



VINTAGE

HIDDEN AGENDAS

JOHN PILGER

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About the Book

In this powerful book, journalist and film maker John Pilger strips away the layers of deception, dissembling language and omission that prevent us from understanding how the world really works.

From the invisible corners of Tony Blair's Britain to Burma, Vietnam, Australia, South Africa and the illusions of the 'media age', power, he argues, has its own agenda. Unchallenged, it operates to protect its interests with a cynical disregard for people - shaping, and often devastating, millions of lives.

By unravelling the hidden histories of contemporary events, Pilger allows us to read between the lines. He also celebrates the eloquent defiance and courage of those who resist oppression and give us hope for the future. Tenaciously researched and written with passion and wit, *Hidden Agendas* will change the way you see the world.

About the Author

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)*

The Outsiders (with Michael Coren)

Heroes

A Secret Country

Distant Voices

TO THE MEMORY OF MARTHA GELLHORN,
AND FOR JANE, JOSÉ, SAM AND ZOË

Hidden Agendas

John Pilger

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past.

George Orwell, Nineteen Eighty-four

INTRODUCTION

THERE IS SOMETHING in journalism called a slow news day. This usually falls on a Sunday or during the holiday period when the authorised sources of information are at rest. Nothing happens then, apart from acts of God and disorder in far-away places. It is generally agreed that the media show cannot go on while the cast is away.

This book is devoted to slow news. In each chapter, the setting changes, from Iraq to the East End of London, from Burma to the docks of Liverpool and the West of Ireland, from Vietnam to Australia and the 'new' South Africa. In all these places, events have occurred that qualify as slow news. Some have been reported, even glimpsed on the evening news, where they are unremembered as part of a moving belt of images 'shot and edited to the rhythms of a Coca-Cola advertisement', wrote one media onlooker, pointing out that the average length of the TV news 'soundbite' in the United States had gone from 42.3 seconds in 1968 to 9.9 seconds.¹

That is the trend. In American television, a one percentage point fall in the ratings can represent a loss of \$100 million a year in advertising. The result is not just 'infotainment', but 'infoadvertising': programmes that 'flow seamlessly into commercials'.² This is how commercial television works in Australia, Japan, Italy and many other countries. Britain is not far behind; the ever-diminishing circle of multinational companies that control the media, especially television, take their cue from the brand leader, Rupert Murdoch, who says his role in the 'communications revolution' is that of a 'battering ram'. In Britain, on what is still lauded as 'the best

television service in the world', only 3 per cent of peak-time programmes feature *anything* about the majority of humanity, and almost all of that is confined to the 'minority' channels, if you exclude Clive James laughing at the Japanese. In the media's 'global village', other nations do not exist unless they are useful to 'us'.³

Regardless of the BBC's enduring façade of 'impartiality' and 'standards', news is now openly ideological and uniform, as the demands of the 'market' supercult are met. When slow news is included, it is more than likely dressed in a political and social vocabulary that ensures the truth is lost. Thus, in Britain, as in the United States (and Australia), the systematic impoverishment of a quarter of the population is routinely filed under 'underclass', an American term describing a corrupting, anti-social group outside society. The solution to poverty, which is the return of vast wealth taken from the poor by the rich, is seldom given a public airing. The 'new' system of capitalism for the powerless and socialism for the powerful, under which the former are persecuted and the latter are given billions in public subsidies, is rarely identified as such. Terms like 'modernisation' are preferred.

Wars can be notoriously slow news. Not the fireworks, of course. Indeed, like fast food, the whizz-bang of war has been made 'convenient' for the 'consumer' at home in front of the TV set. The Gulf War in 1991 was reported as a technological wonder, an event of bloodless science in which, rejoiced one editorial writer, there were 'miraculously few casualties'.⁴ It was one of the most covered wars in history, yet few journalists reported the truth, still widely unknown, that a quarter of a million Iraqis were wantonly slaughtered or died unnecessary deaths.⁵

Since that bloodfest, the fate of the children of Iraq has been the slowest of news. Who knows that at least half a million children have died as a direct result of the economic sanctions imposed by the Western powers? Who

understands that the sanctions are aimed not at bringing down Saddam Hussein, or deterring him from building some mythical nuclear bomb, but at preventing the 'market' competition of Iraqi oil from forcing down the price of oil produced by Saudi Arabia, the West's most important Middle Eastern proxy, next to Israel, and biggest arms customer?⁶

The children of Iraq are Unpeople. So, too, are the half a million children who, according to UNICEF, die beneath the burden of unrepayable debt owed by their governments to the West.⁷ One Filipino child is said to die every hour, in a country where more than half the national budget is given over to paying just the interest on World Bank and IMF loans. These facts are not allowed to interrupt the cosy British ritual of Red Nose Day, when the money raised for 'the poor of the world' is but a fraction of that paid by the governments of the poor to Western banks on the same day.⁸ Britain, which has an 'ethical' foreign policy, demands levels of debt repayment that far outweigh new loans or aid; only the United States has a longer record of taking more money from the developing world than it gives out.⁹ It was not until the government of Mexico threatened to repudiate its debt, an action that might have brought down the Western banking system, that the wider issue was retrieved from media oblivion.

Unpeople are the heroes of this book. Their eloquent defiance and courage are as important as the secret histories of their neglect. In Part V, 'We Resist to Win', I chart the journey of 500 Liverpool dockers who were summarily sacked in 1996, most of them after a lifetime of service. Replaced by casual and part-time workers, their remarkable struggle is that of millions of people against what Prime Minister Blair, echoing President Clinton, euphemistically calls 'flexible working'.

Hidden Agendas is about power, propaganda and censorship. It picks up where my previous books, *Heroes*, *A Secret Country* and *Distant Voices*, left off. In order to tell

the story so far, I have included brief sections from these books. Several chapters began life as essays in the *Guardian* and the *New Statesman* and have been substantially expanded and brought up to date. Otherwise, the material is new; and all of it is close to my heart.

Having spent much of my life as a reporter in places of upheaval, including many of the wars of the second half of the century, I have become convinced that it is not enough for journalists to see themselves as mere messengers, without understanding the hidden agendas of the message and the myths that surround it. High on the list is the myth that we now live in an 'information age' - when, in fact, we live in a media age, in which the available information is repetitive, 'safe' and limited by invisible boundaries.

In the day-to-day media, much of this is the propaganda of Western power, whose narcissism, dissembling language and omissions often prevent us from understanding the meaning of contemporary events. 'Globalisation' is a prime example. This smokescreen extends to journalists themselves who, wrote Michael Parenti in *Inventing Reality: The Politics of the Mass Media*, 'rarely doubt their own objectivity even as they faithfully echo the established political vocabularies and the prevailing politico-economic orthodoxy. Since they do not cross any forbidden lines, they are not reined in. So they are likely to have no awareness they are on an ideological leash.'¹⁰ Thus, the true nature of power is not revealed, its changing contours are seldom explored, its goals and targets seldom identified. This is counterfeit journalism because the surface of events is not disturbed. It is ironic that, while corruption among the system's managers and subalterns is at times brilliantly exposed by a small group of exceptional journalists, the wider corruption is unseen and unreported.

In *The Serpent*, Marc Karlin's film about Rupert Murdoch (originally entitled *The Cancer* as a tribute to the playwright Dennis Potter, who named his lethal tumour 'Rupert'), the

director ruminates on how easily Murdoch came to dominate the British media and coerce the liberal elite. He illustrates this with clips from a keynote speech which Murdoch gave at the Edinburgh Television Festival. The camera pans across the audience of television executives, who listen in respectful silence as Murdoch accuses them of waging the same kind of thought control as the Established Church before the invention of the printing press. 'This is the silence of the democrats,' says a disembodied voice-over, 'and the Dark Prince could bathe in that silence.'¹¹

The silence of the democrats has been gathering for almost a generation, since the defection of those who once prided themselves on their resistance to the rapacity of power and who understand how fragile is the vital link between the people's right to know and be heard and liberty itself. One of the characters in Arthur Miller's *The Price* put it succinctly: 'We invent ourselves to wipe out what we know.' This is examined in the centrepiece chapters of 'The Media Age', particularly in 'Guardians of the Faith', which questions the false assumption of many liberal communicators that their position at the 'centre' is representative of the 'broad band' of society and its 'best interests'; some, like Tony Blair, even claim that it is non-ideological. Indeed, the ideology he shares with many in the media is one of the most powerful of the modern era and more pervasive for its concealed and unconscious attachment to a status quo of inequity based on class and wealth. The late Steve Biko described this political illusion in the context of South Africa when he remarked that the civilised collaborators' view of apartheid was of 'an eyesore spoiling an otherwise beautiful view'.¹²

These are surreal times, as if 'mainstream' politics has come to the end of the road. In Britain, the United States, much of Europe and Australia, the policies of the principal parties have converged into single-ideology states with rival factions, which are little more than brotherhoods of power

and privilege. Their rhetoric is tendentious. Democratic accountability and vision are replaced by a specious gloss, the work of fixers known as 'spin-doctors', and assorted marketing and public relations experts and their fellow travellers, notably journalists. A false 'consensus' is their invention, such as that invested in the events following Princess Diana's death. Did it occur to those who gorged themselves on her death that the public's reaction might largely be that of a people despairing at the whole political class, politicians and media alike? In one of the rare pieces about Diana that did not surrender social analysis to psychobabble, Mike Marqusee wrote that 'in her life and death the pre-modern met the post-modern, the world of feudal right and blood status entered the media-refracted "society of the spectacle". The result should alarm . . . all those who want to live in a community shaped by informal, critical, genuinely pluralistic debate.'¹³

In one sense, the media have never held such sway. We have government by the media, for the media. In Britain, New Labour constructed itself, its policies, its campaign, then its government with a media-supplied kit. The campaign never ends; one stunt begets another. The new government's solution to the problem of the 'underclass' was dreamt up by Peter Mandelson, the propaganda minister in all but name. He says there is to be a Social Exclusion Unit, a fine Orwellian moniker. In his announcement he praised the politician responsible for the greatest transfer of public wealth from the poor to the rich: Margaret Thatcher. None of it is to be given back. His is the speech of a political March Hare, juxtaposed on the front page of the *Guardian* with news that the Ministry of Defence's £10 billion-a-year budget to buy arms and equipment has been overspent by £14 billion. There is no link, no suggestion that Britain's defence budget might be reduced to the European average, thereby releasing £7 billion, or that obsolete fighter aircraft and Trident

submarines might be scrapped, releasing many more billions. These are taboo subjects, matters for self-censorship.

Having announced an 'ethical' foreign policy, the Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook, embarked on a series of media stunts in south-east Asia. In Malaysia he declared a 'war on drugs', a hand-me-down from former President Bush, who was previously director of the CIA, an organisation as deeply involved in the drugs trade as the British were in the nineteenth century. Did this mean war with the United States? No. Burma was singled out for opprobrium, while Thailand, the most important Western-backed corridor for the drugs trade, was not mentioned. Neither was the almost total absence of a drugs' treatment programme in Britain.

On arrival in Indonesia, Cook introduced high farce by presenting one of the world's most vicious dictatorships with a 'deal on human rights' that included 'a series of lectures on non-violent crowd control given by senior British police officers'. The unfunny and unreported side to this was that while Cook was in Indonesia his hosts were conducting 'Operation Finish Them Off' in East Timor, using the same type of British arms whose delivery he refused to stop. This 'ethical' policy is designed for the media and to co-opt the voluntary agencies; for the public it is a hoax. While 'defending'; human rights, Cook used the Official Secrets Act to conceal the re-supply of the Indonesian regime with everything from bombs and ammunition, to nuclear equipment and rapid-firing machine-guns, with which Indonesia's gestapo has caused, in East Timor, the equivalent of the horror of Dunblane many times over.¹⁴

Those who doubt the true consequences of Western power might reflect on the secret machinations described in Part II, 'Flying the Flag'. Since the Second World War, the arms trade, dominated by the Western powers and conducted principally with murderous tyrannies, has caused the death

of an estimated twenty million people.¹⁵ This is slow news indeed.

At the time of writing, President Clinton is re-arming much of Latin America, and a £22 billion bonanza beckons for American and British arms companies as NATO expands into Eastern Europe. These developments have passed virtually unnoticed. 'Whoever gets in first will have a lock for the next quarter-century,' said Joel Johnson of Aerospace Industries Association. 'The market for fighter jets alone is worth \$10 billion. Then there's transport aircraft, utility helicopters, attack helicopters, communications and avionics. Add them together and we're talking real money.'¹⁶

Even slower news - in this case, almost extinct news - is the nuclear re-arming of the world. People rightly regard the 'peace dividend' as a bad joke, but what they do not know is that all the nuclear powers are upgrading their nuclear arsenals at such a furious pace that the old Cold War might never have ended. The 'first strike' nuclear arms programmes set in train by Ronald Reagan and George Bush have not missed a beat under Bill Clinton; only one relatively minor air-to-ground missile has been cancelled. Otherwise, billions of dollars are being spent on Reagan's favourite Star Wars anti-missiles system, called Theatre High Altitude Area Defence, or THAAD. In response, the Russians are developing their own anti-ballistic-missile system, while both powers collude in the deception that their irresponsibility does not breach the ABM Treaty, signed in 1972. For the Americans, whether or not there is a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty is irrelevant; they have now developed a computer modelling believed to be every bit as reliable as an actual test.

In the Media Age, 'history without memory confines Americans to a sort of eternal present', says *Time* magazine.¹⁷ As the rest of us are drawn into this eternal present, the memory struggles to rescue the truth that our

rights come not from something called consumerism or from commercial invention, known as technology, but from a long and painful history of struggle. 'Rights belong solely to people,' wrote David Korten. 'They do not extend to corporations or other artificial entities.'¹⁸ Nor do they belong to unelected committees, known in Britain as quangos and 'review' bodies, or the international bureaucrats who are redefining our very concept of rights in 'agreements' with which most of us would disagree. In *The Solution*, Bertolt Brecht defined the problem:

The Secretary of the Writers' Union
Had leaflets distributed in the Stalinallee
Stating that the people
Had forfeited the confidence of the government
And could win it back only
By redoubled efforts. Would it not be easier
In that case for the government
To dissolve the people
And elect another?

In the absence of vigilant journalism, the meaning of political language has been reversed. 'Reform' has lost its dictionary meaning; it is now destruction. 'Wealth creation' actually refers to the *extraction* of wealth by the relentless stripping and merging of companies. That noble concept, 'democracy', has become, along with universal suffrage, just another rhetorical device. As the Chartists' revolt of the 1830s and 1840s showed, the vote was only valuable if people's lives improved.

In the eternal present, media technology is promoted as an extension of human consciousness, not as the most powerful tool of a new order controlled by the few at the expense of the many. 'The threat to independence in the late twentieth century from the new electronics', wrote Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism*, 'could be greater than was colonialism itself. We are beginning to learn that de-colonisation was not the termination of imperial relationships but merely the extending of a geo-political web

which has been spinning since the Renaissance. The new media have the power to penetrate more deeply into a “receiving” culture than any previous manifestation of Western technology . . .’ Compared with a century ago, he says, when ‘European culture was associated with a white man’s presence, we now have in addition an international media presence that insinuates itself over a fantastically wide range’.[19](#)

There is only one way now, say the Big Brother media and other mythographers of ‘the market’, which is the equivalent of ‘Our Ford’, the divinity that ruled the totalitarian Utopia in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*. Opposition is apostasy; fatalism is ideal. ‘The core conviction of the centre-left’, wrote John Gray, the academic and media political commentator, ‘is the belief that social cohesion and enduring economic success go together. There is no way of escaping global market competition. There can be no way of going back to regulated labour markets . . .’ Earlier in his observations, Gray had described how ‘necessities’ of global markets had ‘wiped out the life savings of 80 per cent of the Russian population’ and ‘excluded a fifth of British households from work’. That has to be accepted: the ‘core’ divinity says so.[20](#)

There is no news from Africa. In the Media Age, the continent hardly exists. Rwanda was merely a vale of tears, while the memory struggles with the French, British and American manipulation of that tragedy, as it struggles with the imperial carnage in southern Africa in the 1980s, and in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Somalia, Panama and in all of Indo-China. The devastation of Vietnam ‘was *America’s* version of the Holocaust’, says a Hollywood movie writer.[21](#) The italics are mine; the astonishment is not. This recasting of our history is the subject of the chapter ‘Return to Vietnam’. The American attack on that country was a pivotal event of the twentieth century for a number of reasons, not least because it dramatically raised people’s consciousness

across the world and gave millions another way of seeing. It was this that earned the true spirits of the remarkable decade of the 1960s their retrospective trashing by those dedicated to bringing back the 'values' of a time when everybody knew their place.

I have described the attempt to re-impose these 'values' on the Vietnamese, whose resistance to them may well be their final, most decisive battle. That the gunfire is unheard makes it no less important than the great military siege of Dien Bien Phu. They have been told the price of their entry into the 'global economy': cities of sweatshops, a countryside of landlords: everything they fought against. The new foreign banks and private enterprises, wrote the journalist, Nhu T. Le, 'are meant to create a Hobbesian world of scarce resources inhabited by desperate people willing to do almost anything to feed their families. The marketeers are making an argument about human nature - that fear and greed are the fundamental human motivations. But in Vietnam, three million people in the grave serve as its greatest refutation.'[22](#)

The regression is already failing in one sense. There is, to paraphrase Graham Greene, a subterranean world of the mind where most people think what they want to think, and their thoughts are invariably at odds with and more civilised than those of their self-appointed betters. What they offer is not Utopia, simply a hidden reality.

In the United States, national surveys show that overwhelming majorities believe government is 'run for the benefit of the few and the special interests, not the people'; that the economic system is 'inherently unfair'; that 'business has gained too much power'; that 'the federal government must protect the most vulnerable in society, especially the poor and the elderly, by guaranteeing minimum living standards and providing social benefits', including support for the disabled, unemployment insurance, medical and child care. By twenty to one,

Americans want corporations to ‘sacrifice some profit’ for the benefit of ‘workers and communities’.²³ There is no doubt that some propaganda campaigns have had a profound effect, such as that described in Robert Parry’s *Fooling America*, which built a false ‘conservative consensus’ (extreme right wing) in the 1970s and 1980s; but, as Noam Chomsky has pointed out, the sheer resilience of social democratic attitudes is particularly striking in the light of such relentless brainwashing projects, on which billions of dollars are spent year upon year marketing ‘the capitalist story’.²⁴

In Britain, in the wake of New Labour’s victory, the *laissez-faire* guru Samuel Brittan wrote in the *Financial Times* that his followers should count themselves lucky to have Blair, as Labour would have certainly won on a socialist platform. The British public, he lamented, remains ‘hopelessly collectivist’.²⁵

Whether or not they are ‘collectivist’, there is a critical intelligence and common sense in the way most people arrive at their values. The crusaders in power must despair that in attacking single mothers and ‘naming and shaming’ deprived schools, they do not gain in popularity. Along with other surveys, the venerable *British Social Attitudes Survey* shows that the British people are not innately conservative, as journalists and politicians caricature them. On the contrary, they are increasingly tolerant and often supportive of the variety of ways people try to construct their personal lives. They reject overwhelmingly the growing divide between rich and poor – by a remarkable majority of 87 per cent, the highest in the survey’s history – and support the redistribution of wealth and income and tax-funded support for public services. Three-quarters believe that profit should be invested and go to the benefit of working people; barely 3 per cent believe that shareholders and managers should benefit.

The marketed wisdom is that the influence of class is less than it used to be: that there is even a classless 'new Britain'. The reverse is true; sons and daughters of unskilled workers are no more likely to go to university than they were in the 1970s, especially now that New Labour has ended free higher education. Three-quarters of the people surveyed believe that a class war is still being fought - here again, they represent the highest proportion since surveying began.²⁶

In my experience, these attitudes reflect qualities that endure throughout the world, regardless of whether people are tagged 'developed' or 'undeveloped'. In Papua New Guinea, a society the economists would describe as primitive but which, in reality, is sophisticated and civilised, there is a village socialism known as *wantok*. This ensures that no one ever has to face a serious problem alone. Whether it is finding money for an electricity bill or nursing for an elderly relative, there is a system of reciprocal care that keeps hardship and discontent at bay and evens out the distribution of wealth.

In Australia, Aboriginality means similar qualities of generosity and reciprocity among an ancient people who could not imagine extremes of wealth and poverty until these were forced upon them by European predators. Ironically, their undoing was partly due to their belief that all land was common and none of it was owned. In inviting the colonists to share it, and assuming they would not steal it, they set their own trap.

The same invasion continues by other means. The privileges of 'discovery and conquest' granted to Christopher Columbus in 1492, in a world the Pope 'considered his property to be disposed according to his will', have been replaced by other acts of piracy transformed into divine will. The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and other 'international' institutions are invested with the privileges of conquest on

behalf of the new papacy in Washington.²⁷ The objective is what Clinton calls the 'integration of countries into the global free market community', the terms of which, says the *New York Times*, 'require the United States to be involved in the plumbing and wiring of nations' internal affairs more deeply than ever before'. In other words: a *de facto* world government.

This world government was assiduously at work following the collapse of 'model capitalism' in Asia. Reported in the West as a 'bail out' by the International Monetary Fund, the IMF's 'rescue packages' represent an audacious takeover of Asian economies, notably that of South Korea, where local companies are being forced to surrender to foreign control and workers' rights are diminished under plans designed in Washington.

The success of the new Western mission is, however, far from certain. The present order, built on money, electronic technology and illusions, is chronically insecure. People everywhere feel this. The globalised stock market is threatening to follow the disintegration of the 'tiger' economies. More than 700 million are unemployed, thirty-five million in the wealthy countries. Most are young people and many are disaffected and angry. In the United States, where genuine trade union activity was pronounced dead twenty years ago, the victory of the United Parcel Service (UPS) workers in 1997, backed by the public, has shifted the mood of American workers. The Liverpool dockers, denied their union's backing at home and ignored or dismissed by the British media, have seen unprecedented demonstrations of solidarity around the world. While Europe's politicians, central bankers and establishment journalists debate with each other how best to impose a 'single currency' and so further destroy proper employment and social services, French workers have stopped their country and German, Spanish and Greek workers have demonstrated a similar resistance.

As for the 'underdeveloped' world, where the majority live, there are far too many politicised people for the finality of the imperial mission to be accepted. In the revolution that consumed South Africa in the 1980s, 'the anonymous individuals of a humiliated community', wrote Allister Sparks, 'seemed to draw strength from the crowd, gaining from it . . . an affirmation of their human worth. Their daily lives might seem meaningless, but here on these occasions the world turned out, with its reporters and its television cameras, to tell them it was not so, that their lives mattered, that humanity cared, that their cause was just; and when they clenched their fists and chanted their defiant slogans, they could feel they were proclaiming their equality and that their strength of spirit could overwhelm the guns and armoured vehicles waiting outside.'²⁸ And so it did: even if the euphoria may yet have to overcome an enduring system of economic apartheid administered by a black government.

'The hope for peace and justice in the world comes only from the tireless crusade of the common citizen,' wrote José Ramos-Horta, the East Timorese leader in exile. 'The mighty Soviet military arsenal did not prevent the break-up of the Soviet Union, the freedom of the captive Baltic and Eastern European nations, and the dismantling of the Berlin Wall. The tanks of Ferdinand Marcos and Nicolae Ceausescu could not hold back the demands of Filipinos and Romanians for freedom. The Eritreans fought a dogged battle of resistance against Ethiopia for thirty years while all around them said it was a hopeless struggle, yet Eritrea has now won its freedom. In East Timor we have survived Indonesia's brutal occupation, American, French and British complicity, the hypocrisy of countries like Australia and New Zealand that have put mercantile goods above morality and justice - none of this has crushed the Timorese will to be free.'²⁹

There are many such examples. In almost every country today - even in blighted Haiti - people's solidarity with each

other in the form of vibrant grass-roots organisations enables a form of democracy to function in spite of and in parallel with oppressive power often dressed up as democracy. The anarchist Colin Ward called this 'the seed beneath the snow'.

Eduardo Galeano, master poet of black irony, wrote, 'It seems there is no place for revolutions any more, other than in archaeological museum display cases, nor room for the left, except the repentant left willing to sit at the right of the bankers. We are all invited to the world burial of socialism. All of humanity is in the funeral procession, they claim. I must confess, I don't believe it. This funeral has mistaken the corpse.'³⁰

This book is a tribute to people who, in refusing to attend the funeral, have brought light into the hidden agendas of governments, corporations and their bureaucracies. They are those of the calibre of Mordechai Vanunu, who has endured twelve years of solitary confinement in Israel for heroically warning the world about Israel's nuclear threat, and Aung San Suu Kyi, who told me, with exquisite certainty while steel-helmeted troops waited outside her door, that Burma would be free 'within ten years'.

If this book is something of a 'J'accuse' directed at a journalism claiming to be free, it is also a tribute to those journalists who, by not consorting with power, begin the process of demystifying and disarming it. 'Truth is always subversive,' an Indonesian journalist friend told me, 'otherwise why should governments spend so much energy trying to suppress it?'

The other day I met Rotimi Sankore from Nigeria (it's not a recognisable name) in a pub in London. A shy and sardonic man in his early thirties, he is part of the resistance to a vicious regime of generals and colonels shored up by Western oil companies. The Lagos magazine he writes for, *Tempo*, survives in amazing circumstances. His editor-in-chief has spent nine months in prison and the assistant

editor, George Mbah, is being held at Biu prison in northern Nigeria, and has suffered head injuries. Three other editors, Chris Anyawu, Ben Charles Obi and Kunle Ajibade are in prison, and very sick. They were convicted by a secret military tribunal of being 'accessories after the fact of treason'. Known as the Innocent Four, they are immensely popular with the public for the physical and moral courage they have shown. Each was given a life sentence which, after public outrage, was commuted to fifteen years.

'That's a lifetime in a Nigerian prison,' said Rotimi Sankore. He described how *Tempo* still publishes and circulates from a network of safe houses and with printers and vendors willing to risk their freedom, even their lives. 'It is guerrilla journalism,' he said. 'We depend on the people for intelligence. When they tell us the soldiers are coming, we are on our way to the next location where the presses are waiting. When a military lorry parks near the vendors, they signal, and other vendors, out of sight, pick up the papers. We are all fugitives; it is a strange life, but a necessary one.' He was flying home that week. 'I will keep going until they catch me,' he said. 'That is my job: that is what people expect of me.'

JOHN PILGER

I

THE NEW COLD WAR

THE TERRORISTS

I use very big money. I use guns, too. The bums who insist on double-crossing me know what they are up against. City Hall understands what I'm saying. At least I hope they do.

*Al Capone, American Mafia
gangster*

You just give me the word and I'll turn that fucking little island into a parking lot.

*Al Haig, American Secretary of
State*

DIEGO GARCIA IS a British colony in the Indian Ocean, from which American bombers patrol the Middle East. There are few places as important to American military planners as this refuelling base between two continents. Who lives there? During President Clinton's attack on Iraq in 1996 a BBC commentator referred to the island as 'uninhabited' and gave no hint of its past. This was understandable, as the true story of Diego Garcia is instructive of times past and of the times we now live in.

Diego Garcia is part of the Chagos Archipelago, which ought to have been granted independence from Britain in 1965 along with Mauritius. However, at the insistence of the United States, the Government of Harold Wilson told the Mauritians they could have their freedom only if they gave up the island. Ignoring a United Nations resolution that called on the British 'to take no action which would dismember the territory of Mauritius and violate its territorial integrity', the British Government did just that, and in the process formed a new colony, the British Indian Overseas Territories. The reason and its hidden agenda soon became clear.[1](#)

In high secrecy, the Foreign Office leased the island to Washington for fifty years, with the option of a twenty-year extension.² The British prefer to deny this now, referring to a 'joint defence arrangement'.³ This is sophistry; today Diego Garcia serves as an American refuelling base and an American nuclear weapons dump. In 1991, President Bush used the island as a base from which to carpet-bomb Iraq. In the same year the Foreign Office told an aggrieved Mauritian government that the island's sovereignty was 'no longer negotiable'.⁴

Until 1965, the Ilois people were indigenous to Diego Garcia. With the militarisation of their island they were given a status rather like that of Australia's Aborigines in the nineteenth century: they were deemed not to exist. Between 1965 and 1973 they were 'removed' from their homes, loaded on to ships and planes and dumped in Mauritius. In 1972, the American Defense Department assured Congress that 'the islands are virtually uninhabited and the erection of the base will cause no indigenous political problems'. When asked about the whereabouts of the native population, a British Ministry of Defence official lied, 'There is nothing in our files about inhabitants or about an evacuation.'⁵

A Minority Rights Group study, which received almost no publicity when it was published in 1985, concluded that Britain expelled the native population 'without any workable re-settlement scheme; left them in poverty; gave them a tiny amount of compensation and later offered more on condition that the islanders renounced their rights ever to return home'. The Ilois were allowed to take with them 'minimum personal possessions, packed into a small crate'. Most ended up in the slums of the Mauritian capital, leading wretched, disaffected lives; the number who have since died from starvation and disease is unknown.⁶

This terror violated Articles 9 and 13 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, which states that 'no one

should be subjected to arbitrary exile' and 'everybody has the right to return to his country'.⁷ The Labour Foreign Secretary, Michael Stewart, told the US Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, 'The question of detaching bits of territory from colonies that were advancing towards self-government requires careful handling.' He later boasted to a Cabinet colleague, 'I think we have much to gain by proceeding with this project in association with the Americans.'⁸

No one caused a fuss. The islanders had no voice in London. 'Britain's treatment of the Ilois people', wrote John Madeley, author of the Minority Rights Group report, 'stands in eloquent and stark contrast with the way the people of the Falkland Islands were treated in 1982. The invasion of the Falklands was furiously resisted by British forces travelling 8,000 miles at a cost of more than a thousand million pounds and many British and Argentinian lives. Diego Garcia was handed over without its inhabitants - far from being defended - even being consulted before being removed.'⁹

While there was silence in the media on the British atrocity in Diego Garcia, there was resounding condemnation of the Argentinian invasion of the Falklands. Both were British territories; the difference was between a brown-skinned indigenous nation and white settlers. The *Financial Times* called the Falklands invasion an 'illegal and immoral means to make good territorial claims', as well as an 'outrage' that should not be allowed to 'pass over the wishes of the Falkland Islanders'.¹⁰ Echoing Prime Minister Thatcher, the *Daily Telegraph* said 'the wishes of the [Falkland] islanders were paramount', that 'these islanders' must not be 'betrayed' and that 'principle dictates' that the British and American governments could not possibly 'be indifferent to the imposition of foreign rule on people who have no desire for it'.¹¹

Diego Garcia is a microcosm of empire and of the Cold War, old and new. The unchanging nature of the 500-year