

The World War on Democracy

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In-depth Report: [CRIMINALIZE WAR](#)

Lisette Talate died the other day. I remember a wiry, fiercely intelligent woman who masked her grief with a determination that was a presence. She was the embodiment of people's resistance to the war on democracy. I first glimpsed her in a 1950s Colonial Office film about the Chagos islanders, a tiny creole nation living midway between Africa and Asia in the Indian Ocean. The camera panned across thriving villages, a church, a school, a hospital, set in a phenomenon of natural beauty and peace. Lisette remembers the producer saying to her and her teenage friends, "Keep smiling girls!"

Sitting in her kitchen in Mauritius many years later, she said, "I didn't have to be told to smile. I was a happy child, because my roots were deep in the islands, my paradise. My great-grandmother was born there; I made six children there. That's why they couldn't legally throw us out of our own homes; they had to terrify us into leaving or force us out. At first, they tried to starve us. The food ships stopped arriving [then] they spread rumours we would be bombed, then they turned on our dogs."

In the early 1960s, the Labour government of Harold Wilson secretly agreed to a demand from Washington that the Chagos archipelago, a British colony, be "swept" and "sanitised" of its 2,500 inhabitants so that a military base could be built on the principal island, Diego Garcia. "They knew we were inseparable from our pets," said Lisette, "When the American soldiers arrived to build the base, they backed their big trucks against the brick shed where we prepared the coconuts; hundreds of our dogs had been rounded up and imprisoned there. Then they gassed them through tubes from the trucks' exhausts. You could hear them crying."

Lisette and her family and hundreds of islanders were forced on to a rusting steamer bound for Mauritius, a distance of 2,500 miles. They were made to sleep in the hold on a cargo of fertiliser: bird shit. The weather was rough; everyone was ill; two women miscarried. Dumped on the docks at Port Louis, Lizette's youngest children, Jollice, and Regis, died within a week of each other. "They died of sadness," she said. "They had heard all the talk and seen the horror of what had happened to the dogs. They knew they were leaving their home forever. The doctor in Mauritius said he could not treat sadness."

This act of mass kidnapping was carried out in high secrecy. In one official file, under the heading, "Maintaining the fiction", the Foreign Office legal adviser exhorts his colleagues to cover their actions by "re-classifying" the population as "floating" and to "make up the rules as we go along". Article 7 of the statute of the International Criminal Court says the "deportation or forcible transfer of population" is a crime against humanity. That Britain had committed such a crime — in exchange for a \$14million discount off an American Polaris

nuclear submarine — was not on the agenda of a group of British “defence” correspondents flown to the Chagos by the Ministry of Defence when the US base was completed. “There is nothing in our files,” said a ministry official, “about inhabitants or an evacuation.”

Today, Diego Garcia is crucial to America’s and Britain’s war on democracy. The heaviest bombing of Iraq and Afghanistan was launched from its vast airstrips, beyond which the islanders’ abandoned cemetery and church stand like archaeological ruins. The terraced garden where Lisette laughed for the camera is now a fortress housing the “bunker-busting” bombs carried by bat-shaped B-2 aircraft to targets in two continents; an attack on Iran will start here. As if to complete the emblem of rampant, criminal power, the CIA added a Guantanamo-style prison for its “rendition” victims and called it Camp Justice.

What was done to Lisette’s paradise has an urgent and universal meaning, for it represents the violent, ruthless nature of a whole system behind its democratic façade, and the scale of our own indoctrination to its messianic assumptions, described by Harold Pinter as a “brilliant, even witty, highly successful act of hypnosis.” Longer and bloodier than any war since 1945, waged with demonic weapons and a gangsterism dressed as economic policy and sometimes known as globalisation, the war on democracy is unmentionable in western elite circles. As Pinter wrote, “it never happened even while it was happening”. Last July, American historian William Blum published his “updated summary of the record of US foreign policy”. Since the Second World War, the US has:

1. Attempted to overthrow more than 50 governments, most of them democratically-elected.
2. Attempted to suppress a populist or national movement in 20 countries.
3. Grossly interfered in democratic elections in at least 30 countries.
4. Dropped bombs on the people of more than 30 countries.
5. Attempted to assassinate more than 50 foreign leaders.

In total, the United States has carried out one or more of these actions in 69 countries. In almost all cases, Britain has been a collaborator. The “enemy” changes in name – from communism to Islamism — but mostly it is the rise of democracy independent of western power or a society occupying strategically useful territory, deemed expendable, like the Chagos Islands.

The sheer scale of suffering, let alone criminality, is little known in the west, despite the presence of the world’s most advanced communications, nominally freest journalism and most admired academy. That the most numerous victims of terrorism – western terrorism – are Muslims is unsayable, if it is known. That half a million Iraqi infants died in the 1990s as a result of the embargo imposed by Britain and America is of no interest. That extreme jihadism, which led to 9/11, was nurtured as a weapon of western policy (“Operation Cyclone”) is known to specialists but otherwise suppressed.

While popular culture in Britain and America immerses the Second World War in an ethical bath for the victors, the holocausts arising from Anglo-American dominance of resource-rich regions are consigned to oblivion. Under the Indonesian tyrant Suharto, anointed “our man” by Thatcher, more than a million people were slaughtered. Described by the CIA as “the

worst mass murder of the second half of the 20th century”, the estimate does not include a third of the population of East Timor who were starved or murdered with western connivance, British fighter-bombers and machine guns.

These true stories are told in declassified files in the Public Record Office, yet represent an entire dimension of politics and the exercise of power excluded from public consideration. This has been achieved by a regime of un-coercive information control, from the evangelical mantra of consumer advertising to sound-bites on BBC news and now the ephemera of social media.

It is as if writers as watchdogs are extinct, or in thrall to a sociopathic zeitgeist, convinced they are too clever to be duped. Witness the stampede of sycophants eager to deify Christopher Hitchens, a war lover who longed to be allowed to justify the crimes of rapacious power. “For almost the first time in two centuries”, wrote Terry Eagleton, “there is no eminent British poet, playwright or novelist prepared to question the foundations of the western way of life”. No Orwell warns that we do not need to live in a totalitarian society to be corrupted by totalitarianism. No Shelley speaks for the poor, no Blake proffers a vision, no Wilde reminds us that “disobedience, in the eyes of anyone who has read history, is man’s original virtue”. And grievously no Pinter rages at the war machine, as in *American Football*:

Hallelujah.

Praise the Lord for all good things ...

We blew their balls into shards of dust,

Into shards of fucking dust ...

Into shards of fucking dust go all the lives blown there by Barack Obama, the Hopey Changey of western violence. Whenever one of Obama’s drones wipes out an entire family in a faraway tribal region of Pakistan, or Somalia, or Yemen, the American controllers in front of their computer-game screens type in “Bugsplat”. Obama likes drones and has joked about them with journalists. One of his first actions as president was to order a wave of Predator drone attacks on Pakistan that killed 74 people. He has since killed thousands, mostly civilians; drones fire Hellfire missiles that suck the air out of the lungs of children and leave body parts festooned across scrubland.

Remember the tear-stained headlines when Barack Obama was elected: “momentous, spine-tingling”: *the Guardian*. “The American future,” wrote Simon Schama, “is all vision, numinous, unformed, light-headed ...” The *San Francisco Chronicle*’s columnist saw a spiritual “lightworker [who can] usher in a new way of being on the planet”. Beyond the drivel, as the great whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg had predicted, a military coup was taking place in Washington, and Obama was their man. Having seduced the anti-war movement into virtual silence, he has given America’s corrupt military officer class unprecedented powers of state and engagement. These include the prospect of wars in Africa and opportunities for provocations against China, America’s largest creditor and new “enemy” in Asia. Under Obama, the old source of official paranoia Russia, has been encircled with ballistic missiles and the Russian opposition infiltrated. Military and CIA assassination teams have been assigned to 120 countries; long planned attacks on Syria and Iran beckon a world war. Israel, the exemplar of US violence and lawlessness by proxy, has just received its

annual pocket money of \$3bn together with Obama's permission to steal more Palestinian land.

Obama's most "historic" achievement is to bring the war on democracy home to America. On New Year's Eve, he signed the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), a law that grants the Pentagon the legal right to kidnap both foreigners and US citizens and indefinitely detain, interrogate and torture, or even kill them. They need only "associate" with those "belligerent" to the United States. There will be no protection of law, no trial, no legal representation. This is the first explicit legislation to abolish *habeus corpus* (the right to due process of law) and effectively repeal the Bill of Rights of 1789.

On 5 January, in an extraordinary speech at the Pentagon, Obama said the military would not only be ready to "secure territory and populations" overseas but to fight in the "homeland" and provide "support to the civil authorities". In other words, US troops will be deployed on the streets of American cities when the inevitable civil unrest takes hold.

America is now a land of epidemic poverty and barbaric prisons: the consequence of a "market" extremism which, under Obama, has prompted the transfer of \$14 trillion in public money to criminal enterprises in Wall Street. The victims are mostly young jobless, homeless, incarcerated African-Americans, betrayed by the first black president. The historic corollary of a perpetual war state, this is not fascism, not yet, but neither is it democracy in any recognisable form, regardless of the placebo politics that will consume the news until November. The presidential campaign, says the *Washington Post*, will "feature a clash of philosophies rooted in distinctly different views of the economy". This is patently false. The circumscribed task of journalism on both sides of the Atlantic is to create the pretence of political choice where there is none.

The same shadow is across Britain and much of Europe where social democracy, an article of faith two generations ago, has fallen to the central bank dictators. In David Cameron's "big society", the theft of 84bn pounds in jobs and services even exceeds the amount of tax "legally" avoid by piratical corporations. Blame rests not with the far right, but a cowardly liberal political culture that has allowed this to happen, which, wrote Hywel Williams in the wake of the attacks on 9/11, "can itself be a form of self righteous fanaticism". Tony Blair is one such fanatic. In its managerial indifference to the freedoms that it claims to hold dear, bourgeois Blairite Britain has created a surveillance state with 3,000 new criminal offences and laws: more than for the whole of the previous century. The police clearly believe they have an impunity to kill. At the demand of the CIA, cases like that of Binyam Mohamed, an innocent British resident tortured and then held for five years in Guantanamo Bay, will be dealt with in secret courts in Britain "in order to protect the intelligence agencies" – the torturers.

This invisible state allowed the Blair government to fight the Chagos islanders as they rose from their despair in exile and demanded justice in the streets of Port Louis and London. "Only when you take direct action, face to face, even break laws, are you ever noticed," said Lisette. "And the smaller you are, the greater your example to others." Such an eloquent answer to those who still ask, "What can I do?"

I last saw Lisette's tiny figure standing in driving rain alongside her comrades outside the Houses of Parliament. What struck me was the enduring courage of their resistance. It is this refusal to give up that rotten power fears, above all, knowing it is the seed beneath the snow.

For more information on John Pilger visit his website at www.johnpilger.com

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