

# John Pilger (1939-2023): A courageous anti-war journalist

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On New Year's Eve, John Pilger's family shared the news that the well-known journalist had passed away the day before in London, aged 84. Born in Australia, Pilger had worked for many years in Britain, splitting his time between the two countries.

Pilger's career in the media spanned decades, beginning in the late 1950s and continuing up to recent years. He was representative of a layer of reporters radicalised by the criminality of the Vietnam war and committed to basic precepts of investigative journalism, including the exposure of wars, government lies and attacks on democratic rights.

The trajectory of Pilger's career underscored the ever-more open repudiation of these principles by the official media and the press corps. While for many decades, Pilger's exposures were published by major outlets and his films distributed widely, in the latter period of his career Pilger was largely ostracised by the mainstream media. Notwithstanding his lengthy record, Pilger's death has been given short shrift, including by those outlets for which he once wrote.

The reason is not hard to discern. Those publications and their senior reporters now function as blatant war propagandists. Pilger's death coincided with their promotion of the Israeli genocide of Palestinians in Gaza, one of the worst war crimes of the past 80 years, as well as their backing for US-led confrontations with Russia and China which threaten a catastrophic world war.

Under those conditions, even vaguely critical reportage, much less anti-war journalism, is beyond the pale as far as the establishment media is concerned. In the last period of his life, Pilger condemned the onslaught on Gaza and warned of the danger of a broader conflict.

Over the course of his lengthy career, Pilger wrote or edited a number of works and directed dozens of documentaries.

Entering the media as a copy boy in Sydney in 1958, Pilger travelled to Europe shortly thereafter and settled in London. That was a path followed by a number of his contemporaries. Many young Australians were attracted to Britain, and London in particular, amid the "swinging sixties." Pilger became the *Daily Mirror's* foreign correspondent, including in the US.

As with many of his generation, the Vietnam war, with its blatant criminality and neo-colonialism, was a particular

turning point.

Pilger's first documentary, *The Quiet Mutiny*, was broadcast on Britain's ITV channel in 1970. It pointed to growing opposition to the war among conscripts, or "grunts," compelled to do most of the fighting. The film included memorable scenes of young working-class men declaring that they had no desire to kill Vietnamese people and were hostile to the US government and their commanders.

It was a sign of the times that the documentary won seven awards. The reaction of the American state was hostile, with Walter Annenberg, the American ambassador in London and a personal friend of President Richard Nixon, submitting an official complaint to British broadcasting authorities.

Pilger revisited the Vietnam war in three further films. They included *Vietnam: Still America's War* (1974), which exposed the sham character of the 1973 Paris Peace Accords, with US troops continuing to oversee and conduct murderous operations a year later, though many had been rebadged as private contractors. In 1995 Pilger made *Vietnam: The Last Battle* (1995), which highlighted the ongoing toll of the bombardment two decades after the end of the war, as well as the growth of inequality as the Communist Party of Vietnam turned to market-based policies.

In 1979, Pilger released *Year Zero: The Silent Death of Cambodia*, the first of five films examining events in that country. *Year Zero* highlighted the carpet bombing of neutral Cambodia during the Vietnam war, orchestrated by Nixon and his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. This killed untold thousands and created the conditions for the peasant-based and Maoist-inspired Khmer Rouge to take power before rapidly clearing Cambodia's cities and carrying out mass murder.

Filed after Vietnam invaded Cambodia, ousting the Khmer Rouge, *Year Zero* included shocking scenes of children literally starving to death. An indictment of the indifference of the "international community" to the humanitarian catastrophe, Pilger's film also exposed the ongoing collaboration of the US and other imperialist powers with the Khmer Rouge, which was viewed as a potential counterweight to Soviet-aligned Vietnam.

In the 1980s, Pilger would also report on US funding and arming of death squads targeting popular movements, such as the Sandinistas in Nicaragua.

Later, Pilger interviewed Duane Clarridge, who as chief of the CIA's Latin American division from 1981 to 1987, was responsible for many of those crimes. Clarridge, asked what gave the US the right to overthrow South American governments and conduct dirty wars, bluntly declared: "National security... Get used to it world, we're not going to put up with nonsense."

Pilger opposed the first Gulf War and the crippling US sanctions regime against Iraq in the 1990s. He also condemned the 2003 invasion. In one interview with a New Zealand journalist, which is again circulating widely on social media, Pilger exposed the lies of weapons of mass destruction, uncritically echoed by the reporter.

In 2010, Pilger produced and directed *The War You Don't See*. It denounced the official media for its complicity in the Iraq and Afghan wars, and counter posed to that the work of WikiLeaks and its publisher Julian Assange.

Pilger would emerge as one of the most consistent defenders of Assange, targeted for WikiLeaks' exposures of the massive US war crimes and human rights violations associated with the "war on terror." Pilger condemned the attempt to frame Assange on bogus Swedish allegations of sexual misconduct and associated slanders against the WikiLeaks publisher.

This was one reason for Pilger's increasing isolation in official media circles. Most of the press not only repeated the US lies and slanders against Assange, but developed their own propaganda against him in a campaign United Nations Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer would describe as a "public mobbing."

Pilger also wrote about the role of the US and its allies in a 2014 coup in Ukraine, aimed at installing a pro-NATO regime as part of intensifying aggression against Russia. His 2016 documentary, *The Coming War on China*, is one of the few feature films on that critical issue, which threatens the very existence of humanity. These positions cut across what was being peddled in the mainstream press and led to Pilger's effective blacklisting from most official outlets.

Pilger would condemn the growing turn to online censorship. In 2018, he wrote a statement in response to a campaign initiated by the *World Socialist Web Site* against the censoring of left-wing and anti-war websites by Google and other tech giants. Pilger wrote: "Something has changed. Although the media was always a loose extension of capital power, it is now almost fully integrated. Dissent once tolerated in the mainstream has regressed to a metaphoric underground as liberal capitalism moves toward a form of corporate dictatorship."

In 2018 and 2019, Pilger addressed rallies called by the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) demanding Assange's freedom and condemning the complicity of Australian governments in his persecution.

Over his lengthy career, Pilger made films on a number of other topics, including the horrific social conditions afflicting

Australia's Aboriginal population and the oppression of the Palestinians. Others treated the British theft of the Chagos Islands, the growth of social inequality and attacks on fundamental social rights, including the dismantling of the British National Health Service.

Pilger's films were strongest when exposing the crimes of American imperialism and the other major powers.

The limitations of his work were bound up with those of bourgeois journalism—including of the left and radical variety—based as it is on an impressionistic approach to immediate events and a de facto acceptance of the prevailing social order.

Some of his works were marked by the influence of various forms of bankrupt middle-class radical politics, including those which promoted Hugo Chavez of Venezuela and other Latin American bourgeois nationalists. The so-called Pink Tide on that continent has ended in a fiasco, with the "left" bourgeois nationalists implementing austerity and attacks on democratic rights, creating the conditions for the growth of openly fascist forces.

Pilger's limitations were underscored by his support in 1999 for Australian intervention into East Timor on bogus humanitarian grounds. For the Australian pseudo-left tendencies, that campaign marked the beginning of an open entrance into the imperialist camp, including support for the regime-change operations in Libya and Syria and the current US-NATO proxy war against Ukraine. Pilger, however, spoke out against those conflicts.

Pilger's career was similar to that of several other reporters of a similar age, such as Robert Fisk and Robert Parry. Seymour Hersh is one of the few of that generation to remain active. Within the framework of bourgeois journalism, they maintained a courageous commitment to investigation, including of the wars and crimes of governments.

The passing of this layer is a measure of the crisis of the capitalist system itself. The ruling elites, overseeing war crimes worse than even those exposed by Pilger and preparing still greater horrors, cannot tolerate any, even limited, criticisms or exposures within the official media.



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