

Empire Journalism: Venezuela, the US and John McCain

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The US political commentator Michael Parenti once [observed](#) that:

'Bias in favor of the orthodox is frequently mistaken for "objectivity". Departures from this ideological orthodoxy are themselves dismissed as ideological.'

Once you understand the truth of that remark, seeing the daily biases and distortions of the corporate media becomes obvious. Thus, there is plenty of space on the BBC News website, and plenty of time on the BBC's airwaves, to discuss the [Venezuela migrant crisis](#), [hyper-inflation](#) and [food shortages](#). Rob Young, a BBC News business correspondent, [wrote](#):

'Venezuela, now in its fourth year of recession, has joined a sad list of other countries whose economies imploded as hyperinflation tore through them.'

Young quoted a senior official of the International Monetary Fund:

'The situation in Venezuela is similar to that in Germany in 1923 or Zimbabwe in the late 2000s.'

A BBC News clip headlined, 'Begging for food in Venezuela', [emphasised](#):

'Food has become so scarce in Venezuela after the economy collapsed that people are getting desperate.'

Likewise, there has been ample [heart-wrenching coverage](#) of Venezuelans fleeing to other countries. But you will struggle to find any substantive analysis of the severe US sanctions and long-standing threats to bring about a US-friendly government in Caracas, including an [attempted coup](#) in 2002 to remove Hugo Chávez, Venezuela's then president.

On August 19, BBC South America correspondent Katy Watson reported for BBC News at Ten:

'President Nicolas Maduro is doing little to stop his country's economic freefall.'

Last week, he announced plans to devalue the country's currency; an attempt to rein in inflation that the International Monetary Fund says could hit one million per cent by the end of the year.'

But there was next to no context. BBC viewers were led to believe that the blame for the crisis in Venezuela lay squarely at Maduro's door.

By contrast, consider the [analysis](#) of Gabriel Hetland, an expert academic on Latin America. He stated that the Venezuelan government's actions – and inactions – have made the crisis 'far worse'. But crucially:

'the government has not acted in a vacuum, but in a hostile domestic and international environment. The opposition has openly and repeatedly pushed for regime change by any means necessary.'

On August 4, there was even an attempt to assassinate President Maduro, with responsibility [claimed](#) by a clandestine opposition group made up of members of the Venezuelan military.

Hetland continued:

'The US government has not only cheered, and funded, these anti-democratic actions. By absurdly declaring that Venezuela is an "unusual and extraordinary threat" to US national security and pressuring investors and bankers to steer clear of the Maduro administration, the White House has prevented Venezuela from obtaining much-needed foreign financing and investment.'

The *Morning Star's* Tim Young [pointed out](#) that:

'Sanctions now form a key part of what is a strategic plan by the US to ruin the Venezuelan economy.'

These US sanctions have even impacted Venezuela's health programme, with the country's vaccination schemes disrupted, dialysis supplies blocked and cancer drugs refused. Young added:

'It is clear that the US sanctions — illegal under international law — are part of an overall strategy to bring about what the US calls "regime change."

'Its aim is to undermine and topple the elected government of President Nicolas Maduro and secure control of Venezuela's vast oil reserves and other natural resources and wealth.'

In a news [report](#) in the *Independent* last year, Andrew Buncombe quoted remarks by Mike Pompeo, then head of the CIA, suggesting that:

'the agency is working to change the elected government of Venezuela and is collaborating with two countries [Mexico and Colombia] in the region to do so.'

As Buncombe observed:

‘The US has a long and bloody history of meddling in Latin America’s affairs.’

That is an accurate and truthful headline you are very unlikely to see on BBC News.

To realise how incomplete and distorted is BBC News coverage, you only have to listen to the superb independent journalist Abby Martin, who has risked her life to [report](#) what the corporate media is not telling you about Venezuela. It is little wonder that, as she [discusses](#), her important news programme, ‘[Empire Files](#)’, is currently [off-air](#) as a result of US sanctions against left-leaning TeleSUR, the Venezuela-based television network.

A [report](#) by media analyst Gregory Shupak for US-based media watchdog FAIR, notes the repeated usage of the word ‘regime’ to describe Venezuela by the US corporate media. As Shupak observes, a ‘regime’ is, by definition, a government that opposes the US empire. He goes on:

‘Interestingly, the US itself meets many of the criteria for being a “regime”: It can be seen as an oligarchy rather than a democracy, imprisons people at a higher rate than any other country, has grotesque levels of inequality and bombs another country every 12 minutes. Yet there’s no widespread tendency for the corporate media to describe the US state as a “regime.”’

In short, if you rely on the corporate media, not least the BBC, for what’s going on in Venezuela, you will get the US-friendly version of events, downplaying or simply ignoring the crippling effects of US sanctions and threats.

On Venezuela, as with so many other issues, BBC News regularly violates its own stated [‘Editorial Values’](#):

‘Accuracy is not simply a matter of getting facts right; when necessary, we will weigh relevant facts and information to get at the truth.’

The notion that BBC News journalists perform a balancing act, sifting through ‘facts and information’ to present ‘the truth’ to the public is simply pure fiction, as the ample evidence presented in our forthcoming book, [‘Propaganda Blitz’](#), makes clear.

‘A Human Landmark; An American Hero’

Consider coverage of the recent death of US politician John McCain. McCain was the Republican nominee in the 2008 US presidential election which he lost to Barack Obama. In 1967, during the Vietnam War, he was shot down while on a bombing mission over Hanoi and was seriously injured. Captured by the North Vietnamese, he was tortured during his incarceration, before being released in 1973. In later years, the media would call him a ‘war hero’ and depict him as a political ‘maverick’ in not always supporting Republican Party policy on certain issues.

Theresa May [declared](#):

'John McCain was a great statesman, who embodied the idea of service over self. It was an honour to call him a friend of the UK.'

Con Coughlin, the *Telegraph's* defence editor and chief foreign affairs columnist, [echoed](#) the mantra that McCain was a 'war hero'.

In similar vein, 'neutral' and 'impartial' Nick Bryant, the BBC's New York correspondent, intoned loftily on BBC News at Ten on August 27:

'Washington without John McCain is a lesser place. He was a human landmark; an American hero whose broken body personified the Land of the Brave.'

Senior reporters from Channel 4 News and ITV News added their own eulogies to warmonger McCain, dubbed '[McNasty](#)' by people who had observed his 'inexplicable angry outbursts'. C4 News political correspondent Michael Crick [said](#) via Twitter:

'I'll always be grateful to John McCain. When I was #C4News Washington Correspondent in the late '80s, he was one of the few senators happy to do interviews with us, and always very friendly & accommodating.'

Robert Moore, ITV News Washington Correspondent [responded](#):

'Agreed. And that continued almost until the end - for the foreign press, McCain was the single most accessible political figure in Washington. He always had time for an interview, and a joke - including teasing me for my choice of ties.'

Other Twitter users put things in stark perspective:

['My thoughts are entirely with his victims and their families.'](#)

And:

['How hard did you grill him about the decisions he made that killed innocent civilians in hundreds of thousands?'](#)

It would be hard to find an exchange on Twitter that better exemplifies the divide between sycophantic journalists fawning before power, and members of the public refusing to whitewash a politician's ugly record.

Patrick Martin, writing for the World Socialist Website, [makes](#) a vital point:

'The overriding feature of McCain's career [...] was his reflexive hawkishness on foreign policy. He supported war after war, intervention after intervention, always promoting the use of force as the primary feature of American foreign policy, and always advocating the maximum allocation of resources to fuel the Pentagon.'

Peace activist Medea Benjamin [told](#) Amy Goodman in a *Democracy Now!* interview:

'We had constantly been lobbying John McCain to not support all these wars. Amy, I think it's so horrible to be calling somebody a war hero because he participated in the bombing of Vietnam. I just spent the last weekend with Veterans for Peace, people who are atoning for their sins in Vietnam by trying to stop new wars. John McCain hasn't done that. With his life, what he did was support wars from not only Iraq, but also Libya.'

Benjamin founded [Code Pink: Women for Peace](#), a grassroots peace and justice movement that McCain once disparaged as '[low-life scum](#)'.

She continued:

'He called John Kerry delusional for trying to make a nuclear deal with Iran, and threw his lot in with the MEK, the extremist group in Iran. He also was a good friend of Mohammad bin Salman and the Saudis. There was a gala for the Saudis in May when the crown prince was visiting, and they had a special award for John McCain. He supported the Saudi bombing in Yemen that has been so catastrophic. And I think we have to think that those who have participated in war are really heroes if they spend the rest of their lives trying to stop war, not like John McCain, who spent the rest of his life supporting war.'

Norman Solomon, executive director of the Institute for Public Accuracy, made clear his empathy for McCain for having suffered through brain cancer. But he castigated the corporate media phenomenon of 'obit omit'—obituaries that are flagrantly in conflict with the real historical record.'

He told Goodman:

'we really have to fault the mass media of the United States, not just for the last few days, but the last decades, pretending that somehow, by implication, almost that John McCain was doing the people of North Vietnam a favor as he flew over them and dropped bombs. You would think, in the hagiography that we've been getting about his role in a squadron flying over North Vietnam, that he was dropping, you know, flowers or marshmallows or something. He was shot down during his 23rd mission dropping bombs on massive numbers of human beings, in a totally illegal and immoral war.'

As Branko Marcetic [noted](#) in an accurate assessment of McCain's political legacy:

'John McCain's greatest achievement was convincing the world through charming banter and occasional opposition to his party's agenda that he was anything other than a reactionary, bloodthirsty war hawk.'

In a recent [article](#), Joe Emersberger, an insightful [writer](#) on foreign affairs, notes that corporate media coverage of both Venezuela and John McCain illustrates two main features:

1. The uniformity of empire-friendly reporting across the corporate media.

2. The complicity of major human rights groups in this empire-friendly 'journalism'.

As an example:

'Amnesty International has refused to oppose US economic sanctions on Venezuela, and has also refused to denounce flagrant efforts by US officials to incite a military coup.'

Emersberger also points to a [statement](#) on John McCain's death from Human Rights Watch:

'Senator McCain was for decades a compassionate voice for US foreign and national security policy.'

For anyone able to think critically and speak openly, such statements are risible. Brutal imperialism will continue for as long as empire-friendly journalism and tame public opposition exist.

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