

Lecture given by Robert Fisk, 26 September, 2002, at the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona

"11 SEPTEMBER: ASK WHO DID IT BUT, FOR HEAVEN'S SAKE, DON'T ASK WHY"

Ladies and gentlemen, September 11th 2001 did not change the world. I tell my colleagues all the time, "Please stop printing and broadcasting those words". Over and over, after September 11th, this has become one of the outstanding, dangerous lies that we journalists have been propagating. September 11th may have given president George W. Bush an excuse to change the world but that, I believe, should be exposed for what it is: a manipulation of grief and fear in order to start a war that has nothing to do with the international crimes against humanity which took place in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania just over a year ago, and against a country that has absolutely nothing to do with those atrocities.

On September 12th this year, Mr Bush addressed the United Nations and I sat in the General Assembly in New York and watched him. And he started what I fear is an American attempt to reshape the Middle East, to rewrite the history of a region which is white-hot with anger at the United States. It will, I suspect, be the most frightening attempt to change the map of the Middle East since Britain and France, victors over the Ottoman Empire, divided up the spoils of the 1914 - 1918 war. We heard Mr Bush's increasingly violent demands for an attack on Iraq and regime change elsewhere in the region. And be sure, when it starts, our television broadcasters will use their familiar line at the bottom of the screen: "War on terror".

In the days and weeks that followed September 11th 2001, I became increasingly disturbed by the vapid, hopeless, gutless, unchallenging journalism which passed for coverage in the western media. The terrifying events of September 11th were mutated into a movie: America at War, War on Terrorism, War on Terror. Often, these titles would appear in a kind of laminated gold typeface on the screen, the kind that once appeared in American biblical ethics like **Ben Hur**, and each newscast would be introduced with an orchestral theme tune, a TV jingle to summon you back to the next part of the serial in case you were taking a cup of coffee when they were bombing. I felt that this obscured realities just as I also feared it dishonoured the dead of September 11th. And, just as in the 1991 Gulf War, when we were treated to the hapless pictures of journalists wearing army costumes, so CNN's man at Kandahar last year was among the first to put on a marine helmet. When I condemned this pathetic piece of theatre, CNN's executives announced that the US marines had insisted that their reporter wear a helmet. This is no excuse. Journalists have no business obeying military orders that make them look like combatants. And when so many of our colleagues accept these orders, as they did in the 1991 Gulf War, or when they turn up with a pistol in Jalalabad in October and November, claiming they want to shoot Osama bin Laden, as the representative of Fox News did, is it any wonder that we journalists become targets of attack? We lost eleven people in Afghanistan.

But my talk to you tonight is not about the dangers to journalists. It's about the dangers now posed for journalism itself: the facile, unquestioning acceptance of authority and of the trite and bland and deeply misleading government statements which are parroted and then blended into titles and headlines. From the very start, I predicted in my newspaper, **The Independent**, that this was not a war on "terror" but a war against America's enemies and, most probably, Israel's enemies., which is what it is turning out to be. Yet we went along. Indeed we still go along, despite all the evidence, in calling this a "war on terror", a "war for democracy", a "war against evil". **Newsweek** actually carried a front-cover headline which read "The Evil One". Not content with allowing governments to become TV headline writers, journalists were now using biblical authority for their stories. We, the West, Democracy, the Forces of Good, we were the ones that suffered, of course. And all this week, and all next week, and the following year, I suspect, we're going to be invited to suffer all over again. And when the anniversary of the bombardment of Afghanistan falls due, in a few weeks' time, will we be carrying long and moving accounts of the thousands of innocent Afghans killed by our bombs? Will we, hell!

Let me first ask you one question. When did we first hear of the Iraqi dimension of September 11th? Here in Spain, when did **La Vanguardia**, **El País**, **ABC**, first suggest that Saddam was in the picture? Did anyone say back then, September 11th 2001, and in the days and weeks immediately following these crimes against humanity, did anyone say then that Iraq would be in the firing line? I don't remember anyone saying that. Where exactly did the slippage come? At what point did Osama bin Laden fade away to be replaced by Saddam Hussein? Our journalists, who should have picked this up at once, were silent. Far from doing their job, alerting readers and viewers to this astonishing transition in US foreign policy, they went along with it. **The New York Times** and **The Washington Post** suddenly began to run long stories on the supposed intelligence links between Iraq and bin Laden: eight stories in one week, I recall, each sourced to administration officials, intelligence officials, diplomats in Washington and London, all of them, of course, anonymous.

Look at this **Daily Express** from London. I picked this up when I was passing through. "Nuclear Attack in Just Weeks". We British are going to have nuclear weapons fired at us before Christmas, if you believe what the government is telling the tabloid newspapers in England. A nuclear attack! In just weeks! Why didn't Mr Blair, for example, tell us British about this astonishing threat a year ago? So today, while we are prepared to discuss the wisdom of starting yet another war in the Middle East - there is, after all a fairly bloody enough conflict already going on there - we remain quiescent. We do not want to investigate just how Target Kabul became Target Baghdad and, in the coming days perhaps, Target Damascus, or Target Beirut or even - since the Rand Corporation's pro-Israeli lecturer referred to the kingdom of Saudi Arabia as "the kernel of evil" - Target Riyadh. Even when our own dear Prime Minister Blair returns from the United States telling us that there may be a "blood price" that has to be paid in the event of war, not a single journalist points out that this would be a blood price principally paid by the Iraqis, not us. Richard Armitage, one of Colin Powell's deputies in Washington, announced two weeks ago that the Lebanese Hezbollah may be the A-team of terrorism with al-Qa'ida relegated, presumably, to the third division of the football league. Armitage said that the Hezbollah owed America - here we go again - a "blood debt". But ... where does this word fit into the language of these men? Note how, yet again, we're on the move. First, the heart of darkness beats in a man with a beard who has a propensity to live in Afghan caves. Then, he transmogrifies into a resident of Baghdad, with a liking for chemical weapons and supposedly developing nuclear bombs. And now, out of the blue, it's the Levant, the Mediterranean, Beirut we should be targeting. Armitage's "blood debt" is presumably a reference to the killing of 241 US servicemen in the US marine suicide bombing in Beirut on October 23rd 1983 but, of course, he doesn't say so.

Very few reporters have tried to winkle out what all this means. To its great credit, I should say that the **Nation** magazine in New York has published, on September 2nd, a first-class article detailing the number of US administration officials who have previously worked for pro-Israeli lobby groups in Washington. This at least might explain why the Bush Administration now appears set to redraw the map of the Middle East along lines which Israel itself can only dream of. No mention of all this, of course, in the mainstream television and media, in the United States, or Britain or here.

Yet still our blindness goes on. Immediately after the 1991 Gulf War, once it was clear that the awful Saddam would remain in power, the United States government suddenly stopped making any reference to the Iraqi president. Sound familiar? I remember how Colin Powell told a press conference I attended, in northern Kurdish Iraq, that the American government was talking to "Iraqi officials" but he made no mention any more of the "Hitler of Baghdad". I asked him what had happened to the Saddam factor. Hadn't he told us that Hitler was in Baghdad? Why no more references to the man who had been bastardised - and not without good reason - a few weeks before? He just shrugged his shoulders and went on talking about officials. The word "Saddam" had become banned. Having failed to destroy him, Saddam had been turned into a non-person, to be recreated of course, eleven years later when we wanted to go to war again.

In just such a way, Osama bin Laden has now been air-brushed out of the picture. No US officials any longer mention Osama bin Laden's name. Having failed to destroy him, he has now been turned into a non-person although, Saddam-like, I assure you we will disinter him when we need him in the months to come. The language of journalism has, as usual, fallen into step with government. Note how almost every journalistic reference to al-Qa'ida now talks about how US forces in Afghanistan are mopping up - wait for it - "al-Qa'ida remnants". The word "remnants" began to be used at US press briefings in Afghanistan and has now effortlessly, and without any self-questioning, entered the journalistic lexicon. We are always closing in on, hunting down, chasing, liquidating, cornering, arresting those elusive remnants. True, when US forces tried to ambush them, at Shaikot Valley earlier this year, the "remnants" turned out to be of around brigade strength. And true, the attempted assassination of president Hamid Karzai, and the car bomb in Kabul which killed twenty-six innocent people a couple of weeks ago, suggest that there are rather more remnants than we bargained for. But, no matter, we're now lining up Baghdad in our sights. Afghanistan is now descending deeper into anarchy. I've just come back from there, a couple of weeks ago. It is impossible to travel by night on the roads. The drug barons are back in control. Read the UN's warnings about the massive new narcotics traffic that is due to restart when this year's poppy crop is in. And we can't even bother to investigate the mass graves of northern Afghanistan in which our war criminal allies buried well over a thousand of their Taliban enemies.

But let me give you a personal reflection on all this. On December 8th of last year, I was attacked by a crowd of Afghan refugees in a village called Kila Abdullah, not far from the Pakistan-Afghan border. My car had broken down and the Afghans, many of whom had lost relatives in the recent US bombing raids around Kandahar, decided to take their rage out upon me. I was beaten on the head with stones, kicked and cut. Rescue came from a religious man. I recall he had a turban but I had so much blood in my eyes that I could scarcely see him. He escorted me to a Pakistani police van. Sitting in the Red Cross ambulance on its way to Quetta, I realised how carefully I was going to have to handle the frightening and very painful event that had just occurred and which I knew would be reported by my fellow journalists. I did not wish to be the source of another Muslim-bashing story: the lone Briton, savagely assaulted by an angry mob of Afghans. We've been savagely assaulted by Afghans ever since 1842. It's not a tradition I wish to join. I hate the what and where stories that leave out the why. Some context had to be given to their fury, their anger, some reference to the fact that they had been most cruelly bereaved, that my sudden, and very definitely western, appearance in the village represented for them the face of those who had just destroyed their loved ones. So, in every interview I gave, I therefore made this point. Indeed I said, and later wrote in **The Independent**, that if I was one of those grief-filled Afghan men, I too would have attacked Robert Fisk. Those who beat me, I wrote, were truly innocent of any crime except being the victims of the world.

Almost every published and televised report mentioned the reasons behind the assault except for the British **Mail on Sunday** newspaper which used an agency story and carefully deleted my explanation. In the **Mail**, of course, a mob of angry Afghans attacked me, but apparently without reason. Readers might have been excused for thinking that the Afghans are always angry, primitive, generically violent and thus prone to beat up foreigners on a whim, the classic Islamophobic story, and the response of anyone reading the **Mail** newspaper article. Later reactions were even more interesting. Among a mass of letters that arrived from readers of **The Independent**, almost all of them expressing their horror at what had happened, came a few Christmas cards, all but one of them unsigned, expressing the writers' disappointment that the Afghans hadn't "finished the job". **The Wall Street Journal** carried an article which said more or less the same thing under the sub-head "A self-loathing multiculturalist gets his due". In it, Mark Steyn wrote of my reaction that "You'd have to have a heart of stone not to weep with laughter". The Fisk doctrine, he went on, taken to its logical conclusion, absolves of responsibility, not only the perpetrators of September 11th but also Taliban supporters who attacked several of Mr Fisk's fellow journalists in Afghanistan, all of whom, alas, died before being able to file a final column explaining why their murderers are blameless. Quite apart from the fact that most of my journalist colleagues who died in Afghanistan were killed by thieves who had taken advantage of the Talibans' defeat, Steyn's article was interesting for two reasons. It insinuated that, in

some way, I approved of the crimes against humanity on September 11th or, at the least, would absolve the mass murderers. More importantly, Steyn's article would not have been written had I not explained the context of the assault that was made on me, tiny though it was on the scale of suffering visited upon Afghanistan. Had I merely reported an attack by a mob, the story, like the one in the **Mail on Sunday**, would have fitted perfectly into the general American media presentation of the Afghan war: no reference to civilian deaths from US B-52 bombers, no suggestion that the widespread casualties caused in the American raids would turn Afghans to fury against the West. We were, after all, supposed to be liberating these people, were we not? Not killing their families. Of course, my crime - the **Journal** gave its column the headline "Hate-Me Crimes" - my crime was to report the why as well as the what and where.

I was crossing the Atlantic on September 11th 2001. My plane took off from Europe just after the first reports of the attack on the World Trade Center and it turned round off the coast of Ireland when the US closed its airspace. So I filed my first column to **The Independent** from my airline seat, on the plane's satellite phone, without notes, dictating to a copy-taker, pointing out that there would be an attempt in the coming days to avoid asking the why questions. I wrote about the history of deceit and lies in the Middle East, the growing Arab anger at the deaths of thousands of Iraqi children under UN sanctions and the continued occupation of the West Bank and Gaza by Israel. I suggested bin Laden may have been responsible. I wrote that thousands of Muslims may soon die in Afghanistan or elsewhere as a result of the outrages in New York and Washington. E-mails poured into **The Independent**, mostly in support of my article, many demanding my resignation. The attacks on America were caused "by hate itself, of precisely the obsessive and dehumanising kind that Fisk and bin Laden have been spreading", said one. According to the same message, from professor Judea Pearl of UCLA (sadly his son was to be murdered in Pakistan after, by the way, being very kind to me after I was hurt, in looking after me, along with his wife), but according to professor Pearl, I was "drooling venom" and a "professional hate-peddler". Another missive, signed Ellen Popper, announced that I was "in cahoots" with the arch-terrorist bin Laden. Mark Guon labelled me "a total nut case". I was "psychotic", according to Lillie and Barry Weiss. Brandon Heller of San Diego informed that, "You are actually supporting Evil itself". It was only 750 words. On an Irish radio show, in Ireland, a Harvard professor announced that I was a liar, a dangerous man and that anti-Americanism, of which I was obviously guilty, was the same as anti-Semitism. The show's Irish presenter eventually pulled the plug on the good professor, but I got the point. Not only was it wicked to suggest that someone might have had a reason, or come from an area that had a reason, to see this mass slaughter. It was even more appalling to suggest what these reasons might be. To criticise the United States or to be "anti-American", whatever that is, was to be a Jew-hater, a racist, a Nazi. Merely to suggest that Washington's policies in the Middle East, its unconditional support for Israel, its support for Arab dictators (who do what we want), its approval of UN sanctions that have cost the lives of so many Iraqi children, might lie behind, or might be part of a context of the venomous attacks of September 11th, was an act of evil in itself.

Oddly, the fact that the mass murderers were all Arabs, and that most came from Saudi Arabia, was not regarded as a problem by reporters or readers, or by the US government. They were clearly from the "Muslim world". This fell into the where and what slot. And "Arab terrorists" are familiar characters in America. Hollywood's made sure of that. The sin, the sin, was to connect the Arabs with the problems of the lands they came from, to ask the why question. They came from the Middle East! Is there something wrong there maybe? Is there a problem in the Middle East?

When the cops turn up, when the *guardia civil*, the police come along to the scene of any crime - if they make it - if they come along to the scene of any crime, the first thing they do is look for a motive. But when the crime scene is on a vast and terrifying scale, in New York and Washington and Pennsylvania, the one thing we're not allowed to do is look for a motive. How very odd. The killers were evil. They hated democracy, even though most of them wouldn't have the slightest idea of what democracy was if they woke up in bed and found it next to them.

I say all this because I have a particular interest in Osama bin Laden. Back in 1997, I met him and not for the first time. I had interviewed him in Sudan in 1994, then in Afghanistan in 1996, then again in Afghanistan, in one of his camps the following year. That last night when we met, I was driven by one of his armed followers hundreds of miles across the mountains of Afghanistan, high up the rugged, towering Kabul Gorge. The clouds were below us, waterfalls of ice clinging to the living rock above our Toyota. The gunman informed me, "Toyota is good for Holy War". I didn't think it was a very good joke. And bin Laden does not make jokes. After hours of sliding and slipping on the scree, the rough stones, above sheer precipices, we reached a plateau of stones and an air-raid shelter twenty-five feet high and twenty-five feet wide, cut into the living rock of the mountainside by bin Laden's construction teams at the height of the war between Afghans and the Russians, a war, of course, in which bin Laden fought with great courage, being wounded six times, fighting on **our** side, the side with which the West was allied. Indeed, most of his camps, the camps at which the United States directed its bombs, at Tora Bora and elsewhere, were very well-known to the United States. They didn't have to look at radar pictures. They were built by the CIA, during the war against the Russians. They didn't actually have "Made by the CIA" on the side, but they were. But, strange isn't it, how that simple fact didn't quite make it into our news reports.

So that night in Afghanistan, I waited in a tent, along with several of bin Laden's armed followers. An oil lamp sputtered in the corner. Then bin Laden himself came in, lithe as a cat but, I thought, with a slight infirmity in one of his legs. I was carrying, over my shoulder, a school satchel, which I use in rough countries to carry my passport and other documents. But bin Laden saw some Arabic-language newspapers from Beirut in the bag and seized upon them, turning to study them in the corner of the tent, in silence for all of twenty minutes. He didn't even know that the Iranian foreign minister had just visited his country, Saudi Arabia. And I sat there with his men, all of us ignored by bin Laden, and thought how isolated he seemed. Didn't he have a radio? A television? When he did speak, it was with a determination, a rather chilling self-conviction, which I had not seen before. I still have my notes of that meeting. And what he said is even more sinister in retrospect. "Mr Robert", he said, "we fought and beat the Russian army in Afghanistan. We won our battle over the Russians from this very mountain upon which you are now sitting and that battle destroyed the Soviet Union." I couldn't totally disagree with that. I think Afghanistan did help to destroy the Soviet Union. From time to time, bin Laden, rather disconcertingly, would clean his teeth with a piece of wood, a piece of *mishwak* stick, while I was asking the questions, and he'd go on cleaning his teeth for a minute afterwards while he thought what he wanted to say. "Mr Robert", he went on, "I pray to God that He will permit us to turn the United States into a shadow of itself".

A shadow of itself. Ladies and gentlemen, I could not fail to remember these words when I saw those terrible images of New York on the television when I returned to Europe. The World Trade Center had disappeared into two almost biblical columns of smoke and New York, I realised, **was** now a shadow of itself. "Shadow", just one word, made me feel deeply disturbed. But bin Laden's power in the Middle East comes from what he says rather than what he does, in the Middle East. I don't think he climbs to the top of a mountain and pulls out a mobile phone and mutters, "Plan B". Hollywood might have him do that. The US State Department might have him do that. I fear, however, that his awful power and influence comes more from his words. Many times I have listened to them, personally present, his armed followers hanging upon those words as if he was a messiah. He would demand that the American forces leave the Middle East, leave what he called the "Land of the two holy places": Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia. Seven thousand American troops are there, of course. He wanted them to leave the other Gulf countries, Egypt and Jordan, which torture their own people. He demanded an end to Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. He demanded an end to the sanctions which are killing so many Iraqi children, under the UN sanctions, which are principally still supported by the United States. Whether or not he really felt that strongly, that is what he said. And his words have a special resonance in an Arab world which has for decades felt humiliated by the West, especially by America, a world which, many of its millions believe, has indeed been corrupted and damaged almost beyond repair by the culture and armed might and politics of the West. Without those feelings of despair and humiliation and fury, bin Laden would truly be a voice in

the wilderness, ignored, derided, perhaps freighted to a hospital for the insane. But to many Arabs - and this is the point - to many Arabs who **were** appalled, for both moral and religious reasons, by the staggering massacres in New York and Washington, bin Laden does not sound insane, which is why his voice circulates so frequently, to so many thousands of people, millions of people, sometimes on cassettes, and so often of course on Al-Jazeera television, in the Middle East.

I've spent twenty-six years in the Middle East now, trying to answer the whys. And in no part of the world is our reporting so flawed, so biased in favour of one country: Israel. And so consensual in its use of words. Indeed, the language of Middle East journalism has become so cowardly, so slippery, so deferential, so locked into the phrases used by the State Department, by the president, by US diplomats, by Israeli officials, that our reporting has, in many cases, become incomprehensible. Such is the bizarre nature of our profession in the region that any talk, like the one I'm giving you tonight, must follow a kind of mantra. So here we go. Saddam Hussein **is** a wicked, cruel tyrant who invaded Iran and then Kuwait. Yes, he **did** use poison gas on the Kurds. His Iranian war cost up to a million lives. He has a hangman on twenty-four hour duty at Abu Ghraib prison. (Women are hanged on Tuesdays and Thursdays.) Yasser Arafat **is** a corrupt, vain little despot, allowing his eleven, some say thirteen, secret services - when they can operate - to beat, torture and occasionally kill, Palestinian opponents. I should add that I never could see why Israel wanted to negotiate with him, unless they saw him as a weak militia ally who could police the West Bank and Gaza on their behalf. Palestinian suicide bombings are a fearful, evil weapon but we are nevertheless lying about the Middle East, because we are distorting the truth, either because we are afraid of criticisms from Israel and its supporters, or because we journalists prefer an easy life, unencumbered by hate mail and letters to the editor.

Take the pejorative use of the word "terrorist". The mass murders of September 11th may require a redefinition by those journalists, including myself, who normally abjure the word in Middle East reporting on the grounds that it is used exclusively about Arabs. But its over-use, almost as a punctuation mark, in any discussion of the Arab-Israeli conflict remains as poisonous as ever. It is difficult to explain to Arabs, for example, why the New York and Washington massacres were an act of terrorism, which it clearly was, but why the massacre of up to 1,700 Palestinians in the Sabra and Chatila refugee camps in Beirut between September 16th and 18th 1982 has never been called an act of terrorism, by journalists or by governments. The death toll in Chatila, after all, was more than half that of September 11th in the United States. But we didn't call the killers terrorists. Was this strange omission of the word "terrorism" because the killers, members of the Christian Lebanese Phalangist militia, happened to be allied to Israel? Did it not qualify as an act of terrorism because most of the murderers were wearing Israeli defence force uniforms? Albeit with the Hebrew acronym *sahal* painted out. Or did it fail to meet the terrorism test because Israeli forces had surrounded the camp in 1982 and because Ariel Sharon, then Israel's Defence Minister, had sent the Phalange into the camps. Not once, ever, has a western newspaper called the mass murderers of Sabra and Chatila terrorists. Indeed, Israel's own Kahan commission of inquiry into the massacre, which held Ariel Sharon personally responsible for the killings, called the Phalangist killers "soldiers". This is not an isolated example. When an Israeli reserve officer, Baruch Goldstein, massacred twenty-nine Palestinians in a Hebron mosque, on 25 February 1994, he was not called a terrorist. CNN referred to him as "deranged". Later, the Israeli ambassador in London said that Goldstein was "deranged by fanaticism". Other reports spoke of Goldstein as an extremist. Yet when Hamas took its inevitable - and wicked - revenge, with a bus bomb in the Israeli town of Afula, CNN recovered its nerve. Reporter Bill Delaney told us it was an act of "Arab terrorism".

Of far greater ethical significance was the cover of **Newsweek** magazine. I'll show you. As you see: "Terror Goes Global", alluding to Osama bin Laden's international network of terror. This is February 19th of 2001. They got that right, OK. Beneath these words, however, is a photograph of a Palestinian. He's wearing a *kofiya* (the *kofiya* almost totally conceals his face), holding in his hands an automatic rifle. Now the readers might suppose, might they not, that this is part of the terror network. Indeed, the reader was obviously meant to believe this. But I was puzzled about this cover picture. I had seen it before. It was taken by Ilkka Uimonen of the Gamma

picture agency in Paris. Uimonen lives in New York and, when I called him, he confirmed the cover picture was his. "I took the picture in the West Bank", he told me. "It was a member of Tanzim" - (the Palestinian militia) - "at a Palestinian funeral". Thus, a Palestinian gunman, armed and attending the funeral of a fellow Palestinian killed by Israelis, had been turned into a representative of global terror. That's what it says. Palestinians as a people - and the man on **Newsweek's** cover is very definitely a Palestinian - had been effortlessly transformed into enemies of the world. Just what Mr. Sharon wants. It wasn't the fault of the photographer that **Newsweek's** cover picture was a lie. The man whose face was covered by the kofiya, dangerous though he would be to the Israelis, had nothing to do with bin Laden or the lead story in the magazine.

Just as Ariel Sharon, Israel's prime minister today, of course, has been doing his best to link Yasser Arafat with bin Laden, journalists have gone out of their way to decontextualise Israel's role in the occupied territories. Indeed, once the State Department told its diplomats to stop using the word "occupied" in relation to the West Bank and Gaza, American journalists dutifully followed their example. Henceforth, the land would be called "disputed" as in "Benjamin Netanyahu turns up the heat by okaying new houses in disputed territory" - a **Time** caption. "Disputed", of course, changes the reality. By deleting "occupation" from their lexicon, journalists erase the colonies illegally built, for Jews and Jews only, on Arab land. They erase the many Israeli checkpoints which still covered, as they do today, the West Bank and Gaza. You know, I was on a live radio interview from Beirut with an Israeli government spokesman some months ago and the moment I mentioned the occupied territories, he said, "They are not occupied!" And I said, "Ah, I see, so you mean the soldiers who stopped me between Ramallah and Jenin two weeks ago, they were Swiss? Or Burmese maybe?" You see, "disputed" suggests an argument about land deeds or "conflicting heritage claims", as CNN once memorably called them, failing to point out that Palestinians have documents to prove land ownership while, of course, many Israeli settlers believe that God gave them the land. There's a problem there, isn't there. The Associated Press has now gone one gutless step further. Anxious to avoid "occupied", terrified to avoid "occupied", the agency, the largest American news agency, indeed, except for Reuters, the largest news agency in the world, has now referred, and constantly refers to lands, not occupied but "war-won". Try that in English, "war-won"! It's an extraordinary contortion. There must be something very frightening to avoid, to use a word like that! This contorted expression, of course, places an almost victorious façade upon the illegality of occupation.

I have been searching in vain to find the first use of the phrase "settlements" and "settlers" in relation to Israel's occupation. In its Wild West context, I suppose it makes sense for, if the Israelis have taken this land less brutally than America's settlers took lands from the native inhabitants, the word still obscures the reality. These Israeli settlements are occupied. They are on occupied land and they are occupied as colonies and their inhabitants are colonists, every bit as much as the French colonised Algeria. When I made this point in my own newspaper, the London **Independent**, a stream of letters accused me of deliberately trying to make a parallel between Palestinian terrorism and the FLN's ultimately successful 1954 to 1962 war for independence against France. I was indeed making that parallel! Interestingly, Sharon has himself compared all of Israel to Algeria under French rule, revealing to the correspondent of the French magazine **L'Express** almost a year ago, how he told president Chirac of France that, "You've got to understand that we here, we are like you in Algeria. We have no other place to go and besides we have no intention of leaving".

The French word for a settler is *colon*, accurately representing what the Israeli settlers in the West Bank and Gaza are doing. But today, even that tame word "settlement" is disappearing in British and American journalism. CNN, in one of its most recent contributions to journalism, sent out an instruction to correspondents, telling them that Giloh, the Jewish settlement built largely on Arab land south of Jerusalem, is to change its definition. I quote from the CNN memo. "We refer to Giloh as a Jewish neighbourhood on the outskirts of Jerusalem, built on land occupied by Israel in 1967. We don't refer to it as a settlement." Now it happens that Giloh **is** a settlement, or colony, built for Jews only, on occupied and largely Palestinian land. CNN at least

got the "occupied" bit right. It's partly owned by Palestinians in the neighbouring Christian village of Beit Jallah. Giloh is Hebrew for Jallah. It was constructed in violation of UN Security Council resolutions 242 and 338 - and we have to obey UN resolutions, remember - and it was against international law. It has also been incorporated into the enlarged municipality of Jerusalem, in itself partly an illegal annexation. But CNN's little lie about "neighbourhood" again transforms the reality. You see neighbourhood - neighbourhood like, I don't know, the northern part of Barcelona, or southern Madrid - it's a cosy friendly neighbourhood. Why on earth would anyone ever attack a neighbourhood? To fire guns at a neighbourhood would be an act of madmen, mindless terrorists, evil men. There can't be a reason. You see, as the viewer is spared the reality of a settlement, so Palestinian violence against Giloh becomes inexplicable. No need for the whys.

Asked for a comment - I called up CNN from Beirut and talked to their man in Atlanta - asked for a comment about the style instruction, a CNN spokesman told me, on the record "We really don't want to talk about this". And I can well see why. The BBC has also recently advised its reporters in the Middle East - another little instruction - to use the phrase "targeted killings" for the murder of Palestinians by Israeli death squads, preferring this to assassinations which, so thinks the BBC, might be reserved for more important folk than the suspected Palestinian gunmen and bombers on Israel's hit-list. But it just happens, it just happens, that "targeted killings", the quotation, is Israel's own expression for its killing of selected Palestinians, and I don't believe the BBC was unaware of this.

As the growing list of totally innocent civilians killed during these attacks demonstrates - and we do not forget the growing list of Israeli civilians killed in the wicked suicide bombings, but I'm talking here about the Israeli killings - they do include women and children. The word "targeted" is therefore highly misleading. I was amused to see a BBC advertisement for a television documentary about the end of the peace process. The BBC were kind enough to send this to our foreign desk. Now, on the left, you'll see the familiar and terrifying image of the Palestinian who helped to murder two Israeli soldiers, holding up his hands with blood on them, at Ramallah police station. The two soldiers were lynched. On the right, is the equally familiar picture and image of Mohammed Aldurah, the little Palestinian boy, who was shot dead by the Israelis next to his father in Gaza. Let me show you the back of this card. I'm going to read you the text. The BBC loves these little logos for correspondents. I quote, "Two images capture the hatred that has destroyed the peace process in the Middle East. Mohammed, the boy from Gaza, shielded by his father, but still dying under a hail of bullets, and the brutal murder of two Israeli soldiers by a Palestinian mob". Note how Mohammed Aldurah's death carries no attribution. Many Israelis and almost all the journalists who investigated the case, though not of course the Israeli army, concluded that Israeli troops killed the boy, although they may not have known they were shooting in his direction. So Aldurah's death was caused by a "hail of bullets". Who fired them? The killing of the Israeli soldiers is firmly attributed, and rightly, to a Palestinian mob.

It is ironic that among the exceptions to the grotesque and misleading journalism coming out of the Middle East, are a few brave Israeli reporters who question the morality of Israel's actions with a ruthlessness which is rare in any European publication, and almost totally absent in the United States. Among the most courageous and eloquent of these journalists are Gideon Levy and Amirah Haas in *Ha'aretz*. If you don't read *Ha'aretz*, you should.

Haas recently told me that she believes the duty of a journalist is, and I quote her, "to monitor the centres of power", as good a definition as I've ever heard for our profession. But it raised an important question. How can Amirah Haas say things that her American counterparts shy away from? Why can she say things which far-better paid and supposedly more powerful American journalists cannot? At least not without the weasel words that I've shown you, which immunise them from criticism. Needless to say, Haas not only puts us to shame, but Arab journalists as well. For out in the arid wastes of Arab journalism, there is as little interest in serious investigation of the Middle East conflict as there is in the United States. As I know to my cost. I've been abused as a liar by Damascus radio in 1982 after describing at first hand Syria's bloody suppression of the Islamist uprising in Hammah, with up to twenty thousand killed. In

Egypt I've been called "a black dog pecking at the corpse of Egypt", this in the Cairo press, for saying the Egypt's elections are rigged. In president Mubarak's last presidential election, he got 98.8%. Remarkable! That's two percent more than Saddam Hussein got! at the last elections in Iraq. But Mubarak is our man, so no more laughter.

I'll show you what happened now when I wrote about a former British Special Branch officer called Ian Henderson - he's actually Scottish - who was running the Bahrain interrogation centre and where torture was taking place, in the small Arab island of Bahrain. I'll show you what happened. This cartoon turned up in a Bahrain newspaper. As you can see, my colleague from the BBC is here. This is the correspondent of **The Times**, and here is Robert Fisk. We'll take a closer look at Bob. There's Bob. I must say that the nightmare dentures are fairly accurate. But as you can see, this dog is rabid. A rabid dog, which is why that cartoon, ladies and gentlemen, is not a joke. It was meant to be a threat.

In all the Middle East, however, I think nothing quite surpasses our journalistic desire to humour Turkey, by obfuscating the reality of the twentieth century's first genocide, the deliberate killing of one and a half million Christian Armenians, most of them slaughtered in 1915 by the Ottoman Turkish authorities. No serious academic, except those holding chairs plundered from Turkey, disputes the facts and anyone who doubts them should read the recently-published and excellent **Encyclopaedia of Genocide** by Israel's foremost Holocaust scholar, Israel Charney. Indeed, my paper, **The Independent** now refers to "the Armenian Holocaust" with a capital "H". Winston Churchill called it a holocaust in the 1920s. This is what Hitler remembered when he turned to his generals and said, "Who now remembers the Armenians?".

It's a very important historical fact. Much of Charney's horrifying documentation comes from 1915 editions of **The New York Times**. It was a great scoop for **The New York Times**, though a terrible one. Recently, however, these appalling and bloody events have been almost universally referred to by journalists as "disputed", like the disputed lands in the West Bank and Gaza. And most extraordinary of all, **The New York Times**, the paper which eighty-six years ago did more to publicise the massacres than any other paper in the United States, has done its bit to discredit the tragedy. In April of 1998, for example, **The New York Times'** Stephen Kinzer wrote a report about the seventy thousand Armenians who live in present-day Turkey. Here is a key paragraph from his report. "Relations between Turks and Armenians were good during much of the Ottoman period but they were deeply scarred by massacres of Armenians that pro-Ottoman forces" (note the words here - "pro-Ottoman forces") "in eastern Anatolia carried out in the spring of 1915. Details of what happened then are still hotly debated" (remember the words "hotly debated") "but it is clear" (I'm quoting the report) "but it is clear that vast numbers of Armenians were killed or left to die during forced marches in a burst of what is now called ethnic cleansing." Just like that.

I still read this paragraph with a sense of shock. What did Kinzer mean by "deeply scarred"? Relations between Turks and Armenians came to a virtual end in 1915 because tens of thousands of Armenians were no longer alive to have any kind of relations with anyone. And note the intriguing phrase "pro-Ottoman forces", a weasel word that effectively avoids the use of the words "Turks" or "Turkish". Most incredible of all, is Kinzer's assertion that the details are "hotly debated". Turkey may use its lobby groups to lie about the genocide, and the Turkish government still tries to cover up the massacres as the side-effects of civil war, but for **The New York Times** to present the Armenian holocaust as a subject of serious dispute is as insulting to Armenians as it is for Jews to hear the facts of their holocaust disputed or denied. Note how Kinzer talks about "vast numbers", thus avoiding the key figure one and a half million. And how "ethnic cleansing" takes the place of genocide.

Another of Kinzer's articles, written from the Armenian capital of Yerevan even carried the headline, "Armenia Never Forgets - Maybe it Should". Here's Mr Kinzer's latest contribution. This is in **The New York Times** of April this year. He's writing about genocide museums in general. "Washington already has one major institution, the United States Holocaust Museum that ... [some words lost with turning the tape] ... are still a matter of intense debate.

I got a fascinating e-mail the other day from an Armenian living in Toronto. He'd read an article I'd written, about what I referred to as - and what **The Independent** called - the Armenian Holocaust. He was a little but upset because, in the **Toronto Globe & Mail**, the same article did not use the words "Armenian Holocaust". It had been edited. As he said in his letter to the editor of the **Toronto Globe & Mail**, "Mr Fisk referred to Holocaust while your version refers to it as 'the mass murder of the Armenians'". They'd changed the words. I called London immediately and told them that, under the terms of our syndication agreement, the **Toronto Globe & Mail** had no permission and had signed a document saying that they would not change words. We then found out that they hadn't even asked for it. They'd just stolen it from us and changed the words.

You know, when you look at all this, I ask the same questions as I do about the coverage of the 1982 Sabra and Chatila massacre. Why do we journalists try so hard to avoid the truth? To extenuate, to dissimulate, to cover up? Is it because Turkey is an important political and military ally of the United States? Because it is a valuable purchaser of American weaponry? Or is it because Turkey is an ally of Israel? Or because it has a powerful lobby group in Washington?

Let's go back to the Arabs. I want to give you one small example now about how Arab anger comes about. Back in 1993, I made a three-part documentary film for the Discovery Channel in America, and for Channel Four television in Britain, called "Beirut to Bosnia". It attempted to find out why an increasing number of Muslims had come to hate the West. It was not quite timely enough at the time. We filmed in Beirut, southern Lebanon, Israel, the occupied West Bank and Gaza, Egypt, Bosnia and Croatia. Among many stories we filmed, we followed the last, and hopeless, attempts of a Palestinian farmer to hold on to his land. Because you won't be getting a translation during this eight-minute clip of film, for those of you who don't speak English, what it shows is a Palestinian farmer called Mohamed Khatib who has been told by the Israelis that he must leave the land, the home that he and previous generations of his family had lived on, in order to make way for a Jewish settlement. It's just east of Jerusalem. We then go to see Mohamed Khatib's lawyer, who explains that his client, Mr Khatib, is quite happy to give up the land to Israel if he can join this settlement and live there, among the Israelis. And, so the lawyer tells us, that's not something that's going to be permitted. I go and see an Israeli woman settler who's just arrived from France and who's very proud of her new home, just above Mr Khatib's house and then I talk to the head of the Jewish settlers' organisation, Mickey Molad, who explains that, while the matter is in court and, although there's nothing wrong with Mr Khatib, it's not a question of fairness, it's a question of legality and, as he says, he's an Arab and not a Jew. [Interruption for eight-minute film clip].

Ladies and gentlemen, we all hoped, the crew, the director Mike Dutfield and myself that, in some way, this film might help Mohamed Khatib, make the Israelis change their mind. No go. He was out by Christmas. I've been back to the land. It is a Jewish settlement. In the film, we had a number of stories to make up the whole series. We visited the site of the Sabra and Chatila massacre. We visited the former Acre home of a Palestinian refugee in Beirut, now owned by an Israeli. And we travelled then to Poland, to find the house of the elderly Israeli in the Acre house. The man had been driven from his own original home and his parents killed by the Nazis in 1939. Shortly after this series, aired on the Discovery Channel, a series of pro-Israeli lobby groups, including Camera, the Camera Media Resources Center, bombarded the channel with complaints. Joseph Ungar wrote to complain that for me to say that Israel confiscates or occupies land and "builds huge Jewish settlements on Arab land", was twisted history. Twisted history! To say that the Phalangist militia had been sent into Sabra and Chatila by Israel, as even the Kahan Commission report clearly established, was "an egregious falsehood". One letter said it was like "**My Fair Lady**" and Fisk was "Henry Higgins with fangs". I was "drooling venom" into the living-rooms of America. The "drooling venom" phrase came in even back then. These claims were totally false but Discovery rang me in Beirut to say that they were receiving lots of letters condemning the films from these groups. Then director Mike Dutfield and I heard that Discovery had cancelled a second showing. In an imperishable letter to Dutfield, Bunting wrote, and I quote, "Given the reaction to the series, upon its initial airing, we never scheduled a subsequent airing. So there's not really an issue as to any scheduled re-

airing being cancelled". When I read those words, ladies and gentlemen, I felt ashamed to be a foreign correspondent.

Interestingly, the condemnation and abuse that I regularly receive - far outnumbered, I should add, by literally thousands of e-mails praising **The Independent's** coverage of the Middle East from Jerusalem and Beirut - has increased significantly since **The Independent** became available through its website (www.independent.co.uk) to internet users throughout the world, especially America. Many American readers lament what one of them called our "lobotomised journalistic coverage". A number of letters of support also came from American Jewish readers. But the mailbag contained the usual vitriol. An American law student at a British university wrote to tell me that I was "an evil fucking man", a remark he withdrew when I called him at college and threatened to report his remarks to the police as a threatening letter. He had obligingly put his phone number on the e-mail. Another letter, anonymous this time, began, "To Mr Shit Fisk. You are what you are, an evil, mad, evil anti-Semite. Your judgement day will come". One of my most recent messages, again anonymous, and thrown this time with disgust into the garbage bin, contained the accusation that my mother must have been "Eichmann's daughter". The daughter of Adolf Eichmann, one of the men who ran the Holocaust. My mother, Peggy, I should add, died in 1998 after a long battle with Parkinson's disease. In 1940, she was an RAF radio repair mechanic on Spitfires at the height of the Battle of Britain. She was fighting Hitler.

So, we ask a number of questions. What has been happening to us in the months since September 11th 2001? You know, we spent decades preaching to the Third World, to China, to the Soviet Union, to Black Africa and, of course, to the Arabs, about the need for law, democracy, human rights, fair trials. But the moment our glittering towers were struck, we tore up all those old lectures, imprisoned hundreds on suspicion, brought prisoners drugged and blindfolded to Guantánamo Bay, bombed the poorest country in the world and killed thousands of its citizens and now we are set to kill thousands more.

I visited the home of a man called Ziad Jarrah last year. He was a Lebanese suicide pilot who came from a village in the Bekkah Valley of Lebanon. This was the pilot of the plane that crashed in Pennsylvania after those passengers had so courageously stormed the cockpit, the flight-deck of the aircraft. His parents were middle class, his mother a schoolteacher, his father a civil servant in the Lebanese government. They desperately wanted to believe that their son was an innocent passenger on the plane. His father wept in front of us and I believe he knew the truth. His son had a girlfriend, a Turkish girl, who was to have met his parents the summer before, to announce their engagement. In the end, she travelled alone to meet them, a very strange arrangement in Lebanon, because Jarrah suddenly announced he was too busy with flight training in the United States. You bet he was! His father sent him two thousand dollars three days before September 11th. And, on the 10th, the day before the international crimes against humanity, Ziad Jarrah rang his parents to thank them for the money. I suspect it was used to buy airline tickets. He had been to Afghanistan for six weeks. He had been non-political before. However, as a boy, he had been trapped in Beirut by the 1982 Israeli invasion, spending weeks under shell-fire. Had this touched him, as it did so many others at the time? After all, the Lebanese Hezbollah were born in 1982.

What are we to learn of the personal reasons for the crimes against humanity of September 11th? Not much. The middle-class murderers left only one infantile statement, their message with their deed. But it came from the Middle East. It came from a land that has been deceived and mistreated and humiliated for decades. Was the world really changed forever? I don't think so. Perhaps America was changed forever. But why should the world be changed? As I said to you, in Israel's invasion of Lebanon, seventeen thousand five hundred people, almost all of them civilians, were killed in just three months. Twenty thousand Syrians were slaughtered in Hammah by the Syrian army. Did the world change? No! Not at all. No tears were shed. No candles were lit and absolutely no one said that the world was changed forever. And the world did not change.

I heard the US Secretary of State Colin Powell telling us from Louisburg University, in the United States, in the autumn that "Never again could we look up into the pale blue sky and see an airliner and feel the same way about it". I think this is nonsense. From my home in Beirut, I look up every day at airliners flying over, and they're in the pale blue sky, and they land at Beirut airport. I fly on a lot more planes than Secretary Powell and they all land at my destination. You know, without in any way belittling the horror and the evil - yes it was evil - of that terrible day, I do sometimes wonder whether America's concentration on that one day, to the point where we cannot discuss the whys, isn't becoming a form of dangerous self-absorption. Can we journalists ignore the abuse and the lobby groups and the attempt to soft-pedal our reporting about the Middle East? White House spokesman, Ari Fleischer's remark last October that, I quote, "The press is asking a lot of questions that I suspect the American people would prefer not to be asked or answered", carried its own ominous implications. And when the head of CNN instructed his reporters not to say too much about the hundreds, indeed the thousands, of Afghan civilian casualties of American bombing because this might provide propaganda for the Talibans, it was, I think, the most shameful comment made by a western news head in recent decades.

Ladies and gentlemen, may I make an appeal. Let's stop saying that September 11th 2001 changed the world. Let's not say "disputed" when we mean occupied, "neighbourhood" when we mean colony, "ethnic cleansing" when we mean genocide. Let's always ask the why questions and let's do what the Americans used to tell their journalists to do: let's tell it how it is. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your patience tonight.