

John Pilger: Washington's war on democracy

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***The War on Democracy* will be released in British cinemas on June 15. It will be released in Australia in September 2007. For more information visit <http://www.johnpilger.com> or <http://www.warondemocracy.net>. Reprinted from [Venezuelanalysis.com](#).**

John Pilger is an award-winning journalist, author and documentary filmmaker, who began his career in 1958 in his homeland, Australia, before moving to London in the 1960s. He has been a foreign correspondent and a front-line war reporter, beginning with the Vietnam War in 1967. He is an impassioned critic of foreign military and economic adventures by Western governments.

"It is too easy", Pilger says, "for Western journalists to see humanity in terms of its usefulness to 'our' interests and to follow government agendas that ordain good and bad tyrants, worthy and unworthy victims and present 'our' policies as always benign when the opposite is usually true. It's the journalist's job, first of all, to look in the mirror of his own society."

Pilger also believes a journalist ought to be a guardian of the public memory and often quotes Milan Kundera: "The struggle of people against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting."

In a career that has produced more than 55 television documentaries, Pilger's first major film for the cinema, *The War on Democracy*, will be released in Britain on May 11. Pilger spent several weeks filming in Venezuela and *The War on Democracy* contains an exclusive interview with Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez.

Could you begin by telling us what your new film *The War on Democracy* is about?

I happened to watch [US President] George Bush's second inauguration address in which he pledged to "bring democracy to the world". He mentioned the words "democracy" and "liberty" 21 times. It was a very important speech because, unlike the purple prose of previous presidents (Ronald Reagan excluded), he left no doubt that he was stripping noble concepts like "democracy" and "liberty" of their true meaning — government, for, by and of the people.

I wanted to make a film that illuminated this disguised truth — that the United States has long waged a war on democracy behind a facade of propaganda designed to contort the intellect and morality of Americans and the rest of us. For many of your readers, this is known. However, for others in the West, the propaganda that has masked Washington's ambitions has been entrenched, with its roots in the incessant celebration of World War II, the "good war", then "victory" in the Cold War. For these people, the "goodness" of US power represents "us". Thanks to Bush and his cabal, and to [British Prime Minister Tony] Blair, the scales have fallen from millions of eyes. I would like *The War on Democracy* to contribute something to this awakening.

The film is about the power of empire and of people. It was shot in Venezuela, Bolivia, Chile and the United States, and is set also in Guatemala and Nicaragua. It tells the story of “America’s backyard”, the dismissive term given to all of Latin America. It traces the struggle of indigenous people — first against the Spanish, then against European immigrants who reinforced the old elite.

Our filming was concentrated in the barrios where the continent’s “invisible people” live in hillside shanties that defy gravity. It tells, above all, a very positive story: that of the rise of popular social movements that have brought to power governments promising to stand up to those who control national wealth and to the imperial master. Venezuela has taken the lead, and a highlight of the film is a rare face-to-face interview with President Hugo Chavez whose own developing political consciousness, and sense of history (and good humour), are evident.

The film investigates the 2002 coup d’état against Chavez and casts it in a contemporary context. It also describes the differences between Venezuela and Cuba, and the shift in economic and political power since Chavez was first elected. In Bolivia, the recent, tumultuous past is told through quite remarkable testimony from ordinary people, including those who fought against the piracy of their resources. In Chile, the film looks behind the mask of this apparently modern, prosperous “model” democracy and finds powerful, active ghosts.

In the United States, the testimony of those who ran the “backyard” echo those who run that other backyard, Iraq; sometimes they are the same people. Chris Martin (my fellow director) and I believe *The War on Democracy* is well timed. We hope people will see it as another way of seeing the world: as a metaphor for understanding a wider war on democracy and the universal struggle of ordinary people, from Venezuela to Vietnam, Palestine to Guatemala.

As you say, Latin America has often been described as the US’s backyard. How important is Latin America for the US in the global context?

Latin America’s strategic importance is often dismissed. That’s because it is so important. Read Greg Grandin’s recent, excellent history (I interview him in the film) in which he makes the case that Latin America has been Washington’s “workshop” for developing and honing and rewarding its imperial impulses elsewhere. For example, when the US “retreated” from South-East Asia, where did its “democracy builders” go to reclaim their “vision”? Latin America. The result was the murderous assaults on Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala, and the darkness of “Operation Condor” in the southern cone. This was Ronald Reagan’s “war on terror”, which of course was a war of terror that provided basic training for those now running the Bush/Cheney “long war” in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Noam Chomsky recently said that after five centuries of European conquests, Latin America was reasserting its independence. Do you agree with this?

Yes, I agree. It’s humbling for someone coming from prosperous Europe to witness the poorest taking charge of their lives, with people rarely asking, as we in the West often ask, “What can I do?” They know what to do. In Cochabamba, Bolivia, the population barricaded their city until they began to take control of their water. In El Alto, perhaps the poorest city on the continent, people stood against a repressive regime until it fell. This is not to suggest that complete independence has been won. Venezuela’s economy, for example, is still very much a “neoliberal” economy that continues to reward those with capital. The changes made under Chavez are extraordinary — in grassroots democracy, health care, education and the sheer uplifting of people’s lives — but true equity and social justice and freedom from corruption remain distant goals. Venezuela’s well-off complain endlessly that their economic power has been diminished; it hasn’t; economic growth has never been higher, business has never been better. What the rich no longer own is the government. And when

the majority own the economy, true independence will be in sight. That's true everywhere.

US deputy secretary of state John Negroponte, recently called Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez "a threat to democracy" in Latin America. What are your views on this?

This is Orwellian, like "war is peace." Negroponte, whose record of overseeing Washington's terrorism in Central America is infamous, is right about Hugo Chavez in one respect. Chavez is a "threat" — he's the threat of an example to others that independence from Washington is actually possible.

President Chavez talks about building "socialism of the 21st century" in Venezuela. To what extent do you think this project is different to the socialist experiences in the 20th century?

In the time I spent with Chavez, what struck me was how un-self-consciously he demonstrated his own developing political awareness. I was intrigued to watch a man who is as much an educator as a leader. He will arrive at a school or a water project where local people are gathered and under his arm will be half a dozen books — Orwell, Chomsky, Dickens, Victor Hugo. He'll proceed to quote from them and relate them to the condition of his audience. What he's clearly doing is building ordinary people's confidence in themselves. At the same, he's building his own political confidence and his understanding of the exercise of power.

I doubt that he began as a socialist when he won power in 1998 — which makes his political journey all the more interesting. Clearly, he was always a reformer who paid respect to his impoverished roots. Certainly, the Venezuelan economy today is not socialist; perhaps it's on the way to becoming something like the social economy of Britain under the reforming Attlee Labour government. He is probably what Europeans used to be proud to call themselves: a social democrat. Look, this game of labels is pretty pointless; he is an original and he inspires; so let's see where the Bolivarian project goes. True power for enduring change can only be sustained at the grassroots, and Chavez's strength is that he has inspired ordinary people to believe in alternatives to the old venal order. We have nothing like this spirit in Britain, where more and more people can't be bothered to vote any more. It's a lesson of hope, at the very least.

P.S.

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