

Normalising the unthinkable

Edward S Herman's landmark essay, "The Banality of Evil", has never seemed more apposite. "Doing terrible things in an organised and systematic way rests on 'normalisation'," wrote Herman. "There is usually a division of labour in doing and rationalising the unthinkable, with the direct brutalising and killing done by one set of individuals... others working on improving technology (a better crematory gas, a longer burning and more adhesive Napalm, bomb fragments that penetrate flesh in hard-to-trace patterns). It is the function of the experts, and the mainstream media, to normalise the unthinkable for the general public."

On Radio 4's Today (6 November), a BBC reporter in Baghdad referred to the coming attack on the city of Fallujah as "dangerous" and "very dangerous" for the Americans. When asked about civilians, he said, reassuringly, that the US marines were "going about with a tannoy" telling people to get out. He omitted to say that tens of thousands of people would be left in the city. He mentioned in passing the "most intense bombing" of the city with no suggestion of what that meant for people beneath the bombs.

As for the defenders, those Iraqis who resist in a city that heroically defied Saddam Hussein; they were merely "insurgents holed up in the city", as if they were an alien body, a lesser form of life to be "flushed out" (the Guardian): a suitable quarry for "ratcatchers", which is the term another BBC reporter told us the Black Watch use. According to a senior British officer, the Americans view Iraqis as untermenschen, a term that Hitler used in Mein Kampf to describe Jews, Romanies and Slavs as sub-humans. This is how the Nazi army laid siege to Russian cities, slaughtering combatants and non-combatants alike.

Normalising colonial crimes like the attack on Fallujah requires such racism, linking our imagination to "the other". The thrust of the reporting is that the "insurgents" are led by sinister foreigners of the kind that behead people: for

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example, by Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian said to be al-Qaeda's "top operative" in Iraq. This is what the Americans say; it is also Blair's latest lie to parliament. Count the times it is parroted at a camera, at us. No irony is noted that the foreigners in Iraq are overwhelmingly American and, by all indications, loathed. These indications come from apparently credible polling organisations, one of which estimates that of 2,700 attacks every month by the resistance, six can be credited to the infamous al-Zarqawi.

In a letter sent on 14 October to Kofi Annan, the Fallujah Shura Council, which administers the city, said: "In Fallujah, [the Americans] have created a new vague target: al-Zarqawi. Almost a year has elapsed since they created this new pretext and whenever they destroy houses, mosques, restaurants, and kill children and women, they say, 'we have launched a successful operation against Al Zarqawi'. The people of Fallujah assure you that this person, if he exists, is not in Fallujah... and we have no links to any groups supporting such inhuman behaviour. We appeal to you to urge the UN [to prevent] the new massacre which the Americans and the puppet government are planning to start soon in Fallujah, as well as many parts of the country." Not a word of this was reported in the mainstream in Britain and America.

"What does it take to shock them out of their baffling silence?" asked the playwright Ronan Bennett in April after the US marines, in an act of collective vengeance for the killing of four American mercenaries, killed more than 600 people in Fallujah, a figure that was never denied. Then, as now, they used the ferocious firepower of AC-130 gunships and F-16 fighterbombers and 500-pound bombs against slums. They incinerate children; their snipers boast of killing anyone, as snipers did in Sarajevo.

Bennett was referring to the legion of silent Labour backbenchers, with honourable exceptions, and lobotomised junior ministers (remember Chris Mullin?). He might have added those journalists who strain every sinew to protect "our" side, who normalise the unthinkable by not even gesturing at the demonstrable immorality and criminality. Of course, to be shocked by what "we" do is dangerous, because this can lead to a wider understanding of why "we" are there in the first place and of the grief "we" bring not only to Iraq, but to so many parts of the world: that the terrorism of al-Qaeda is puny by comparison with ours. There is nothing illicit about this cover-up; it happens in daylight. The most striking recent example followed the announcement, on 29 October, by the prestigious scientific journal, the Lancet, of a study estimating that 100,000 Iraqis had died as a result of the Anglo-American invasion. Eighty-four per cent of the

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deaths were caused by the actions of the Americans and the British, and 95 per cent of these were killed by air attacks and artillery fire, most of whom were women and children.

The editors of the excellent MediaLens observed the rush - no, stampede - to smother this shocking news with "scepticism" and silence (mediaLens.org). They reported that, by 2 November, the Lancet report had been ignored by the Observer, the Telegraph, the Sunday Telegraph, the Financial Times, the Star, the Sun and many others. The BBC framed the report in terms of the government's "doubts" and Channel 4 News delivered a hatchet job, based on a Downing Street briefing. With one exception, none of the scientists who compiled this rigorously peer-reviewed report was asked to substantiate their work until ten days later when the pro-war Observer published an interview with the editor of the Lancet, slanted so that it appeared he was "answering his critics". David Edwards, a MediaLens editor, asked the researchers to respond to the media criticism; their meticulous demolition can be viewed on medialens.org 2 November. None of this was published in the mainstream. Thus, the unthinkable that "we" had engaged in such a slaughter was suppressed - normalised. It is reminiscent of the suppression of the death of more than a million Iraqis, including half a million infants under five, as a result of the Anglo American driven embargo.

In contrast, there is no media questioning of the methodology of the Iraq Special Tribune which has announced that mass graves contain 300,000 victims of Saddam Hussein. The Special Tribune, a product of the quisling regime in Baghdad, is run by the Americans; respected scientists want nothing to do with it. There is no questioning of what the BBC calls "Iraq's first democratic elections". There is no reporting of the fact that the Americans have assumed control over the electoral process with two decrees passed in June that allows an "electoral commission" effectively to eliminate parties Washington does not like. Time magazine reports the CIA buying its preferred candidates, which is how the agency has fixed elections all over the world. When or if the elections take place, we will be doused in clichés about the nobility of voting as America's puppets are "democratically" chosen.

The model for this was the "coverage" of the American presidential election: a blizzard of platitudes normalising the unthinkable that what happened on 2 November was not democracy in action. With one exception, no one in the flock of pundits flown from London described the circus of Bush and Kerry as the contrivance of less than one per cent of the population, the ultra-rich and powerful, who control and manage a permanent war economy. That the losers

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were not only the Democrats, but the vast majority of Americans, regardless of whom they voted for, was unmentionable.

No one reported that John Kerry, by contrasting the “war on terror” with Bush’s disastrous attack on Iraq, merely exploited public distrust of the invasion to build support for American dominance throughout the world. “I’m not talking about leaving [Iraq],” said Kerry. “I’m talking about winning!” In this way, both he and Bush shifted the agenda even further to the right, so that millions of anti-war Democrats might be persuaded that the US has “the responsibility to finish the job” lest there be “chaos”. The issue in the presidential campaign was neither Bush nor Kerry but a war economy aimed at conquest abroad and economic division at home. The silence on this was comprehensive, both in America and here.

Bush won by invoking, more skilfully than Kerry, the fear of an ill-defined threat. How was he able to normalise this paranoia? Let’s look at the recent past. Following the end of the cold war, the American elite - Republican and Democrat - were having great difficulty convincing the public that the billions of dollars spent on the war economy should not be diverted to a “peace dividend”. A majority of Americans refused to believe there was still a “threat” as potent as the red menace. This did not prevent Bill Clinton sending to Congress the biggest “defence” bill in history in support of a Pentagon strategy called “full spectrum dominance”. On 11 September 2001 the threat was given a name: Islam.

Flying into Philadelphia recently, I spotted the Kean Congressional report on 11 September on sale at the bookstalls. “How many do you sell?” I asked. “One or two” was the reply. “It’ll disappear soon.” Yet, this modest, blue-covered book is a revelation. Like the Butler report, which detailed all the incriminating evidence of Blair’s massaging of intelligence before the invasion of Iraq, then pulled its punches and concluded nobody was responsible, so the Kean Commission makes excruciatingly clear what really happened, then fails to draw the conclusions that stare it in the face. It is a supreme act of normalising the unthinkable. This is not surprising as the conclusions are volcanic.

The most important evidence to the commission came from General Ralph Eberhart, commander of the North American Aerospace Defence Command (Norad). “Air force jet fighters could have intercepted hijacked airliners roaring towards the World Trade Center and Pentagon,” he said, “if only air traffic controllers had asked for help 13 minutes sooner... We would have been able to shoot down all three... all four of them.”

Why did this not happen?

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The Kean report makes clear that “the defence of US aerospace on 9/11 was not conducted in accord with pre-existing training and protocols... If a hijack was confirmed, procedures called for the hijack coordinator on duty to contact the Pentagon’s National Military Command Center (NMCC)... The NMCC would then seek approval from the office of the Secretary of Defense to provide military assistance...” Uniquely, this did not happen. The commission was told by the deputy administrator of the Federal Aviation Authority there was no reason the procedure was not operating that morning. “For my 30 years of experience...” said Monte Belger, “the NMCC was on the net and hearing everything real-time... I can tell you I’ve lived through dozens of hijackings... and they were always listening in with everybody else.” But on this occasion, they were not. The Kean report says the NMCC were never informed. Why? Again, uniquely, all lines of communication failed, the commission was told, to America’s top military brass. Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld could not be found; and when he finally spoke to Bush an hour and a half later, it was, says the Kean report, “a brief call in which the subject of shoot-down authority was not discussed.” As a result, NORAD’s commanders were “left in the dark about what their mission was”.

The report reveals that the only part of a previously fail-safe command system that worked was in the White House where Vice-President Cheney was in effective control that day, and in close touch with the NMCC. Why did he do nothing about the first two hijacked planes? Why was the NMCC, the vital link, silent for the first time in its existence? Kean ostentatiously refuses to address this. Of course, it could be due to the most extraordinary combination of coincidences. Or it could not. In July 2001, a top secret briefing paper prepared for Bush read: “We [the CIA and FBI] believe that OBL [Osama Bin Laden] will launch a significant terrorist attack against US and/or Israeli interests in the coming weeks. The attack will be spectacular and designed to inflict mass casualties against US facilities or interests. Attack preparations have been made. Attack will occur with little or no warning.”

On the afternoon of 11 September, Donald Rumsfeld, having failed to act against those who had just attacked the United States, told his aides to set in motion an attack on Iraq - when the evidence was non-existent. Eighteen months later, the invasion of Iraq, unprovoked and based on lies now documented, took place. This epic crime is the greatest political scandal of our time, the latest chapter in the long 20th-century history of the west’s conquests of other lands and their resources. If we allow it to be normalised, if we refuse to question and probe the

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hidden agendas and unaccountable secret power structures at the heart of “democratic” governments and if we allow the people of Fallujah to be crushed in our name, we surrender both democracy and humanity.

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