

Pilger punctures “war on terror” lies

Breaking the Silence, written and directed by John Pilger

Richard Phillips
12 January 2004

Breaking the Silence, the latest documentary by veteran journalist John Pilger, is an important exposure of the lies and falsifications used to justify the Bush administration’s global “war against terror” and its illegal attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq. The one-hour documentary was screened on December 9 by Australia’s Special Broadcasting Services network and given a four-day release in a Sydney cinema.

Using archival footage and interviews with former intelligence analysts, historians, human rights activists and some White House officials, the documentary explains how the Bush administration seized on the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack on the World Trade Center to activate long-held plans to seize control of valuable oil resources in the Middle East and elsewhere.

The documentary opens with a series of black and white photographs showing the carnage inflicted on Iraqis by US and British military forces over the past year. A voiceover from US President George W. Bush declares that America will bring “food, medicine, supplies and freedom” to the people of Iraq. Likewise, British Prime Minister Tony Blair claims the war in Iraq is a “fight for freedom”.

Against these chilling images, Pilger explains that US actions have nothing to do with fighting terrorism but are part of an opened-ended war for American global dominance. The real danger facing humanity, he says, is the increasingly aggressive military action of US imperialism and the state terrorism orchestrated by the White House.

Breaking the Silence also includes firsthand reportage from Afghanistan. Pilger, who has written and directed more than 50 documentaries during his 30-year career, describes Afghanistan as a country “more devastated than anything I have seen since Pol Pot’s Cambodia”.

Among those interviewed is Orifa, an Afghan woman who lost eight members of her family including six children, when the US airforce dropped a 500-pound bomb on her mud-brick home in 2001. She describes the massacre and declares: “What has America done for us? My day and night is full of sorrow.”

Pilger speaks with New Yorker Rita Lasar, whose brother, Avraham Zelmanowitz, was killed in the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center (WTC). Lasar notes the remarkable similarity between the fundamentalist rhetoric of Al Qaeda and that of the Bush administration. She states that the US government used the death of her brother and other WTC victims “to justify killing innocent people in Afghanistan”.

Angered and concerned, she decides to visit Afghanistan to help the victims of US attacks. She meets Orifa and visits the US embassy with her to try to secure compensation for the Afghan woman. Senior US officials, however, refuse to see Orifa and denounce her as a beggar.

The documentary cuts to Bush telling the Congress that America was “a friend of the Afghan people”. But as Pilger points out, few countries in the world have been helped less by the US. Only 3 percent of all aid given to Afghanistan is used for reconstruction. Kabul, the capital, is a maze of destroyed buildings and infrastructure, with US cluster bombs still not cleared from parts of the city and hundreds of families living in ruined and

abandoned buildings.

At the same time, the US government provides military hardware and finance to a select group of Afghan warlords who have restored opium production to record levels and maintained a reign of terror over the population. While ordinary people in “liberated” Afghanistan live in dire poverty, the US has a major military base and plans are underway for a US-controlled oil pipeline from Central Asia.

Breaking the Silence highlights the role played by Project for the New American Century (PNAC), the Washington think-tank established by Richard Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle and other extreme-right Republicans in the 1990s.

The PNAC developed detailed plans for the invasion of Iraq and helped formulate the Bush administration’s “war against terror” to justify the placement of American military forces in key oil and natural gas locations around the world. Its *Rebuilding America’s Defenses: Strategy, Forces and Resources for a New Century* forms the foundation of the US government’s “National Security Strategy”.

Pilger also points to Washington’s long history of supporting Islamic fundamentalist and other terror groups in the Middle East, Latin America and elsewhere.

In mid-1979, six months before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Carter administration authorised \$500 million to help establish the mujahedin. For many years Osama bin Laden was regarded as an ally by London and Washington, both of which provided finance and political backing.

In 1996, the Clinton administration established friendly relations with the Taliban government in order to secure its backing for a US oil pipeline from Central Asia through Afghanistan. Taliban officials were flown to the US, where they were given red carpet treatment.

Two brief but revealing interviews expose the Bush administration’s criminal indifference to the human consequences of its actions and highlight its sensitivity to any criticism.

Defence Undersecretary Douglas Feith, an extreme-right ideologue and former member of the Reagan administration, denies that the US supplied weapons of mass destruction to Saddam Hussein during the early 1980s. His claims, however, are contradicted by archival footage of Donald Rumsfeld warmly greeting Hussein in Baghdad in 1983 during the Iran-Iraq war. The US encouraged the former Iraqi dictator to wage war against Iran and provided him with material and logistical support. This included chemical and biological weapons and advice on how to use them.

Pilger points out that an estimated 10,000 Iraqis were killed in last year’s invasion. Feith denies this figure but then declares that it is “inevitable” that innocent people are killed in war. When Pilger attempts to press the point about Iraqi casualties, an off-camera US military official intervenes and orders an end to the interview.

Undersecretary of State John Bolton cynically tells Pilger that the US has done “more to create the conditions for individual freedom than any other country in the world”. Pilger answers this with an on-the-spot report

from Afghanistan about America's Bagram Air Base and the arrest of Wazir Mohamad, an Afghan taxi driver.

Mohamad, who is officially recognised as a political opponent of the former Taliban regime, was seized by the US military in April 2002, jailed in Bagram and then shipped to Guantanamo Bay after he asked why one of his taxi-driver friends had been jailed by the US. While his friend has since been released, Mohamad is still held incommunicado and without charge in Guantanamo Bay.

Pilger asks Bolton about Iraq casualties. His answer: "I think Americans, like most people, are mostly concerned about their own country. I don't know how many Iraqi civilians were killed. But I can assure you that the number is the absolute minimum that is possible in modern warfare... One of the stunning things about the quick coalition victory was... how low Iraqi casualties were."

Among other things, this chilling reply is aimed at denying the real character of the unprovoked and illegal US military assault, which led to the death of thousands of innocent Iraqis. Bolton, as it happens, was centrally involved in the Bush administration's campaign against the International Criminal Court (ICC), which has a mandate to conduct war crime hearings. He claims that the court, which the US refuses to support, is "contrary to US principles". Washington has demanded and obtained agreements with up to 70 countries exempting Americans from war crime trials.

As the interview ends, Bolton asks Pilger if he is a member of the British Labour Party, suggesting this had something to do with the journalist's line of questioning. When Pilger explains that he is not, and that British Labour consisted of "the conservatives", Bolton retorts, "You're a Communist Party member then?"

Bolton's reaction reveals the relations White House officials have come to expect from the mass media, which slavishly parrots every government lie. When confronted with a few probing questions, Bolton treats the journalist as an outright political opponent, resorting immediately to his stock-in-trade—provocative red-baiting.

Another significant interview in the film takes place with Andrew Wilkie, the former Australian intelligence officer who resigned from the Office of National Assessments in protest over Australia's participation in the US-led invasion of Iraq. Wilkie was the only serving intelligence analyst to break ranks, quit his position and publicly challenge the government lies about "weapons of mass destruction" before the Iraq invasion.

In measured language, Wilkie tells Pilger that the Bush, Blair and Howard governments were guilty of "serious dishonesty". Iraq possessed no secret stockpiles of weapons and there were no links between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda. Wesley Clark and others interviewed by Pilger back up Wilkie's statement.

Ray McGovern, a former senior CIA officer and friend of former president George Bush senior, tells Pilger that Bush senior regarded figures such as Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Perle as dangerous "crazies". McGovern bluntly states that the weapons of mass destruction claims used by Bush and Blair against Iraq were "95 percent charade".

Denis Halliday, a former UN assistant secretary-general, explains that the Bush administration's "axis of evil" and its preemptive strike doctrine represents an "outrageous flaunting of international law". Halliday, who resigned from his position in 1998, has recently attacked the UN as "an aggressive arm of US foreign policy".

Pilger touches on the media's pernicious role in circulating White House lies about WMDs and amplifying paranoia about supposed impending terrorist attacks on the US from Iraq. He also briefly interviews Kings College Professor Richard Overy, an acclaimed expert on Nazi war crimes. Overy makes clear that the unprovoked US-led attack on Iraq constitutes a war crime as defined at the Nuremberg trials and in the

Geneva Conventions.

Perhaps the most damning footage in the documentary concerns speeches by US Secretary of State Colin Powell and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice in 2001, a few months before the September 11 attacks.

Few will forget Powell's lengthy address to the UN Security Council on February 5, 2003, in which he solemnly declared that Iraq had vast stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction and was involved in an elaborate campaign to conceal weapons materials and manufacturing facilities. But as Pilger's documentary reveals, two years earlier Powell and Condoleezza Rice claimed the opposite.

Speaking in Cairo on February 24, 2001, seven months before 9/11, Powell categorically declared: "He [Saddam Hussein] has not developed any significant capability with respect to weapons of mass destruction. He is unable to project conventional power against his neighbours." Rice repeated this in July 2001 when she told US television that the Iraqi military had not been rebuilt since 1991 war.

The Bush administration at that time, for its own tactical reasons, was proclaiming the effectiveness of sanctions against Iraq. But in the aftermath of 9/11, the White House seized on the terrorist attacks to unleash its military assault on Afghanistan and prepare for a full-scale invasion of Iraq. The mass media dutifully ignored Powell and Rice's previous statements. Pilger's use of this archival footage is powerful and constitutes a damning exposure of the White House.

Pilger concludes his documentary with a direct appeal for people to challenge Washington and London. What is required, he says, is for people around the world to remember the lies and the ongoing military aggression.

"We need not accept any of this if we recognise that there are now two superpowers. One is the regime in Washington the other is public opinion now stirring all over the world. Make no mistake it is an epic struggle. The alternative is not just conquest of far away countries; it is the conquest of us, of our minds, our humanity and our self-respect. If we remain silent, victory over us is assured."

Pilger is one of a handful of serious journalists prepared to openly challenge the Bush administration and its international allies and point to the terrible human consequences of their policies. But Pilger's political perspective, which is aimed at pressuring rival imperialist powers to oppose the US or making appeals to the UN, weakens the documentary.

In his concluding remarks, Pilger states that the United Nations was founded "so that we would never forget the crimes of the great powers".

This comment is false and highlights the political flaws in Pilger's outlook. The United Nations was not established to highlight the "crimes of the great powers" but was formed in 1945 by the victors of World War II and from the outset operated as an imperialist institution.

While the UN mediated conflicts between US and the Soviet Union during the Cold War period, its central function for almost 60 years has been as a clearinghouse for imperialist intrigue and oppression against the backward countries. The most obvious recent examples were the UN backing for the 1991 Gulf War and the harsh economic sanctions and invasive weapons inspection regime imposed on Iraq over the ensuing decade.

Pilger's inability to confront this reality means that he cannot explain why the UN failed to challenge the latest US invasion of Iraq or why it endorsed the illegal war after the fact. The viewer is left to draw the conclusion that the replacement of the US occupation of Iraq with a UN force would represent a positive alternative.

Notwithstanding this significant weakness, Pilger's documentary is a valuable work. It delivers an important blow against the mountain of lies used to justify the US-led military aggression in Afghanistan and Iraq, and therefore deserves the widest possible audience.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact