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The Death of Freedom

John Pilger
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On Christmas Eve, I dropped in on Brian Haw, whose hunched, pacing figure was just visible through the freezing fog. For four and a half years, Brian has camped in London's Parliament Square with a graphic display of photographs that show the terror and suffering imposed on Iraqi children by British policies. The effectiveness of his action was demonstrated last April when the Blair government banned any expression of opposition within a kilometre of Parliament. The high court subsequently ruled that, because his presence preceded the ban, Brian was an exception.

Day after day, night after night, season upon season, he remains a beacon, illuminating the great crime of Iraq and the cowardice of the House of Commons. As we talked, two women brought him a Christmas meal and mulled wine. They thanked him, shook his hand and hurried on. He had never seen them before. "That's typical of the public," he said. A man in a pinstriped suit and tie emerged from the fog, carrying a small wreath. "I intend to place this at the Cenotaph and read out the names of the dead in Iraq," he said to Brian, who cautioned him: "You'll spend the night in cells, mate." We watched him stride off and lay his wreath. His head bowed, he appeared to be whispering. Thirty years ago, I watched dissidents do something similar outside the walls of the Kremlin.

As night had covered him, he was lucky. On December 7, Maya Evans, a vegan chef aged 25, was convicted of breaching the new Serious Organised Crime and Police Act by reading aloud at the Cenotaph the names of 97 British soldiers killed in Iraq. So serious was her crime that it required 14 policemen in two vans to arrest her. She was fined and given a criminal record for the rest of her life.

Freedom is dying.

Eighty-year-old John Catt served with the Royal Air Force in World War II. Last September, he was stopped by police in Brighton for wearing an "offensive" T-shirt, which suggested that Bush and Blair be tried for war crimes. He was arrested under the Terrorism Act and handcuffed, with his arms held behind his back. The official record of the arrest says the "purpose" of searching him was "terrorism" and the "grounds for intervention" were "carrying placard and T-shirt with anti-Blair info [sic]".

He is awaiting trial.

Such cases compare with others that remain secret and beyond any form of justice: those of the foreign nationals held at Belmarsh prison, who have never been charged, let alone put on trial. They are held "on suspicion". Some of the "evidence" against them, whatever it is, the Blair government has now admitted, could have been extracted under torture at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib. They are political prisoners in all but name. They face the prospect of being spirited out of the country into the arms of a regime that may torture them to death. Their isolated families, including children, are quietly going mad.

And for what? From September 11 2001 to September 30 last year, a total of 895 people were arrested in Britain under the Terrorism Act. Only 23 have been convicted of offences covered by the Act. As for real terrorists, the identity of two of the July 7 bombers, including the suspected mastermind, was known to MI5, and nothing was done. And Blair wants to give them more power. Having helped to devastate Iraq, he is now killing freedom in his own country.

Consider parallel events in the United States. Last October, an American surgeon, loved by his patients, was punished with 22 years in prison for founding a charity, Help the Needy, which helped children in Iraq stricken by an economic and humanitarian blockade imposed by the US and Britain. In raising money for infants dying from diarrhoea, Dr Rafil Dhafir broke a siege that, according to Unicef, had caused the deaths of half a million under the age of five. The then attorney general of the United States, John Ashcroft, called Dr Dhafir, a Muslim, a "terrorist", a description mocked by even the judge in his politically motivated travesty of a trial.

The Dhafir case is not extraordinary. In the same month, three US circuit court judges ruled in favour of the Bush regime's "right" to imprison an American citizen "indefinitely" without charging him with a crime. This was the case of Joseph Padilla, a petty criminal who allegedly visited Pakistan before he was arrested at Chicago airport three and a half years ago. He was never charged and no evidence has ever been presented against him. Now mired in legal complexity, the case puts George W Bush above the law and outlaws the Bill of Rights. Indeed, on November 14, the US Senate effectively voted to ban habeas corpus by passing an amendment that overturned a Supreme Court ruling allowing Guantanamo prisoners access to a federal court. Thus, the touchstone of the US's most celebrated freedom was scrapped. Without habeas corpus, a government can simply lock away its opponents and implement a dictatorship.

A related, insidious tyranny is being imposed across the world. For all his troubles in Iraq, Bush has carried out the recommendations of a messianic conspiracy theory called the "Project for a New American Century". Written by his ideological sponsors shortly before he came to power, it foresaw his administration as a military dictatorship behind a democratic facade: "the cavalry on a new American frontier" guided by a blend of paranoia and megalomania. More than 700 US bases are now placed strategically in compliant countries, notably at the gateways to the sources of fossil fuels and encircling the Middle East and Central Asia. "Pre-emptive" aggression is policy, including the use of nuclear weapons. The chemical warfare industry has been reinvigorated. Missile treaties have been torn up. Space has been militarised. Global warming has been embraced. The powers of the president have never been greater. The judicial system has been subverted, along with civil liberties. The former senior CIA analyst Ray McGovern, who once prepared the White House daily briefing, told me that the authors of the Project for a New American Century and those now occupying positions of executive power used to be known in Washington as "the crazies". He said, "We should now be very worried about fascism."

In his epic acceptance of the Nobel Prize in literature on December 7, Harold Pinter spoke of "a vast tapestry of lies, upon which we feed". He asked why "the systematic brutality, the widespread atrocities, the ruthless suppression of independent thought" of Stalinist Russia was well known in the West while American state crimes were merely "superficially recorded, let alone documented, let alone acknowledged".

A silence has reigned. Across the world, the extinction and suffering of countless human beings can be attributed to rampant American power, "but you wouldn't know it", said Pinter. "It never happened. Nothing ever happened. Even while it was happening, it wasn't happening. It didn't matter. It was of no interest."

To its credit, The Guardian in London published every word of Pinter's warning. To its shame, though unsurprising, the state television broadcaster ignored it. All that Newsnight flatulence about the arts, all that recycled preening for the cameras at Booker Prize-giving events, yet the BBC could not make room for Britain's greatest living dramatist, so honoured, to tell the truth.

For the BBC, it simply never happened, just as the killing of half a million children by America's medieval siege of Iraq during the 1990s never happened, just as the Dhafir and Padilla trials and the Senate vote, banning freedom, never happened. The political prisoners of Belmarsh barely exist, and a big, brave posse of Metropolitan police never swept away Maya Evans as she publicly grieved for British soldiers killed in the cause of nothing, except rotten power.

Bereft of irony, but with a snigger, the BBC newsreader Fiona Bruce introduced, as news, a Christmas propaganda film about Bush's dogs. That happened. Now imagine Bruce reading the following: "Here is delayed news, just in. From 1945 to 2005, the United States attempted to overthrow 50 governments, many of them democracies, and to crush 30 popular movements fighting tyrannical regimes. In the process, 25 countries were bombed, causing the loss of several million lives and the despair of millions more." (Thanks to William Blum's *The Rogue State*, published by Zed Books.)

The icon of horror of Saddam Hussein's rule is a 1988 film of petrified bodies in the Kurdish town of Halabja, killed in a chemical weapons attack. The attack has been referred to a great deal by Bush and Blair and the film shown a great deal by the BBC. At the time, as I know from personal experience, the Foreign Office tried to cover up the crime at Halabja. The Americans tried to blame it on Iran. Today, in an age of images, there are no images of the chemical weapons attack on Fallujah in November 2004. This allowed the Americans to deny it until they were caught out recently by investigators using the Internet. For the BBC, American atrocities simply do not happen.

In 1999, while filming in Washington and Iraq, I learned the true scale of bombing in what the Americans and British then called Iraq's "no fly zones". During the 18 months to January 14 1999, US aircraft flew 24 000 combat missions over Iraq; almost every mission was bombing or strafing. "We're down to the last outhouse," a US official protested. "There are still some things left [to bomb], but not many." That was more than six years ago. In recent months, the air assault on Iraq has multiplied; the effect on the ground cannot be imagined. For the BBC it has not happened.

The black farce extends to those pseudo-humanitarians in the media and elsewhere, who themselves have never seen the effects of cluster bombs and air-burst shells, yet continue to invoke the crimes of Hussein to justify the the nightmare in Iraq and to protect a quisling prime minister who has sold out his country and made the world more dangerous. Curiously, some of them insist on describing themselves as "liberals" and "left of centre", even "anti-fascists". They want some respectability, I suppose. This is understandable, given that the league table of the carnage of Hussein was overtaken long ago by that of their hero in Downing Street, who will next support an attack on Iran.

This cannot change until we, in the West, look in the mirror and confront the true aims and narcissism of the power applied in our name: its extremes and terrorism. The traditional double standard no longer works; there are now millions like Brian Haw, Maya Evans, John Catt and the man in the pinstriped suit, with his wreath. Looking in the mirror means understanding that a violent and undemocratic order is being imposed by those whose actions are little different from the actions of fascists. The difference used to be distance. Now they are bringing it home.

John Pilger's new book, Freedom Next Time, will be published in June by Bantam Press