

Journalist and Film Maker John Pilger (1939-2023): A Voice for the People and Against Western Imperialism

By [Vanessa Beeley](#), [Prof. David Miller](#), and [Professor Piers Robinson](#) Theme: [Media Disinformation](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

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In the worlds of journalism and political activism, John Pilger stands out as one of the greatest and most courageous voices of our time. In a career that reaches as far back as the Vietnam War, John has been a persistent thorn in the side of corrupt political power and, in particular, the West's belligerent and repressive Imperialism. He went to the places he reported on, often at great risk to himself. He defended the disenfranchised, the weak and the vulnerable against the rapacious colonialist power complexes that preyed upon the sectors of society that could not fight back. He was a champion of truth and many of us have stood on his shoulders to attempt to emulate his courage under fire. The world has lost a powerful force for justice and truth.

It was a deep understanding of how power operates in liberal democracies that marked John out. Unlike so many of his peers, John recognised the powerful constraints that acted upon journalists — the political and corporate pressures, the propensity to self-censor, the unwarranted deference to official sources — and he fought hard against these. At the same time, he was unique among journalists in terms of understanding the role and significance of propaganda. Usually dismissed by corporate/legacy media journalists as a feature of non-democratic 'enemy' states, John understood the extent to which propaganda is used in order to manipulate Western populations, especially in times of war.

And it was because of this informed approach to the craft of journalism that he became such an effective voice for marginalised and repressed people around the world, and those of us who have sought to challenge the belligerent and nefarious foreign policies pursued by the US and its allies.

Early in his career he joined the UK's *Daily Mirror*, becoming chief foreign correspondent, at a time when the US war of aggression against the Vietnamese people was at its height. His first film, [The Quiet Mutiny](#) for ITV's *World in Action* in 1970*,* documented the collapse in morale amongst US forces in Vietnam.

Four years later, [Vietnam: Still America's War](#) revealed the ongoing US engagement in Vietnam and its consequences for civilian suffering. He also documented events in Cambodia in [Year Zero: The Silent Death of Cambodia](#), noting the culpability of Nixon and Kissinger in terms of laying the ground work for that disastrous phase in Cambodia's history. When Indonesia invaded East Timor in 1975, with the backing of the US, and unleashed a genocidal campaign that wiped out one third of the population, Pilger [shined a spotlight](#) on these crimes.

During the 1990s, when the liberal classes were celebrating the [End of History](#) and the West's [purported new found humanitarianism](#), John maintained his critical gaze. The documentary [Paying the Price: Killing the Children of Iraq](#) documented the brutal consequences of the UN sanctions in place against Iraq following the 1991 Gulf War. In this case, the [US-led sanctions regime](#) and the resulting deaths of half a million children was infamously justified by the then US Secretary of State Madeline Albright as a 'price worth paying'. Senior UN officials Denis Halliday and [Hans von Sponeck](#) both resigned over these horrors whilst UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter, by highlighting the basic lie underpinning the sanctions regime regarding alleged Iraqi production and possession of chemical and biological weapons, effectively foretold the deceptions that would subsequently be used in 2002/2003 to justify the US-led invasion of Iraq. John was there to help keep the record straight.

When the US invaded Afghanistan in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 event, John was [quick to point](#) out the injustice of such actions and the thinly disguised resource interests driving US policy. He also [noted the plausibility](#) that 9/11 itself was a case of LIHOP (let it happen on purpose). And when the US turned its guns on Iraq, stage two of their regime-change war plans, he helped convey the [lies and hypocrisy](#). His 2010 documentary [The War You Don't See](#) served as a masterful critique of wartime propaganda and how it works to obscure the scale of death and human misery.

David Miller worked with John on his film, which opens with the now famous horrific footage of a US Apache helicopter attack on Iraqi civilians. He was only able to use that footage because of the heroic efforts of Julian Assange and Wikileaks to get leaked classified material into the public domain. David was in touch with John regularly during the War on Terror, and John provided advice and volunteered four of his pieces to be what became the opening section of the book David edited in 2003 called [Tell Me Lies](#).

Throughout, Pilger was attentive to understanding and giving a voice to the victims of power. For much of his career this meant providing a voice to people who would otherwise be drowned out by the propaganda emanating from Western power centres. He relayed the plight of the Aborigines in his Australian homeland in [The Secret Country: the first Australians fight back](#) (1984) and [Utopia](#) (2013), and documented the [brutal expulsion](#) of the inhabitants of the Chagos Islands by the British so as to enable the construction of the US military base in Diego Garcia.

John had been an early advocate of the Palestinians, producing the film *Palestine is Still the*

Issue in 1977. Twenty-five years later in 2002, he made a [companion film](#) with the same name, a pointed reminder that the liberation of Palestine had still not been achieved. There is a scene in the film which John [describes as follows](#). It is worth quoting at length for the strong parallels between then and what is now happening in Gaza.

In Ramallah, following an invasion of the West Bank by the late Ariel Sharon in 2002, I walked through streets of crushed cars and demolished houses, to the Palestinian Cultural Centre. Until that morning, Israeli soldiers had camped there. I was met by the centre's director, the novelist, Liana Badr, whose original manuscripts lay scattered and torn across the floor. The hard-drive containing her fiction, and a library of plays and poetry had been taken by Israeli soldiers. Almost everything was smashed, and defiled.

Not a single book survived with all its pages; not a single master tape from one of the best collections of Palestinian cinema.

The soldiers had urinated and defecated on the floors, on desks, on embroideries and works of art. They had smeared faeces on children's paintings and written — in shit — "Born to kill". Liana Badr had tears in her eyes, but she was unbowed. She said, "We will make it right again."

What enrages those who colonise and occupy, steal and oppress, vandalise and defile is the victims' refusal to comply. And this is the tribute we all should pay the Palestinians. They refuse to comply. They go on. They wait — until they fight again. And they do so even when those governing them collaborate with their oppressors.

This passage prefigures, and perhaps in retrospect can be seen as more perceptive than it might then have been, in apprehending the full horror of Zionism. In Gaza, we have seen the systematic extermination of civilians and especially children, attacks on all elements of Palestinian society especially those that keep the society running, bakeries, doctors, journalists, fuel supplies, and of course there are multiple videos emerging of unimaginable abuses including triumphalist representations of humiliation of Palestinians and of naked Jewish supremacism.

As Western governments have become ever more authoritarian and prone to heavy-handed censorship of dissent on the home front, Pilger has stood by those courageous enough to speak out against war and corruption. He viscerally understood what it is to be maligned, persecuted and threatened by the privileged and powerful when it is their agendas you threaten with the truth. Naturally, John was an instinctive and strong supporter of Julian and [Wikileaks](#) — and his support never wavered, unlike many on the left who were gulled by propaganda lines about women's rights, which turned out to fabrications of a sort familiar to astute observers of the CIA and other Western Intelligence agencies.

Indeed, John has become a cornerstone for the now [longstanding battle](#) to save Assange from the clutches of the US Security State. John understood that this battle, as well as a personal and very human one for Assange and his wife, Stella Assange, and family, represents the most important case in Western democracies regarding the battle between freedom of expression and nefarious, ill-intentioned, governments.

The British and US governments, soaked in the blood of the countless victims killed by their eternal belligerence, have already succeeded in making an example of Assange in order to create a chilling effect amongst journalists. Extradition and incarceration will seal that. But

victory in this critical case will be a powerful blow against US-led imperialism abroad and authoritarianism on the home front. A huge amount is at stake, and that is why the Julian Assange case was such an important battle for John to champion.

John's support for those pushing back against corrupt power was ubiquitous. When scientists from the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) courageously spoke out about the [manipulation of an alleged chemical weapons attack investigation](#) in Syria, Pilger [gave his support](#).

He also supported Professors Mark Crispin Miller, David Miller, Piers Robinson and Chris Simpson when they established the [Organisation for Propaganda Studies](#) in 2017, and he served on its advisory board. John was always ready to support progressive initiatives and to give sage advice on contemporary issues.

In 2018, he wrote to David about [his work](#) on the Novichok and anti-Russian propaganda which he referred to as 'superb':

'I must say the events of the past few weeks have left my jaw permanently ajar. Doesn't it say so much about media/education that [Theresa] May et al can be so confident that they can get away with their fabrications and manipulations? You rightly call them 'spectacularly successful'. I'm glad you mentioned that millions of British citizens remain sceptical — as no doubt they are — yet the 'filter bubble' remains in control. For the first time in my life, I have to try hard not to be dispirited.'

In March 2019, David and Piers [published co-authored work](#) on the UK government funded propaganda project, called the Integrity Initiative, and, in response, the Foreign Office minister Alan Duncan denounced us as "*working against democracy*". John was his usual supportive self, writing to us that *'he's attacking you ... because you've been effective. You've revealed them. In its way, it's a compliment. Let me know what happens.'* Later in 2019, he was supportive of the campaign to defend Chris Williamson in what John called 'his struggle against the Kafkaesque nonsense about anti-semitism'.

In private, John was a quiet, kind and studious man with a lovely sense of humour, and the three of us are honoured to have known him. When Vanessa was going through a difficult phase in the BBC harassment campaign, he replied with the words:

You'll get through this. My mother, a Latin teacher, used to say to me — in Latin — 'Don't let the bastards get you down'. She despaired when I could never remember it ...! You threaten them — in the same way Julian threatens them. That's to be proud of.

Another time Vanessa was discussing an article outlining the 75 years of regime change wars, clandestine operations, and CIA or MI6 meddling in Syria's internal affairs since their independence from French mandate in 1946. John, as always, gave sage and constructive advice, and he included an excerpt from a 2014 article entitled — [From Pol Pot to ISIS: "Anything that flies on everything that moves"](#)

Like Ebola from West Africa, a bacteria called "perpetual war" has crossed the Atlantic. Lord Richards, until recently head of the British military, wants "boots on the ground" now. There is a vapid, almost sociopathic verbosity from Cameron, Obama and their "coalition of the willing" — notably Australia's aggressively weird Tony Abbott — as they prescribe more violence delivered from 30,000 feet on places where the blood of

previous adventures never dried. They have never seen bombing and they apparently love it so much they want it to overthrow their one potentially valuable ally, Syria. This is nothing new, as the following leaked UK-US intelligence file illustrates:

“In order to facilitate the action of liberative [sic] forces ... a special effort should be made to eliminate certain key individuals [and] to proceed with internal disturbances in Syria. CIA is prepared, and SIS (MI6) will attempt to mount minor sabotage and coup de main [sic] incidents within Syria, working through contacts with individuals ... a necessary degree of fear ... frontier and [staged] border clashes [will] provide a pretext for intervention ... the CIA and SIS should use ... capabilities in both psychological and action fields to augment tension.”

That was written in 1957, though it could have been written yesterday. In the imperial world, nothing essentially changes. Last year, the former French Foreign Minister Roland Dumas revealed that “two years before the Arab spring”, he was told in London that a war on Syria was planned. “I am going to tell you something,” he said in an interview with the French TV channel LPC, “I was in England two years before the violence in Syria on other business. I met top British officials, who confessed to me that they were preparing something in Syria ... Britain was organising an invasion of rebels into Syria. They even asked me, although I was no longer Minister for Foreign Affairs, if I would like to participate ... This operation goes way back. It was prepared, preconceived and planned.”

The only effective opponents of ISIS are accredited demons of the West — Syria, Iran, Hezbollah. The obstacle is Turkey, an “ally” and a member of NATO, which has conspired with the CIA, MI6 and the Gulf medievalists to channel support to the Syrian “rebels”, including those now calling themselves ISIS. Supporting Turkey in its long-held ambition for regional dominance by overthrowing the Assad government beckons a major conventional war and the horrific dismemberment of the most ethnically diverse state in the Middle East.

John was a consummate journalist and human being. He was the epitome of effective reporting on the crimes of the ruling elite and their military adventurism. His writing style was unique — compassionate, informative and deeply researched — imbued with his own personal experiences. When the US/UK proxy war in Yemen struck in 2015, and the US-manufactured cluster bombs began to decimate the northern regions literally flaying the skin of children that were being targeted, we were reminded of another John Pilger quote:

If those who support aggressive war had seen a fraction of what I’ve seen, if they’d watched children fry to death from Napalm and bleed to death from a cluster bomb, they might not utter the claptrap they do.

John cared, it was that simple.

He also said *‘It’s only when journalists understand the role they play in this propaganda, it’s only when they realize they can’t be both independent, honest journalists and agents of power, that things will begin to change.’* We hope his legacy will be a new generation of journalists who will take this advice to heart. Thank you John for your lifetime contribution to our enlightenment. You will never be forgotten and you will be hugely missed both personally and professionally.

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David Miller is an investigative researcher, broadcaster, and academic. He is the founder and co-director of the lobbying watchdog Spinwatch and editor of Powerbase.info. David is also Producer of a weekly show, Palestine Declassified, on PressTV, and he is a regular columnist at al Mayadeen English. David was unjustly sacked by Bristol University at the behest of the Zionist movement.

Dr. Piers Robinson is a co-director of the Organisation for Propaganda Studies, convenor of the Working Group on Syria, Media and Propaganda, associated researcher with the Working Group on Propaganda and the 9/11 Global 'War on Terror', member of Panda and BerlinGroup21. He researches and writes on propaganda, conflict and media and was Chair/Professor in Politics, Society and Political Journalism, University of Sheffield, 2016-2019, Senior Lecturer in International Politics (University of Manchester 2010-2016) and Lecturer in Political Communication (University of Liverpool, 1999-2005).

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