

'The Dwindling Band of Iraq Obsessives' - Endless War and Media Complicity

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The 20th anniversary of the illegal US/UK-led invasion of Iraq has demonstrated once again the subservience of state and corporate media to Western power. Jeremy Bowen, the BBC's international editor, veered as close to the truth as BBC News allows in an [online piece](#) as well as a [segment](#) of its flagship News at Ten on BBC1.

'The invasion of March 2003 was', [wrote](#) Bowen, 'a catastrophe for Iraq and its people.' He noted that:

'George Bush and Tony Blair embarked on a war of choice that killed hundreds of thousands of people. The justifications for the invasion were soon shown to be untrue. The weapons of mass destruction that Tony Blair insisted, eloquently, made Saddam a clear and present danger, turned out not to exist. It was a failure not just of intelligence but of leadership.'

Bowen added a further observation on the death toll:

'No-one knows exactly how many Iraqis have died as a result of the 2003 invasion. Estimates are all in the hundreds of thousands.'

But this was false. A reliable estimate is that [at least one million Iraqis died](#) as a result of the invasion.

On BBC News at Ten, Bowen did not even mention Blair or Bush; far less label them as 'war criminals' in the eyes of many viewers and expert commentators. Indeed, BBC 'balance' meant that salient facts were not mentioned; the usual insidious phenomenon of state-corporate '[propaganda by omission](#)':

- not calling the 2003 US-UK invasion of Iraq a '[war of aggression](#)'.

- not pointing out that, by the standards of Nuremberg, it was the [supreme international crime](#).
- not mentioning that the UN sanctions against Iraq in the 1990s resulted in an estimated [death toll](#) of 1.5 million, including over [half a million children under five](#). The sanctions were described as '[genocidal](#)' by senior UN officials Denis Halliday and Hans von Sponeck. Bowen said merely that the sanctions had 'made a lot of people suffer'.

Bowen is, of course, not alone in the state-corporate media for never stating these essential facts about the Iraq war, and the awful impact of criminal UN sanctions that preceded it. As Noam Chomsky [said](#) in an MSNBC interview with Mehdi Hasan:

'It's a very striking fact that in twenty years you cannot find – at least, I have not found – a single statement, one sentence, anywhere near the mainstream that says the most elementary truth: it [the invasion of Iraq] was the supreme international crime of aggression.'

Chomsky added:

'In fact, war has been refashioned in liberal commentary as a kind of mercy mission to rescue suffering Iraqis from an evil dictator.'

When Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's statue in Baghdad's Firdos Square was brought down by US Marines using an M88 armoured recovery vehicle on 9 April 2003, Andrew Marr, then BBC political editor, delivered a [career-defining speech](#) to the nation from outside 10 Downing Street:

'Frankly, the main mood [in Downing Street] is of unbridled relief. I've been watching ministers wander around with smiles like split watermelons.' (BBC News At Ten, 9 April, 2003)

So, what was the significance of this moment for Prime Minister Tony Blair? Marr explained:

'It gives him a new freedom and a new self-confidence. He confronted many critics. I don't think anybody after this is going to be able to say of Tony Blair that he's somebody who is driven by the drift of public opinion, or focus groups, or opinion polls. He took all of those on. He said that they would be able to take Baghdad without a bloodbath, and that in the end the Iraqis would be celebrating. And on both of those points he has been proved conclusively right. And it would be entirely ungracious, even for his critics, not to acknowledge that tonight he stands as a larger man and a stronger prime minister as a result.'

This piece of political 'analysis' was no blip. It is, in fact, typical of the Washington-Downing Street narrative that is the very cornerstone of BBC 'impartiality'.

Now, twenty years later, Andrew Marr [says](#) his 2003 broadcast was 'terribly badly misjudged'. It was the most pathetic of *mea culpas*. There was no acknowledgement of his or the BBC's role in selling a war that has had such appalling repercussions for millions of people in Iraq, elsewhere in the Middle East and the wider world.

Marr said:

‘In my diary, I find I went to bed perplexed, unsure and exhausted.’

It certainly didn’t look that way on the day. In reality, we suspect Marr was exhausted from beaming his own ‘smiles like split watermelons’.

Roger Mosey, who was in charge of BBC television news when the 2003 invasion of Iraq took place, recently [said](#) on Twitter:

‘I spent 33 years in the BBC and could not comment on government policy. But that’s because if you want to hold the powerful to account, it is better for the organisation and individuals within it to be seen as impartial.’

He gave a supposed example of this by [linking](#) to a [BBC Newsnight special](#) from 2003:

‘Blair on Iraq with a 100% critical audience and Paxman. That would have been much harder if any of us in the BBC team had been known as Labour or Conservative supporters.’

In fact, as we detailed at the time in a [media alert](#), far from holding Blair to account, Paxman’s ‘challenge wilted at the first sign of resistance’ from the Prime Minister. It was a desperate failure by Paxman. He ignored essentially all of the key points that we and many other members of the public emailed to him directly, urging him to raise them with Blair.

The [historical record](#) shows that there is, of course, a long-standing, institutionalised media aversion to seriously challenging establishment power of even the most ruthless and cynical kind. The BBC is very much part of that same system of power.

War Pushers And Apologists

What about the ‘liberal’ Guardian? Consider its star columnist Jonathan Freedland who claimed in a cleverly self-serving [retrospective](#) on the Iraq war that:

‘I was writing on these pages back then, arguing that the case George W Bush and Tony Blair were making for war did not add up.’

This was remarkablechutzpah.

Freedland was actually one of the first journalists to sell the case for attacking Iraq. His November 2001 article titled, [‘Turning Towards Iraq’](#), was essentially one long uncritical list of US war hawks’ reasons for targeting Iraq after Afghanistan.

We devoted a [media alert](#) at the time to this terrible piece:

‘The article appears neutral – Freedland is merely communicating the Hawks’ views. But by communicating *only* their views, the net result is that the Hawks are made to seem almost reasonable. In the absence of critical comment or balancing argument (unless we consider a brief reference to Colin Powell’s “cautious” approach balance), the reader is left nodding.’

In his recent Guardian [article](#), Freedland quotes the BBC’s security correspondent, Gordon Corera:

'In my mind, the original sin lay with the spies – who got it wrong.'

The 'original sin', in fact, lay with politicians and journalists who fraudulently claimed that possession of chemical or biological weapons justified the invasion of a country that had not attacked or even threatened the West.

Freedland affected to show how deeply he cared about the suffering of Iraqis. And yet, as far back as 2011, in discussing Tony Blair's appearance at the Chilcot Inquiry, Freedland [wrote](#):

'It was an electric close to what had seemed set to be a rather dry session, one of interest to few beyond the families in mourning and the dwindling band of Iraq obsessives.'

Journalist and filmmaker John Pilger [observed](#) of Freedland's abysmal article:

'Jonathan Freedland, voice of the Guardian, blames "spooks and politicians" for the destruction of Iraq – not journalists who sold it. Freedland made the criminal Blair seem reasonable, allowing his hero to say, unchallenged, he brought "a ripple of change" to the Middle East.'

Freedland is one of many journalists and commentators whose uncritical acceptance, sometimes enthusiastic championing, of pro-war rhetoric has not hindered their media careers; quite the contrary.

Infamously, David Aaronovitch, a high-ranking officer of the corporate media's 101st Chairborne Division, once devoted a [Guardian column](#) with the key message that:

'If nothing is eventually found, I – as a supporter of the war – will never believe another thing that I am told by our government, or that of the US ever again. And, more to the point, neither will anyone else. Those weapons had better be there somewhere.'

Presumably aware this would become his journalistic epitaph, one year later – with no Iraqi WMD to be found – he published a [lame, exculpatory piece](#), pleading 'Was I wrong about Iraq?'

Aaronovitch has since enjoyed long employment with Rupert Murdoch's Times and has backed every US-UK 'humanitarian intervention' to 'bomb the world better' ever since. Aaronovitch has continued to 'believe' US-UK government war propaganda more fervently than ever. Not that we actually *believe* he 'believes' any of it – he's not a fool.

On the 20th anniversary of the invasion of Iraq, Double Down News published [a short clip](#), clearly inspired and informed by the work of Media Lens, titled:

'Never Forget how the Media Sold, Enabled & Whitewashed the War'

The pattern of successful careers for politicians, journalists and commentators – who should all have been utterly discredited, if not held accountable for war crimes – has been repeated on both sides of the Atlantic. Here, Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and Alastair Campbell are still feted as respected elder statesmen and knowledgeable 'experts' on domestic and world affairs.

Having [survived accusations](#) that he had tainted the BBC's otherwise spotless record of

'impartiality', football commentator Gary Lineker repeatedly tweeted praise for Alastair Campbell's discussions about the Iraq war on Campbell's podcast, ['The Rest Is Politics'](#). Lineker [opined](#) sagely:

'The long awaited addressing of the elephant in the room, and it's every bit as fascinating and illuminating as you would expect.'

We [commented](#):

'This ought to provoke deep outrage – Campbell authentically shares responsibility for an illegal war of aggression that took one million human lives. But hailing him as an Iraq war illuminator is fine, nobody notices – certainly no impartiality concern here.'

To be fair, the Spectator [did notice a problem](#) with Lineker's support for Campbell (and Campbell's earlier support for Lineker):

'Campbell stars on the Rest Is Politics podcast, which is produced by Goalhanger Productions, owned by one G Lineker.'

But, of course, Campbell's responsibility for mass death in Iraq went unmentioned, being of interest only to 'the dwindling band of Iraq obsessives'.

The Blairite virus is running rampant once again in the Tory-lite Labour party under its Blairbot leader Sir Keir Starmer. His Shadow 'Defence' Secretary, John Healey, [tweeted](#) this on the anniversary of the illegal invasion that led to over one million Iraqi deaths:

'Twenty years after the beginning of Operation Telic in Iraq, we thank all who served and remember the 179 personnel who lost their lives. The war has had an enduring impact for many, and we renew our commitment today to support all those who have served in our Armed Forces.'

As Mark Curtis, director and co-founder of Declassified UK, [said](#):

'This was the sum total of what Labour's defence spokesperson said on Iraq while its foreign affairs spokesperson – the laughable David Lammy – tweeted nothing at all. Labour is cool with a few hundred thousand dead. They're the junior imperialist party.'

The replies to Healey's tweet from members of the public were heartening to read; people with souls and insight. [Such as](#):

'Illegal wars of aggression are so cool when we do them.'

[And](#):

'No comment on the hundreds of thousands of unnecessary deaths, the destabilisation of the region, leading to the rise of ISIS? This really is a disgusting tweet'

[And](#):

'Twenty years after an illegal invasion you voted for, you can't even bring yourself to apologise to the people of Iraq'

War! Good For Profit And Careers

Across the pond, US media's Iraq war pushers are doing very well twenty years later, as media critic Adam Johnson [observed](#):

'It's not just that media figures who sold the most devastating war crime of the 21st century never faced any professional consequences—they're more powerful and influential now than ever.'

David Frum was a head writer for the Bush White House and coined the term 'Axis of Evil.' He later became a well-paid and prestigious columnist for The Atlantic, an influential US magazine, and a regular contributor to cable TV.

Another example is Jeffrey Goldberg. He was a reporter at The New Yorker who promoted conspiracy theories linking Saddam to the 9/11 attacks. Goldberg is now editor-in-chief of The Atlantic. Johnson pointed out that:

'Like everyone else on this list, he [Goldberg] has used recent Russian meddling in US elections and aggression against Ukraine to launder his image and promote himself as a champion of Western Liberal Democracy and the Liberal Rules Based Order™.'

Johnson summed up:

'The almost uniform success of all the Iraq War cheerleaders provides the greatest lesson about what really helps one get ahead in public life: It's not being right, doing the right thing, or challenging power, but going with prevailing winds and mocking anyone who dares to do the opposite.'

Even today, the 'free press' is burying awkward truths about Iraq. Declassified UK has just [revealed](#) that the British oil company BP has 'reaped a bonanza upon its return to Iraq after the 2003 invasion'. In 2009, BP was awarded a significant interest in the country's largest oil field, Ramaila, near Basra, which had been occupied by British troops. Since 2011, BP has pumped 262m barrels of Iraqi oil worth £15.4 billion. You will search in vain for significant, if any, coverage of this in the UK state-corporate media, not least to make the glaring contrast between the sordid reality and Blair's [boast](#) in 2003 to make a 'brighter and better Iraq' in which:

'any money from Iraqi oil will go in a trust fund, UN-administered, for the benefit of the Iraqi people.'

It turns out, however, that Britain's first special representative to post-invasion Iraq, appointed by Blair, *has* done well: Sir John Sawers, who later joined BP's board in 2015.

In 2001, Kevin Maguire, then chief Guardian reporter, [noted](#) that BP was 'nicknamed Blair Petroleum for its close links with the government'. When Sawers joined BP as a non-executive director in May 2015, he had just stepped down as head of MI6, Britain's external intelligence agency, which he had led since 2009. He has since 'earned' £1.1m in fees from the company. His BP shareholding was also worth £135,000 last year, up 181% from when he joined the company. ['War! What is it good for?'](#) Profit – both corporate and personal.

Declassified UK [reported](#):

'Sawers' predecessor as head of MI6, Sir John Scarlett, joined Statoil after MI6. Scarlett was the senior intelligence official [responsible](#) for Tony Blair's notorious dossier on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction produced in the run-up to the invasion. Scarlett "[proposed](#) using the document to mislead the public about the significance of Iraq's banned weapons".'

Scarlett's predecessor, Sir Richard Dearlove, [joined](#) Kosmos Energy after MI6.

It really is not hard to join the dots, and the big picture is ugly indeed.

The Anti-Democratic War Consensus

Contrary to the limited, face-saving, post-Iraq war promises by editors and journalists to 'do better', 'to scrutinise more', and so on, the reality is that the media consensus in support of government war aims is stronger than ever. We have pointed out this phenomenon in our [media alerts on Ukraine](#) over the past year.

In an excellent recent [article](#), Tara McCormack, a lecturer in international relations at the University of Leicester, expanded on this theme. The media, she noted, is giving huge prominence to political leaders and commentators who have asserted again and again that Western policy to achieve 'victory' for Ukraine is to do *whatever it takes, for as long as it takes*.

Thus, for example, British Foreign Secretary James Cleverly has [declared](#) that British support to Ukraine is 'not time-limited' and that Britain would: 'Keep the promises that we made to the UN Charter and to the Ukrainian people'. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has even [stated](#) recently that now is 'not the time for peace'.

As McCormack observed:

'This adds to the evidence that Britain is playing a key role in prolonging the war. Last year it was [reported](#) by Ukrainian media that Boris Johnson went to Kiev in April and told Zelensky that even if he (Zelensky) was ready to negotiate, the West was not. Former Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett has also [recently argued](#) that in the spring of last year, Russia and Ukraine were both keen to negotiate but that Johnson was not and that ultimately the Western powers put a halt to the negotiations.'

The reality is that the UK, along with the rest of Europe and the US, is now part of a proxy war against Russia, a nuclear-armed state. We are also shoulder to shoulder with the US and Australia in aggressive behaviour towards China as part of the so-called 'Aukus pact'. This is 'a historic security pact', [the BBC tells us](#), to 'counter China'. The Orwellian language of 'security' and 'countering' foreign 'threats' is standard for the state-affiliated BBC News.

As McCormack says, the British people are being subjected to an 'anti-democratic war consensus' created by the government and the media. There is no proper debate or accountability. Questions are not permitted. *Whatever it takes? However long it takes? And why should* Britain even be a part of this?

McCormack warned that the Ukraine war could well be the first case since the end of the Cold War where any dissent has been almost entirely excluded by the political-media class. She rightly concluded:

‘The war consensus is a deliberate construction of the British state in order to avoid democratic scrutiny and exclude the public from what are existential policy choices. The decision by the political and media class that there should be total exclusion of any kind of discussion about our foreign policy should be a cause for great alarm, whatever one believes British policy towards Ukraine should be.’

A good starting point for public debate and discussion would be to increase one’s awareness of the inherent bias in current media reporting. For example, Tim Holmes [noted](#) recently via Twitter that:

‘The Guardian have used the phrase “Putin apologist” 5,790 times.

‘They have used the phrase “NATO apologist” a grand total of ... zero times.’

It is also worth noting exactly when media use the word ‘controversial’. It is common practice to apply the word to the actions and intentions of Official Enemies; less so for those of our own government and allies. Thus, a recent Guardian [headline](#):

‘Putin welcomes China’s controversial proposals for peace in Ukraine’

As US political commentator Aaron Maté astutely [noted](#):

‘In NATO state media, there’s nothing more “controversial” than a peace proposal’

The Bloomberg news agency even [reported](#) that:

‘US Fears a War-Wearied World May Embrace China’s Ukraine Peace Bid’

Imagine that! The world is war-weary and wants to see peace: what a terrible outcome for US power.

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