

Empire, war and propaganda

By [John Pilger](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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The National Museum of American History is part of the celebrated Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. Surrounded by mock Graeco-Roman edifices with their soaring Corinthian columns, rampant eagles and chiselled profundities, it is at the centre of Empire, though the word itself is engraved nowhere. This is understandable, as the likes of Hitler and Mussolini were proud imperialists, too: on a “great mission to rid the world of evil”, as President Bush has also said.

One of the museum’s exhibitions is called “The Price of Freedom: Americans at war”. In the spirit of Santa’s Magic Grotto, this travesty of revisionism helps us understand how silence and omission are so successfully deployed in free, media-saturated societies. The shuffling lines of ordinary people, many of them children, are dispensed the vainglorious message that America has always “built freedom and democracy” – notably at Hiroshima and Nagasaki where the atomic bombing saved “a million lives”, and in Vietnam where America’s crusaders were “determined to stop communist expansion”, and in Iraq where the same true hearts “employed air strikes of unprecedented precision”.

The words “invasion” and “controversial” make only fleeting appearances; there is no hint that the “great mission” has overseen, since 1945, the attempted overthrow of 50 governments, many of them democracies, along with the crushing of popular movements struggling against tyranny and the bombing of 30 countries, causing the loss of countless lives. In central America, in the 1980s, Ronald Reagan’s arming and training of gangster-armies saw off 300,000 people; in Guatemala, this was described by the UN as genocide. No word of this is uttered in the Grotto. Indeed, thanks to such displays, Americans can venerate war, comforted by the crimes of others and knowing nothing about their own.

In Santa’s Grotto, there is no place for Howard Zinn’s honest People’s History of the United States, or I F Stone’s revelation of the truth of what the museum calls “the forgotten war” in Korea, or Mark Twain’s definition of patriotism as the need to keep “multitudinous uniformed assassins on hand at heavy expense to grab slices of other people’s countries”. Moreover, at the Price of Freedom Shop, you can buy US Army Monopoly, and a “grateful nation blanket” for just \$200. The exhibition’s corporate sponsors include Sears, Roebuck, the mammoth retailer. The point is taken.

To understand the power of indoctrination in free societies is also to understand the subversive power of the truth it suppresses. During the Blair era in Britain, precocious revisionists of Empire have been embraced by the pro-war media. Inspired by America’s Messianic claims of “victory” in the cold war, their pseudo-histories have sought not only to hose down the blood slick of slavery, plunder, famine and genocide that was British imperialism (“the Empire was an exemplary force for good”: Andrew Roberts) but also to rehabilitate Gladstonian convictions of superiority and promote “the imposition of western

values", as Niall Ferguson puts it.

Ferguson relishes "values", an unctuous concept that covers both the barbarism of the imperial past and today's ruthless, rigged "free" market. The new code for race and class is "culture". Thus, the enduring, piratical campaign by the rich and powerful against the poor and weak, especially those with natural resources, has become a "clash of civilisations". Since Francis Fukuyama wrote his drivel about "the end of history" (since recanted), the task of the revisionists and mainstream journalism has been to popularise the "new" imperialism, as in Ferguson's War of the World series for Channel 4 and his frequent soundbites on the BBC. In this way, the public is "softened up" for the rapacious invasion of countries on false pretences, including a not unlikely nuclear attack on Iran, and the ascent in Washington of an executive dictatorship, as called for by Vice-President Cheney. So imminent is the latter that a supine Congress will almost certainly reverse the Supreme Court's recent decision to outlaw the Guantanamo kangaroo courts. The judge who wrote the majority opinion – in a high court Bush himself stacked – sounded his alarm through this seminal quotation of James Madison: "The accumulation of all powers, legislative, executive, and judiciary, in the same hands, whether of one, a few, or many, and whether hereditary, self-appointed, or elective, may justly be pronounced the very definition of tyranny."

The catastrophe in the Middle East is a product of such an imperial tyranny. It is clearly a US-ordained operation, with the long-planned assault on Gaza and the destruction of Lebanon pretexts for a wider campaign with the goal of installing American puppets in Lebanon, Syria and eventually Iran. "The pay-off time has come," wrote the Israeli historian Ilan Pappé; "now the proxy should salvage the entangled Empire."

The attendant propaganda – the abuse of language and eternal hypocrisy – has reached its nadir in recent weeks. An Israeli soldier belonging to an invasion force was captured and held, legitimately, as a prisoner of war. Reported as a "kidnapping", this set off yet more slaughter of Palestinian civilians. The seizure of two Palestinian civilians two days before the capture of the soldier was of no interest. Neither was the incarceration of thousands of Palestinian hostages in Israeli prisons, and the torture of many of them, as documented by Amnesty. The kidnapped soldier story cancelled any serious inquiry into Israel's plans to invade Gaza, from which it had staged a phoney withdrawal. The fact and meaning of Hamas's self-imposed 16-month ceasefire were lost in inanities about "recognising Israel", along with Israel's state of terror in Gaza – the dropping of a 500lb bomb on a residential block, the firing of as many as 9,000 heavy artillery shells into one of the most densely populated places on earth and the nightly terrorising with sonic booms.

"I want nobody to sleep at night in Gaza," declared the Israeli prime minister, Ehud Olmert, as children went out of their minds. In their defence, the Palestinians fired a cluster of Qassam missiles and killed eight Israelis: enough to ensure Israel's victimhood on the BBC; even Jeremy Bowen struck a shameful "balance", referring to "two narratives". The historical equivalent is not far from that of the Nazi bombardment and starvation of the Jewish Warsaw Ghetto. Try to imagine that described as "two narratives".

Watching this unfold in Washington – I am staying in a hotel taken over by evangelical "Christians for Israel" apparently seeking rapture – I have heard only the crudest colonial refrain and no truth. Hezbollah, drone America's journalistic caricatures, is "armed and funded by Syria and Iran", and so they beckon an attack on those countries, while remaining silent about America's \$3bn-a-day gift of planes and small arms and bombs to a state whose

international lawlessness is a registered world record. There is never mention that, just as the rise of Hamas was a response to the atrocities and humiliations the Palestinians have suffered for half a century, so Hezbollah was formed only as a defence against Ariel Sharon's murderous invasion of Lebanon in 1982 which left 22,000 people dead. There is never mention that Israel intervenes at will, illegally and brutally, in the remaining 22 per cent of historic Palestine, having demolished 11,000 homes and walled off people from their farmlands, and families, and hospitals, and schools. There is never mention that the threat to Israel's existence is a canard, and the true enemy of its people is not the Arabs, but Zionism and an imperial America that guarantees the Jewish state as the antithesis of humane Judaism.

Government silence

The epic injustice done to the Palestinians is the heart of the matter. While European governments (with the honourable exception of the Swiss) have remained craven, it is only Hezbollah that has come to the Palestinians' aid. How truly shaming. There is no media "narrative" of the Palestinians' heroic stand during two uprisings, and with slingshots and stones most of the time. Israel's murders of Rachel Corrie and Tom Hurndall have left them utterly alone. Neither is the silence of governments all that is shocking. On a major BBC programme, Maureen Lipman, a Jew and promoter of selective good causes, is allowed to say, without serious challenge, that "human life is not cheap to the Israelis, and human life on the other side is quite cheap actually . . ."

Let Lipman see the children of Gaza laid out after an Israeli bombing run, their parents petrified with grief. Let her watch as a young Palestinian woman – and there have been many of them – screams in pain as she gives birth in the back seat of a car at night at an Israeli roadblock, having been wilfully refused right of passage to a hospital. Then let Lipman watch the child's father carry his newborn across freezing fields until it turns blue and dies.

I think Orwell got it right in this passage from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, a tale of the ultimate empire:

"And in the general hardening of outlook that set in . . . practices which had been long abandoned – imprisonment without trial, the use of war prisoners as slaves, public executions, torture to extract confessions . . . and the deportation of whole populations – not only became common again, but were tolerated and even defended by people who considered themselves enlightened and progressive."

John Pilger's new book, "Freedom Next Time", is published by Bantam Press

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