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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

BY DENNIS BERNSTEIN

12.09.2021

The Bloody US Withdrawal From Afghanistan and the Persecution of Julian Assange: an Interview With John Pilger



Drawing by Nathaniel St. Clair

John Pilger is an Emmy Award winning investigative journalist and filmmaker. His compelling documentaries have won major recognition in the U.S. and Europe and around the world. He is the recipient of the Royal Television Society's Best Documentary and many other awards. The British Film Institute includes his 1970 film Year Zero, the Silent Death of Cambodia among the ten most important documentaries of the 20th Century. And here let me add to the bio that he is a close friend of Julian Assange

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and leading the fight to free Julian. John Pilger, it is great to have you back on Flashpoints. It's been too long.

John: Thank you, Dennis, very good to be back

Dennis: Yes, indeed. Well can we start in Afghanistan? Can I get you to respond to the bloody and disastrous U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan after 20-years of a bloody, senseless and illegal occupation?

John: Well it was coming, wasn't it, and here it is finally. And it's a repetition of something we've seen in the past and which I've witnessed in Vietnam and Indochina. But do we have to go through this again? That's what surely people now have to ask themselves, 20 years of suffering and disaster, and Afghanistan had led – compounded the suffering for many people, of course, and has given us almost a front seat of Imperialism's ruthlessness and inhumanity and failure. I find it very difficult to say more than that.

I was in Saigon on the last day there. I was in many other places, and I reported from and filmed in Afghanistan two years after the U.S. coalition invasion in October 2001. And then it was evident. I think – the headline over my first published dispatch in the London Mirror was *This War is a Fraud*. And that was late in 2001. It was clear then that it was a fraud. Osama Bin Laden had almost certainly left Afghanistan. The Taliban were – had been a client of the Bill Clinton Administration.

The Clinton Administration wanted to build a natural gas pipeline from Turkmenistan across Afghanistan to Pakistan, and were offering – I remembered the figure actually. They were offering something like – they were offering the Taliban 58 cents per cubic feet of natural gas. That was the deal. But I'm mentioning this because the U.S. Administration, was in bed with the Taliban. In fact, I think once when an official in the Department of State was asked about the problem of the Taliban and women, they said, "Well look, we get on with Saudi Arabia and they're terrible to women. It will work out." And they didn't give a damn.

George W. Bush tired of the Taliban. Actually, he didn't think they were that reliable as a client, and that administration. as a lot of information that we now have has revealed, planned to actually overthrow the Taliban in the time-honored manner in July of 2001, well before September the 11th, 2001. And if I remember it, it was Pakistan's foreign minister who let the cat out of the bag when he said that he'd been told that the U.S. wanted to attack the Taliban then.

I mean all this, what all this adds up to is the utter fraudulence of the rationale for invading Afghanistan just as the rationale for the invasion of Iraq two years later was utterly

fraudulent. This is the same but 20 years later. I don't know, Dennis, how many people have died. It's impossible to keep up with statistics, and after a while they become almost obscene in their calculation.

Dennis: Yes.

John: But I've seen the country and it's devastated.

Dennis: You know, John, I know you know, your films are sort of a guide to U.S. failed aggression, and the film, the amazing film, Year Zero, the Silent Death of Cambodia, really represents the nature at the core and what happens as a result, the various deadly things that happen to people as a result of this U.N. – U.S. foreign policy. I almost said U.N., but it's sort of a collaboration there.

John: Yeah.

Dennis: And it is true, and how many times do we see this over and over again?

John: Well over and over. Look, just on that, it's one of the few times I will actually recommend your listeners go to my website and look at a particular film. There's a film I made in 2003 in Afghanistan and in the United States called *Breaking the Silence, Truth and Lies in the War on Terror*. And I think that film, which was shown in independent cinemas by groups all over the United States, but that film I think has interviews in it to do with the Administration, the George W. Bush Administration. It has revelations about Cambodia and Afghanistan in it that is worth your listeners looking at.

My site is johnpilger.com and you go to video and scroll down. It's called *Breaking the Silence*. It's one of those films that is absolutely germane to everything that is happening now, and the people with information, the people have a right to know, and that's the difference now, Dennis. People not only have a right to know this information, but they've got to wake up. If we're going to go out and find out, you know, this just can't go round and round again, you know.

Dennis: I agree with you, John, and there's so much of your work that speaks to this endless war conducted by the United States because, of course, you also did a film, The Coming War on China, against China. Now we know that Afghanistan has China on one border, Iran on another border, Pakistan on another border. One has to wonder why the United States was there.

John: Yeah, I mean I think it was there for a number of reasons in Afghanistan. I think it's strategic. Afghanistan's strategic geographical position is very important. It borders Russia and China, and the important, and as I mentioned at the beginning, that important through-route of such sought after sources of natural gas. I mean Afghanistan had been

before George W. Bush invaded it, had been the battleground on which the Soviet Union had really been defeated by an American invented force called the Mujahideen, and that was probably Afghanistan's most serious role that it played in the great imperial scheme of things. It was a trap. It was described as a trap by Brzezinski who was –

Dennis: Right.

John: – President Carter's National Security Advisor. And in 1979, his last year in office, unknown to American people and Congress, Carter signed a special directive which allotted something – I think like \$500 million to helping to create this jihadist group in Afghanistan to threaten the Soviet Union because they shared a border with the Soviet Union and the Soviets had their own jihadist problem, to draw the Soviets into Afghanistan, as Brzezinski described it, "to create a Vietnam for the Russians". And they did that.

The Russians invaded Afghanistan in 1979/1980, and were bloodied by the tribalist forces of the Mujahideen, bankrolled and armed by the CIA which gave them a very effective weapon called a stinger which was a missile that you could carry. And they used it with great success against the Soviet troops. And of course, this disturbed Afghanistan to the point where Jihadism for the first time in living memory became an international force. The jihadist were trained both in Afghanistan and in Pakistan and one of the jihadist sects was the Taliban.

So, it's fair to say that without this scheme to bring down the Soviet Union that was hatched by Brzezinski and the Carter Administration, without that, there would be no international jihadist problem, if you like. There probably would be no Taliban. There may not have been a 9/11. And this deadly game plan was acted out in the extraordinary and beautiful and rugged and brutal countryside of Afghanistan, disturbing a feudal society. I mean ironically, Dennis, it was the one Afghan government that was enlightened and gave equal rights to women, dismantled its Secret Police.

It was a very left-wing government which rose in 1978. This was undermined by the United States. The one government that gave Afghanistan real hope was undermined by the United States because they saw it as being supported by the Soviet Union. And of course, again another irony with the Taliban that eventually brought down this government. So, when you look at the faces of all those people who threw in their lot with the U.S., I mean they basically, you know, the U.S. created a whole community, huge, massive humanity of collaborators.

I mean they're seen as collaborators by the Taliban, well, that's what they were. They collaborated with the United States in what they would try – and the coalition forces, in what they were trying to do in Afghanistan. And understandably, these people are very frightened and they should have been protected by the United States. So, I think people need a little bit of background, but with just something of that background with some historical memory it's possible to look on the events of the last few weeks as really an utter disgrace in every possible way that should never happen again.

Dennis: Should never happen again. I wish that would be so. It is interesting, by the way, in terms of Brzezinski bragging. I can't remember the name of the French magazine, but it is – he did –

John: L'observatoire, Les Observatoire, yes.

Dennis: The Observatoire.

John: Yeah.

Dennis: Right. And he was bragging away about this plot to, you know –

John: That's right.

Dennis: – that ended the Soviet Union. So if people want to see it in it's own words, you're not going to hear it on American television. It is interesting that there's a three-hour show hosted by his daughter called Morning Joe. They're not going to cover it. It's also interesting – you mentioned the Stinger Missile. It was also – I believe it was a Stinger Missile that a 15-year-old Nicaragua Sandinista was using to bring down Hasenfus and that pulled the cover off that whole operation when more of these illegal and bloody covert operations to prevent the people's will.

Anyway, We're delighted to be talking with John Pilger, award winning filmmaker, journalist and truth teller in this world. I want to talk to you about what's going on with Julian and also what's going on with a former ambassador, Craig Murray, cause it's devastating. It is an attack on journalism. It's an attack on free speech, and it's sort of nearing ahead, and Julian is in trouble. You want to speak to this a little bit?

John: Yeah, well he – it's coming into the last, as far as the traditional process is concerned, it's coming into the final stretch. Two weeks ago I was in the World Courts of Justice here, the Appeal Court where there was a one-day hearing on – for a judge to decide whether or not the United States could extend the terms of its appeal against the decision made earlier this year by the lower court that Julian will not be extradited. So, the whole thing now hangs around whether or not the U.S. is successful in its appeal

against this, and I have to say a rather surprising decision, but a decision by the lower court, that Julian would be at personal risk if he was extradited to the United States.

This one day hearing the other day, the judge allowed the U.S. to extend the terms of its appeal, but the really – the main event, if you like, will be on the 27th and the 28th of October in the high court in London when three judges will decide whether the U.S. appeal against the decision not to extradite will be allowed to stand. We won't get a judgment on the second day, but it will be shortly afterwards. There's a possibility, a real possibility, that Julian could be free on that. That really depends on that.

The U.S. is really running out of appeal options. If it goes against Julian, then he would be able to appeal to the Supreme Court in the U.K. And eventually to the European Court. In other words, I suppose the worst-case thing is that Julian will be kind of indefinitely in prison here while all these various legal machinations go on, or by Christmas he could be free.

Dennis: He's imprisoned for being what? For being a journalist? For being a publisher?

John: He's imprisoned because the United States has applied for his extradition. He is not charged with anything in this country, nothing. He's not being charged with anything anywhere. The U.S. hasn't even had the opportunity to charge him. They want to charge him under the Espionage Act, basically, which is about journalism. That's what they use against journalists. And so he hasn't been charged with anything. He's being held by the British here in prison because of an agreement between the U.S. and Britain on matters of extradition, that they hold those who, the central figure, in an extradition. So, he's not being held even as a criminal.

And yet, he's being held in the most fearsome prison in this country, Belmarsh Prison, maximum security prison. He's in solitary confinement a lot of the time, so he's being punished, voluntarily punished, without having been charged, let alone convicted. So, he's waiting. If the U.S. loses this appeal in the high court, then Julian should be free. It sounds extraordinary even to say it, but that could happen. I don't know what the odds are against it happening, Dennis, and I wouldn't like to guess because how courts are politically manipulated, certainly in this country, is beyond me.

I think it's much more obvious in the United States where they're very obviously politically manipulated. So, I don't know. We can only guess what might happen in October. But October, shortly thereafter, is the crucial time. And you mentioned Craig Murray. Craig – I worry about Craig, so I emailed him in prison last week. I hope he's just very busy, but I haven't heard back from him.

Dennis: Why is he in prison? Why is Craig Murray, who is one of the key –

John: Why? Contempt of court. The Scottish High Court found that he had in his blog revealed or appealed to reveal the names of witnesses involved in the case against the leader of the Scottish National Party, Alex Salmond, who was acquitted of all charges of sexual assault and rape 18 months ago or last year. Craig, who was a supporter of Alex Salmond, wrote several blogs in which the courts said you could identify the women who were the witnesses in this.

Now Craig didn't name anybody and in Scotland – they don't have it in England, but in Scotland they call this jigsaw identification. But you can put all the pieces together if you know enough about a case and you can work out the identity. It was quite obvious Craig was being punished for being first of all I would think a very passionate supporter of the Scottish Independent Movement and particularly of Alex Salmond, and secondly, his support for Julian Assange. That's just my guess.

But it's such an arcane case. It's very difficult to work out what Craig's crime is actually, work out any crime at all. But that's it basically. He was charged with contempt, and the high court here found him guilty of that and sentenced him to eight months. With luck, he will be out by Christmas.

Dennis: I hope so, and I hope he is okay. I want to come back to Julian. How is Julian doing physically? We know he's somewhat frail. He's in prison in the midst of a pandemic. How is he doing? What do you know about this?

John: Well yeah, he's imprisoned in Belmarsh has coincided with the pandemic, and fortunately he hasn't courted. Mind you, they've locked him down, I mean locked him down literally, so comprehensively, that it's only – only very recently that Stella Morris, his partner, and his two young children, were able to have their first visit to him in 18 months. So, they've kept him sealed off.

And how is he doing? Well, I haven't seen him for well over a year, so I can't tell, but I'm told that his resilience is still to the full, he is still very strong, he clearly has had ups and downs, to say the least. I don't know. I always put myself in that position, Dennis. I just couldn't imagine it. I just don't think I would – I don't think I'd survive it.

Dennis: I know what you mean. I really do know what you mean, and I don't want to leave before talking a little bit about the real reason, the real reason that Assange is in jail is because he's a truth-teller.

John: Yeah.

Dennis: He made it possible for people to tell truths and he did a good job of protecting those people. And those truths affected governments, wars, and peace, corporations and it became a problem for the U.S. and power brokers around the world. Is that really – is that the bottom line?

John: Well yes, that's it. I mean it was – they had to close down WikiLeaks. WikiLeaks was – WikiLeaks produced some incredibly important information for the wider public all over the world about the way governments work, the lies they tell, the manipulations that they undertake, and important information to people in free societies. This was intolerable.

Interestingly, Obama, who prosecuted all whistle-blowers than any other president ever, and prosecuted Chelsea Manning, decided not to prosecute Julian Assange because he and his advisors worried about what they called “the New York Times problem”. So, in other words, if they prosecuted Assange, a published journalist, for revealing journalism, then they would be – could find themselves then prosecuting the New York Times, the Washington Post and all those who were in many ways Obama supporters. So, Obama decided not to prosecute Julian.

It was Trump's Department of Justice, a very zealous team of prosecutors, and they are the same people who under Trump – they're the same people now under Biden, and they are pursuing this case. I mean when you read all the documents that have been leaked. It's making an example of Julian. I mean one can be encouraged in that they really feared WikiLeaks. They feared this kind of transparency. They feared this kind of real journalism, and it had to be crushed. And an example had to be made of the person who devised the whole system of WikiLeaks.

And none of it surprises me because I've – one thing I had to learn pretty early in my career, that great power, particularly rapacious, great power, is ruthless. It's ruthless to a degree, and vindictive, I have to say. But ruthless to a degree that many of us can't imagine. We're not like that in our lives. But great power is, and so they pursue Julian.

Dennis: And I – it just really infuriates me that so many journalists, new organizations, used the extraordinary material he provided, won many awards based on the material that he provided, and they are silent as a clam under the sea.

John: Yes, I think that is finally – the penny has dropped for many in the media, but still there is a – a penny has dropped that they themselves could be – could find themselves being prosecuted for something similar should Julian be convicted. That's taken a long time for that to actually penetrate. It's taken a long time to penetrate because as you and I

know only too well, the so-called mainstream media is ANOM of great power whether it's Trump or Biden or whoever. It just is.

And it – what really – what Julian's conviction, if it happens, if it happens, threatens the only exceptions to the system of journalism known as the mainstream media, that is real journalists, those who defy authority, who want to find out how great power works, really works, that will be the Assange effect. It will be on the honorable exceptions, not on the rest of the media because the rest of the media is, you know, they're all onboard. They're all part of it.

CounterPunch 10.09.2021