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Freedom Next Time

John Pilger

About the Book

When Nelson Mandela stepped out of prison to freedom in 1990, the elation in South Africa and around the world was palpable. But true freedom for his people remains a distant dream. Why? From South Africa to India, Palestine to Afghanistan and beyond, a rapacious economic system condemns millions to poverty while men in decorous offices far away impose a ruthless political order with tariffs and embargoes, bombs and bullets, distorting the very language of freedom, causing suffering they never know, spilling blood they never smell.

Freedom Next Time is renowned journalist and film-maker John Pilger's brilliant depiction of how courageous people battling to free themselves often glimpse freedom, only to see it taken away. He challenges us in the West to 'look in the mirror' at the actions of 'our' governments for the true source of much of the world's fear and insecurity - and terrorism.

In Palestine, India, South Africa, Afghanistan, Britain and the United States, John Pilger's vivid eyewitness reporting, backed by meticulous research, blows away the secrets and lies of our rulers and turns a searchlight on to events consigned to the shadows by an unrecognised yet virulent censorship. With humanity, wit and passion, he salutes people who refuse to be victims and defiantly demand their freedom. They could soon be us.

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FREEDOM
NEXT TIME

John Pilger

For Louis,
born as this was being written

Acknowledgements

This book could not have been completed without the help and support of the following people, to whom I give my warmest appreciation: Anthony Arnove, Terry Bell, Patrick Bond, Jill Chisholm, John Cooley, Ania Corless, Ann Cunningham, Cosmas Desmond, Roger Diski, Helen Edwards, Mona El-Farra, Sally Gaminara, Richard Gifford, Amira Hass, Jane Hill, Mike Holderness, Jacqueline Korn, Sheila Lee, Nur Masalha, Ray McGovern, Chris Martin, Gavin Morris, Ilan Pappé, Sam Pilger, Zoë Pilger, Nida Rafa, Jaine Roberts, Vicki Robinson, Stephen Rudoff, Laura Sherlock, Gil Sochat, Gillian Somerscales, Margie Struthers.

Rise like lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number.
Shake your chains to earth like dew.
Which in sleep has fallen on you.
Ye are many - they are few.

Percy Bysshe Shelley
The Mask of Anarchy

Introduction

This book is about empire, its façades and the enduring struggle of people for their freedom. It offers an antidote to authorised versions of contemporary history that censor by omission and impose double standards. It is, I hope, a contribution to what Vandana Shiva calls 'an insurrection of subjugated knowledge'.¹

When I began as a journalist, there was something called 'slow news'. We would refer to 'slow news days' (usually Sunday) when 'nothing happened' - apart, that is, from triumphs and tragedies in faraway places where most of humanity lived. The triumphs, the painstaking gains of people yearning to be free, were rarely acknowledged. The tragedies were dismissed as acts of nature, regardless of evidence to the contrary. Our terms of reference were those of great power, such as 'our' governments and 'our' institutions. The 'view from the ground' had value only if it reinforced that from on high. Whole societies were described and measured by their relationship with 'us': their usefulness to 'our interests' and their degree of compliance with (or hostility to) our authority. Above all, they were not 'us'.

These colonial assumptions have not changed. To sustain them, millions of people remain invisible, and expendable. On September 11, 2001, while the world lamented the deaths of innocent people in the United States, the UN Food and Agricultural Organisation reported that the daily mortality rate continued: 36,615 children had died from the effects of extreme poverty. This was normal in the age of 'economic growth'.²

The expendable people of impoverished Nicaragua fed this statistic. In the early 1980s, the historian Mark Curtis surveyed five hundred articles in the British press that dealt with Nicaragua. He found an almost universal suppression of the triumphs of the Sandinista government in favour of the falsehood of 'the threat of a communist takeover', which was then Anglo-American propaganda. 'It would take considerable intellectual acrobatics,' he wrote, 'to designate Sandinista success in alleviating poverty - remarkable by any standard - as unworthy of much comment by objective indicators ... One might reasonably conclude that the reporting was conditioned by a different set of priorities, one that conformed to the stream of disinformation from Washington and London.'³

Meanwhile, the atrocious misadventure known as the 'Iran-Contra affair' was represented in Washington as a domestic embarrassment for the Reagan administration rather than a conspiracy to bleed to death the Nicaraguan government, whose only threat was that of a good example. That countless innocent people were killed or denied the opportunity to free themselves from poverty, disease and illiteracy was never an 'issue'. A subsequent ruling by the International Court of Justice distinguished the Reagan administration as the only government the court has ever condemned for 'terrorism', calling on it to pay the Nicaraguan government \$17 billion in reparations. This was ignored and the matter long forgotten, for it was the slowest news.⁴

The following year, 1987, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution that all member states should combat 'terrorism wherever and by whomever it is committed'. Only two states voted against it: the United States and Israel. At the time, this was unreported. When Ronald Reagan died, he was lauded as a 'great communicator', a leader of magnetic personal charm. His terrorism and lawlessness were unmentionable.⁵

The current occupation of Iraq is seen from the same parallel world. When the BBC's Director of News, Helen Boaden, was asked in January 2006 to explain how one of her 'embedded' reporters in Iraq could possibly describe the aim of the Anglo-American invasion as 'bring[ing] democracy and human rights' to Iraq, she replied with sheaves of quotations from Tony Blair that this was indeed his aim, as if his now notorious mendacity and the truth were compatible. No other evidence was required.⁶ Such matter-of-fact servility to the state used to bemuse Soviet journalists visiting the West during the Cold War. 'How do you achieve that?' one of them once joked. 'In our country, to get that result, we tear out fingernails!'⁷

On March 28, 2003, during the attack on Iraq, sixty-two people were killed by an American missile that exploded in the al-Shula district of Baghdad. That evening, *Newsnight*, the BBC's only regular televised current affairs programme, devoted forty-five seconds to the massacre – less than one second per death. Contrast that with July 7, 2005, when the terrorist bombing of London killed almost the same number of people and received such coverage that overnight we became intimate with the lives of the victims, and could mourn their loss or salute their courage.

In other words, for the men, women and children blown to pieces in Baghdad, the solidarity we extended naturally to the London victims was denied; we were not allowed to know them. Why? Certainly, they were not 'us', but they *were* 'our' victims – that is, they had died at the hands of forces in collusion with our government, and in our name.

As I began to write this, early in 2006, three families in three different towns in Iraq were wiped out by American missiles and bombs. One family had seventeen members and the others fourteen and seven; the victims were mostly women, the elderly and children. Their violent extinction caused not a ripple in that man-made phenomenon known as the 'mainstream', the main source of what we call news.

Browsing the internet, I happened to read all seventeen names of the dead of the first family. Their names and ages had been meticulously collected and posted by an independent American reporter, Dahr Jamail, whose outstanding eye-witness and investigative work never appears in the 'mainstream'.⁸

The innocent people killed in London were worthy victims. The innocent people killed in Iraq were unworthy victims. Put another way, the London massacre was worthy of our compassion; the Iraqi outrages were not.

This logic does not always follow a true course. When the late Saddam Hussein was in power and being courted and armed to the teeth by 'us', notably with the technology to build weapons of mass destruction, Iraqi Kurds massacred by him were slow news. When, in 1988, Saddam attacked the Kurdish village of Halabja with nerve gas, killing five thousand people, the British and American governments did their best to discourage coverage of the atrocity; the Americans went as far as blaming it on Iran. When I enquired at the time, I was told by the Foreign Office in London that it was 'far too easy' to blame Saddam.

However, in 1991, when Saddam displeased his sponsors in Washington and London by attacking another of their clients, Kuwait, and was now an official enemy, the plight of Iraqi Kurds suddenly became a great charitable cause in the West. Headlines and TV footage were lavished on them. They were made worthy victims *par excellence*. Alas, this change of status did not apply to the Kurds across the border in Turkey, even though they were part of the same dispossessed nation and were being slaughtered in far greater numbers by the Turkish military. The Ankara regime is a member of NATO and beneficiary of Anglo-American, World Bank and IMF 'aid'. Indeed, at the height of the Turkish Kurds' agony, the Turkish military received \$8 billion worth of American gifts of tanks, planes,

helicopters and ships.⁹ In 2007, Turkey's Kurds remain unworthy victims.

By the same rule of thumb, a crime is only a crime if the perpetrators are 'them', not 'us'. In his epic acceptance of the 2005 Nobel Prize in Literature, Harold Pinter referred to 'a vast tapestry of lies, upon which we feed'. He asked why 'the systematic brutality, the widespread atrocities, the ruthless suppression of independent thought' of Stalinist Russia were well known in the West while American imperial crimes were merely 'superficially recorded, let alone documented, let alone acknowledged'.

He was referring to a great silence, unbroken by the incessant din of the media age. Across the world, the extinction and suffering of countless human beings could be attributed to rampant America. 'But you wouldn't know it,' said Pinter. 'It never happened. Nothing ever happened. Even while it was happening it never happened. It didn't matter. It was of no interest.'¹⁰

To its shame, though unsurprisingly, the BBC ignored Pinter's warning. All that drawing-room flatulence about the arts, all that preening for the cameras at Booker prize-givings, yet the national broadcaster could not make room for Britain's greatest living dramatist, so honoured, to tell the truth. For the BBC, it never happened.

Soon afterwards, bereft of irony, the newsreader Fiona Bruce introduced, as news, a Christmas propaganda film about George W. Bush's dogs. The film showed how kind the President and his family were. That happened. Now imagine Bruce reading this: 'Here is delayed news, just in. From 1945 to 2005, the United States attempted to overthrow fifty governments, many of them democracies, and to crush thirty popular movements fighting tyrannical regimes. In the process, twenty-five countries were bombed, causing the loss of several million lives and the despair of millions more.'¹¹

One of the striking features of the post-Cold War era has been the public rehabilitation of the concept of empire. Like Prime Minister Harold Macmillan secretly in the 1950s, a new crop of imperialists now openly laments the 'loss of white prestige' that was the old imperialism and the denigration of 'our' culture.¹² 'Culture' has become the code for race and class; revisionism is all the rage. The *Wall Street Journal* has lauded Britain's and France's disastrous imperial adventure in Suez in 1956, describing American opposition as 'perhaps the biggest strategic mistake in the post-war era'.¹³ The Cambridge academic John Casey has rejoiced that the Western powers now 'can do what they like [in the developing world]'.¹⁴

'It is easy to forget,' wrote Frank Furedi in *The New Ideology of Imperialism*, 'that until the 1930s the moral claims of imperialism were seldom questioned in the West. Imperialism and the global expansion of the Western powers were represented in unambiguously positive terms as a major contributor to human civilisation ... To be an imperialist was considered a respectable, political badge.'¹⁵ As the United States emerged from the Second World War and shed what 'Atlanticists' like to call its 'age of innocence' (forgetting the slaughter of the Native Americans, slavery, the theft of Texas from Mexico, the bloody subjugation of Central America, Cuba and the Philippines, and other innocent pursuits), 'imperialism' was dropped from American textbooks and declared a European affair. One of the difficulties for proud imperialists in the immediate post-war period was that Hitler and fascism, and all their ideas of racial and cultural superiority, had left a legacy of guilt by association. The Nazis had been proud imperialists, too.

A serious, if farcical, campaign to expunge the word from the language followed 'on the grounds that it falsely attributed immoral motives to Western foreign policy'. The term was deemed to no longer have 'relevance'. Those who

persisted in using it as a pejorative term were 'disreputable' and 'sinister'. They were, wrote one American historian, 'inspired by the Communist doctrine', or they were 'Negro intellectuals who had grievances of their own against white capitalism'.¹⁶

In the best Stalinist tradition, imperialism was airbrushed out. 'The Cold War intelligentsia,' wrote Furedi, 'by denying the centrality of the imperial identity to Western society, were denying their own past. They did not deny that imperialism was something to be ashamed of, they merely denied all association with it.'¹⁷

That changed in the 1990s. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the imperialists took heart. The economic and political crises in the 'developing' world, caused by the collapse in commodity prices and the ravages of debt, would now serve as retrospective justification for imperialism. Once again, the 'third world' needed to be saved from itself. Imperialism's return journey to establishment respectability had begun.

Written up by Bush's ideological sponsors shortly before he came to power in 2000, a messianic conspiracy theory called the 'Project for the New American Century' foresaw his administration as an imperial dictatorship behind a democratic façade: 'the cavalry on the new American frontier' that could 'fight and win multiple, simultaneous major theatre wars'.¹⁸ The attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001 ensured the theory became practice; a fraudulent 'war on terror' became a war of terror.

A Pentagon plan entitled 'Vision 2020' had already identified the goal as 'full spectrum dominance'. This would allow 'the medium of space, the fourth medium of warfare - along with land, sea and air - to close the ever-widening gap between diminishing resources and increasing military commitments'.¹⁹ General John Jumper of the US Air Force predicted that the planet could be easily mastered because American forces enjoyed 'God's eye' from satellites and

commanded 'the global information grid'.²⁰ He had a point. More than 725 American bases are now placed strategically in compliant countries, notably at gateways to sources of fossil fuels and encircling the Middle East and Central Asia.²¹

No longer whispered, 'empire' is a word to be embraced again. The British treasurer Gordon Brown has told the *Daily Mail*, 'The days of Britain having to apologise for the British empire are over. We should celebrate.'²² The historian Andrew Roberts insisted in the *Daily Express* that for 'the vast majority of its half-millennium-long history, the British empire was an exemplary force for good'.²³ In the *Daily Telegraph*, the military historian John Keegan declared the empire 'highly benevolent and moralistic'.²⁴ Applauding Blair's moral gunboats and Gladstonian convictions of superiority, Niall Ferguson, professor of politics at Oxford, said, 'Imperialism may be a dirty word, but when Tony Blair is essentially calling for the imposition of Western values - democracy and so on - it is really the language of liberal imperialism ... imposing your views and practices on others.'²⁵

Ferguson's honesty is provocative to the 'liberal realists' who dominate the study of international relations in Britain and teach that the new imperialists are the world's crisis managers, rather than the cause of a crisis. With honourable exceptions, these scholars of 'geopolitics' have taken the humanity out of the study of nations and congealed it with a jargon that serves great power. Laying out whole societies for autopsy, they identify 'failed states' and 'rogue states', inviting 'humanitarian intervention' - a term used by imperial Japan to describe its bloody invasion of Manchuria. (Mussolini also used it to justify seizing Ethiopia, as did Hitler when the Nazis drove into the Sudetenland.)²⁶

There are minor variations. Michael Ignatieff, former professor of human rights at Harvard and an enthusiastic

backer of the West's invasions, prefers 'liberal intervention'.²⁷ From the same lexicon of modern imperial euphemisms have come 'good international citizen' (a Western vassal) and 'good governance' (a neo-liberal economy run by the World Bank/IMF). Once noble concepts have been appropriated: 'democracy' (pro-Washington regime) and 'reform' (dismantling genuine social reforms) and 'peacemaking' (war). Remarkably, academics and commentators still describe Tony Blair and Bill Clinton as 'centre-left', a denial of the historical record.

The 'centre', of course, is liberal and reasonable, because liberalism is non-ideological. That is the mythical touchstone of the world's most powerful ideology. Tony Blair, wrote the *Guardian* columnist Hugo Young in 1997, 'wants to create a world none of us have known, where the laws of political gravity are overturned [and] ideology has surrendered entirely to "values"'.²⁸ That Blair would commit, in pursuit of these 'values', the crime of invading, unprovoked, a defenceless country, which the Nuremberg judges described as 'the paramount war crime', was unthinkable. 'It's a nice and convenient myth that liberals are the peacemakers and conservatives the warmongers,' wrote Hywel Williams, 'but the imperialism of the liberal may be more dangerous because of its open-ended nature - its conviction that it represents a superior form of life.'²⁹

It is not surprising that the 'liberal' Blair has taken Britain to war more often than any Prime Minister in the modern era, or that his closest ally, or mentor, is George W. Bush, considered by a large section of humanity the most dangerous man on earth. What unites them is not their extremism, but a time-honoured orthodoxy, celebrated relentlessly in the 'mainstream'. This, wrote Richard Falk, professor of international relations at Princeton and a distinguished dissenter, 'regards law and morality as irrelevant to the identification of rational policy'. Thus, Western policies and actions have long been formulated

'through a self-righteous, one-way, legal/moral screen [with] positive images of Western values and innocence portrayed as threatened, validating a campaign of unrestricted political violence...' This 'is so widely accepted ... as to be virtually unchallengeable'.³⁰

Freedom Next Time pushes back this one-way moral screen to demonstrate that imperialism, in whatever guise, is the antithesis of the 'benevolent and moralistic'. Each chapter is set in a country with which I have had long association as a reporter and film-maker. Along with a sense of history, I have tried to convey something of what I have seen and what has moved me - the everyday pain, dark humour and generosity of lives lived a long way away and conveniently dehumanised in a surreal assembly line of 'sound-bites', from the children playing among cluster bombs in Kabul to the ritual humiliations forced upon Palestinians, to the determination of impoverished South African women in erecting their own modern homes. The stories are those both of eye-witnesses and of the powerful, including voices that speak from the bunkers of British imperialism where they wrote their true intentions, not intended for our eyes.

These phantom truth-tellers appear in [chapter 1](#), 'Stealing a Nation'. Knowing this story as I do, I still find its criminal audacity almost incredible. In high secrecy, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, British governments tricked, coerced and finally expelled the entire population of the Chagos Islands in the Indian Ocean in order to give the principal island, Diego Garcia, a paradise, to the Americans for a military base. From here, Iraq and Afghanistan have been attacked. That the islanders were British citizens and had roots in the islands that went back to the eighteenth century, that they spoke their own language and practised their own culture, made no difference. Methodically, they were kidnapped by their own government and sent into exile to the slums of Mauritius,

where untold numbers have wasted away, including children who died 'simply of sadness', as their mothers told me.

The ruthlessness was explicit - 'the object is to get some rocks which will remain *ours*'. The United Nations was lied to, as if none of this was happening. While Margaret Thatcher and the British media cheered on the Royal Navy as it sped to the rescue of two thousand white Falkland islanders in 1982, not a word was uttered about the brutal dispossession of two thousand Chagos islanders, who are black. When, eighteen years later, the islanders glimpsed their freedom in a High Court judgement that ruled they had been wronged and could go home, they were tricked again by the Blair government; a decree passed by 'royal prerogative', an archaic, secretive mechanism, was used to circumvent the law and justice.

In a landmark judgement in May, 2006, the High Court overturned the decree, describing the government's treatment of the islanders as 'repugnant'.³¹ The government has appealed, and as I write this early in 2007, a decision is anxiously awaited. The injustice already done is a metaphor for the great piracy begun more than five hundred years ago when European buccaneers were granted the privileges of 'discovery and conquest' in a world the Pope and kings considered their property, to be disposed of according to their divine right. This assumption of divinity has not changed.

The title of [chapter 2](#), 'The Last Taboo', is taken from an essay by the Palestinian-born writer and scholar Edward Said, published shortly before his death in 2002. He wrote, 'The extermination of the Native Americans can be admitted, the morality of Hiroshima attacked, the national flag [of the United States] publicly committed to the flames. But the systematic continuity of Israel's 52-year oppression and maltreatment of the Palestinians is virtually

unmentionable, a narrative that has no permission to appear.'³²

The narrative begins almost forty years ago when I arrived in Palestine as a young correspondent and listened to Palestinians and Israelis, and saw the barren refugee camps. In describing the 'destructive role' of foreign journalists who ignored the history and context of Palestinian frustration and violence, Edward Said understood the taboo many of us saw and privately deplored while nourishing and prolonging lethal myths.

In 2002, a Glasgow University study found that barely 9 per cent of young British viewers of television news knew that the Israelis were the occupying force and that the illegal settlers were Jewish: many believed them to be Palestinian. The term 'Occupied Territories' was rarely explained, and people were not told that the Palestinians were the victims of an illegal military occupation. Language was used selectively, terms such as 'murder' and 'atrocities' applied exclusively to the deaths of Israelis. Only they were worthy victims. The deaths of Palestinians were not so much slow news as non-existent news.³³

At the end of 2005, when Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon fell seriously ill and was hailed as a 'man of peace' whose 'hope for a Palestinian state' might be 'lost' should he die, it seemed the ghost of Lewis Carroll had finally made off with the forbidden narrative. And when, soon afterwards, Hamas was elected to office in the Occupied Territories and Gaza, the news was received in the West through the same looking-glass. The wrong kind of democracy had spoken and a Brechtian solution was surely called for: 'To dissolve the people / And elect another'. That the ascent of Hamas was due in no small part to the secret, machiavellian support of Israel and to an Anglo-American campaign to destroy secular Arabism and its 'moderate' dreams of freedom was unfathomable.³⁴ That Hamas, moreover, had quietly undergone an historic ideological

shift and now recognized the reality of Israel was unmentionable.³⁵

In his 2001 history, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, Mike Davis writes that as many as twenty-nine million Indians died unnecessarily in famines wilfully imposed by British policies. He relates how in 1876 the Viceroy, Lord Lytton, insisted that nothing should prevent the export of surplus wheat and rice to England and that officials were ordered to 'discourage relief works in every way'. As millions starved, the imperial government launched 'a militarised campaign to collect the tax arrears accumulated during the drought'. In the north-west provinces alone, which had brought in record harvests in the preceding three years, at least one and a quarter million people died.³⁶

Stalin in the Ukraine would subsequently match this, infamously; and this was Harold Pinter's point: we know of Stalin's crimes; we know next to nothing of our own. It is a tribute to the elite promotion of that 'exemplary force for good' that the India of the Raj remains mainly a source of nostalgia. While young Britons are taught modern history largely conditioned by the evils of Hitler and the 'good war' – that 'ethical bath where the sins of centuries of conquest, slavery and exploitation were expiated', as Richard Drayton wrote – the story of how the British Raj brought its own dimension of imperial suffering to India is, at most, a footnote.³⁷

In my [chapter 3](#), 'Shining India', the legacy of the Raj is present in independent India: in the elite denial of enduring poverty. I first went to India in the 1960s, at the height of a famine in Rajasthan. As in the time of the Raj, the term 'famine' was officially frowned upon; 'emergency' was preferred. Those who enquired too deeply into the criminal absurdity of Indian mass impoverishment were unwelcome; several foreign film-makers were banned. In 2004, after a long absence, I returned to India's greatest city, Bombay, where the mighty freedom movements had rallied and

Gandhi had lived and, today, a new empire has arrived: that of Bushite 'free trade', bourgeois consumerism, call centres, a ferocious meritocracy and a new struggle for freedom.

In 1967, I was banned from apartheid South Africa. Thirty years later, I flew back. Nelson Mandela was President, the 'rainbow nation' had been declared and apartheid was dead. Great men and great events had convinced the outside world that freedom had arrived, and black South Africans felt the thrill of freedom as they queued patiently to vote for the first time in their lives.

The betrayal of their struggle, goodwill and optimism is described in [chapter 4](#), 'Apartheid Did Not Die'. This was the title of a documentary film I made on my return, which stirred spirited debate in South Africa. Apartheid took its name and mysticism from the first Boer regime, but its lifeblood flowed from the British imperial legacy of Cecil Rhodes and other 'men of commerce and industry', who at the turn of the twentieth century stole the land, resources and economic birthright of the majority. The poverty they created has not been turned back in 'free' South Africa, as the African National Congress solemnly pledged. In the 'townships', conditions are described as 'desperate', with more than five million hungry children and a health system unable to cope with epidemic disease, such as AIDS and tuberculosis.³⁸

A new elite has emerged, the product of 'black empowerment' and the beneficiary of nefarious deals with the white power that still runs South Africa. 'We seek to establish', said Trevor Manuel, the Finance Minister, 'an environment in which winners flourish.'³⁹ However, members of the tribe known sardonically as the 'waBenzi' (the Mercedes Benz is their preferred means of transport) are beginning to look over their shoulders at the great struggles of the past, for their compatriots are stirring again and demanding more than symbols. Community

uprisings are common again as townships and squatter camps are torched, along with the buildings of authority. In the global apartheid created by modern economic imperialism, today's South Africa provides both a spectre and a warning.

As the first American bombs fell on Afghanistan in October 2001, retribution for the attacks on America five weeks earlier, President Bush broadcast the following message to his far-off victims: 'The oppressed people of Afghanistan will know the generosity of America. As we strike military targets, we will also drop food, medicine and supplies to the starving and suffering men and women and children of Afghanistan. The United States is a friend of the Afghan people.'⁴⁰

The previous week, Tony Blair had said memorably: 'To the Afghan people, we make this commitment. We will not walk away ... If the Taliban regime changes, we will work with you to make sure its successor is one that is broad-based, that unites all ethnic groups and offers some way out of the poverty that is your miserable existence.'⁴¹

In the final chapter, 'Liberating Afghanistan', their words are set against the consequences of their actions. The attack on Afghanistan, said to be the first 'victory' in the 'war on terror', caused the deaths of almost seven times the number that died in the Twin Towers. As the Taliban melted away, the country was taken over by some of the world's most brutal men, the same warlords America had nurtured during the Soviet occupation, who had reduced Kabul, the capital, to rubble. The 'liberal intervention' in Afghanistan is today a surreal concoction. The American-arranged 'democracy' includes, for example, Mulavi Qalamuddin, the Taliban's head of the Department for the Prevention of Vice and the Promotion of Virtue, who enforced Sharia law through unusual forms of punishment and physical abuse. The liberation of women is a mirage. While al-Qaida is nowhere to be found, American patrols

flying outsized Stars and Stripes and playing rock music at full volume attack isolated villages and 'render' their 'suspects' to a CIA gulag. Meanwhile, assisted once again by the American 'ally' Pakistan, the Taliban are fighting their way back.

When I heard Donald Rumsfeld, then US Defense Secretary, describe Afghanistan today as a 'model' of democracy, I thought how my favourite chronicler of the absurdities of war, Joseph Heller, would appreciate this assessment. In [chapter 5](#), I relate a conversation I had with a colonel on an American base, who resembled uncannily 'Major Major' in Heller's *Catch-22*. Tony Blair's Home Secretary, John Reid, also seemed to step from the pages of *Catch-22* when he announced that the 'war on terror' in Afghanistan was 'absolutely interlinked to countering narcotics'.⁴² The main export of the 'model' democracy is heroin, which the Taliban had successfully banned and from which the current, democratic warlords are making their fortunes. The drug ends up on the streets of cities like Glasgow. Such is the 'great game of nations' which pith-helmeted Englishmen evolved and their successors do proud.

After leaving Afghanistan, I flew to the United States, where a rebellion within the 'old' establishment is under way. I met Ray McGovern, a former CIA analyst who had once prepared the daily briefing for the White House. When I said to him that Norman Mailer believed that America had entered a 'pre-fascist' state, he was silent, then said, 'I hope he's right, because there are others saying that we are already in a fascist mode. When you see who is controlling the means of production here, when you see who is controlling the newspapers and periodicals, and the TV stations, from which most Americans take their news, and when you see how the so-called war on terror is being conducted, you begin to understand where we are headed ... so yes, we all ought to be worried about fascism.'⁴³

Another establishment voice, Paul Craig Roberts, a former associate editor of the *Wall Street Journal* and Assistant Secretary of the Treasury under Reagan, wrote,

The United States is starting to acquire the image of Nazi Germany. Knowledgeable people should have no trouble drawing up their own list of elements common to both the Bush and Hitler regimes: the use of extraordinary lies to justify military aggression; reliance on coercion and threats in place of diplomacy; total belief in the virtue and righteousness of one's cause; the equating of factual objections or 'reality-based' analysis to treason; the redirection of patriotism from country to leader; the belief that defeat resides in debate and a weakening of will.⁴⁴

'Fascism' is too easily used as abuse or as a neat label for all the world's evils, but what is striking about the debate in America today is the recurring warning of conservatives who believe in the separation of powers under the constitution. 'In effect,' wrote Roberts, 'Bush is asserting the powers that accrued to Hitler in 1933 ... Thus has the US arrived at the verge of dictatorship.'⁴⁵

In 2005, the US Senate, in effect, voted to abolish habeas corpus when it passed an amendment that overturned a Supreme Court ruling allowing Guantanamo Bay prisoners access to a federal court. On October 17, President Bush signed a bill that legalised torture and kidnapping and all but confirmed the repeal of habeas corpus and the Bill of Rights. The CIA can now legally abduct people and 'render' them to secret prisons in countries where they are likely to be tortured. Evidence extracted under torture is now permissible in 'military commissions'; people can be sentenced to death based on testimony beaten out of witnesses, and on hearsay.⁴⁶ You are now guilty until confirmed guilty. And you are a

'terrorist' if you commit what George Orwell in *Ninety Eighty-Four* called 'thoughtcrimes'. Bush has revived the prerogatives of the Tudor and Stuart monarchs: the power of unrestricted lawlessness.

Many Americans believe these are the features of a rapidly emerging dictatorship. Without habeas corpus and the 'due process' provisions of the Bill of Rights, a government can lock away its opponents and implement a dictatorship. A not untypical case is that of an American doctor who was punished with twenty-two years in prison for founding a charity, Help the Needy, which helped children in Iraq stricken by the economic blockade enforced by America and Britain in the 1990s. In raising money for infants dying from diarrhoea, Dr Rafil Dhafir broke this siege which, according to UNICEF, had caused the deaths of half a million infants under the age of five.⁴⁷ The then Attorney-General, John Ashcroft, called Dr Dhafir a 'terrorist', a description derided by even the judge in what was a transparently political trial.⁴⁸

Secretly, Bush has assumed the power of a variety of 'signing statements'. These are little-known decrees that circumvent laws passed by Congress and allow him to ignore legislation, not to mention the Geneva Convention, forbidding torture of prisoners. After all, blurted out the President, the US Constitution 'is just a goddamned piece of paper'.⁴⁹

Along with the intelligence agencies, the Pentagon has expanded its domestic surveillance to 'investigate crimes within the United States'.⁵⁰ In the CIA gulag, torture and murder are admitted. In Iraq, the true extent of the slaughter and the punishment of the civilian population, notably the massacres and use of white phosphorus weapons in the city of Fallujah, is masked by a successful, 'embedded' system of reporting. In 2004, a peer-reviewed study by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore, published in the British medical

journal *The Lancet*, suggested a 'conservative' figure of a hundred thousand killed by mostly American firepower.⁵¹ Four other studies estimate a higher figure.⁵² Two years later, the same prestigious organisation, together with Al Mustansiriya University in Baghdad, published in *The Lancet* the results of a revised (and courageous) field study. 'We estimate,' the researchers wrote, 'that, as a consequence of the coalition invasion of March 18, 2003, 655,000 Iraqis have died.'⁵³ Unlike the hostile response to the earlier study, the BBC and at least two national newspapers made this their main news item. In the United States, the *Lancet* report was buried; the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* relegated their original reference to it to pages eight and twelve respectively. Today, Americans have little idea of the staggering price paid in blood by those illegally invaded by their government.

They are unaware that a once bountiful land is being poisoned by an invisible weapon of mass destruction: radiation from uranium-tipped weapons (known as 'depleted' uranium) and equivalent to many times that released by the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs. Children are especially vulnerable because they play in heavily polluted areas, where cancers have increased thirty-fold. More than half of Iraq's cancer sufferers are under the age of five. I have seen the hospital wards filled with these little, mutated ghosts.⁵⁴

Once I believed that if only those with power and responsibility had seen what I had seen, the horror and degradation of war, they would act otherwise. That was naïve, for only the power of popular dissent changes their course, or rids us of them. They understand that. That is why, as the legal powers of the state are criminalised, so is dissent.

In Britain, from January 1, 2006, you can be arrested for the most minor offences. This is clearly directed at peaceful protest. Maya Evans, a vegan chef aged twenty-five, will

have a criminal record for the rest of her life. She was arrested under the new Serious Organised Crime and Police Act for reading aloud at the Cenotaph in London the names of ninety-seven British soldiers killed in Iraq. So serious was her crime that it took fourteen policemen in two vans to arrest her.⁵⁵

Eighty-year-old John Catt, who served in the Royal Air Force during the Second World War, was stopped by police in Brighton for wearing an 'offensive' T-shirt which suggested that Bush and Blair be tried for war crimes. He was arrested under the Terrorism Act and handcuffed, with his arms wrenched behind his back. The office record of his arrest says the 'purpose' of searching him was 'terrorism' and the 'grounds for intervention' were 'carrying a plackard and T-shirt with anti-Blair info' (*sic*). At the time of writing, he is awaiting trial for refusing to accept a police caution.⁵⁶

This capture of the law for political ends is no different from the subversion of the High Court's original judgement in favour of the Chagos islanders. Is this the beginning of a kind of fascism in which great goose-stepping rallies are quite unnecessary? George Orwell warned that totalitarianism did not require a totalitarian state. The consequences of decisions taken by respectable, 'democratic' politicians are now evocative of decisions taken by fascists.

The difference is distance. The entire population of the British archipelago of Chagos was rounded up and expelled, the women and children forced into the hold of a ship without fresh water in a fashion reminiscent of slavery. While that was going on, Britons at home remained free, protected by laws. Now that is changing. The distance is diminishing.

I have written *Freedom Next Time* to warn against these dangers and to celebrate those who challenge them. It takes up the theme of my previous books, such as *Heroes*,

Distant Voices and *Hidden Agendas*, the last having been recently distinguished with a 'denied' stamp by the censors of Guantanamo Bay.⁵⁷ This is not a pessimistic book. In my experience, most people do not indulge the absurdity of rapacious power's 'rules'. They do not contort their morality and intellect to comply with double standards and the notion of approved evil, of worthy and unworthy victims. They would agree wholeheartedly with Robert Jackson, Chief Counsel of the United States at the Nuremberg trials of the Nazi leaders. 'If certain acts of violation of treaties are crimes,' he said, 'they are crimes whether the United States does them or whether Germany does them, and we are not prepared to lay down a rule of criminal conduct against others which we would not be willing to have invoked against us.'⁵⁸

In Britain, opinion polls show that the majority oppose the invasion and occupation of Iraq and believe the Prime Minister has lied to them. In the 2005 British general election, barely a fifth of the adult population voted for the Blair government in the second lowest turnout since the franchise. This was not apathy; it was an undeclared strike that reflects a rising awareness, consciousness even, offering more than hope. For all New Labour's investment in public relations and 'spin', declared a *Guardian* editorial, 'after nearly a decade in power the British public now mistrusts the government machine to a degree unmatched in the democratic era'. Only estate agents and tabloid journalists are trusted less.⁵⁹ No mention was made of the part the 'serious' media has played in this cynicism.

Since the crusaders in Washington squandered the sympathy of most of humanity for the victims of September 11, 2001, in order to accelerate their own dominance, a critical public intelligence has stirred. Canards such as 'anti-American', which were once used to stifle real debate about the nature of great power, are defunct, thanks to the Bushites. Generations immersed in Cold War propaganda

and the legacy of its myths have heard the penny drop. No longer do millions in the West see the rest of humanity merely through the eyes of their rulers and journalists; nor do they any more regard their governments as essentially benign. This awakening is expressed in a number of striking ways. Witness the spectacular response of people in the West to the tsunami of December 26, 2004. While Bush offered less than the cost of his inauguration party and Blair one-twentieth of a loan given to the Indonesian regime so that it could buy British military aircraft, ordinary people gave millions. More than charity, this was a reclaiming of the politics of community, morality and internationalism.

The celebrated American commentator Walter Lippmann once described the public as 'a bewildered herd'.⁶⁰ This contempt is shared by those who fear the unmasking of their apparent invincibility when the 'herd' suddenly changes direction. During the 1960s, in the United States, the civil rights campaign ended the vestiges of slavery. It was allied to a movement that stopped an all-out military mobilisation which would have set alight Asia and beyond. Like the Chartists and the other crusaders who fought for the freedoms many of us enjoy, they knew that if power was truly invincible it would not fear the people so much as to expend vast resources trying to distract and deceive them. As I write this, Bush is using deception and distraction to plan and justify an attack on Iran; it is a critical moment.

I offer none of this as rhetoric; human renewal is not a phenomenon. The continuation of a struggle may appear at times frozen, but is a seed beneath the snow. Look at Latin America, long declared invisible, almost expendable in the West. 'Latin Americans have been trained in impotence,' wrote Eduardo Galeano. 'A pedagogy passed down from colonial times, taught by violent soldiers, timorous teachers and frail fatalists, has rooted in our souls the belief that reality is untouchable and that all we can do is swallow in

silence the woes every day brings.’⁶¹ Galeano, dissident and poet, was celebrating the rebirth of democracy in his homeland, Uruguay, where people had voted ‘against fear’. In Venezuela, Hugo Chavez heads the only government on earth sharing the nation’s oil wealth with its poorest. In Bolivia, poorest of them all, the indigenous people, having forced out foreign corporations that ‘owned’ their water, have elected the continent’s first indigenous leader.

These forces are part of a worldwide movement against poverty and war and misinformation that has arisen in less than a decade, and is more diverse, enterprising, internationalist and tolerant of difference than anything in my lifetime. It is also unburdened by Western narcissism, which has no part in freedom, as the wisest know. The wisest also know that just as the conquest of Iraq is unravelling, so a whole system of domination and impoverishment can unravel, too.