

Welcome to the Shammies, the Media Awards that Recognise Truly Unsung Talent

By [John Pilger](#)

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Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

There are awards for everyone. There are the Logies, the Commies, the Tonys, the Theas, the Millies ("They cried with pride") and now the Shammies.

The Shammies celebrate the finest sham media. "Competition for the 2013 Gold Shammy," said the panel of judges, "has been cutthroat." The Shammies are not for the tabloid lower orders. Rupert Murdoch has been honoured enough. Shammies distinguish respectable journalism that guards the limits of what the best and brightest like to call the "national conversation".

The Shammy judges were especially impressed by a spirited campaign to rehabilitate Tony Blair. The winner will receive the coveted Jeremy Paxman Hoodwink Prize, in honour of the famous BBC broadcaster who says he was "hoodwinked" over Iraq – regardless of the multiple opportunities he had to challenge Blair and expose the truth and carnage of the illegal invasion.

Short-listed for Hoodwink is Michael White, the *Guardian's* political editor, whose lament for Blair's "wasted talent" is distinguished by his defence of Blair as the victim of a "very unholy alliance between a familiar chorus of America-bashers and Blair bait[ers]". (I am included).

On 19 December, another contender, White's colleague, Jane Martinson, was granted a "rare" interview with Cherie Blair in her "stately private office" with its "gorgeous views over Hyde Park" and "imposing mahogany furniture". In such splendour does Mrs. Blair (she prefers her married name for its "profile") run her "foundation for women" in Africa, India and the Middle East. Her political collusion in her husband's career and support for adventures that destroyed the lives of countless women was not mentioned. A PR triumph and odds-on for a Shammy.

Also nominated: the brains behind the *Guardian's* front page of 8 November: "The best is yet to come", dominated by a half-page picture of the happy-huggy-droney Obama family. And who could fail to appreciate the assurance from the BBC's Mark Mardell that, in personally selecting people to murder with his drones, "the care taken by the president is significant"?

Matt Frei, formerly of the BBC now of *Channel 4 News*, drew commendation for his reporting of Obama as a "warrior president" and Hugo Chavez as a "chubby-faced strongman". A study by the University of the West of England found that, of the 304 BBC reports on Venezuela published in a decade, only three mentioned the Chavez government's extraordinary record in promoting human rights and reducing poverty.

In the Gold Shammy category, the judges were struck by the outstanding work of the *Guardian's* Decca Aitkenhead. "Everywhere we went, before my eyes people fell in love with him ... no one seemed to be immune." This was her memorable encounter with Peter Mandelson in 2009. She described his "effortless allure... the intensity of his theatre is electrifying to behold... His skin is dewey, as if fresh from a spa facial, and his grooming so flawless he looks almost hyper-real, the cuff links and tie delicately co-ordinated, with their detail inversely echoed in his socks ... His whole body seems weirdly untroubled by the passage of time..."

Aitkenhead had previously "profiled" Alistair Darling, the Chancellor who presided over the worst financial collapse in memory. Greeted as "old friends" by Darling and his "gregarious" wife Maggie "who cooks and makes tea and supper while Darling lights the fire", Aitkenhead effused over "a highly effective minister ...he seems almost too straightforward, even high-minded, for the low cunning of political warfare."

The judges were asked to compare and contrast such moments of journalistic ecstasy with the same writer's profile of Julian Assange on 7 December. Assange answered her questions methodically, providing her with a lot of information about the state's abuse of technology and mass surveillance. "There is no debate that Assange knows more about this subject than almost anyone alive," she wrote. No matter. Rather than someone who had exposed more state criminality than any journalist, he was described as "someone convalescing after a breakdown": a mentally ill figure she likened to "Miss Havisham". Unlike the alluring, electrifying, twice disgraced Mandelson, and the high-minded, disastrous Chancellor, Assange had a "messianic grandiosity". No evidence was offered. The Gold Shammy was within her grasp.

Then, on Christmas Eve, the BBC News magazine published an article marking the 40th anniversary of the 1972 Christmas bombing of Hanoi. The bombing, wrote Rebecca Kesby, "was President Richard Nixon's attempt to hasten the end of the Vietnam war, as the growing strength of the Viet Cong caused heavy casualties among US ground troops".

In fact, Nixon promised "an honourable end to the war" four years earlier. His 1972 Christmas bombing of Hanoi in the north was as much concerned with peace as Hitler's bombing of Poland: a cynical, vengeful act of barbarism that changed nothing in the stalled Paris talks. Kesby cites Henry Kissinger's absurd claim that the North Vietnamese "were on their knees". Far from hastening "the end of the Vietnam war", America's savagery ensured the war went on for another two and a half years, during which more Vietnamese were killed than during the previous decade.

Kesby claimed that previous US targets had been "fuel depots and munitions stores". On my wall is a photograph I took of a hamlet in the north obliterated by F-105 and Phantom fighters flying at 200 feet in order to pick off "soft targets" – human beings. In the town of Hongai, I stood in the debris of churches, hospitals, schools. A new type of "dart bomb" was used; the darts were made from a plastic that did not show in X-rays, and the victims, mostly children, suffered until they died. Filmed by Malcolm Aird and James Cameron, a news report on this type of terror bombing was suppressed by the BBC.

Today our memory of all of this is sanitised. America and its allies, using even more diabolical weapons, continue to "hasten to the end of war". Such has been the BBC's unerring theme since Vietnam. The Gold Shammy is richly deserved.

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