

PEACE Hero John Pilger: Afflicter of the Powerful

From Joe Lauria, Consortium News, 2 January 2025

John Pilger is one of the world's greatest Peace Heroes, journalists, authors, and film makers, from way back, deserving of recognition and press!

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John Pilger: Afflicter of the Powerful



John Pilger in his film, [Palestine Is Still the Issue](http://johnpilger.com) (johnpilger.com)

By Joe Lauria / [Consortium News](#)

During a lifetime of extraordinary journalism on both paper and the screen, John Pilger, who died one year ago on Monday, showed the world the suffering caused by U.S.-led aggression in mostly poor nations that had the temerity to hinder Washington's path to global dominance.

In his many extraordinary films, books and articles, Pilger filled in what corporate media purposely left out: the industrial-scale human casualties of governments that dare call themselves democracies.

Pilger was simply doing his job as a reporter. What made him stand out exceptionally were herds of journalists not doing theirs.

And what is their job? To reveal the deprivations of the powerful that result in the deprivations of the weak. If there was an essence to Pilger's work it was this: he connected Whitehall, White House and Wall Street decisions to the wasting of innocent lives a world away.

This is searingly portrayed in a scene from his film *Year Zero: The Silent Death of Cambodia* (1979) about the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge's genocide. Pilger [says](#):

"These children are the end of a process begun by impeccable politicians who took their decisions at great distance from the results of their savagery. Their style may have been different from Pol Pot, but the effect was the same. The bombs are like falling rain, wrote a child in 1973, a year in which the tonnage of bombs dropped on Cambodia exceeded by half the entire tonnage dropped on Japan in World War Two. ..."

William Shawcross, the British author, interviewed Prince Sihanouk last year. The two men, said Sihanouk, who are responsible for the tragedy in Cambodia today are Mr. Nixon and Dr. Kissinger. By expanding the war into my country, they killed a lot of Americans and many other people, and they created the Khmer Rouge."

Corporate media masterfully obscures the link between the decisions of the people's elected and unelected leaders, and the human destruction that follows. Omission, as Pilger pointed out many times, is at the heart of successful propaganda, especially as it is practiced by mainstream journalists and historians.

In his 1989 book, *A Secret Country*, he wrote:

"With the Aborigines written out, the Australian story seems apolitical, a faintly heroic tale of white man against Nature, of 'national achievement' devoid of blacks, women and other complicating factors. With the Aborigines in it, the story is completely different. It is a story of theft, dispossession and warfare, of massacre and resistance. It is a story every bit as rapacious as that of the United States, Spanish America, and colonial Africa and Asia."

Perhaps a majority of Australians, Britons and Americans don't want to know what's omitted about the suffering caused by the leaders they vote for. But Pilger made them know. He revealed the gory consequences for the "other side" of the glory of war.

He answered the question too often not asked: What are Western taxpayers paying for in their involuntary contributions to their nations' war machines? Since Vietnam, where John broke the story of U.S. grunts rebelling against their officers, ([Vietnam: The Quiet Mutiny](#), 1970) until today, it has not been the triumph of aggression in winning wars.

Instead, citizens pay for massive deaths of peasants in dirt villages and workers in shanties in the interests of massively rich arms manufacturers, corporate predators and the politicians they buy off.

These are the victims Pilger gave voice to in his reporting: Vietnamese, Cambodians, Palestinians, Iraqis, First Nation Australians, Timorese, Chagossians and Marshall Islanders, the latter victims of U.S. experiments in radiation.

Add to the list Western workers after nearly half a century of the Thatcher-Reagan neoliberal revolution. From the start, Pilger saw the damage it would cause. In an op-ed for *The New York Times* as early as 1980, he wrote:

(Click on image to see the full article)

LONDON — We have entered a dark period in Britain, during which many of the precious gains of our modern civilization are being vandalized. Almost every day now, the British press carries soaring stories of human tragedy that are the direct result of political decisions.

In the northern city of Sunderland, three children die in a fire that was started because they had to use candles after the state electricity board cut off the power in their home. Their impoverished parents, both made redundant from their jobs, could not afford to pay the bills. Such suffering is now common. Surgeons at one of Britain's most celebrated teaching hospitals, King's College in London, announce that their patients are beginning to die, perhaps in the hundreds, because they are denied the most basic equipment such as heart pacemakers. Doctors at hospitals throughout the country are now operating a triage system similar to that used, out of desperation, in the overflowing field hospitals of World War I. "What it means," said a cancer specialist, "is that due to a starvation of funds, we must now choose who will live and who will die."

It is nearly a year since Margaret Thatcher came to power as Prime Minister. In that time, a new "ism" has entered our everyday language: "Thatcherism." What Thatcherism has done to the fabric of British society and to the prospects of Britain's wealth-producing industries amounts, in my view, to a political iniquity without parallel in Britain's postwar history.

I should say without further delay that I belong to no political party or group and that I share the belief that the political infection now identified as Thatcherism took root in our body politic during the disastrous years of Harold Wilson's Labor Government and spread, unchecked, during the time of James Callaghan's administration. Two vantage myths cherished in the United States were that Britain was becoming a jolt of socialism and that Mrs. Thatcher would bring back robust free enterprise! What almost nessuno! Even before Mrs. Thatcher, only Ireland, among our European partners, spent proportionately less on social services than Britain. Indeed, our "welfare state" was always part diversion, part fraud reality.

Our rich were allowed to grow proportionately richer than the rich of most other Western nations, so that today a mere tenth of the population owns 60 percent of the national wealth. Those voters from the United States who inquire and

Thatcherism Equals 'Political Iniquity'

By John Pilger

shocked by the low level of wages on which millions of our people try to live. Up until the coal miners were forced to strike in 1972, Britain's workforce remained docile within the confines of their class, holding the poverty line with access to reasonably priced food and clothing and low rents. Sadly, the tolerance and gentleness and lack of greed among ordinary Britons made them too easy to exploit.

Thatcherism, as represented by a Cabinet whose leading members grew up mostly in the ridiculous top hats and tails of Eton College and that boasts more inherited personal wealth than any Cabinet since 1921, is now delivering the coup de grace.

In his recent budget, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir Geoffrey Howe, cut training programs for the unemployed, sham-clearance programs and funds to improve the health and safety of people at work. British working conditions already are among the dirtiest, cheapest and unhealthiest in Europe, which helps to explain why the mortality rate for miners, machine-tool operators, building laborers and other working people ranges from about 900 to 1,600 per 100,000.

Unlike "moderate" Tories, the Thatcherites are abandoning an all-party consensus that since World War II has stood, at least in theory, at improving the quality of life on the edges of our industrial society. Having announced petty "necessary" rises in the price of school milk, on which the poorest children often depend for nutrition, and measures that will ensure the wholesale sacking of teachers, and assault to a frontal assault on state education, Sir Geoffrey publicly

shared up the apex of privilege in Britain: royalty. To one of the world's wealthiest families, he gave, out of the public purse, a tax-free increase of £1.1 million. Princess Anne's untaxed personal allowance is to go up 30 percent, to approximately £87,500, because, unlike Buckingham Palace, the untaxed Princess has "overspent" on the magnificent country estate that the Queen gave her as a wedding present. At the same time, the Thatcherites have launched an "anti-overspend" campaign, the object of which is to convince the nation that many of the unemployed are defrauding the Social Security system. The campaign itself is fraudulent. In 1977-78, less than 20.8 million was illegally claimed in Social Security benefits, compared with approximately £16 million in legal benefits that are not claimed every year.

The monetarist economic policies of Thatcherism are based on the simplistic observations of Prof. Milton Friedman whose belief in an "invisible" world is embraced by Mrs. Thatcher. So far, these policies have helped to double inflation in one year, to annual rates of 18.1 percent, and have retroacted much of our industry to the point where, in the view of the respected Cambridge Economic Policy Review Group, much of Britain could be an industrial wasteland by 1984. Free enterprise has nothing to do with it; with cash rigidly controlled and demand forcibly depressed, hundreds of small enterprising businessmen are going bankrupt, while major banks announce record cash profits of more than £2.3 billion.

"There is no longer poverty in Britain," declares Sir Keith Joseph, Secretary of State for Industry. Of course, he and his colleagues may well believe this, for they reside in "posh houses" — in fact, more than 14 million Britons, a quarter of our population, now live in or close to actual poverty. A solution to this poverty, not a brainwashing of the poor, remains the key to the renaissance of our nation.

Many Americans admire the way the British people successfully stood alone against the Nazis. This was achieved in great part because emergency measures of equality were thrust upon our class-ridden society and the national border was closed more than ever before. No child went to sleep hungry, as thousands do now. No man or woman was declared obsolete, as millions are now. Miraculous incentive, decency and courage won that day. And they would win again, given the chance.

John Pilger is a writer for The Daily Mirror of London.

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He had already brought a working man's story into the drawing rooms of the British middle class and elite who typically shunned such men in his 1971 film *Conversations With a Working Man*, chronicling a day in the life of a proud trade unionist before Thatcher's devastation.

He was still telling the story of neoliberalism's assault on British society nearly 50 years later in his 2019 film *The Dirty War on the NHS*.

US Dominance of Australia

Pilger was also keenly aware of the servile relationship of his native Australia to the United States.

The subservience of the Anthony Albanese government to the United States in its continuation of the AUKUS project, in which Australia will fork out billions of dollars for submarines it does not need, in order to protect itself from an enemy it does not have, would come as no surprise to readers of Pilger's 1989 *A Secret Country*:

"Australia still has not gained true independence, as the historical record shows. We Australians remain one of the most profoundly colonised of peoples and Australian sovereignty the goal of dreamers: a goal which other, usually poorer, countries have achieved, after struggle and bloodshed. It is a melancholy irony that Australians, proportionate to their numbers, have shed more battlefield blood than most, and that so much of this sacrifice has not been in the cause of independence, but in the service of an imperial master.

The Australian is to fight other people's wars, against those with whom Australians have no quarrel and who offer no threat of invasion."

First for Britain in the two world wars, and then for the U.S. in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq and now apparently against China.

When a prime minister opposed Australia fighting in Vietnam and withdrew the troops, and for other sins of independence, he was overthrown by the C.I.A. and Buckingham Palace. Gough Whitlam was forced out in 1975, an event Pilger [wrote](#) about for years, including in *Consortium News*.

An Unfortunate Need for Courage

There would be no need to affix the adjective "courageous" before "journalist" if Western governments functioned the way they purport to. But they don't and no one in the past half century save Julian Assange deserves the adjective more than Pilger.

His courage was saying the unsayable in Western journalism. That there are unsayable things in the West is itself an indictment of the West's hypocrisy, which no one in the past half century exposed more thoroughly than Assange and Pilger.

Like Assange, Pilger was [hated](#) and feared by Western rulers because he dared rip the cover off their lie of a benign influence in the world spreading democracy, rather than the death and destruction they feel are needed to secure their dominance.

A Master

Of course Pilger's work isn't special only because his craven and lazy competitors made him stand out. He didn't only do the job they refused to do. He did it in a way they couldn't, even if they'd wanted to.

What separated Pilger from today's citizen journalists and Assange, whose courage in publishing damning documents landed him in prison, was that Pilger was a master researcher, writer, on-camera reporter, interviewer and interviewee — all the skills of traditional journalism with none of the political baggage of a corporate reporter.

Writer

He was an exceptional writer and stylist. Consider this description of his hometown:

“Not long ago Sydney was an impoverished city, whose working conditions were at times worse than the worst in England. The sweatshops of east Sydney, with their low wages, long night shifts and unsafe practices—unguarded machinery and floors so hot the soles peeled from your boots—produced an hypnotic routine from working lives.

Smoke from industrial chimneys blotted blue skies and congealed winter afternoons into premature night; and the silhouettes that moved along ribbons of tenement houses in the inner city might have been painted by L.S. Lowry. The repossessors, the bailiffs, the Dickensian sharpies, the man who sold props for backyard wash lines, were from lives on the edge.

At Central Station the rural poor, white and black, spilled out of the overnight mail trains that come from “out west,” the northern rivers and the southern tablelands, and dragged their cardboard cases, tied with string, to the hostels and a cheap hotel known as the People's Palace. Here there were army surplus stores and greasy-spoon Chinese restaurants with newspaper tablecloths and tiled pubs from which people staggered or were thrown. ...

Bondi was men coughing up their innards in a rush-hour tram because an entire Australian division was mustard-gassed on the Western Front. ... Bondi was domestic trench warfare, with bodies thudding against thin walls, and a woman in an apron led bleeding to an ambulance: street entertainment for the young.” (A Secret Country)

Interviewer

Pilger was the consummate outsider confronting the insider on behalf of a fearful, confused and largely muted public. Consider this extraordinary interview he conducted with former C.I.A. agent Duane Clarridge.

Pilger spoke with a moral authority on camera, laced with appropriate irony and sarcasm. His films have a distinct language derived from the dramatic pace in which his stories unfold.

Interviewee

He was no pushover when being interviewed by the mainstream, as seen in this clip from TV New Zealand.

The Closing Space

John Pilger never changed, but the mainstream media did. It seems almost unfathomable today that he was permitted anywhere near a mainstream newspaper or television studio.

He said over and over again that in the days in which he began in journalism — from the early 1960s through the 1990s — there was a space in the mainstream for journalists like him. But it began closing 30 years ago and is now completely closed off.

Journalist Mick Hall [wrote](#) on **CN**:

“We live in a time of state surveillance and creeping restrictions on freedom of speech, where whistleblowers are criminalised and journalists like Julian Assange face persecution and life imprisonment. Self-censorship is strictly adhered to by media outlets, as narratives are shaped by a technocratic elite. Gone are the days when John Pilger was able to have a story attacking George W Bush and Tony Blair’s invasion of Iraq on the front page of the UK tabloid, the Daily Mirror.”

John Pilger & Consortium News

John recognized the greatness of **Consortium News**’ founder, Robert Parry, and became a long-time friend of the publication. When I became editor in 2018 I invited him to join the newspaper’s board and was delighted when he accepted. **Consortium News** published many of [his articles](#) and he had very kind words for us.

Four months before he died, John [tweeted](#):

“Having reported from across the world, I have rarely known anything approaching the dynamism and high standards of ... Consortium [News]. If you yearn for an ‘old fashioned’ newspaper of the left, one with real news and authentic ethics, please support.”

Gary Webb Award

For his lifetime of extraordinary achievement **Consortium News** presented John with the Gary Webb Freedom of the Press Award. I was able to inform him of it just months before he died.

In presenting it to Jane Hill, a book editor and Pilger’s partner, on the stage of the British Film Institute on Oct. 28, I [read](#) the citation:

*“Gary Webb, Freedom of the Press Award, 2023 winner John Richard Pilger, Journalist, Filmmaker, Author, For a lifetime of exposing injustice, afflicting the powerful and defending press freedom in his films, books and articles. Presented by the Consortium for Independent Journalism, publishers of **Consortium News**.”*

Jane [said](#):

“Thank you Joe. John’s son Sam, his granddaughter Matilda and I are really proud to receive this from you. It’s a great honor, and it’s something we’ll absolutely cherish. News that he had won this prize came, as you know, not long before his death. And at a time of very great personal struggle. So it was a dark time.

*“And I can’t tell you how uplifting it was and how moved and proud he was to receive the news that he had won this prize. And it was both because it was in the name of Gary Webb, a journalist, a courageous journalist he really did admire, and also because it was coming from **Consortium News**. I think John said to me many a time that **Consortium** was one of the last outposts of independent journalism.*

It was a place unafraid to publish information and viewpoints increasingly excluded from the mainstream. So thank you, Joe. And as John would say, all power to you.”

About the origin of the award, Robert Parry wrote: The award is named in honor of investigative reporter Gary Webb who in 1996 courageously revived interest in one of the darkest scandals of the 1980s, the Reagan administration’s tolerance of cocaine trafficking by the C.I.A.-organized Nicaraguan Contra rebels who were fighting to overthrow Nicaragua’s leftist Sandinista government.

The Contra-Cocaine scandal was originally exposed by Associated Press reporters Robert Parry and Brian Barger in 1985, but the major U.S. newspapers accepted the Reagan administration’s denials and treated the story as a “conspiracy theory.”

So, when Webb revived the story in 1996 for *The San Jose Mercury News* and described how some of the Contra cocaine fueled the spread of crack across urban America, the major newspapers again rallied to the defense of the Contras and the Reagan administration’s legacy.

The assault on Webb was led by *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The Los Angeles Times* – and was so ferocious that Webb’s editors at the *Mercury News* sacrificed him to protect their own careers. Webb found himself cast out from the profession that he loved.

It didn’t even matter that an internal C.I.A. investigation by Inspector General Frederick Hitz confirmed, in 1998, that the C.I.A. was aware of the Contra cocaine trafficking but had put its goal of ousting the Sandinistas ahead of any responsibility to expose the Contra criminality.

Because of the false impression that Webb had manufactured a fake story, he remained unemployable in mainstream journalism. In 2004, with his life in tatters and his financial resources spent, Webb took his own life, a tragic casualty in the difficult fight for a truly free press in America, a press that doesn’t just rubber stamp government propaganda and accept official lies as truth.

Watch the presentation of John Pilger’s Gary Webb Award:

Please share this story and help us grow our network!

Joe Lauria

Joe Lauria is editor-in-chief of *Consortium News* and a former U.N. correspondent for *The Wall Street Journal*, *Boston Globe*, and numerous other newspapers, including *The Montreal Gazette* and *The Star* of Johannesburg. He was an investigative reporter for the *Sunday Times* of London, a financial reporter for *Bloomberg News* and began his professional work as a 19-year old stringer for *The New York Times*. He can be reached at joelauria@consortiumnews.com and followed on Twitter [@unjoe](https://twitter.com/unjoe)

Editor’s Note: *At a moment when the once vaunted model of responsible journalism is overwhelmingly the play thing of self-serving billionaires and their corporate scribes, alternatives of integrity are desperately needed, and we are one of them. Please support*

our independent journalism by contributing to our online donation platform, Network for Good, or send a check to our new PO Box. We can't thank you enough, and promise to keep bringing you this kind of vital news.

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Attachments area

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