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News: Globalisation & social justice

The people don't know and can't know

13 March 2003

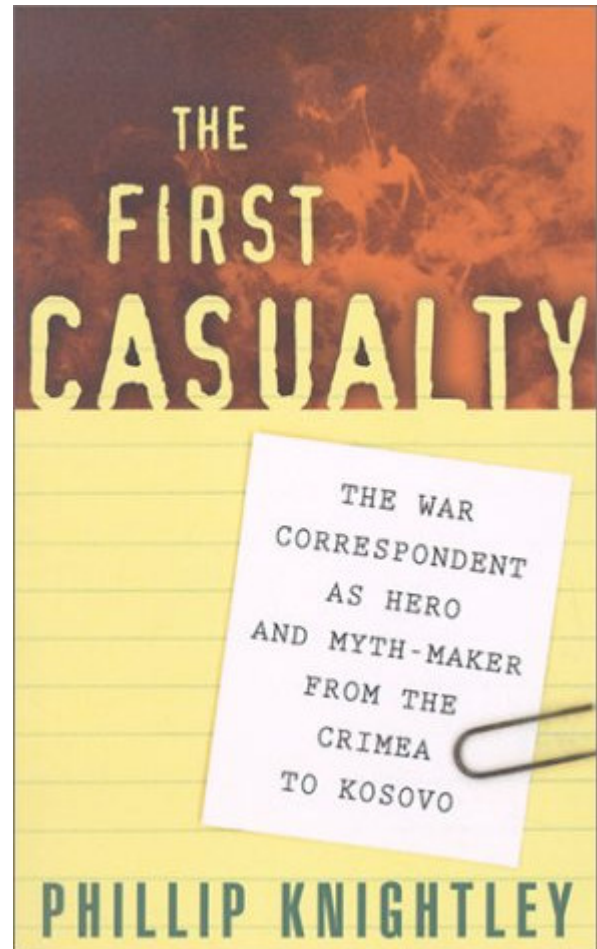
John Pilger introduces the new edition of Phillip Knightley's classic.

The First Casualty: Introduction to the revised edition

By John Pilger

When I read the first edition of this remarkable book twenty-five years ago, I was struck by the following quotations. During the First World War, Prime Minister David Lloyd George told C P Scott, editor of the *Manchester Guardian*: "If the people really knew [the truth] the war would be stopped tomorrow. But of course they don't know and can't know." The truth was reported, insisted *The Times* correspondent, Sir Phillip Gibbs (knighted for his services), "apart from the naked realism of horrors and losses, and criticism of the facts."

Robert C Millar, a United Press correspondent covering the Korean War in 1952, was less subtle. "There are certain facts and stories from Korea," he said, "that editors and publishers have printed which were pure fabrication ... Many of us who sent the stories knew they were false,



but we had to write them because they were official releases from responsible military headquarters and were released for publication even though the people responsible knew they were untrue."

"When American bombs incinerated hundreds of women and children in a bomb shelter in a residential part of Baghdad, and several British correspondents reported that there were no strategic or military targets nearby, their patriotism was called into question and their reporting was pilloried in the tabloid press as 'truly disgusting' and 'a disgrace to their country'."

Almost every word of these testimonies could apply to the wars of our time, especially the Gulf War of 1991 and the Nato bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999. Chapters covering these have been added to this new edition, making Knightley's work the most comprehensive *'accuse* of journalism as propaganda in the English language. It is the author's lament that, for all the dazzling advances in media technology, the media has little or no memory, as the same bogus "truth" is served up again and again. Reading the new material, I wondered when journalism's modern breeding grounds, the media studies courses, would begin to address the most important issue raised in this book: the virulence of an unrecognised censorship, often concealed behind false principles of objectivity, whose effect is to minimise and deny the culpability of Western power in acts of great violence and terrorism, such as the Gulf and Kosovo.

Thus *The Independent* could praise the "miraculously few casualties" in the Gulf War (meaning the few British and American casualties, most of them the result of American "friendly fire"), while the horror of up to a quarter of a million Iraqis slaughtered by the US-led forces was consigned to oblivion. Had this been the headline news, rather than the dubious technological triumph of the West, the public "would have really known the truth", as Lloyd George said in 1917, and the pattern might not have been repeated in the Balkans. At the very least, journalists might have raised the questions that distinguish their duty to keep the record straight.

Instead, and with honourable exceptions, they were "managed" more efficiently than ever before. Editors were called to the Ministry of Defence and handed their guidelines. The BBC and ITV told their

correspondents to fall into line. It was right, said *The Economist*, "to suspend the normal play of democratic argument. The truth about the Gulf War must await the end of the fighting." Reporters were pressured to wear uniforms and corralled in a "pool" system. When the great maverick reporter, Robert Fisk, tried to slip the leash, he was told by another correspondent: "Get out of here, you arsehole. You'll prevent the rest of us from working." When American bombs incinerated hundreds of women and children in a bomb shelter in a residential part of Baghdad, and several British correspondents reported that there were no strategic or military targets nearby, their patriotism was called into question and their reporting was pilloried in the tabloid press as "truly disgusting" and "a disgrace to their country".

At the time of writing this, there is virtually no news of Kosovo, scene of Nato's "humanitarian war" and Tony Blair's "moral crusade". The expulsion and terrorising of 240,000 Serbs and Roma Gypsies from the province, now ruled by Nato, is of little interest. Who cares about Gypsies, let alone demonised Serbs? Like the Iraqis, they are the media's unpeople. The most important non-news is the unravelling of Nato's justification for killing and maiming several thousand civilians, both Serbs and Kosovars, and for devastating the environment and economic life of the region. This epic destruction, according to British Defence Secretary George Robertson last March, was to stop "a regime which is bent on genocide." President Clinton referred to "deliberate, systematic efforts at ... genocide."

The British press took its cue and the Nazis, World War Two and the holocaust were invoked. The US Defence Secretary, William Cohen, said: "we've now seen about 100,000 military-aged men missing ... They may have been murdered." Since Nato took over Kosovo, no place on earth has been as scrutinised by forensic investigators, not to mention 2,700 media people, yet the head of the Spanish forensic team attached to the International Criminal Tribunal, Emilio Perez Pujol, has complained angrily that his colleagues have become part of "a semantic pirouette by the war propaganda machines, because we did not find one - not one - mass grave." Several thousand bodies have been found across the province: a gruesome toll, but a far cry from "the second European Holocaust." To my knowledge, the forbidden question has been asked just once. "Could it turn out to be," wrote Andrew Alexander in the *Daily Mail*, "that we killed more innocent people than the Serbs did?" To that I would add: Did Nato's bombs fall on innocent people partly in response to the drum beat of journalists?

One of my prized possessions is a first edition of the dairies of William Howard Russell, who was sent by *The Times* to cover the war in the Crimea nearly 150 years ago, a war described by Queen Victoria as "popular beyond belief". In fact, as Phillip Knightley describes, it was like all wars: a catalogue of blunders, needless killing and official lies. So independent-minded was Russell that his life on the battlefield was made a misery. No satellite phone for the reporter, no email, no fax. His

despatches took a week to get to London by horse and steamer. "Am I to tell these things?" Russell wrote to his editor, "or am I to hold my tongue?" To which Delane replied, "Continue to tell as much truth as you can." Both of them were accused of treason, until the truth of Russell's courageous reporting forced the government to resign.

Like Russell's, the best journalism is the first draft of history: for that we are indebted to Phillip Knightly, whose clear-sighted and principled book throws down a challenge to journalists to examine their role in the promotion of the war, in propaganda and its myths, and the subliminal pressures applied by organisations like the BBC, whose news is often selected on the basis of a spurious establishment "credibility". The following pages ought to be read by every young reporter and by those who retain pride in our craft of truth-telling, no matter how unpopular and unpalatable the truth. The rest is not journalism.

John Pilger is a war correspondent, film-maker, writer and playwright. An Australian based in London, he has twice won the British award for Journalist of the Year, has been International Reporter of the Year and winner of the United Nations Association Media Prize, has won an American Television Academy Award, an Emmy and the Richard Dimbleby Award given by the British Academy of Film and Television Arts. This is his introduction to the revised (2000) edition of *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as hero and Myth-Maker from the Crimea to Kosovo* (Prion and Johns Hopkins University Press) by Phillip Knightley and is reproduced with the author's kind permission.

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