

The Washington Consensus and the Axis of Empire: Tariq Ali's Address to the UDC Conference, St. Louis 2004

One of the highlights of the 2004 UDC Conference, in keeping with its theme, The Axis of Empire, was Tariq Ali's talk to the general body. Ali, who was born in colonial India and actively resisted the war against Vietnam, spoke to us about the contemporary adventures of the U.S. Empire and its junior allies. Since Ali spoke without a written text what we have here is a transcription of his speech prepared by Jim Hale with editorial changes made by the editors of this issue.

What has happened to media globally today is that it has come under the rules of Washington Consensus. Once it was determined how capitalism was going to function after the defeat of a big enemy that had called itself communism, media too were redirected — not necessarily, on a one-to-one basis — but sooner or later, both in the U.S. and elsewhere, in Europe as well, by the Washington Consensus.

Compare, for instance, media coverage in the 1970s and 1980s in terms of detailed news stories they carried on international events. After the Washington Consensus there has been a sharp decline in both the coverage of world politics and the numbers of foreign correspondents. There have been international crises after 9/11 without people to report on them. The problem was how to report a world where they had nobody to cover it.

This was deliberate — the ruling media had decided after the Cold War that we now lived in world where there would be no more conflicts. They had decided we did not need to educate a population to the same extent as had been necessary at the height of the Cold War. The Cold War had created an enemy, an enemy that challenged the functioning of capitalism itself; so we had to keep print and electronic media at certain level. For example, East Germans watching West German television could see diversity and debate. Then arguments had to be made to explain why the Cold War was being fought. Now, hot war arguments have to be found to convince people to support the new wars.

Of course, most journalists have never been permitted to cover what they wanted. But many decided to go their own way and report what they wanted to report. Saigon in Vietnam is an example. David Halberstam and Morley Safer are examples of some of those who broke the news management that was being imposed on them. They gave a different, more truthful picture. But that is now distant and remote. It is now discussed as history.

After the first Gulf War they tried to control television coverage, how war would be reported, and you had little coverage of the Turkey Shoot, the massacre of a retreating army. Some photographs got out, brave individuals went in. But news management was successful. This gave confidence to those who were in control. The same thing happened in the Balkan wars: images were used to whip up fervor, to get populations to accept the war. The number of Kosovans killed, in clashes between armed guerillas and the Yugoslav army prior to the NATO intervention, was less than 1,500. Instead, the figure we were told was 10,000. Based on this falsification, the decision was made that we had to go in and intervene. Once this began, the Milosevic regime acted the only way it did and began to drive people out. Images were edited and made to resemble images of the Second World War, of Jews being taken to concentration camps.

This imagery has played a big part in the mythology of wars following World War II. Egypt 1956 was the last war the British fought without American backing. They portrayed Prime Minister Abdul Nasser as "Hitler on the Nile," which is why they had to crush him. But this spelled the end of an independent Britain. Nasser was the most popular nationalist leader produced on the Nile, but the image that was transmitted was that fascism had taken over Egypt. They decided to pick a fight with him and take his country.

In the First Gulf War, they turned Saddam Hussein into a "Hitler on the Tigris." The same was true of "Milosevic on the Danube." In every one of these instances of news management, the images used were very similar. It's a sad business, indeed. We imagine the war was fought to save the Jews in Hitler's Germany, but that was far from the truth. If this was really the case, then WWII was a defeat. In reality, the Allies, despite repeated requests, refused to bomb the camps although they didn't make it difficult to bomb the camps

either. While the inmates of those camps would have been killed in the bombings it would have also become difficult to continue to use those camps. Instead, the allies made the argument that they didn't have planes to spare. So it became a war to defeat German/Italian fascism rather than save the Jews. Idiots said this about Osama Bin Laden — a man with 2000 or 3000 people and no state power, whatsoever: that he was the leader of a global Islamo-fascist threat. The image stuck in the consciousness of United States and Britain.

This constant use of media, since the end of the Cold War, to whip up populations is very dangerous. The only way to combat it is by showing counter images, even on the web. Sometimes that has a much, much bigger effect. That's the hopeful side of this. It is difficult for them to totally ignore what Indy media do. They could sometimes get away with this in the 1970s, 1980s and even in the 1990s.

When we took Baghdad, shameless news managers listened to house-Arabs in Washington who said that we would be greeted with sweets and flowers. There were no sweets, no flowers. No people to greet them. This stunned them. They couldn't use mass mobilization to recreate a new image of a Berlin Wall of Middle East. There was no one to tear down statues. So they rapidly assembled machinery and mercenaries to do the job. Saddam was not popular but occupation by foreigners was even less popular. Basically, the entire event of tearing down the statue was manufactured by Chalabi's people and Marine heavy equipment. Two hundred people pretended to be two million. It was pathetic. It was pathetic in a city of two million. Yet, this was the image that went around the world.

Mercifully, independent journalists took photos of the large square, a square that was mostly empty, and, as they couldn't have done 25 years ago, put the images on the Internet and around the world. Activists begin to challenge what was going in Iraq. This big challenge completely skewered media attempts to justify this war. We tend to give too much weight to official media and too little to public opinion, which often sees through the lies imposed on them by politicians and backed by the media. So, they rebel, an instinctive rebellion against the lies of the politicians and the media barons. And they tried to stop a war from taking place. We had massive demonstrations on Feb. 15, 2003,

without media support. After it happened, it got reported on the media. Such protests have never happened on this scale, at any time on the globe.

The British government, the prime minister, asked the director general of BBC why he continued reporting this. His question was, “How do you know there are a million people protesting?” But the figures were police figures. “One million,” the BBC replied. “Should we now challenge the police figures?” I was on a BBC program and talked about this exchange between Downing Street and BBC. I said there were lots of people who opposed this war. But the government had supplied its own people for the program. Audiences were seen as too radical! I was on another panel before the war — you could tell that it was a weird audience, 25 percent were brought in purposely, including Chalabi’s nephew. It was noticeable what had happened. There were others now on the payroll of the West.

The size and scale of these anti-war demonstrations, these first mass revolts *against media news management and media lies* as well as against the war was remarkable. This protest was not just against politicians. People didn’t believe the pack of lies about the threat of mass destruction and a collapsing regime. We knew instinctively that it was just a pack of lies. Ours was also a rebellion against *untruth*.

This shook senior people in Europe. There were switches in Britain, with two mainstream papers coming out against the war. *The Daily Mirror* started to look like an anti-war newspaper. Of its three million readers, between 40 and 50 percent were against the war and the press realized it. In one issue there was a big picture of Blair and Bush naked. The caption said, “Make Love, Not War.”

Why did this happen? Let’s go back one step further. In Europe, senior people in the ruling elite were divided on war. When you have division on that level and to that degree, it becomes impossible for media, which have to serve the interests of the entire elite, to be single-minded in their devotion to government of the day.

One of the most senior figures in British intelligence, Blair’s national security advisor, wrote to the *London Financial Times* and denounced the government. He charged it with lying and attempting to scare the country. He wrote that housewives were encouraged to stock up and

that tanks were sent to Heathrow Airport to create war-hysteria. We knew this was fake. I was told by a policeman that these were 9-to-5 tanks — “they don’t pay overtime after 5,” said the policeman. This type of letter is unheard of in British society. A senior figure in British intelligence wrote, “warmongers sell war. Fishmongers sell fish. Our prime minister has somewhat oversold his wares.” Other senior figures said they didn’t think we’re ready to go to war, that this was one war that went too far. The lies weren’t having the desired effect.

The knowledge of this conflict created a division in the heart of the media establishment. The BBC could not be as loyal as it usually is. Previously, it used to be difficult to get dissident voices on BBC. Now, we could get in dissident voices at certain times. BBC World used to get me on in the morning. They would not have me on at 3 to 4 in the afternoon — because America’s woken up by then, I was told. That’s how carefully they plan it. They didn’t want too many radical voices to wreck our standing in the U.S.

The Iraq war has caused massive problems for the ruling class because the reality is totally different from that told by news managers in Washington and London. It is a tribute to Iraqi resistance that they helped the truth come out. If there had been no resistance in Iraq, the whole business would have been treated as an incredible triumph. Even Europeans would have clamored on board to share the loot. In fact, that’s exactly what they said at first: Please let us share the loot. Now, they’ve gone silent. It was quite a step in Spain, to pull their troops out of Iraq, making the U.S. establishment livid.

The media cannot *not* report but they report events in a particular way. It is taken for granted in the U.S., not in Europe, that targeting individuals and killing them is justified. It’s shocking what makes this acceptable in regard to U.S. policy in the Middle East: there is absolutely no opposition at the official political level on Iraq and Palestine. There is nothing to choose between Bush and Kerry. Kerry is to the right of Bush on Palestine. This collusion makes it easier for mainstream media to justify bombing Fallujah, to shock and punish civilian populations. No matter, that this is exactly what the Germans did in WWII. But there was no shock or horror in the U.S. media.

The U.S. is on a different planet, altogether. There is no serious criticism of what is happening in Palestine. The Israeli army is targeting young children under 17. The Israeli army is well trained. The number of young boys targeted has reached astronomical proportions. Yet, this is acceptable. The Western liberal conscience is dead as far as Palestine is concerned. The reason given for its acceptance is Judaicide. So the Palestinians are indirect victims of WWII Judaicide, which was done in the name of Christianity by a regime that flaunted its Christianity. Hitler had a great deal about divine wrath and God in him.

When you compare the coverage of Palestine in the U.S. and Israel media, there is much more critical coverage in some sections of the Israeli press than in the U.S. The question is asked by the Israeli press, "Can't you just print some sections of this in the *New York Times*?" The answer, no we can't. Some courageous pilots refused to bomb Palestinians. They said that they were not the mafia and would not carry out revenge killings. It was published here in the U.S., but only in a small fashion. A very brave Israeli journalist wrote a "Defense of Israel" and the government reaction was interesting. He had taken every single paragraph and statement from Hitler's writings and signed it, A. Schickelgrueber. They didn't realize this was Hitler's real name. Probably thought it was some nice Jewish boy. He lost his job, but his piece was syndicated in many magazines and newspapers.

Subversive acts can and do have an impact. Dissident Israelis have far more courage than that displayed by their equivalents, certainly the liberals, in the U.S. These people are incredibly high-minded, but with all these brutalities, they give a nod and a wink to what they know about Hussein and Milosevic. It's a totally different story when it comes to Israeli actions against Palestinians. I feel, this is something the Independent media network has to do: to let the Israeli dissidents speak, to get stuff regularly from dissident Israeli groups, and to publicize it here.

Meanwhile, news management has become an art form. Watching Fox television is a rare experience, an anthropological experience like nothing else in the Western world. Third Reich television would have been more

intelligent. Yet, they can get away with it because they have the money.

But the power of corporations can be challenged by producing counter programs. Sometimes lies become so big, people even pour out into the streets against those lies. The large anti-war demonstrations were not just a triumph of the left. Millions from every walk of life, of many different political opinions came out as citizens. If three million leftists had poured into the streets of Rome we would have been close to an insurrection! They came out as citizens speaking against a war that had been based on total lies. Their protest forced the media to stand back in Europe. In the U.S., resistance has caused a few newspapers to stand back and ask a few questions. These reports are beginning to come out.

Once the lies of officialdom are broken you begin to see that things are not going so well for the establishment. Without the resistance, you wouldn't have had these books from within the administration — Clark's book, or even that wretch Bob Woodward's. They are producing these books because it is not going well. They want to say, "We told you so."

I had said before the war — this is an Arab country and it has had an awful leadership. But once you occupy the country they will resist because they will not like losing their independence. The occupying soldiers are demoralized. They did not find any weapons of mass destruction. Capturing Saddam didn't stop the resistance. It only increased it, as I had predicted. Now that they got rid of this son-of-a-bitch they can drive the Americans out. Then, they tried to sell the story that the resistance was nothing but the Al Queda. If the Al Queda were there at all, they were there because the occupation had drawn them there like a magnet. They had never been there before. Iraq was a country in which more women were educated as doctors, teachers, and airline pilots.

Resistance is always fought by a minority. When at the beginning of any resistance has it not been a minority? Nearly 50 percent of the French had cooperated happily in WWII. The U.S. recognized the Vichy regime until 1944. That argument, that the Iraqi resistance is only a minority, just doesn't work. We have to keep in touch with history.

It was said of the Shi'ite uprising that the Shias were

the only ones resisting. Sunni/Shiite divisions exist, but the Sunni triangle is a western invention. Iraq is an integrated society. The other big lie is that power is being handed over to the Iraqis. The U.S takes a handful of Iraqis from here, most of them are from the U.S. anyway, and it's not going to work. Well, they say, we won't hand them full sovereignty. The resistance is going to go on. The media is going to be tested.

Words like resistance, empire, imperialism are being discussed not only on the left but also on the right. We're seeing a twenty-first century colonization of a country. This is a lesson of history. Contrary to the denunciations of dominant narratives by postmodern academics there is a dominant narrative in history — the triumph of capitalism, of the neo-liberal steamroller, of the Washington consensus, and the American empire. Find me a narrative to compete with that. Many in the academy ran from that — because it's threatening.

But history has come up again.

Understand Iraq in its history. It was once dominated by the British Empire and there were those who fought against that. Now those very grandparents are telling their grandchildren how to fight the U.S. Iraq has not lost its history. This is a country that has a living memory.

Many in the U.S. cannot believe that this could happen again. This country is full of those who were dissident in the '60s and '70s and have now made their peace with establishment. Yet, a new generation is being radicalized in a different way, in a different time. We need to put our hopes on this generation — it's hardheaded and cynical, not like those under Reagan and Thatcher. The day Baghdad was being bombed, hundreds, thousands of school kids poured out to protest. Radicals in a generation are not a majority. They never are. This generation's radicals are out there. They have many technological and political opportunities.

If only, we had only had the web in 1960s and 1970s. What miracles we could have achieved! Radical websites are now deluged from all over the world. When a war erupts three or four radical websites are deluged, from all over the world, because no one believes the official truth, and this is incredibly positive.

And, on that happy note I will stop.
