

British defence secretary offers a rationalisation for war crimes

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In an extraordinary speech given February 20 at Kings College, London, Defence Secretary John Reid attacked opponents of the Iraq war for criticising human rights abuses by the British military and suggested that media outlets that reported on such abuses were aiding and abetting the terrorists.

Reid had been invited to give the keynote address before an audience of War Studies students at the College, many of whom can expect, on completing their studies, to go on to careers in the UK's civil service and armed forces, or with such institutions as NATO and the United Nations.

He made his remarks just days after further images came to light of US forces brutalising Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib prison and video stills were published of British troops beating young Iraqi men in their Basra army compound.

Reid did not deny that such abuses were taking place, and began his speech by stating he was not “defending indefensible conduct.” This caveat to one side, however, his address was a rationalisation of these and other war crimes, and a warning to anyone seeking to expose them.

There had to be more understanding of the “unprecedented challenges” faced by British troops overseas, Reid said, who face “risks, dangers, threats unimaginable to most of us,” and are called upon to “make immediate life-and-death decisions upon which literally thousands of lives may depend.”

“Our legal culture, just like our civilian culture, would do well to ponder these circumstances,” he told his audience, so as to “better understand” the “feelings” of soldiers and officers.

This was especially important under conditions in which developments in technology had created a situation of “real-time media scrutiny of war, on a scale

and a level of intrusiveness inconceivable” previously.

This meant that Al Qaeda could now “exploit isolated unlawful acts by those ranged against them” in order to sway “public opinion away from support for our campaigns,” he complained, before slanderously equating those opposing and exposing such crimes with Nazi propagandists.

British troops “must sometimes feel that if Lord Haw-Haw was still around today someone would be telling us that human rights demand that he be given a weekly column in our newspapers,” Reid said. This was in reference to William Joyce, a former member of the British Union of Fascists, who broadcast Nazi propaganda to Great Britain during World War Two and was hung for treason in 1946.

It was necessary to “re-assure” soldiers against the “perception that human rights lawyers and international bodies such as the International Criminal Court are waiting in the wings to step in and act against them,” he continued.

“The reality is that they operate under British law. That if they are accused of breaking that law, they are innocent until proved otherwise. If, and only if, those charges are proved can they expect to be punished. But that’s a decision that will be made in a British court—not the ICC.”

It should be noted that the Blair government has shown no regard for due process when it comes to the thousands of people swept up in the counterinsurgency conducted by US and British forces in Iraq, who have been thrown into prison and held for months without charge and with no access to lawyers or outside contact.

Within Britain itself, the government is seeking to implement police-state measures that go well beyond anything that was imposed during the wars of the twentieth century, when Britain was fighting major

imperialist rivals such as Germany.

That is why, in the process of painting Al Qaeda and the “global war on terrorism” as an enemy more evil, pervasive and illusive than anything that has gone before, Reid resorted to such historical distortions that he ended up belittling the crimes of the Nazis in comparison.

“The enemy our parents and grandparents faced in the first and second world wars wore a different uniform to theirs, but had aims and, by and large, had conduct they could understand,” Reid said. “The enemy fought much as we fought; his forces were structured in much the same way. And, by and large, they accepted the same conventions.”

Britain’s enemy now, however, is “unrecognisable from the past.” It is one “which revels in mass murder; which sets out to cause the greatest pain it can to innocent people; which is entirely unconstrained by any law; which sees all civilians, including women and children, not as non-combatants but as easy targets; which sees terror as a key part of its arsenal, and which both glorifies and operates suicide bombers.”

“It is an enemy, unfettered by any sense of morality—indeed it is spurred on by a perverse perception of morality to achieve ever-greater extent of civilian carnage.”

It is highly ironic, in a political environment that brands virtually all criticism of Israel as anti-Semitism, that such remarks can be made by a leading representative of the Blair government.

Reid’s suggestion that the Nazis had “aims” and “conduct” that could largely be approved is not only grotesque; in many European countries, it would be considered tantamount to holocaust denial. Indeed, based on his claims, one would have to conclude that the Nuremberg Trials, which held the Nazis guilty of “crimes against peace,” should never have taken place.

But his claims only expose in a particularly crude way the historical and political absurdities underlying the so-called “war on terror.”

It is not accidental that in defending the illegal and morally reprehensible actions of UK troops, Reid should downplay the most brutal killing machine in world history. The drive by the British ruling class to imperialist militarism has its own inner logic.

The unstated premise of the defence secretary’s speech was that the atrocities carried out by British

troops are individual aberrations, resulting from the pressures created by a new and uniquely difficult type of warfare. In other words, they are *not* the product of policies and decisions made at the top of the military and civilian chain of command.

The opposite is the case. Both the US and British governments have sanctioned tactics and methods that are banned under international laws such as the Geneva Conventions and the conventions on torture. The abuses that are being carried out in the field are the result of policies decided on at the highest levels of the military and government, which themselves flow from the neo-colonialist character of the war.

Yet, few in the media have drawn attention to the spurious character of Reid’s remarks, nor their broader implications. Most notably, the *Guardian* treated his comments as a welcome contribution to the political debate surrounding the “war on terror.”

The defence secretary had made a “timely and important speech,” the newspaper stated, in which “he made many points which even the most reflex critic of the British military should note with care.”



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