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Heroes

John Pilger

John Pilger
HEROES

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*For Sam and Zoe, and the memory
of my mother and father, and Eric Piper*

HEROES

John Pilger grew up in Sydney, Australia. He has been a war correspondent, author and film-maker. He has twice won British journalism's highest award, that of Journalist of the Year, for his work all over the world, notably in Vietnam and Cambodia. Among a number of other awards, he has been International Reporter of the Year and winner of the United Nations Association Media Peace Prize. For his broadcasting, he has won France's Reporter Sans Frontières, an American television Academy Award, an Emmy, and the Richard Dimbleby Award, given by the British Academy of Film and Television Arts. He lives in London.

ALSO BY JOHN PILGER

The Last Day

Aftermath: The Struggle of Cambodia and Vietnam

(with Anthony Barnett)

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(with Michael Coren)

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I would like to pay tribute to my mother, Elsie Pilger, who died as I wrote this. Elsie put up with hours of tape-recorded interviews and gave us both many laughs in the process; the result is a glimpse of her life in the early chapters of this book. The fifth of nine children, she grew up in the coalfields of the Hunter Valley, New South Wales. She was one of the first 'scholarship girls', who gained a degree at Sydney University at the unheard of age of nineteen. She became a teacher, linguist, factory worker, traveller and, in her seventies, a student again. She was a humanist and a rebel who had the courage to defy authority and her family, for love and principle. She was my most enduring friend and ally, and I so miss her restless spirit.

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Introduction

This is a new edition of *Heroes*, which was first published in 1986, the first in a trilogy completed by *Distant Voices* and *Hidden Agendas*. It is my favourite and most painfully written (and re-written) book, having taken a decade to complete, a true test of the faith of my publisher, Liz Calder, who can chart much of her career by the presence of my synopsis on her desk and my optimistic calls from distant places. My life as a journalist was to blame; I was then in permanent transit between front lines of one kind or another.

I carried unfinished chapters with me (taped inside the steel lid of my vintage Baby Hermes typewriter, bought in Aden in 1962 for £12). Perhaps the long gestation is the book's strength; for each chapter represents a place, a time and, above all, tries to make sense of events that have touched and influenced many lives, not least my own. The chapter on Robert Kennedy, who was assassinated in front of me, having told me the previous night how he would end the war in Vietnam, was one of the most difficult. Watching him die muddied my memory of him: was he a carpetbagger or a genuine social democrat? The first draft was the best; I completed it in Kenya, lost it in Laos and rewrote it in an attic in south London.

Much of the long Vietnam section was written on a partly destroyed veranda overlooking beautiful Ha Long Bay, in northern Vietnam, in a mining town called Hongai, statistically the most bombed place on earth. For almost two years, American carrier-based aircraft bombed it in the morning, broke for lunch, and returned in the afternoon. To

my knowledge, none of this was reported at the time. When I was there, it was like a Pompeii of war, dominated by the silhouette of the shell of a Gothic church on a hill that had been bombed repeatedly; yet the town never died. People lived underground: miners and fisherfolk and their families, moving at night, including the children in their makeshift schools lit by hurricane lamps, the infants lowered in baskets to nurseries beneath the street. The doctor in charge of community health told me that ten per cent of the children were deaf from the bombing. There was a menacing stillness, and no birds. It was a place of media unpeople and of heroes.

Heroes originally was to be a book about another mining community I knew well, in County Durham, in the north of England. However, the more I travelled, the more extraordinary stories of ordinary lives I found, and began to set them in their political context, especially struggles against great power, often power wielded indirectly and at a distance by Western democracies. I felt I was drawing back screens, and it was this that shaped *Heroes*, complementing its universal theme of justice and injustice, oppression and freedom. If, as James Cameron said, journalism is history's first draft, then *Heroes* is people's history through the eyes of a sympathetic witness. It is the view from the ground, at times unseen or unrecognised by those for whom the only view is from above.

It is also about the fallibility and farce of much of journalism. That's how my own career began. On my second day as a journalist, aged eighteen, I was assigned by the Sydney *Daily Telegraph* to report on a swarm of bees that had stuck to the windscreen of a car in a busy street. When I got there it was clear that this was a 'non-story', and other reporters were putting away their notebooks when somebody walked up to the bees and was stung between the eyes. The following day, a rival newspaper's

headline read, 'BEES TERROR: MAN HURT'. There was a photograph of the bees and the victim with his head in his hands. It was me.

Having since made my way through events on a different scale, including many wars and moments of upheaval, I have trusted that, if all my faculties should fail, my sense of the absurd will remain. How can it not survive when, on an Asian battlefield, blonde 'donut dollies' are dropped out of the sky to calm mutinous troops with parlour games of charades and I-spy; when combat troops are sent into the jungle to win 'hearts and minds' with 5,000 gift-wrapped toothbrushes and party balloons; when ghost sounds are played from a helicopter in order to frighten the enemy; when tens of thousands of scorched dollars rain down on those waiting to be evacuated on the last day of the longest war of the twentieth century; and when millions of unused banknotes flow in the afternoon monsoon through the streets of a city without food and light? How can it be otherwise when a reporter stands at a press conference and shouts, 'Three cheers for the victorious general!' And when the BBC's director-general refuses to lift a ban on a television programme about the insanity of nuclear war because of the effect it might have 'on people of limited mental intelligence'? When I was sent by my newspaper up the River Niger to Timbuktu on a hovercraft with a man called Smithers and another man called Captain Energy and 'Bob' from the CIA, along with crates of whisky and paper underwear (see the chapter, *Smithers of the river*), I read, not for the first time, the celebrated *Scoop*, in which my predicament was accurately described.

In this theatre of the absurd, there is invariably serious purpose. I was struck, early in my career, by how easily people were stereotyped for political ends that were never admitted. Television news and current affairs, while claiming a beatific state of political neutrality, are adept at

this. Figures of authority are usually articulate and credible, 'moderates' are polite and acceptable and dissenters are invariably cast as the 'other': the 'militants' and 'extremists' of the 1970s are today's 'hardliners'. To the BBC, 'balancing' these stereotypes, rather like balancing right and wrong, is meant to demonstrate its impartiality. Thus, stone-throwing Palestinian teenagers and children, the historic victims in the Middle East, are reported as a 'threat' to their colonial oppressors, a fully equipped army respectfully described by the BBC as 'security forces'. Indeed, most of foreign humanity, apart from the inhabitants of the United States and Europe (minus the Balkans), are generally portrayed in terms of their usefulness to Western power: thus, Kurds opposed to the regime in Iraq are 'good' while Kurds opposed to the regime in Turkey are 'bad'. Turkey is an ally of the United States and a member of NATO.

Generally speaking, people who inhabit the ultimate 'other', the so-called third world, alternate between demons and victims. The subliminal message, notably in Africa, is that the colonial past is justified retrospectively, along with the West's return as saviour/exploiter. At the time of writing, Britain's violent return to Sierra Leone is reported as 'peacekeeping'.

Heroes is meant as an antidote to this view from above. The characters who people it are a rich variety; there is Jack Walker, a Yorkshire dyehouse worker and trade unionist whose grace and eloquence, in the face of everyday hardship, were rarely reflected in the media's mirrors; and Penn Jones, editor of a small Texas newspaper, who was fire-bombed for upholding the freedom to publish; and Lupita Reyes Montiel, who went under fire to rescue the tortured body of her son in Nicaragua, and Marta Kubisova, whose songs of freedom in Czechoslovakia became anthems for her country, in which she was made a

prisoner; and Thieu Thi Tao, who endured torture in the infamous 'tiger cages' in south Vietnam and rebuilt her life; Chhay Son Heng, who survived Pol Pot's Cambodia for three-and-a-half years by keeping a calendar in his head and reciting Shakespeare and Yeats to himself, knowing that a spoken word of a foreign language would mean death; and, in my own country, Yami Lester, blinded by nuclear bombs dropped on test sites in his ancient Aboriginal land, who, with the magnanimity typical of his people, fought for justice for others. (Despite the glamorous promotion of the Aboriginal gold medallist Cathy Freeman at the Sydney Olympics, the government in Canberra continued its assault on her people, barring United Nations officials from investigating the appalling conditions in black Australia.)

The stories these people tell are contrasted with the propaganda versions of the great and often painful events that rushed through their lives. A prime example is the Vietnam war, reputedly the only war fought during the twentieth century by a Western power which did not impose censorship; yet it was a deeply censored war.

I have attempted to explain this and identify the most common forms of censorship, including those least understood by journalists and the public alike, such as censorship by omission. In the 1960s, Presidents Kennedy and Johnson and their liberal 'new frontiersmen' invaded a small, impoverished, peasant country, Vietnam, maiming a society and justifying their actions with carefully prepared, fraudulent provocation; this is described in the Vietnam chapters. None of the illusion was reported until much later, and its lies have since been repeated as part of a formidable mythology and revisionism. Thus, the terrible suffering today of the Vietnamese victims of Agent Orange, a poisonous weapon of mass destruction, is not news. Seen from the West, Vietnam was a war, not a country.

Today, the same censorship by omission ensures there is no public debate about the daily illegal bombing by American and British governments of civilians in stricken Iraq. In Britain, at the time of writing, there is a hoo-ha over whether the BBC and ITN should put out their evening television news bulletins at the same time. That both have almost identical self-censoring agendas is not at issue. Watching their almost surreal nightly parade of unconnected, barely explained images and their political platitudes, the words of Robert Louis Stevenson come to mind: 'Beware of your sham impartialists, wolves in sheep's clothing, simpering honestly as they suppress.'

One thinks of all the societies that have been dismissed or criminalised by labels, and by the clichés that serve to minimise 'our' culpability. (The British Government's 'honest brokerage' in Ireland, Washington's in the Middle East.) The people of Iraq, effectively held hostage to the compliance of a dictator, whose grip is largely the product of Western power, exemplify this. During the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, the liberal commentator, Andrew Marr, now the political editor of the BBC, described the inhabitants of that country as a 'war-hardened people ... far more callous, seemingly readier to die ... like an alien race.' No matter that this 'alien race' were the heroes of the Second World War and have since risen up against the Milosevic regime.

In everyday media and political discourse, political language has been turned on its head. A positive, hopeful word like 'reform' has lost its dictionary meaning. It now means regression, even destruction. 'Wealth creation' actually means the taking of wealth by a few. 'Restructuring' is the transfer of income from production to speculation. And 'market economics' means capitalism for the majority and socialism for the privileged few and the powerful, an ingenious system under which the poor are

persecuted and the rich are given billions in public subsidies, such as tax cuts and public properties at knock-down prices. As for that noble concept 'democracy', in single ideology states like Britain and the United States, this is now little more than a rhetorical device.

The chapter on Nicaragua illustrates this, offering a view of that country during its brief period of democratic hope in the 1980s. The historian Mark Curtis surveyed 500 articles in the British press that dealt with Nicaragua during the early Reagan and Thatcher years of 1981-3. He found an almost universal suppression of the achievements of the Sandinista government in favour of the falsehood of 'the threat of a communist takeover'. 'It would take considerable intellectual acrobatics,' he wrote, 'to designate Sandinista successes in alleviating poverty - remarkable by any standard - as unworthy of much comment by objective indicators. This might particularly be the case when compared to the appalling conditions elsewhere in the region - surely well-known to any reporter who visited the area ... The absence of significant press comment on the Sandinista achievements was even more remarkable in view of the sheer number of articles that appeared on the subject of Nicaragua in these years. One might reasonably conclude that the reporting was conditioned by a different set of priorities, one that conformed to ... the stream of disinformation emanating from Washington and London.'

Thanks mostly to an invasion by murderous 'Contra' squads, who specialised in slitting the throats of peasant farmers, midwives and other anti-Americans and were paid, armed and directed by the CIA, Nicaragua has been returned to its status under the Washington-sponsored Somoza dictatorship: that of the poorest, most indebted country in Latin America. Gone are the literacy programmes, the improving child mortality figures, the

'barefoot doctors', the community schools, the agricultural co-operatives. This is not news.

Since I wrote the *Media Games* section, the tools of the media have changed radically. There is now the internet, which, having provided a means of thwarting gatekeepers and censors, has also brought an illusion: the beguiling prospect of a global technological democracy. While half the population of Britain own a mobile phone, it is reported that half the population of the world have no telephone. Most human beings have never laid eyes on a computer and the way things are, they never will. The majority of the world's computers are in the United States, yet even there, the division is vast. With 34 million Americans living in poverty, almost half the population have no access to a computer.

For most of one year, the Western media was obsessed with Monica Lewinsky. Fed by the Internet, this so-called scandal began on a website called the Drudge Report, which, like so much of the internet, is a cut-and-paste of newspapers and magazines. There were few facts, and sources. Attribution was rare; what counted was quantity and hype. While Iraqis were starved and bombed, and record shipments of American weapons went to Turkey to use against the Turkish Kurds, and another Vietnam was ignited in Colombia, the news was Monica Lewinsky. That great master of black irony, Eduardo Galeano, has pointed out that while the Lewinsky scandal was running, 'the most important news of our lifetime' was not news. An international group of leading scientists estimated that in the last twenty-five years, a third of the earth's natural wealth was lost or destroyed.

The truth is that, while we sit at our computers, editing our copy and sending our e-mail, dreaming of the empowerment of the individual, the greatest corporate forces ever known are using cyberspace to change the

environment, to force unwanted development on rural and farming societies and to steal our wilderness – from the internal cell structure of living creatures to the far reaches of untrammelled space: above all, to make vast amounts of money. For all the hype about the new technologies enhancing democracy, what we are beckoning is what the *Financial Times* has called ‘a de facto world government’.

Consider the ironies. As media technology becomes ‘global’ as never before, the media itself is becoming more parochial. ‘Dumbed down’ is the jargon term. According to a study by the leading British voluntary agencies, television in Britain, said to be the best, devotes little more than three per cent of its overall output to the rest of humanity; and most of that is on the minority channels, which are themselves cutting back. Not only are the traditional means of journalism becoming obsolete, but so too, it seems, are the honourable traditions. The American journalist Susan Faludi, a Pulitzer Prize winner, reckons that ‘no more than two dozen journalists’ in the United States have the freedom to work uncompromised by corporate pressure. ‘Whenever I visit media schools,’ she said, ‘I find the majority of students don’t want to be reporters or investigative journalists or even broadcasters. They want to be image consultants; they want to get into PR; that’s where the money is and where the jobs are, and where our freedom has been lost.’ In journalism schools in Britain, this is not yet the case. Many young people still see journalism as an honourable way of helping us make sense of the world, but they quickly come up against the modern pressures of ‘multi-skilling’ by depleted staffs, and a reliance on technology, rather than on shoe leather.

Taking a lead from the United States, PR, public relations, has usurped much of journalism’s proper work, becoming as Tom Baistow warned in 1985, a ‘fifth estate’. According to *PR Week*, the amount of ‘PR generated

material' in the media is '50 per cent in a broadsheet newspaper in every section apart from sport'. What often passes for news in the financial pages is 'packaged' by PR consultants paid by investment firms. The PR, says Max Clifford, the famous PR man, 'is filling the role investigative reporters should fill but no longer can because [of] cost cutting.'

Journalists can resist this, first by rejecting the Murdoch view that their principal aim is to 'give the public what it wants': code for giving the public no choice. An awareness of self-censorship is critical. Journalists may insist they are never told what to do, that there is never a 'line' - when of course it may not be necessary to tell them: they *know* almost instinctively what is required of them: what to publish and, most important, what to leave out. 'When the truth is replaced by silence,' wrote Yuri Yevtushenko, 'the silence is a lie.' Understanding these indirect, sometimes subliminal pressures is the beginning of resisting them.

With this in mind, although revised more than a decade ago, the media chapters need no change, because the principle has not changed. The link between a truly free media, keeping the record straight and the powerful accountable, and freedom for all citizens, is far too important and tenuous for journalists to look away. In one sense, the role of the journalist is more important today than at any time during the modern era. Academics, those who once regarded themselves as ideological challengers, have, with a few exceptions, abandoned the field, many embracing the reactionary diversions of post-modernism. As a result, Noam Chomsky points out, 'truths that were once understood fade into individual memories, history is shaped into an instrument of power, and the ground is laid for the enterprises [of the abuses of power] to come.' As Greg Philo and David Miller wrote in *Market Killing*, 'The abdication by academics can mean that it is left to a small

number of critical journalists to do the hard work of uncovering the truth ... Many of the most penetrating critiques of developments in areas such as government information management, the new PR and promotional industries and political corruption, state secrecy, journalistic practice, editorial control ... have been written not by academics, but by journalists.'

I have written this book in the hope that it will help in the defence of the craft I love. It is no coincidence that among the heroes in the following pages there are many journalists, past and present: William Howard Russell of *The Times*, who reported the truth about the disastrous war in the Crimea; Morgan Philips Price of the *Manchester Guardian*, who remained in the Soviet Union after the 1917 revolution, almost alone, starving, trying to report the Allied invasion and its implications for the future; Ed Murrow, the American reporter, who dared to report Dunkirk as a near-disaster and in later years exposed the vendettas of Senator Joseph McCarthy; Robert Fisk, whose reporting of the Middle East, as I write this, is a beacon.

In the fifteen years since it was published, *Heroes* has found its way into many a back-pack and to places of continuing struggle. When I returned to South Africa in 1997 after an enforced absence of thirty years, I was greeted by a banned journalist imprisoned with Nelson Mandela on Robben Island, where he had read a smuggled copy as it was passed between the prisoners. Among the belongings of Farzad Bazoft, the *Observer* journalist murdered by Saddam Hussein on false charges of spying, was *Heroes*. At the end of the chapter listing journalists who made personal sacrifices to expose the truth, Farzad had written his own postscript and epitaph: 'Farzad Bazoft of *The Observer*, who tried to tell the truth about a huge explosion that killed so many people in Iraq, was arrested.

Under pressure and fear gave false confession, and
accused of spying. He is a journalist, too.'

John Pilger
November 2000

I

AUSTRALIA