

The Invisible Government

John Pilger

Edward Bernays, the so-called father of public relations, wrote about an 'invisible government' which is the true ruling power of US. He was referring to journalism, the media. That was almost 80 years ago, not long after corporate journalism was invented. It is a history few journalists talk about or know about, and it began with the arrival of corporate advertising. As the new corporations began taking over the press, something called "professional journalism" was invented. To attract big advertisers, the new corporate press had to appear respectable, pillars of the establishment—objective, impartial, balanced. The first schools of journalism were set up, and a mythology of liberal neutrality was spun around the professional journalist. The right to freedom of expression was associated with the new media and with the great corporations, and the whole thing was, as Robert McChesney put it so well, "entirely bogus".

For what the public did not know was that in order to be professional, journalists had to ensure that news and opinion were dominated by official sources, and that has not changed. Go through the *New York Times* on any day, and check the sources of the main political stories—domestic and foreign—you'll find they're dominated by government and other established interests. That is the essence of professional journalism. It does not mean that independent journalism was or is excluded, but it is more likely to be an honorable exception. Think of the role Judith Miller played in the *New York Times* in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq. Yes, her work became a scandal, but only after it played a powerful role in promoting an invasion based on lies. Yet, Miller's parroting of official sources and vested interests was not all that different from the work of many famous *Times* reporters, such as the celebrated W H Lawrence, who helped cover up the true effects of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima in August, 1945. "No Radioactivity in Hiroshima Ruin," was the headline on his report, and it was false.

Consider how the power of this invisible government has grown. In 1983 the principal global media was owned by 50 corporations, most of them American. In 2002 this had fallen to just 9 corporations. Today it is probably about 5. Rupert Murdoch has predicted that there will be just three global media giants, and his company will be one of them. This concentration of power is not exclusive of course to the United States. The BBC has announced it is expanding its broadcasts to the United States, because it believes Americans want principled, objective, neutral journalism for which the BBC is famous. They have launched BBC America.

The BBC began in 1922, just before the corporate press began in America. Its founder was Lord John Reith, who believed that impartiality and objectivity were the essence of professionalism. In the same year the British establishment was under siege. The unions had called a general strike and the Tories were terrified that a revolution was on the way. The new BBC came to their rescue. In high secrecy, Lord Reith wrote anti-union speeches for the Tory Prime Minister

Stanley Baldwin and broadcast them to the nation, while refusing to allow the labor leaders to put their side until the strike was over.

So, a pattern was set. Impartiality was a principle certainly: a principle to be suspended whenever the establishment was under threat. And that principle has been upheld ever since.

Take the invasion of Iraq. There are two studies of the BBC's reporting. One shows that the BBC gave just 2 percent of its coverage of Iraq to antiwar dissent—2 percent. That is less than the antiwar coverage of ABC, NBC, and CBS. A second study by the University of Wales shows that in the buildup to the invasion, 90 percent of the BBC's references to weapons of mass destruction suggested that Saddam Hussein actually possessed them, and that by clear implication Bush and Blair were right. The BBC and other British media were actually used by the British secret intelligence service MI-6. In what they called Operation Mass Appeal, MI-6 agents planted stories about Saddam's weapons of mass destruction, such as weapons hidden in his palaces and in secret underground bunkers. All of these stories were fake. But that's not the point. The point is that the work of MI-6 was unnecessary, because professional journalism on its own would have produced the same result.

Listen to the BBC's man in Washington, Matt Frei, shortly after the invasion. "There is no doubt," he told viewers in the UK and all over the world, "That the desire to bring good, to bring American values to the rest of the world, and especially now in the Middle East, is especially tied up with American military power." In 2005 the same reporter lauded the architect of the invasion, Paul Wolfowitz, as someone who "believes passionately in the power of democracy and grassroots development." That was before the little incident at the World Bank.

None of this is unusual. BBC news routinely describes the invasion as a miscalculation. Not Illegal, not unprovoked, not based on lies, but a miscalculation.

The words "mistake" and "blunder" are common BBC news currency, along with "failure"—which at least suggests that if the deliberate, calculated, unprovoked, illegal assault on defenseless Iraq had succeeded, that would have been just fine. These words remind one of Edward Herman's marvelous essay about normalizing the unthinkable. For that's what media clichéd language does and is designed to do—it normalizes the unthinkable; of the degradation of war, of severed limbs, of maimed children. One of this correspondent's favorite stories about the Cold War concerns a group of Russian journalists who were touring the United States. On the final day of their visit, they were asked by the host for their impressions. "I have to tell you," said the spokesman, "that we were astonished to find after reading all the newspapers and watching TV day after day that all the opinions on all the vital issues are the same. To get that result in our country we send journalists to the gulag. We even tear out their fingernails. Here you don't have to do any of that. What is the secret?"

What is the secret? It is a question seldom asked in newsrooms, in media colleges, in journalism journals, and yet the answer to that question is critical to the lives of millions of people. On August 24 last year the *New York Times* declared this in an editorial: "If we had known then what we know now the invasion of Iraq would have been stopped by a popular outcry." This amazing

admission was saying, in effect, that journalists had betrayed the public by not doing their job and by accepting and amplifying and echoing the lies of Bush and his gang, instead of challenging them and exposing them. What the *Times* didn't say was that had that paper and the rest of the media exposed the lies, up to a million people might be alive today. That's the belief now of a number of senior establishment journalists. Few of them—they've spoken to this writer about it—few of them will say it in public.

Vandana Shiva has called this subjugated knowledge. The great Irish muckraker Claud Cockburn got it right when he wrote, "Never believe anything until it's officially denied."

One of the oldest clichés of war is that truth is the first casualty. No it's not. Journalism is the first casualty. When the Vietnam War was over, the magazine *Encounter* published an article by Robert Elegant, a distinguished correspondent who had covered the war. "For the first time in modern history," he wrote, "the outcome of a war was determined not on the battlefield, but on the printed page, and above all on the television screen." He held journalists responsible for losing the war by opposing it in their reporting. Robert Elegant's view became the received wisdom in Washington and it still is. In Iraq the Pentagon invented the embedded journalist because it believed that critical reporting had lost Vietnam.

In both Vietnam and Iraq, deliberate policies and strategies have bordered on genocide. In Vietnam, the forced dispossession of millions of people and the creation of free fire zones; In Iraq, an American-enforced embargo that ran through the 1990s like a medieval siege, and killed, according to the United Nations Children's Fund, half a million children under the age of five. In both Vietnam and Iraq, banned weapons were used against civilians as deliberate experiments. Agent Orange changed the genetic and environmental order in Vietnam. The military called this *Operation Hades*. When Congress found out, it was renamed the friendlier *Operation Ranch Hand*, and nothing changed. That's pretty much how Congress has reacted to the war in Iraq. The Democrats have damned it, rebranded it, and extended it. The Hollywood movies that followed the Vietnam War were an extension of the journalism, of normalizing the unthinkable. Yes, some of the movies were critical of the military's tactics, but all of them were careful to concentrate on the angst of the invaders. The first of these movies is now considered a classic. It's *The Deerhunter*, whose message was that America had suffered, America was stricken, American boys had done their best against oriental barbarians. The message was all the more pernicious, because the *Deerhunter* was brilliantly made and acted. I have to admit it's the only movie that has made me shout out loud in a Cinema in protest. Oliver Stone's acclaimed movie *Platoon* was said to be antiwar, and it did show glimpses of the Vietnamese as human beings, but it also promoted above all the American invader as victim.

I wasn't going to mention *The Green Berets* when I set down to write this, until I read the other day that John Wayne was the most influential movie star who ever lived. I saw the *Green Berets* starring John Wayne on a Saturday night in 1968 in Montgomery Alabama. (I was down there to interview the then-infamous governor George Wallace). I had just come back from Vietnam, and I couldn't believe how absurd this movie was. So I laughed out loud, and I laughed and laughed. And it wasn't long before the atmosphere around me grew very cold. My

companion, who had been a Freedom Rider in the South, said, "Let's get the hell out of here and run like hell."

We were chased all the way back to our hotel, but I doubt if any of our pursuers were aware that John Wayne, their hero, had lied so he wouldn't have to fight in World War II. And yet the phony role model of Wayne sent thousands of Americans to their deaths in Vietnam, with the notable exceptions of George W. Bush and Dick Cheney.

Last year, in his acceptance of the Nobel Prize for Literature, the playwright Harold Pinter made an epoch speech. He asked why, and it is appropriate to quote him, "The systematic brutality, the widespread atrocities, the ruthless suppression of independent thought in Stalinist Russia were well known in the West, while American state crimes were merely superficially recorded, left alone, documented." And yet across the world the extinction and suffering of countless human beings could be attributed to rampant American power. "But," said Pinter, "You wouldn't know it. It never happened. Nothing ever happened. Even while it was happening it wasn't happening. It didn't matter. It was of no interest." Pinter's words were more than the surreal. The BBC ignored the speech of Britain's most famous dramatist.

This writer has made a number of documentaries about Cambodia. The first was 'Year Zero : the Silent Death of Cambodia'. It describes the American bombing that provided the catalyst for the rise of Pol Pot. What Nixon and Kissinger had started, Pol Pot completed—CIA files alone leave no doubt of that. Year Zero was offered to PBS and taken it to Washington. The PBS executives who saw it were shocked. They whispered among themselves. They asked me to wait outside. One of them finally emerged and said, "John, we admire your film. But we are disturbed that it says the United States prepared the way for Pol Pot."

Now the term "journalist adjudicator" might have been invented by George Orwell. In fact they managed to find one of only three journalists who had been invited to Cambodia by Pol Pot. And of course he turned his thumbs down on the film and nothing was heard from PBS again. *Year Zero* was broadcast in some 60 countries and became one of the most watched documentaries in the world. It was never shown in the United States.

Harold Pinter's subversive truth was that he made the connection between imperialism and fascism, and described a battle for history that's almost never reported. This is the great silence of the media age. And this is the secret heart of propaganda today. It is all about talking about a system, of course, not personalities. And yet, a great many people today think that the problem is George W Bush and his gang. And yes, the Bush gang are extreme. But they are no more than an extreme version of what has gone on before. More wars have been started by liberal Democrats than by Republicans during the past few decades. Ignoring this truth is a guarantee that the propaganda system and the war-making system will continue.

Like Blair, like Clinton, like Bush, Blair's successor Brown believes in the liberal truth that the battle for history has been won; that the millions who died in British-imposed famines in British imperial India will be forgotten—like the millions who have died in the American Empire will be forgotten. And like Blair, his successor is confident that professional journalism is on his side. For most

journalists, whether they realize it or not, are groomed to be tribunes of an ideology that regards itself as non-ideological, that presents itself as the natural center, the very fulcrum of modern life. This may very well be the most powerful and dangerous ideology people have ever known because it is open-ended. This is liberalism. Liberalism began as a preserve of the elite in the 19th century, and true democracy is never handed down by elites. It is always fought for and struggled for.

A senior member of the antiwar coalition, United For Peace and Justice, said recently, "The Democrats are using the politics of reality." Her liberal historical reference point was Vietnam. She said that President Johnson began withdrawing troops from Vietnam after a Democratic Congress began to vote against the war. That's not what happened. The troops were withdrawn from Vietnam after four long years. And during that time the United States killed more people in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos with bombs than were killed in all the preceding years. And that's what's happening in Iraq. The bombing has doubled since last year, and *this is not being reported*. And who began this bombing? Bill Clinton began it. During the 1990s Clinton rained bombs on Iraq in what were euphemistically called the "no fly zones." At the same time he imposed a medieval siege called economic sanctions, killing perhaps a million people, including a documented 500,000 children. Almost none of this carnage was reported in the so-called mainstream media. Last year a study published by the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health found that since the invasion of Iraq 655, 000 Iraqis had died as a direct result of the invasion. Official documents show that the Blair government knew this figure to be credible. In February, Les Roberts, the author of the report, said the figure was equal to the figure for deaths in the Fordham University study of the Rwandan genocide. The media response to Robert's shocking revelation was silence. What may well be the greatest episode of organized killing for a generation, in Harold Pinter's words, "Did not happen. It didn't matter."

Many people who regard themselves on the left supported Bush's attack on Afghanistan. That the CIA had supported Osama Bin Laden was ignored, that the Clinton administration had secretly backed the Taliban, even giving them high-level briefings at the CIA, is virtually unknown in the United States. The Taliban were secret partners with the oil giant Unocal in building an oil pipeline across Afghanistan. And when a Clinton official was reminded that the Taliban persecuted women, he said, "We can live with that." There is compelling evidence that Bush decided to attack the Taliban not as a result of 9-11, but two months earlier, in July of 2001. This is virtually unknown in the United States—publicly. Like the scale of civilian casualties in Afghanistan. Only one mainstream reporter, Jonathan Steele of the *Guardian* in London, has investigated civilian casualties in Afghanistan, and his estimate is 20,000 dead civilians, and that was three years ago.

The enduring tragedy of Palestine is due in great part to the silence and compliance of the so-called liberal left. Hamas is described repeatedly as sworn to the destruction of Israel. The *New York Times*, the *Associated Press*, the *Boston Globe*—take your pick. They all use this line as a standard disclaimer, and it is false. That Hamas has called for a ten-year ceasefire is almost never reported.

Even more important, that Hamas has undergone an historic ideological shift in the last few years, which amounts to a recognition of what it calls the reality of Israel, is virtually unknown; and that Israel is sworn to the destruction of Palestine is unspeakable.

There is a pioneering study by Glasgow University on the reporting of Palestine. They interviewed young people who watch TV news in Britain. More than 90 percent thought the illegal settlers were Palestinian. The more they watched, the less they knew—Danny Schechter’s famous phrase.

The current most dangerous silence is over nuclear weapons and the return of the Cold War. The Russians understand clearly that the so-called American defense shield in Eastern Europe is designed to subjugate and humiliate them. Yet the front pages here talk about Putin starting a new Cold War, and there is silence about the development of an entirely new American nuclear system called Reliable Weapons Replacement (RRW), which is designed to blur the distinction between conventional war and nuclear war—a long-held ambition.

In the meantime, Iran is being softened up, with the liberal media playing almost the same role it played before the Iraq invasion. And as for the Democrats, look at how Barak Obama has become the voice of the Council on Foreign Relations, one of the propaganda organs of the old liberal Washington establishment. Obama writes that while he wants the troops home, “We must not rule out military force against long-standing adversaries such as Iran and Syria.” Listen to this from the liberal Obama: “At moment of great peril in the past century our leaders ensured that America, by deed and by example, led and lifted the world, that we stood and fought for the freedom sought by billions of people beyond their borders.”

That is the nub of the propaganda, the brainwashing if you like, that seeps into the lives of every American, and many people who are not Americans. From right to left, secular to God-fearing, what so few people know is that in the last half century, United States administrations have overthrown 50 governments—many of them democracies. In the process, thirty countries have been attacked and bombed, with the loss of countless lives. Bush bashing is all very well—and is justified—but the moment one begins to accept the siren call of the Democrat’s drivel about standing up and fighting for freedom sought by billions, the battle for history is lost.

So what should American people do? That question often asked in meetings, even meetings as informed as those in this conference, is itself interesting. People in the so-called third world rarely ask the question, because they know what to do. And some have paid with their freedom and their lives, but they knew what to do. It’s a question that many on the democratic left—small “d”—have yet to answer.

Real information, subversive information, remains the most potent power of all—it’s a trap that the media speaks for the public. That wasn’t true in Stalinist Czechoslovakia and it isn’t true of the United States.

Why did the *New York Times* come clean in that editorial last year? Not because it opposes Bush’s wars—look at the coverage of Iran. That editorial was a rare acknowledgement that the public was beginning to see the concealed role of the media, and that people were beginning to read between the lines.

If Iran is attacked, the reaction and the upheaval cannot be predicted. The national security and homeland security presidential directive gives Bush power over all facets of government in an emergency. It is not unlikely the constitution will be suspended—the laws to round of hundreds of thousands of so-called terrorists and enemy combatants are already on the books. If anything these dangers are understood by the public, who have come along way since 9-11, and a long way since the propaganda that linked Saddam Hussein to al-Qaeda. That's why they voted for the Democrats last November, only to be betrayed. But they need truth, and journalists ought to be agents of truth, not the courtiers of power.

In truth a fifth estate is possible, the product of a people's movement, that monitors, deconstructs, and counters the corporate media. In every university, in every media college, in every news room, teachers of journalism, journalists themselves need to ask themselves about the part they now play in the bloodshed in the name of a bogus objectivity. Such a movement within the media could herald a perestroika of a kind that people have never known. This is all possible. Silences can be broken. In Britain the National Union of Journalists has undergone a radical change, and has called for a boycott of Israel. The web site Medialens.org has single-handedly called the BBC to account. In the United States wonderfully free rebellious spirits populate the web—from Tom Feeley's International Clearing House, to Mike Albert's ZNet, to Counterpunch online, and the splendid work of FAIR. The best reporting of Iraq appears on the web—Dahr Jamail's courageous journalism; and citizen reporters like Joe Wilding, who reported the siege of Fallujah from inside the city.

In Venezuela, Greg Wilpert's investigations turned back much of the virulent propaganda now aimed at Hugo Chávez. Make no mistake, it's the threat of freedom of speech for the majority in Venezuela that lies behind the campaign in the west on behalf of the corrupt RCTV. The challenge for the moment is to lift this subjugated knowledge from out of the underground and take it to ordinary people.

Liberal Democracy is moving toward a form of corporate dictatorship. This is an historic shift, and the media must not be allowed to be its façade, but itself made into a popular, burning issue, and subjected to direct action. That great whistleblower Tom Paine warned that if the majority of the people were denied the truth and the ideas of truth, it was time to storm what he called the Bastille of words. That time is now.□

[This is a slightly shortened version of a speech delivered by the author at the Chicago Socialism 2007 Conference on June 16, 2007]