

Bush v. Kerry: The fake debate

On 6 May last, the US House of Representatives passed a resolution which, in effect, authorised a “pre-emptive” attack on Iran. The vote was 376/3. Undeterred by the accelerating disaster in Iraq, Republicans and Democrats, wrote one commentator, “once again joined hands to assert the responsibilities of American power.”

The joining of hands across America’s illusory political divide has along history. The native Americans were slaughtered, the Philippines laid to waste and Cuba and much of Latin America brought to heel with “bi-partisan” backing. Wading through the blood, a new breed of popular historian, the journalist in the pay of rich newspaper owners, spun the heroic myths of a super sect called Americanism, which advertising and public relations in the 20th century formalised as an ideology, embracing both conservatism and liberalism.

In the modern era, most of America’s wars have been launched by liberal Democratic presidents – Truman in Korea, Kennedy and Johnson in Vietnam, Carter in Afghanistan. The fictitious “missile gap” was invented by Kennedy’s liberal New Frontiersmen as a rationale for keeping the cold war going. In 1964, a Democrat-dominated Congress gave President Johnson the authority to attack Vietnam, a defenceless peasant nation offering no threat to the United States. Like the non-existent WMDs in Iraq, the justification was a non-existent “incident” in which two North Vietnamese patrol boats were said to have attacked an American warship. More than three million deaths and the ruin of a once bountiful land followed.

During the past 60 years, only once has Congress voted to limit the president’s “right” to terrorise other countries. This aberration, the 1975 Clark Amendment, a product of the great anti-Vietnam war movement, was repealed in 1985 by Ronald Reagan. During Reagan’s assaults on Central America in the 1980s, liberal voices such as Tom Wicker of the New York Times, doyen of the “doves”,

JOHN PILGER | BUSH V. KERRY: THE FAKE DEBATE

seriously debated whether or not tiny, impoverished Nicaragua was a threat to the United States. These days, terrorism having replaced the red menace, another fake debate is under way. This is lesser evilism.

Although few liberal-minded voters seem to have illusions about John Kerry, their need to get rid of the “rogue” Bush administration is all consuming. Representing them in Britain, the Guardian says the coming presidential election is “exceptional”. “Mr Kerry’s flaws and limitations are evident,” says the paper, “but they are put in the shade by the neo-conservative agenda and catastrophic war-making of Mr Bush. This is an election in which the whole world will breathe a sigh of relief if the incumbent is defeated.”

The whole world may well breathe a sigh of relief; the Bush regime is both dangerous and universally loathed; but that is not the point. We have debated lesser evilism so often on both sides of the Atlantic that it is surely time to stop gesturing at the obvious and to examine critically a system that produces the Bushes and their Democratic shadows. For those of us who marvel at our luck in reaching mature years without having been blown to bits by the warlords of Americanism, Republican and Democrat, conservative and liberal, and for the millions all over the world who now reject the American contagion in political life, the true issue is clear. It is the continuation of a project that began more than 500 years ago.

The privileges of “discovery and conquest” granted to Christopher Columbus in 1492, in a world the Pope “considers his property to be disposed according to his will”, have been replaced by another piracy transformed into the divine will of Americanism and sustained by technological progress, notably that of the media. “The threat to independence in the late 20th century from the new electronics,” wrote Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism*, “could be greater than was colonialism itself. We are beginning to learn that de-colonisation was not the termination of imperial relationships but merely the extending of a geo-political web which has been spinning since the Renaissance. The new media have the power to penetrate more deeply into a “receiving” culture than any previous manifestation of western technology.”

Every modern president has been, in large part, a media creation. Thus, the murderous Reagan is sanctified still; Murdoch’s Fox Channel and the post-Hutton BBC have differed only in their forms of adulation. And Clinton is regarded nostalgically by liberals as flawed but enlightened; yet Clinton’s presidential years were far more violent than Bush’s and his goals were the same: “the integration of countries into the global free market community”, the terms of

JOHN PILGER | BUSH V. KERRY: THE FAKE DEBATE

which, noted the New York Times, “require the United States to be involved in the plumbing and wiring of nations’ internal affairs more deeply than ever before”. The Pentagon’s “full spectrum dominance” was not the product of the “neo-cons” but of the liberal Clinton who approved what was then the greatest war expenditure in history. According to the Guardian, John Kerry sends us “energising progressive calls”. It is time to stop this nonsense.

Supremacy is the essence of Americanism; only the veil changes or slips. In 1976, the Democrat Jimmy Carter announced “a foreign policy that respects human rights”. In secret, he backed Indonesia’s genocide in East Timor and established the muhajideen in Afghanistan as a terrorist organisation designed to overthrow the Soviet Union, and from which came the Taliban and al-Qaeda. It was the liberal Carter, not Reagan, who laid the ground for Bush. In the past year, I have interviewed Carter’s principal foreign policy overlords, Zbigniew Brzezinski, his national security advisor, and James Schlesinger, his defence secretary. No blueprint for the new imperialism is more respected than Brzezinski’s. Invested with biblical authority by the Bush gang, his 1997 book *The Grand Chessboard: American primacy and its geostrategic imperatives*, describes American priorities as the economic subjugation of the Soviet Union and the control of Central Asia and the Middle East. His analysis says that “local wars” are merely the beginning of a final conflict leading inexorably to world domination by the US. “To put it in a terminology that harkens back to a more brutal age of ancient empires,” he writes, “the three grand imperatives of imperial geostrategy are to prevent collusion and maintain security dependence among the vassals to keep tributaries pliant and protected, and to keep the barbarians from coming together”.

It may have been easy once to dismiss this as a message from the lunar right. But Brzezinski is mainstream. His devoted students include Madeleine Albright, Clinton’s secretary of state, who described the death of half a million infants in Iraq under the American-led embargo as “a price worth paying”, and John Negroponte, the mastermind of American terror in Central America under Reagan and currently “ambassador” in Baghdad. James Rubin, who was Albright’s enthusiastic apologist at the State Department, is being considered as John Kerry’s national security adviser. He is also a Zionist; Israel and its role as a terror state, is beyond discussion.

Cast an eye over the rest of the world. As Iraq has crowded the front pages, American moves into Africa have attracted little attention. Here, the Clinton and Bush policies are seamless. In the 1990s, Clinton’s African Growth and

JOHN PILGER | BUSH V. KERRY: THE FAKE DEBATE

Opportunity Act launched a new scramble for Africa. Humanitarian bombers wonder why Bush and Blair have not attacked Sudan and “liberated” Darfur, or intervened in Zimbabwe or the Congo. The answer is that they have no interest in human distress and human rights and are busy securing the same riches that led to the European scramble in the late 19th century by traditional means of coercion and bribery known as multilateralism. The Congo and Zambia possess 50 per cent of world cobalt reserves; 98 per cent of the world’s chrome reserves are in Zimbabwe and South Africa. More importantly, there is oil and natural gas in west Africa, from Nigeria to Angola, and in the Hagleig Basin in Sudan. Under Clinton, the African Crisis Response Initiative (Acri) was set up in secret. This has allowed the US to establish “military assistance programmes” in Senegal, Uganda, Malawi, Ghana, Benin, Algeria, Niger, Mali and Chad. Acri is run by Colonel Nestor Pino-Marina, a Cuban exile who took part in the 1961 Bay of Pigs landing, and went on to be a special forces officer in Vietnam and Laos, and, under Reagan, helped lead the contra invasion of Nicaragua. The pedigrees never change.

None of this is discussed in a presidential campaign in which John Kerry strains to out-Bush Bush. The multilateralism or “muscular internationalism” that Kerry offers in contrast to Bush’s unilateralism is seen as hopeful by the terminally naive; in truth, it beckons even greater dangers. Bush, having given the American elite its greatest disaster since Vietnam, writes the historian Gabriel Kolko, “is much more likely to continue the destruction of the alliance system that is so crucial to American power.

One does not have to believe the worse the better, but we have to consider candidly the foreign policy consequences of a renewal of Bush’s mandate. As dangerous as it is, Bush’s re-election may be a lesser evil.” With Nato back in train under President Kerry, and the French and Germans compliant, American ambitions will proceed without the Napoleonic hindrances of the Bush gang. Little of this appears even in the American papers worth reading. The Washington Post’s hand-wringing apology to its readers on 14 August for not “pay[ing] enough attention to voices raising questions about the war [against Iraq]” has not interrupted its silence on the danger that the American state presents to the world. Bush’s rating has risen in the polls to more than 50 per cent, a level at this stage in the campaign at which no incumbent has ever lost. The virtues of his “plain speaking”, which the entire media machine promoted four years ago, Fox and the Washington Post alike, are again credited. As in the aftermath of the 11 September attacks, Americans are denied a modicum of

JOHN PILGER | BUSH V. KERRY: THE FAKE DEBATE

understanding of what Norman Mailer has called “a pre-fascist climate”. The fears of the rest of us are of no consequence. The professional liberals on both sides of the Atlantic have played a major part in this. The campaign against Michael Moore’s Fahrenheit 9/11 is indicative. The film is not radical and makes no outlandish claims; what it does is push past those guarding the boundaries of “respectable” dissent. That is why the public applaud it. It breaks the collusive codes of journalism, which it shames. It allows people to begin to deconstruct the nightly propaganda that passes for news: in which “a sovereign Iraqi government pursues democracy” and those fighting in Najaf and Fallujah and Basra are always “militants” and “insurgents” or members of a “private army”, never nationalists defending their homeland and whose resistance has probably forestalled attacks on Iran, Syria or north Korea.

The real debate is neither Bush nor Kerry, but the system they exemplify; it is the decline of true democracy and the rise of the American “national security state” in Britain and other countries claiming to be democracies, in which people are sent to prison and the key thrown away and whose leaders commit capital crimes in faraway places, unhindered, then, like the ruthless Tony Blair, invite the thug they instal to address the British Labour Party conference.

The real debate is the subjugation of national economies to a system dividing humanity as never before and sustaining the deaths, every day, of 24,000 hungry people. The real debate is the subversion of political language and of debate itself and perhaps, in the end, our self respect. **JP**

John Pilger’s new book, Tell Me No Lies: investigative journalism and its triumphs, will be published in October by Jonathan Cape. Look for an excerpt on coldtype.net next month.