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John Pilger was a charlatan and a fraudster

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I admired the force of his writing, even when I often didn't support what he wrote, and he was always warm when we met.' So [wrote John Simpson](#), the veteran BBC foreign affairs correspondent, on news of the death of the campaigning journalist John Pilger on 30 December at the age of 84.

Those who know of Pilger's work only in recent years and from the obscure far-left websites that published it may struggle to imagine that he was once a big figure in print and broadcast media, when newspapers sold in the millions and there was only terrestrial television with three channels. But he was, and generous sentiments like Simpson's have abounded in the past few days. Pundits, politicians and others have typically praised Pilger for his journalistic integrity while making clear that they did not necessarily share his politics.

There's a more sceptical variant of the same message, which I've noted especially among people of my generation, born in the 1960s and 1970s, who were impressed by Pilger's reports when we were young and he was at the height of his fame. It runs like this: though Pilger descended in later years into apologetics for repressive regimes, he was once a principled and vital foe of oppression and human rights abuses, and it is this side of his work that deserves to be remembered.

The dichotomy is unfortunately not raised at all in an obsequious and evasive [Guardian obituary](#) by Anthony Hayward, from which you will learn little, but more thoughtful admirers of Pilger are exercised by this question and do pose it. What made Pilger, the famed voice of radical conscience, go from his celebrated series of films on the plight of Cambodia to his defence of Slobodan Milosevic, Bashar al-Assad and Vladimir Putin and his furious denial of their amply documented war crimes?

I immodestly claim to have the answer to this conundrum. There is an essential continuity in Pilger's work. It's not, as many believe, that his judgment dramatically deteriorated as he got older: he was always that way, and his reputation has progressively adjusted downwards to match reality. [Pilger was not really an investigative journalist at all, for he never did investigations. As a reporter who once worked closely with him explained it to me, Pilger was a polemicist who went out looking for what he wanted to find.](#)

Therein lies the essential transience of Pilger's life's work, for while there is much suffering and evil in the international order, [a journalist's first duty, allowing for personal biases and partial information, is to describe the world as it is and not as they might wish it to be.](#) Pilger, by contrast, [fabricated his conclusions in order to accord with his premises.](#) This was always

his method and I will give examples of this malpractice from his output on two particular issues. The first is his celebrated reporting from Cambodia and the second concerns the wars in the former Yugoslavia, a region he neither knew nor understood.

There is no diplomatic way of saying it but, in his journalism, Pilger was a charlatan and a fraudster. And I use those terms in the strict sense **that he said things he knew to be untrue, and withheld things he knew to be true and material, and did it for decades, for ideological reasons**. If you know where to look, you'll uncover his inspiration.

In 1983, the newly established Channel 4 broadcast a series of interviews by Pilger with people who, in his words, 'have challenged orthodox ideas that lead us in the same direction'; additionally, 'he or she must have demonstrated the courage of his or her convictions'.

The series was titled *The Outsiders*. Some of the interviewees were genuinely courageous or at least of real historical weight and importance. They included Salman Rushdie, Jessica Mitford and the redoubtable anti-apartheid campaigner Helen Suzman. And there was also **an interviewee called Wilfred Burchett**.

Few people now have heard of Burchett but he was not like these others. He was, by his own lights, a pioneering radical Australian journalist, though he travelled on a British passport. In Pilger's words, Burchett was 'the only Western journalist to consistently report events from the other side in the Korean War and the Cold War, and from China, the Soviet Union and Vietnam'.

That's quite some euphemism. Burchett didn't merely report *from* the other side: he literally repeated their propaganda and pretended it was news. He notoriously claimed the US was conducting biological warfare in the Korean War. He never presented a shred of evidence for this incendiary allegation, because it wasn't true. For these efforts he was secretly awarded the (North) Korean Order of the National Flag. Not even the radical American journalist I.F. Stone, later exposed as having been a Soviet spy from **1936 to 1938**, believed the germ warfare allegations and he publicly rejected them. It was later proved, from **documents uncovered in Moscow in 1998**, that the whole story had been a propaganda ruse concocted by the Chinese Communists.

I am not, of course, suggesting Pilger was ever an agent of a foreign power. I'm pointing to the model of his journalistic mentor, **who lied to his dying day in order to serve what he believed to be the greater cause. And that is what, as I shall discuss presently, I charge Pilger with having done too.**

If I'm right (and I am) that Pilger operated with a combination of evasion, misdirection and fakery for decades, it is explicable though inexcusable. This was, after all, easier than the arduous and unglamorous tasks of fact-finding and fact-checking, for which Pilger was temperamentally unsuited. His obituary (unsigned, as is the custom) in *The Times*, a more balanced and reliable treatment than the *Guardian's*, offers pointers.

Pilger was a man of such **natural credulousness** that he never thought to check his own story when, investigating child slavery in Thailand in 1982, he ‘bought’ a girl and returned her to her family. It was a hoax. The girl had been prevailed upon to act the part by a Thai fixer who knew Pilger wanted to ‘buy’ a slave. When the *Far Eastern Economic Review* pointed out Pilger’s error, he responded characteristically with wild and irrelevant invective, accusing the journalist concerned of having CIA connections. Auberon Waugh then additionally **pointed out in the *Spectator*** the sheer improbability of this account, whereupon Pilger responded with bluster and libel writs. The case was settled out of court, with no payment made by the magazine.

The fiasco was due in part to **Pilger’s vanity**, which took the form, among other things, of extreme sensitivity to any perceived slight, consistent rudeness to those he counted as ‘the little people’, and a hair-trigger litigiousness. He was the only journalist I’ve come across who habitually wrote angry letters for publication in response to criticism of his articles by readers. This is in my view an improper practice even supposing the writer has a genuine point, which Pilger rarely did. The letters page of a periodical should be for readers, as writers already have all the other pages.

Pilger’s vulnerability was compounded by the weakness of his technical grasp of almost any given subject. Sooner or later in public debate, and it was generally sooner, he’d flounder. **Fortunately for him it was rare that any top-notch scholar considered his work but this was a danger he continually ran.**

In his book *The Price of Peace: Living with the Nuclear Dilemma* (1986), Lawrence Freedman, one such academic heavyweight, noted ‘a tendentious television documentary which had sought to demonstrate how mendacious governments were in handling nuclear issues but which was in fact riddled with errors of its own’. Freedman was too tactful to name this documentary, but it was **Pilger’s film *The Truth Game*** (1983).

The **gravamen** of the film is as Freedman states it. Pilger purports to offer a critique of ‘nuclear propaganda’ but his errors of fact are legion. Freedman, with William Shawcross, itemised numerous of these fallacious claims for the magazine *New Society* (since subsumed in the *New Statesman*), to which Pilger replied, and it’s worth digging out the exchange. It’s not online but it should be available in a good university library (you can find it at Senate House in London). Pilger plaintively thanks the many people who, on reading Freedman and Shawcross’s critique, sent him sources and information with which to counter it. The notion that he might have investigated sources and checked his claims *before* making the film rather than after had apparently not occurred to him.

The general thesis of the film is extremely weak. Pilger argues that ‘by using reassuring, even soothing, language – language which allowed the politicians and us to distance ourselves from the horror of nuclear war – this new type of propaganda created acceptable images of war and the illusion that we could live securely with nuclear weapons.’ His sources include **Wilfred Burchett**, whose very trade was deceit and treachery on behalf of the Communist

bloc. And the evidence is overwhelming that, so far from seeking to diminish the threat of nuclear war, western policymakers were anxious to stress that the bomb had changed everything.

In the much-quoted words of the American military strategist Bernard Brodie in *The Absolute Weapon* (1946), 'thus far the chief purpose of our military establishment has been to win wars. From now on its chief purpose must be to avert them. It can have almost no other useful purpose.' And in an extraordinarily prescient memorandum titled 'The Atomic Bomb' in August 1945, shortly after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the new prime minister Clement Attlee wrote: 'While steps must be taken to prevent the development of this weapon in any country, this will be futile unless the whole conception of war is banished from people's minds and from the calculations of governments.'

The theme of official deceit was an abiding theme of Pilger's work and he fancied himself a penetrating **debunker of evasive language**. Hence in the *New Statesman* on 9 May 2013 **he congratulated himself** on the thoroughness of his early journalistic training: 'A style developed by a highly literate editor, Brian Penton, who had published poetry in the Telegraph, instilled a respect for English grammar and the value of informed simplicity. Words like 'during' were banned; 'in' was quite enough. The passive voice was considered lazy and banned, along with most clichés and adjectives...'

As you will surely already have perceived, Pilger in this brief **passage roundly condemns the passive voice while using three passive clauses himself**. Indeed, 'the passive voice was considered lazy and banned' is itself an agentless passive of the type almost universally (though in my view misguidedly) condemned by style guides. Were it not for the fact, noted by the *Times* obituarist, that **Pilger was famously humourless**, you'd have to wonder if he was being ironic here. The more plausible explanation is that, while he talked a lot about the power of language, he didn't know much about it, and he didn't know what he didn't know.

That sort of **arrogance** has its inadvertently comic side, but it could also be ugly. Pilger prided himself on his courage in rejecting what he derided as 'identity politics' but in truth he lacked even an elementary sensitivity to issues of ethnicity and gender. Employing a startlingly demeaning racial epithet, **he lambasted Barack Obama** in 2008 as 'a glossy Uncle Tom', and in 2013 **lamented** that 'the problem with media-run "conversations" on gender is not merely [*sic!*] the almost total absence of male participants, but the suppression of class'. He **considered** Hillary Clinton a more dangerous presidential prospect in 2016 than Donald Trump.

Pilger's politics can fairly be described as **anti-American, in that he reflexively saw the United States as a malevolent actor in any conceivable situation**. That *idée fixe* in turn drove him to the conviction that **any regime opposed by the US was automatically innocent or even benign**. Interviewed on the state-propaganda outlet Russia Today in 2018, he **declared** the Putin regime's attempted murder of Sergei and Yulia Skripal in Salisbury a 'carefully constructed drama in which the media plays a role'. He **said** in December 2021, as if Ukrainians lacked any capacity to speak and act for themselves and were merely puppets of Washington: 'It was the US that overthrew the elected govt in Ukraine in 2014 allowing Nato to march right up to Russia's western border.'

The apotheosis of this approach was an article in 2016 in which Pilger **claimed**: 'The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague has quietly cleared the late Serbian president, Slobodan Milosevic, of war crimes committed during the 1992-95 Bosnian war, including the massacre at Srebrenica.'

There was, I need hardly say, no truth whatever in this preposterous fabrication. With all too familiar legerdemain and gullibility, Pilger had alighted on an article on the Russia Today website and, without stating this was his source, plagiarised it. In my view this episode marks, in its combination of idleness and indecency, the nadir of Pilger's career, and it was a very low and shady point indeed.

This is not the place to set out the chronology of the Bosnian war but what the mainstream media (including *The Guardian*, through the exemplary reporting of Ed Vulliamy and Maggie O'Kane) said about it at the time was simply the truth. The war was not a cover for American power: it was a campaign of genocidal aggression conducted by Bosnian Serb forces covertly orchestrated from Belgrade, and in which Nato intervened against their positions far too late. It was also, as I have **described here**, a terrible augury of the barbarous assault that another European autocrat, Vladimir Putin, would direct against Ukraine 30 years afterwards.

What, then, of the earlier body of Pilger's work, before his alleged journalistic and ethical deterioration? In the nature of things, it was not always wrong, but it was always reductive. His condemnation of Australian recognition of Indonesia's occupation of East Timor, in print and in his 1994 film *Death of a Nation*, was entirely correct. But to be right on a discrete issue was never enough for him. **He would have to construct some overarching explanation (or, less politely, a conspiracy theory)** in which to embed it. He hence **charged** that Australia was administering a 'hidden empire' that 'stretches from the Aboriginal slums of Sydney to the South Pacific'. **You'd be hard put to find any such coherence in Australian foreign policy, which has often been made on the hoof and at the mercy of events.**

When East Timor eventually achieved its independence, it did so to the fury of Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. It was, in their eyes, **an affront, for East Timor (whose population is overwhelmingly Roman Catholic) was properly a 'part of the Islamic world' and belonged to Indonesia**. This complaint was **explicitly cited by bin Laden** in justifying al-Qaeda's

bombing of the Indonesian tourist resort of Bali in October 2002, which killed 202 people including 88 Australians.

Pilger was usually quick to blame western foreign policy for provoking terrorism – he referred to the 7/7 attacks in London in 2005 as ‘Blair’s bombs’ – yet here was a case where western nations incurred the wrath of al-Qaeda for unequivocally (if belatedly) doing the right thing. The geopolitical situation was more complex than he had supposed, and than you would imagine from reading his output. He dealt with the disjunction of theory and fact in time-honoured fashion, by never mentioning it.

And then there is the case of Cambodia, the single best-known body of work Pilger did. His first film on the subject, *Cambodia: Year Zero* (1979) elicited a huge public reaction. (It made a big impression on me as a teenager.) It had two undeniable benefits, though one was more alloyed than the other. First, it raised a lot of money from the public to alleviate the desperate plight of Cambodians after the fall of the Khmer Rouge. Second, it dramatically raised public awareness of the issue.

The problem was that public awareness was not necessarily equivalent to public understanding, and Pilger’s work didn’t serve the latter. Pilger’s message in this first film and still more so in its several successors was essentially propaganda on behalf of the Vietnamese puppet regime that had supplanted the Khmer Rouge and that was itself guilty of extensive human rights abuses. It was misleading and dishonest, and it involved defaming decent people trying to do their best for a ravaged nation.

Let me first give a bit of background. Pilger is often thought (and he did nothing to dissuade people from believing it) to have been responsible for exposing the sufferings of Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge from 1975 to 1979. He wasn’t. Journalists who broke this story, whose horrors were almost impossible to conceive of, as early as the summer of 1975 included Tony Paul of *Reader’s Digest*, Bruce Palling and Elizabeth Becker of the *Washington Post*, and Henry Kamm (no relation to this author) of the *New York Times*. They were the first writers to publicise refugee accounts, yet – for their pains – their reports were rubbished by some on the radical left as media distortions.

Noam Chomsky, the famed theoretical linguist, and his coauthor Edward Herman, a grotesque fabulist who went on to deny the genocides in Bosnia and Rwanda, wrote an infamous article in 1977 in which they complained that American newspapers were presenting a ‘seriously distorted version of the evidence available, emphasizing alleged Khmer Rouge atrocities and downplaying or ignoring the crucial US role, direct and indirect, in the torment that Cambodia has suffered’.

But the refugee accounts of Khmer Rouge atrocities, under which about 1.7 million out of a total Cambodian population of 8 million perished, were in all essentials accurate. Western journalists, in impossibly difficult conditions, had alerted the world to depravities that almost defied the imagination. Pilger was late to the story. This was due not to oversight on his part

but to politics. He was a cheerleader for Vietnam, which had only just turned against the Khmer Rouge and invaded Cambodia.

Pilger's consistent theme was that western governments and the United Nations were giving tacit support, including military aid, to the Khmer Rouge in order to undermine the Vietnamese-backed regime in Phnom Penh. And to muddy the truth that the Khmer Rouge had itself been supported by radical left-wing pundits in the west, and that its leaders were all **former members of the French Communist Party**, he slyly and repeatedly compared the movement to the Nazis.

In, especially, his second film in this series, *Cambodia Year One* (1980), and thereafter Pilger developed the theme that the west was denying development aid to Cambodia while providing assistance to the resurgent Khmer Rouge. **These were shocking fabrications with direct and baneful humanitarian consequences. The truth was that Vietnam was deliberately preventing food aid from reaching the starving people of Cambodia: it was using international aid as a political tool, choosing who would be fed and who would not.** UN agencies and NGOs told Pilger this, so he accused them of lying.

The aid agencies were correct and Pilger was the one telling untruths, which he never retracted. In fact the regime in Phnom Penh along with the occupying Vietnamese forces required every UN agency or NGO operating in Cambodia to pledge not to provide aid to starving Cambodians languishing at the border with Thailand. A real campaigning journalist would have exposed this scandal and inhumanity, but it was not Pilger's cause. His documentary *Cambodia: The Betrayal* (1990), in which he alleged that SAS members had trained the Khmer Rouge, provoked a libel writ that Central Television settled at substantial cost.

Pilger went on to engage in reckless and extravagant fakery in the case of Kosovo, a province (and since 2008 an independent country) that he showed no sign of having visited. Nato forces engaged in a military campaign, beginning in March 1999, to stop the Milosevic regime in Belgrade from assaulting the Albanian population of Kosovo. It was a desperate last resort when diplomacy had failed. Though Pilger later depicted it as the forerunner of the Iraq war, the cases were nothing like each other.

The campaign against Milosevic was fought not for regime change or even for the independence of Kosovo but for the single and specific reason of protecting a Muslim population from genocide. It was the right thing to do. Milosevic's forces had already expelled some 300,000 Kosovans from their homes, killed almost 2,000 and destroyed dozens of villages. And they threatened to do much worse. After 78 days, and nearly 40,000 combat sorties, Nato forced Milosevic to back down.

This limited, just and necessary campaign was described by Pilger in apocalyptic terms ('the truth is that the US and Britain are engaged in a form of nuclear warfare in the Balkans,' he **wrote** in *The Guardian* on 4 May 1999) that had absolutely no purchase on reality. But the reason I cite it in this context is that it elicited **a series of demonstrable falsehoods by Pilger**, all crafted to convey the message that western governments were lying about the threat to Kosovo and the numbers of Milosevic's victims. He **later wrote**: 'There was no genocide. The Nato attack was both a fraud and a war crime.'

In the wake of the war itself, Pilger wrote in the *New Statesman* in November 1999: 'The numbers of dead so far confirmed suggest that the Nato bombing provoked a wave of random brutality, murders and expulsions, a far cry from **systematic extermination: genocide**.' He was rubbishing the entirely accurate charge that Serb forces had engaged in **systematic ethnic cleansing**. And to make his point, **he alleged that western politicians had wildly exaggerated the numbers of victims of the Serbs**. Hence, wrote Pilger: 'Figures were supplied. The US defence secretary, William Cohen, said: "We've now seen about 100,000 military-aged men missing . . . They may have been murdered."'

But Pilger deliberately elided the context from this remark. This was an interview that Cohen gave on CBS television, and he was *not* suggesting that the Serbs might have murdered 100,000 military-age men. As Michael Ignatieff **correctly pointed out** in *The New York Times* in November 1999: 'In Mr. Cohen's appearance on Face the Nation, his statements were actually much more complicated. While he said that 100,000 were missing, he also clearly stated that his reports showed that 4,600 Kosovars had been executed, a claim that has been confirmed by the forensic trail of evidence uncovered by war crimes investigators since June.'

Ever after, Pilger claimed that the Nato allies had deliberately and vastly exaggerated the number of victims in Kosovo at the hands of Milosevic's forces. It was completely untrue. He amplified his fakery **by claiming** that, during the Kosovo campaign, 'David Scheffer, US ambassador-at-large for war crimes, announced that as many as '225,000 ethnic Albanian men aged between 14 and 59' may have been murdered'. **Again, Pilger was lying**. What Scheffer actually said, and Pilger trusted that his readers wouldn't check, was **that these men were unaccounted for – a very different thing**.

Then and thereafter, Pilger always referred to a final body count of 2,788 victims of the Kosovo war, to reinforce his message that Nato had maligned the Serbs with false claims of mass violence. Again, he was lying by misdirection. The accepted number of those who were killed or went missing during the war is a little over 13,500. These included just under 1,800 Serb civilians, as well as more than 8,600 Kosovan Albanians.

Thousands, and perhaps tens of thousands, more would have perished under Milosevic's orders had Nato not intervened. Pilger adopted the bizarrely literalistic view that someone could only be counted as dead if their body had physically been found. That is not the reality of war. In particular – as my family, friends and colleagues who reported Milosevic's

depravities observed directly – it was the aim of Serb forces to bury and hide their victims’ body parts far from any theatre of war, trusting these would never be found.

And here is the final weirdness of Pilger’s coverage of the Kosovo war. He not only lied about the statements of Nato governments and denied the atrocities of Milosevic’s regime, but also sought to spread flagrant disinformation about the war itself. Writing in *The Guardian* on 18 May 1999, some three weeks before Milosevic capitulated, [Pilger dramatically claimed](#): ‘Nato is suffering significant losses. Reliable alternative sources in Washington have counted up to 38 aircraft crashed or shot down, and an undisclosed number of American and British special forces killed. This is suppressed, of course.’

Pilger gave no indication of who these ‘reliable sources’ were, but they were anything but reliable. The aircraft that Nato lost in the entire campaign amounted to exactly two, an F-117 Nighthawk stealth attack aircraft and an F-16 fighter jet, and there were no allied fatalities.

This was before the digital age, and I did not take up the trade of journalism myself till several years later, but I did try to identify where Pilger was getting this stuff from. I never managed to track it down. I’m familiar with the small circles of pro-Serb lobbyists but every inquiry came up a blank. I wrote to Pilger, via *The Guardian*, asking for his sources but I neither expected nor got any reply. It’s conceivable that someone, [knowing Pilger’s record of swallowing tall stories and never checking them, fed him these whopping falsehoods in order to see if he’d put them in the public domain](#). But I have no direct evidence that any such third party existed.

The dispiriting but economical explanation is hence that Pilger himself invented the tale of extensive Nato losses which were being suppressed by the state and the news media, because he wished to stimulate popular opposition to government policy. He was spectacularly lying for the cause, which in this case was to assist a genocidal regime in its campaign of brutal repression.

I am sorry for Pilger’s family that he is now dead but sympathy does not necessitate sentimentality. Pilger’s career, at least till his more recent brutish outbursts, was replete with glamour and awards but it was in the service of deceit, and it exemplified indifference to human suffering and disregard for human rights.

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