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The black art of news management

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In his latest column for the New Statesman, John Pilger describes the "master illusions" which have formed the basis of black propaganda and provided "false flags" for political chicanery and for wars and atrocities, such as Iraq and the Israeli assault on the Gaza peace flotilla.

How do wars begin? With a "master illusion", according to Ralph McGehee, one of the CIA's pioneers in "black propaganda", known today as "news management". In 1983, he described to me how the CIA had faked an "incident" that became the "conclusive proof of North Vietnam's aggression". This followed a claim, also fake, that North Vietnamese torpedo boats had attacked an American warship in the Gulf of Tonkin in August 1964.

"The CIA," he said, "loaded up a junk, a North Vietnamese junk, with communist weapons - the Agency maintains communist arsenals in the United States and around the world. They floated this junk off the coast of central Vietnam. Then they shot it up and made it look like a fire fight had taken place, and they brought in the American press. Based on this evidence, two Marine landing teams went into Danang and a week after that the American air force began regular bombing of North Vietnam." An invasion that took three million lives was under way.

The Israelis have played this murderous game since 1948. The massacre of peace activists in international waters on 31 May was "spun" to the Israeli public for most of last week, preparing them for yet more murder by their government, with the unarmed flotilla of humanitarians described as terrorists or dupes of terrorists. The BBC was so intimidated that it reported the atrocity primarily as a "potential public relations disaster for Israel", the perspective of the killers, and a disgrace for journalism.

A similar master illusion currently preoccupies Asian governments. On 20 May, South Korea announced that it had "overwhelming evidence" that one of its warships, the Cheonan, had been sunk by a torpedo fired by a North Korean submarine in March with the loss of 46 sailors. The United States maintains 28,000 troops in South Korea, where popular sentiment has long backed a détente with Pyongyang.

On 26 May, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton flew to Seoul and demanded that the "international community must respond" to "North Korea's outrage". She flew on to Japan, where the new "threat" from North Korea conveniently eclipsed the briefly independent foreign policy of Japanese prime minister Yukio Hatoyama, elected last year with popular opposition to America's permanent military occupation of Japan. The "overwhelming evidence" is a torpedo propeller that "had been corroding at least for several months," reported the Korea Times. In April, the director of South Korea's national intelligence, Won See-hoon, told a parliamentary committee that there was no evidence linking the sinking of the Cheonan to North Korea. The defence minister agreed. The head of South Korea's military marine operations said, "No North Korean warships have been detected [in] the waters where the accident took place." The reference to "accident" suggests the warship struck a reef and broke in two.

To the American media, North Korea's guilt is beyond doubt, just as North Vietnam's guilt was beyond doubt, just as Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, just as Israel can terrorise with impunity. However, unlike Vietnam and Iraq, North Korea has nuclear weapons, which helps explain why it has not been attacked, not yet: a salutary lesson to other countries, such as Iran, currently in the crosshairs.

In Britain, we have our own master illusions. Imagine someone on state benefits caught claiming £40,000 of taxpayers' money in a second home scam. A prison sentence would almost certainly follow. David Laws, chief secretary to the Treasury, does the same and is described as follows:

"I have always admired his intelligence, his sense of public duty and his personal integrity" (Nick Clegg, deputy prime minister). "You are a good and honourable man. I am sure that throughout you have been motivated by wanting to protect your privacy rather than anything else." (David Cameron, prime minister). Laws is "a man of quite exceptional nobility" (Julian Glover, the Guardian). A "brilliant mind" (BBC).

The Oxbridge club and its associate members in politics and the media have tried to link Laws's "error of judgement" and "naivety" to his "right to privacy" as a gay man, an irrelevance. The "brilliant mind" is a wealthy Cambridge-groomed investment banker and gilts trader devoted to the noble task of cutting the public services of mostly poor and honest people.

Now imagine another public official, the force behind one of the great war criminals and liars. This official "spun" the illegal invasion of a defenceless country that resulted in the deaths of at least a million people and the dispossession of many more: in effect, the crushing of a human society. If this was the Balkans or Africa, he would very likely have been indicted by the International Criminal Court.

But crime pays for the clubbable. In quick step with the Laws affair, this truth was demonstrated by the continuing celebration of Alastair Campbell, whose frequent media appearances provide a vicarious thrill for the liberal intelligentsia. To the Guardian, Campbell is "bullish, sometimes misdirected, but unafraid to press on where others might have faltered". The Guardian's immediate interest is its "exclusive" publication of Campbell's "politically explosive" and "uncut" diaries. Here is a flavour: "Saturday 14 May. I called Peter [Mandelson] and asked why he didn't return my calls yesterday. 'You know why.' 'No, I don't.' He said he was incandescent at my Newsnight interview..."

In a promotional interview with the Guardian, Campbell dispensed more of this dated incest, referring just once to the bloodbath for which he was a principal apologist. "Did Iraq lose us support in 2005?" he asked rhetorically. "Without a doubt..." Thus, a criminal tragedy equal in scale to the Rwandan genocide was dismissed as a "loss" for New Labour: a master illusion of notable profanity.

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