television, Helen Boaden, backed him up with a sheaf of quotations from Blair that this was indeed the aim, implying that Blair's notorious word was enough.

More often than not, censorship by omission is employed: for example, by omitting the fact that almost 80 per cent of attacks are directed against the occupation forces (source: the Pentagon) so as to give the impression that the occupiers are doing their best to separate “warring tribes” and are crisis managers rather than the cause of the crisis.

There is a last-ditch sense about this kind of propaganda. Seymour Hersh said recently, “[In April, the Bush administration]

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made a decision that because of the totally dwindling support for the war in Iraq, they would go back to the al-Qaeda card, although there's no empirical basis.

Most of the pros will tell you the foreign fighters are a couple of per cent and they're sort of leaderless... there's no attempt to suggest there's any significant co-ordination of these groups, but the press keeps going ga-ga about al-Qaeda... it's just amazing to me."

Ga-ga day at the London Guardian was 22 May. "Iran's secret plan for summer offensive to force US out of Iraq", said the front-page banner headline. "Iran is secretly forging ties with al Qaeda elements and Sunni Arab militias in Iraq," wrote Simon Tisdall from Washington, "in preparation for a summer showdown with coalition int-

ended to tip a wavering US Congress into voting for full military withdrawal, US officials say." The entire tale was based on anonymous US official sources. No attempt was made to substantiate their "firm evidence" or explain the illogic of their claims. No journalistic scepticism was even hinted, which is amazing considering the web of proven lies spun from Washington over Iraq.

Moreover, it had a curious tone of something-must-be-done insistence, reminiscent of Judith Miller's scandalous reports in the New York Times claiming that Saddam was about to launch his weapons of mass destruction and beckoning Bush to invade. Tisdall in effect offered the same invitation; I can remember few more irresponsible pieces of journalism. The British public and the people of Iran, deserve better.

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