

JOHN PILGER WORLDTV SPOTLIGHT INTERVIEW-  
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Mark Hertsgaard: Mr. Pilger, welcome to Spotlight.

John Pilger: Thank you

MH: Very nice to have you here. Mr. Pilger, you've made 25 films in your career. You've won many awards, including a National Emmy Award here in the United States. You know how the news business works. What is your take on this? What is the problem in getting a film like this picked up by mainstream American television?

JP: Well my history of trying to get my films shown in United States is just one of rejection not because of the quality of the film. Many of the films have been exclusive. Reports from Cambodia, East Timor, Burma and elsewhere. You get two responses. The first response is viewers would not be interested in that kind of thing, they are just not interested in the rest of the world --that's much too serious and they might believe that but there's a subtext to this and it is, 'let's not show anything that really goes against the political grain.' And when you move into the area of US foreign policy and most of my films at the very least touch on the impact of US foreign policy – they don't want anything to do with it. It is a very effective form of censorship.

MH: Well I wonder, is America different in this sense? Have you run into similar resistance to this particular film on Palestine in other countries, in Europe or in Asia let's say?

JP: America is different sadly. I mean the contradiction of course is, you know, it's constitutionally the freest press in the world and a freedom that is probably least exercised of any democracy in my experience. This film and all my films have been shown in about 30 countries. They begin in the UK, I make them for British Television. And then they go around the world. The Palestine film has been shown now in a dozen countries. It is just that I no longer, I don't regard the United States as a place where you can get a documentary shown that is critical of anything to do with the United States. It is not so much of a subjective view it is quite objective really. Anything to do with Israel and Palestine that might suggest that the Palestinians have a

case would be rejected. There is no doubt about that in my mind. But throughout the world the film has been shown.

MH: I wonder, how do you respond to people -thinking about the American audience here, some people who might see this film –particularly those very striking images that you have -and accuse you of rationalizing Palestinian violence and especially the suicide bombings? How do you respond to people like that?

JP: Well, I will be happy to talk to them about it. It is not doing that. And I think demonstrably it is not doing that. What it does do is treat Palestinians and Israelis both as human beings. Most of the interviewees are Israelis and the most moving interview certainly was for me doing it is with a man who is a quintessential Israeli, whose family died in Auschwitz, who is a war hero and whose daughter died in the suicide bombing. And this man described his daughter and the person who killed her as victims. He said unless the reasons for that victim hood, that is the injustices & all the rest of it, the occupation and so on, unless that was solved nothing would change. So there is nothing in the film that rationalizes violence. You can't help people whose minds are shut like steel tracks, thinking that may be the case. I think one of the problems is you know and this is especially true in the United States, is that we in the media had to live with an impression of Israel as something as a kind of sanctified state. It is not that. It is a place of very rapacious power politics as we see with this Likud regime of Sharon. It is also a country that is occupied –the homeland of another people for a very long time. But because the pro-Israel lobby is so powerful in the US and in Europe and around the world, I think journalists generally have sense of themselves on Israel. And what is happening now which is I suppose we can almost think Ariel Sharon and some of the extremists around him, what is happening now is that is changing and I think the timing of this film is particularly interesting because I thought I would run into more resistance in having it distributed around the world, but I haven't. As I said it is been shown in a dozen countries already.

MH: It is interesting when you talk about the American press. It strikes me there seems to be a wider spectrum of views within the press of Israel regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that there is here in United States. Is that your sense of it?

JP: Yes. Let's be fair. It is rather like reading about Northern Ireland or Ireland in British press. You had to go to United States to get a wider view. In the United States you can't read about the Middle East in the mainstream press or watch it on television. It is just not possible. It is just simply pure propaganda and the kind of intimidated news almost. As if even the suggestion that the oppressors are not the victims- that there is a whole people who are victims in the Middle East- the Palestinians. Even that suggestion of equity between the two in terms of victimhood or in their claim to human rights -the suggestion of that will get a hostile reception. PBS made a film twenty years ago and very famously got in to terrible hot water and it put the Palestinian point of view. The producer was sacked, the film was taken off, the voices were raised in the congress and so on and so forth. And that was the end of it. Nothing like that to my knowledge has happened again.

MH: Let's talk about what effect this has on broader American foreign policy. You have studied that. The one-sided impression that we have in United States of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, what has that meant for American foreign policy?

JP: Well, it is part of the distortion because Israel is at the center of American foreign policy. With this Bush Administration, Israel is in the Whitehouse, it is in Washington. A number of members of the Bush group Perle & Wolfowitz and others are fanatical supporters of Israel as a power within the Middle East. We are not talking about Israel's right to survive, everyone supports that or should. I mean the right of Israel to dominate in Middle East. My own view is that Israel is at the center of the reason for Bush Administration's obsession for attacking Iraq. I think there are many reasons at the center and there is no doubt oil is one of them, dominance of the region, reordering the region, settling scores and all the rest of it, but also there is Israel. Israel is once Iraq is dealt with and once Iran is dealt with. 10% of the Israeli air force is at the moment based in Turkey just longing to strike into Iran once Iraq is finished. And this agenda which comes from the most extreme sections of Israeli politics is supported and encouraged in Washington. But you know no president unless he plays court to the Israel lobby is really going to get the supporting congress that he needs and so on and so forth.

MH: Let me ask you once more about journalists here because of course they play a real role in this here in America. In one of your articles you described journalists of today as 'functionaries' –what did you mean by that?

JP: Well I think they are. I don't think many journalists have a right to call them-selves that any more because...

MH: A functionary of what though?

JP: A functionary of the state. And I don't mean a paid functionary of the state - of course they can be paid by other organizations, but I don't see much difference in journalists who might work for a great newspaper or a great TV network who simply echo and channel the state's line or the government line. I don't see much difference between them and those who did it for Pravda. In fact it is much easier to understand those who did it in totalitarian societies because they might argue that there wasn't any choice and their viewers and readers would say they didn't believe them anyway. But when there's meant to be at the very least or near to a free press and of the media playing a democratic role, that kind of propaganda is much more serious but I don't think there is any difference between the echoes of great power wherever they are, they are functionaries. Journalists are people who try to make sense of things, who try their best & perfectly to set the record straight, to not accept the view of power, who try to be independent. It is always difficult. All those things-that is my definition of a journalist. It is not somebody sitting in a network studio in front of an Auto cue, is repeating, channeling, channeling is the word here, what is being said to them and to their organization in Washington

MH: Let's try & set the record straight a little bit here in regards to the Middle East, the situation in Iraq. What is your view having reported from the region? How will a US lead war in Iraq affect the situation in the Middle East and in particular the very battered peace process between Palestine & Israel?

JP: Well I am not very good at predicting. I often get it wrong. I do know that the certain human cost will be huge. The US in my view wanted to do something for a very long time and that is to secure the Middle East - finally if you like. I don't think US foreign policy ever recovered from the loss of the Shah in Iran. That was a great shock and that was one of the great pillars of US foreign policy in Middle East, Saudi Arabia, Israel and Iran were the

three. It lost Iran and it never got it back. And it lost Iraq with Saddam Hussein, so they really need another Saddam Hussein in there and I think that's what they will try and do. It may not be all that easy. It's a very volatile and confused country. I think certainly securing Iraq as a bastion of oil, because Saudi Arabia has become highly unreliable. Saudi Arabia is in fact together with Pakistan, the home of Al Qaeda. I think if Al Qaeda will run for office in Saudi Arabia, they will win and amongst the some very rich and influential people and all that is a reaction in my view to American policy and American presence in the Middle East. The US still wants to hold onto Saudi Arabia as best it can because it is the prime resource of oil in the world. But it needs Iraq back, since Iraq is the second best source of oil. This extraordinary country runs right through the middle of it all. It needs Iraq back. I think by having Iraq, it can win or it feels it can win control over the rest of Middle East. It can give Israel the hand the Bush Administration clearly wants to give it in dealing with the Palestinians. So, it is a terrible term Pax-Americana (?) and it will only bring great suffering and chaos to that region in my view.

MH: Let's talk a little bit quickly here about Israel & the re-election of Ariel Sharon and your film was very striking. You've mentioned the Israeli gentleman whose daughter was lost in that suicide bombing. And I have read recently an opinion poll showing that a large number of both Israelis and Palestinians would like the violence to end, would like to have a two-state solution, would like to have a meaningful relaxation of the tensions there. Nevertheless Ariel Sharon, well known as a hardliner, got re-elected very handily in January. What is your analysis of why that happened?

JP: I think that's right. You know Israelis like all human beings would want to get on with their lives and most of them have identified that hanging on to the occupied territories is causing them grief and is giving them no security and they would like to get rid of that.

MH: But the labor party ran on that position and lost

JP: The labor party ran on a very weak platform. The labor party in terms of dealing with the Palestinians is largely discredited because many people in Israel wrongly in my view see the labor party as having tried and failed and failed very badly with the Oslo process. If they failed, people say to themselves, then let's give the very simple hard-line view a go. There are many questions digging there. The labor party was highly duplicitous in its

dealing with the Palestinians during that whole Oslo process. It was almost as if it was set up to fail. So they wanted both ways. People are not accepting that, they want simple solutions, just keep it safe, just keep them away. In the meantime, terrible attitudes are growing up in Israel; that have always been there in many ways but have certainly been exacerbated by this that are simply racist. When Desmond Tutu went to Israel and the occupied territories he was struck by the likeness between Israel and the occupied territories and a part of South Africa. I spend quite lot of time in South Africa, that was my sense of the place too. So you have people in Israel who want to get rid of the problem, want to be rid of the occupied territories but many of their feelings now about the Palestinians are so base and so strong that they don't really care too much of how it is done and when the suicide bomber blows up yet another restaurant and kills a number of people, of course these feelings are reinforced and people not surprisingly turn to the strong man , as they have done now to Sharon

MH: Now here is a very difficult final question for you. Given that sense of chaos and frustration on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, what is it going to take to finally resolve this conflict and move to a new era, or is that even possible?

JP: I think it is possible and I think first of all the withdrawal, that will have an instant effect

MH: What do you mean by the withdrawal?

JP: The withdrawal from the occupied territories, pulling out. Israel did it from Lebanon, it did it almost overnight. Some would say they were driven out and they were to a certain degree, but they also pulled out and the sky didn't fall in on them. This is simply withdrawing from the occupied territories would be number one I believe, and the suicide bombings. Even Hamas have said in so many words, they have said that once Israel withdraws then pretty much anything is possible. They haven't given any promises but certainly the people I have spoken to in the occupied territories have said as much. I think that is number one. And that will take the kind of bold political move that would carry risks politically but it will be immensely popular in Israel because those people who want to wash their hands of the Palestinians would then have their solution. The boys will come home, that tension will ease. Then the United Nations, some kind of international presence other than the United States has to come in to the

occupied territories and ensure that the next attempt to build a Palestinian homeland is not simply a subsidiary Israeli state but it is a real one. It could be in a number of simple bold moves that someone has got to make - the first step of course. At the moment the Israelis are the powerful part of that terrible relationship if you like between them and the Palestinians. The Palestinians are powerless that's why suicide bombings happened. It is a recent phenomenon. Before that, they were throwing stones at tanks. Even firing guns at Israeli soldiers is relatively recent. They are the powerless ones. So Israel has to make that move and there has to be real pressure from the so-called world community whatever that is these days. It is all about the United Nations reclaiming itself and that's why these maneuverings on Iraq now at the moment are very important because if the UN allows itself to be used as a vehicle to attack Iraq, I think it probably will be finished.

MH: Now Mr. Pilger I understand that there are some groups who have taken a definite disliking of your film. There is a group called Honest Reporting, that accuses you of not doing honest reporting. Can you tell us about them?

JP: Well, Honest Reporting was investigated by the Guardian newspaper in London a couple of years ago when it conducted a virulent campaign against the Guardian's reporter in Jerusalem. It surfaces when there is the slightest criticism of Israel. It is based in New York. It is an extreme group. It is highly organized.

MH: Do you know how many members it has?

JP: I don't know how many members it has but it has though email has given it a worldwide reach. It puts out a critical assessment of a piece of work such as my film and then lets its members all around the world and others have that, they then email me or the producer or whoever it is as an informed attack on the film. It is interesting that probably about 80% of the critical emails I received and Carlton Television received when the film was shown in the U.K. came from the United States where the film wasn't even seen. So you had emails from Texas saying we are disgusted by your film which clearly show Israel in a poor light and so on and so forth.

MH: And they could not have seen this film?

JP: They haven't seen this film. But it does have an impact because it ties up those who make films about Middle East and report from the Middle East and in my case it drew in The Independent Television Commission, which is the regulatory body in United Kingdom for television. It is an independent public body. Under the rules in U.K it can award franchises in television, it hears complaints, it is a watchdog body and so on and so forth. It has considerable powers. So it decided to investigate, it received so many of these complaints.

MH: About your film?

JP: They investigated the film. Its inquiry took about three months. So I have to say I never had in many years of journalism had my sources, motivations and everything else so forensically examined as they were during this inquiry. And a couple weeks ago ITC came out with a complete vindication of the film, praising its journalistic integrity, saying its research was comprehensive & thorough and saying most importantly that it was fair-minded and impartial in that it did have a view but it regarded Israelis and Palestinians as human beings not political pieces on a chess board. Now I am sure this would have absolutely inflamed the lobby. But it is an important judgment because it means that the kind of intimidation that these groups like the one in New York who hope they will succeed did not succeed in this case.

MS: In this case but what about in other cases? First of all, does that ITC ruling was that printed in the newspapers so people will hear about it?

JP: Yes it was printed in U.K. It is on my web site. I think it gave a great deal of encouragement to broadcasters in the U.K. Particularly correspondents you know in Jerusalem who have been complaining to the Israeli government about the numbers of journalists who were shot by the Israeli military. It is very dangerous to be a journalist in Jerusalem because one side is likely to shoot you and that's the Israelis. All the deaths are documented and when you have that kind of physical intimidation and then you have the Israeli government's Senior spokesman saying as he did not all that long ago then that the likes of CNN & BBC actually give their footage to Yasser Arafat first to be approved before they broadcast it, I mean that kind of absurdity is the atmosphere in which people work. When you have an important regulatory body, if you like refuting that and supporting the journalists right to look at all sides and to be sympathetic to those who have

been left out for a long time. When you have that support, it is important. The same thing is happening in South Africa, the film we were showing there has gone before their local complaint tribunal and I have no doubt they will also have it indicted but the point is the complainers are these highly orchestrated groups and most of them emanate from United States.

MH: Well, Mr. Pilger We here at World Link TV are very proud to be the venue for the American Broadcast premiere of your film “Palestine is Still The Issue”. And thank you very much for joining us here.

JP: Well thank you and than you for showing the film. Bye-bye!