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A Preview of Things to Come in *The Coming War on China*: An Interview with John Pilger

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A Preview of Things to Come in The Coming War on China: An Interview with John Pilger *(full interview)*

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In this unabridged interview, sections of which appear in *Foreign Policy in Focus*, John Pilger reflects on his earliest inspirations that have helped shape his countless critical works as a journalist and filmmaker. These ruminations frame a discussion of his current documentary project titled *The Coming War on China*. Included in the dialogues is analysis of the corrupting forces influencing journalism and their effects on public awareness and knowledge of pressing issues, especially as regards abuses of state power, the suppression of information, marginalization of people and culture, and the subsequent development of popular resistance movements. Also contained in the conversation are discussions of the many locations and central figures throughout East Asia and the Pacific that comprise the opposing sides in this unfolding story.

China | Okinawa | Diego Garcia
resistance movements | militarization | East Asia

Maki Sunagawa: Hi John, it's great to finally talk with you again since your last visit to Okinawa. I know there's a big time difference, so thank you for joining in. As I look back through the work you've done in your storied career, you've focused your lens on a great collection of injustices—economic terrorism enacted against working people, the dehumanizing toil of industrial life, abuses of state power and aggression, law used as a weapon against indigenous peoples, and (among many others) the self-serving illusions produced by corporate media. As a researcher myself—who is sometimes criticized for having opinions about unfairness, inequality, and foreign dominance over our culture and language—I wonder if you'd open up a bit about what moved you as a young person (maybe as a reporter) to stand up and seriously question the status quo. Your life's work is an ongoing dialogue with the public that questions the dreadful conditions the powerful create for the powerless. I want young people—especially here [in Okinawa]—to know how you were first inspired.

John Pilger: That's not an easy question to answer because our beginnings are made up of many ingredients. There was no moment of epiphany. It was all gradual, perhaps an awakening of who I am as a person, my passion for journalism and filming and, above all, for not accepting the injustices of the impositions of power and the unaccountable word of authority. My father and mother were political people. They weren't politically active; still, at that time in Australia to grow up in a political family was unusual.

So, undoubtedly, they influenced me; my mother once said, 'We have a motto; we're on the side of the underdog.' We

were very conscious of class. My mother was a teacher. My father was a carpenter. So, there was an alliance of classes in my parents. Both were very conscious of this, and I grew up with a need to understand the importance of class. I also grew up with a real curiosity about the world beyond the antipodes. I loved Australia, but I wanted to get away from our rather grey Anglo-Irish world. The idea of the world as an 'unknown' was exciting to me.

I also had a passion for journalism from an early age. A friend and I started our own newspaper at the age of 12. It was called *The Messenger*, and it wasn't very good, but it was a good effort. I couldn't wait to be a reporter, and the day I was told I had a newspaper cadetship is unforgettable. In the training scheme then, people didn't go straight to university. They became an indentured apprentice on a newspaper. I became a cadet journalist at the age of 18. I felt that it was the beginning of something, even if I didn't quite know what. My education really began when I went from a comfortable western country to a working life in societies that were impoverished and often devastated. I had arrived in London, aged 23; I became a newspaper correspondent and travelled relentlessly: Africa, Latin America, India, the Middle East, the Soviet Union.

Daniel Broudy: I have huge respect for journalists, but it's so sad to see what has happened to this profession over the past number of decades.

J.P.: The idea of the craft of journalism is, for me, one of the most exciting pursuits, but the way it has been mutated, distorted, and co-opted is grievous.

D.B.: Perhaps it has much to do with the 24-hour news cycle—news now cast as an obvious commodity.

J.P.: It has a lot to do with ownership. Who owns the media determines what it says. What is known as the 'mainstream media' is an extension of the established order; it reports the view from the top, often uncritically, and frames and controls the view from the ground.

D.B.: John, you're now finalizing work on your latest project the title of which, it seems, can trigger considerable emotion and fear. *The Coming War*, maybe you'd agree, is pretty heavy. Can you describe the impetus for this particular look at world events, especially as you see them developing in East Asia?

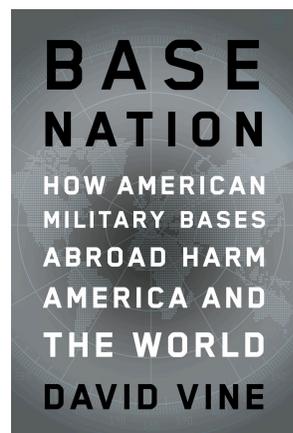
J.P.: Well, the film picks up the theme of much of my work. It will set out to explain how great power imposes itself on people and disguises itself and the dangers it beckons. This film is about the United States rekindling the Cold War. The Cold War has been started again on two fronts—against Russia and against China. I'm concentrating on China. It is a

film about the Asia-Pacific. It's filmed in the Marshall Islands where the United States exploded 67 atomic bombs, nuclear weapons, between 1946 and 1958, leaving that part of the world gravely damaged—in human and environmental terms. And this assault on the Marshalls goes on. On the largest island, Kwajalein, there is an important and secretive U.S. base called the Ronald Reagan Test Facility, which was established in the 1960s—as the archive we're using makes clear—“to combat the threat from China”.

The film is also set in Okinawa, as you know. Part of the theme is to show the resistance to power and war by a people who live along a fence line of American bases in their homeland. The film's title has a certain foreboding about it, but it's meant as a warning. Documentaries such as this have a responsibility to alert people, if necessary to warn, and they also have a responsibility to show the resistance to rapacious plans; in the so-called 'mainstream', this resistance is often suppressed. The film will show that the resistance in Okinawa is remarkable and little known in the wider world. Okinawa has 32 U.S. military installations; more than a quarter of the land is occupied by U.S. bases. The sky is often crowded with military aircraft; the sheer arrogance of an occupier is a daily physical presence.

The film is also set in Jeju Island where something very similar has happened; people on Jeju tried to stop the building of an important and provocative base about 400 miles from Shanghai. The South Korean navy will keep it ready for the U.S. It's really a U.S. base, where Aegis Class destroyers will dock along with nuclear submarines and aircraft carriers—right next to China. Okinawa is about the size of Long Island. Imagine a bristling Chinese base right next to New York.

In China I decided to concentrate in Shanghai, which has seen so much of China's modern history and convulsions, and restoration. Mao and his comrades founded the



Communist Party of China there; today the house where they met in secret is surrounded by the symbols of consumerism: a Starbucks is directly opposite. The final chapter of the film is set in the United States, where I interviewed those who plan and 'war game' a war with China and those who alert us to the dangers. I met some impressive people: Bruce Cummings, the historian, whose last book on Korea is

secret history, and David Vine, whose comprehensive work on U.S. bases was published last year. I filmed an interview

at the State Department with the Assistant Secretary of State for Asia and the Pacific, Daniel Russell, who said that the United States 'was no longer in the basing business'. The U.S. has some 5000 bases—4,000 in the U.S. itself and almost a thousand on every continent. Drawing this together, making sense of it, doing everyone as much justice as possible, is the pleasure and pain of filmmaking. What I hope the film will say is that there are great risks, which have not been recognized. I must say it was almost other-worldly to be in the United States during a presidential campaign which touched on none of these risks.

That's not entirely correct. Donald Trump has taken what appears to be a serious interest. Stephen Cohen, the renowned authority on Russia, has acknowledged this, pointing out that Trump has made clear he wants friendly relations with Russia and China. Hillary Clinton has attacked Trump for this. Incidentally, Cohen himself was abused for suggesting that Trump wasn't a homicidal maniac in relation to Russia. For his part, Bernie Sanders has been all but silent; in any case, he's on Clinton's side now. As her emails show, Clinton is worrying; she wants to destroy Syria to protect Israel's nuclear monopoly. Remember what she did to Libya and Gaddafi. In 2010, as Secretary of State, she turned the regional dispute in the South China's Sea into America's dispute; she promoted to an international issue, a flashpoint. The following year, Obama announced his 'pivot to Asia' and the biggest build-up of U.S. military forces in Asia since World War Two. The current Defense Secretary, Ash Carter, recently announced that missiles and men would be based in the Philippines. This is happening while NATO continues the biggest military buildup in Europe since World War Two, right on Russia's borders. In a country where media in all its forms is ubiquitous and the press is constitutionally the freest in the world, there is no national conversation, let alone debate, about these developments. In one sense, the aim of my film is to help break a silence.

D.B.: I feel the same way since I've been paying close attention to the U.S. primaries. It is quite astonishing to see that the two major democratic candidates have said virtually nothing about Russia and China and what the U.S. is doing, and as you said it is quite ironic that Trump being a businessman talking about China in this way.

J.P.: Trump is unpredictable, but he did state clearly he had no wish to go to war with Russia and China. At one point, he said he would even be neutral in the Middle East. That's heresy, and he backtracked on that. Stephen Cohen said that he had been attacked just for uttering this [Trump's points]. I wrote something similar recently and upset a social media sub-strata, who said I supported Trump.

M.S.: I'd like to shift gears to some of your previous work that touches upon the present. In your film, *Stealing a Nation*,

Charlesia Alexis talks about her fondest memories of Diego Garcia, pointing out that, 'We could eat everything; we never lacked for anything, and we never bought anything, except for the clothes we wore.' These words remind me of the peaceful and untouched places and cultures across the world which existed before classic colonizing techniques were applied to indigenous peoples and environments. Could you expand a bit more on the details you uncovered during your research on Diego Garcia that illustrate facts about this insidious force we still endure today?

J.P.: What happened to the people of Diego Garcia was an epic crime. They were expelled, all of them, by Britain and the United States. The life you have just described, Charlesia's life, was deliberately destroyed. Since the 1980s, like the people of Okinawa, the people of the Chagos have staged an indefatigable resistance. As you suggest, their story represents that of indigenous people all over the world. In Australia, the Indigenous people have been expelled from their communities and brutalized. In North America, there is a similar history. Indigenous people are deeply threatening to settler societies; for they represent another life, another way of living, another way of seeing; they may accept the surface of our way of life, often with tragic results, but their sense of themselves isn't captive. If we 'modernists' were as clever as we believe we are, we would learn from them. Instead, we prefer the specious comfort of our ignorance and prejudice. I've had much to do with the Indigenous people of Australia; I've made a number of films about them and their oppressors and I admire their resilience and resistance. They have a lot in common with the people of Diego Garcia.

Certainly, the injustice and cruelty are similar: the people of the Chagos were tricked and intimidated into leaving their homeland. The British colonial authorities killed their beloved pet dogs, then they loaded the people on to an old freighter with a cargo of bird shit, and dumped them in the slums of Mauritius and the Seychelles. This horror is described in almost contemptuous detail in official documents. One of them, written by the Foreign Office lawyer, is titled, 'Maintaining the Fiction'. In other words: how to spin a big lie. The British Government lied to the United Nations that the people of the Chagos were 'transient workers'. Once they were expelled, they were airbrushed; a Ministry of Defence document even claimed there had never been a population.

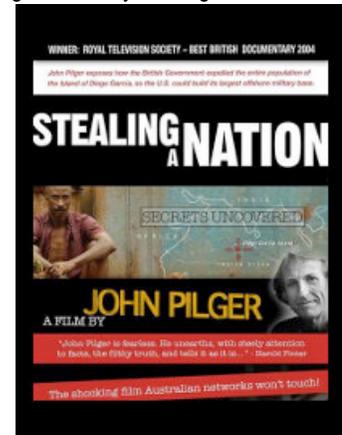
Such is modern imperialism: a word almost successfully deleted from the dictionary. A few weeks ago, saw the Chagossians saw their appeal to Britain's Supreme Court rejected; they had appealed against a decision by the House of Lords in 2009 that refused them the right to go home—even though a raft of High Court judgements had already found in their favour. When British justice is called on to adjudicate between human rights and the rights of great power, its decisions are almost blatantly political.

D.B.: I like the point you've raised about trickery and would like to dwell on that just a bit more, especially trickery enacted against the public that consumes mass media. In hearing over the past couple of decades members of the U.S. military talk about the great beauty of Diego Garcia and the amazing marine leisure activities in store for anyone fortunate enough to be stationed there, I am consistently struck by the seeming willful blindness of those who come and go blithely unconcerned about the history of the island. Maybe, the media that many military members consume serves some part in creating that detached awareness.

The clear line that once traditionally separated civilian commercial advertising and military propaganda seems to have vanished in these mass communications. Nowadays, civilian publications carry headlines such as '[The Best Overseas Military Base Towns Ranked](#).' The author of a recent article points out that military service members admit to their dream of 'seeing the world' as a central reason for their military service. I wonder if the present system allows you or encourages you to see yourself as some sort of cosmopolitan global traveler and, thus, develops in you a shallow sense of the wider world, which also veils hideous realities, like in Diego Garcia, that lie just out of sight. Do you think maybe the process of commercializing and glamorizing these military activities has played some part in maintaining the global system of bases?

J.P.: Persuading young men and women to join a volunteer military is achieved by offering them the kind of security they wouldn't get in difficult economic times and by making it all seem an adventure. Added to this is the propaganda of patriotism. The bases are little Americas; you can be overseas in exotic climes, but not really; it's a virtual life. When you run into the 'locals', you may assume the adventure you're on includes a license to abuse them; they're not part of little America; they can be abused. Okinawans know this only too well.

I watched some interesting archive film about one of the bases on Okinawa. The wife of one of the soldiers based there said, 'Oh, we try to get out once a month to have a local meal to get an idea of where we are'. In flying out of the Marshall Islands last year, my crew and I had to pass through the Ronald Reagan Missile Test Site on Kwajelein Atoll. It was a Kafkaesque experience; we were fingerprinted, our irises recorded, our height measured, our photographs taken



from all angles; it was as if we were under arrest. This was the gateway to a little America with a golf course and jogging tracks and cycle lanes and dogs and kids. The people watering the golf courses, checking the chlorine in the swimming pools come from an island across the bay, Ebeye, where they're ferried to and fro by the military. Ebeye is about a mile long and has 12,000 people crammed on it; they're refugees from the nuclear testing in the Marshalls; the water supply and sanitation barely work. It's apartheid in the Pacific. The Americans at the base have no idea how the islanders live; they have barbecues against tropical sunsets. Something similar happened on Diego Garcia; once the people were expelled, the barbecues and water-skiing could get under way.

In Washington, I interviewed an Assistant Secretary of State, who said the United States was not imperialist; indeed, the U.S. was anti-imperialist. He seemed both sincere and vapid. He actually said, 'We're not in the basing business'. You can say to people of academic stature in the U.S., 'The United States has the greatest empire the world has seen, and here is why; here is the evidence'. It's not unlikely this will be received with an expression of incredulity.

D.B.: What you're discussing reminds me of something I learned from previous friends in the State Department. There is always a risk of State Department employees 'going local'. Of course, there is the risk as well for people who serve in the military overseas that if they are stationed in any one location for too long, there is a great risk that people begin to 'go local', they begin to empathize with people in the local population.

J.P.: I agree. When they empathize, they realize that maybe the whole reason for them being there is nonsense. Some of the most effective truth-tellers are ex military.

D.B.: Maybe the fences, more than keeping the foreigners [local people] out of that area [inside], they are to remind the people within the fence line that there is a barrier and sometimes you are not permitted to cross that barrier.

J.P.: Yes, it's 'them and us'. If you go outside the fence line, there is always the risk you'll gain something of an understanding of another society. That can lead to questions of why the base is there. That doesn't happen often, because another fence line runs through the military consciousness.

M.S.: When you look back on your scouting locations in Okinawa or when you undertook certain shoots for this project, what are some of the more unforgettable and/or shocking memories you have? Are there any scenes or conversations that really stick with you?

J.P.: Well, there are quite a few. I felt privileged to meet

Fumiko [Shimabukuro], who is inspiring. Those who had succeeded in getting Governor Onaga elected and securing Henoko and the issue of all the bases on the Japanese political agenda are among the most extraordinary people of principle I have met: so imaginative and dynamic. They have grace and dignity; they're different.

Listening to the mother of one of the young people who eventually died from his terrible injuries when a U.S. fighter crashed into the school [in Ishikawa] in 1959 was a sharp reminder of the fear that people live with; a teacher told me she never stopped looking up anxiously when she heard the drone of an aircraft above her classroom. When we were filming outside Camp Schwab, we were (as well as all of the demonstrators) deliberately harassed by huge Sea Stallion helicopters, which flew in circles over us. It was a taste of what Okinawans have to put up with, day after day. There is often a lament among liberal people in comfortable societies confronted with unpalatable truths: 'So what can I do to change it'? I would suggest they do as the people of Okinawa have done; you don't give up; you keep going. I say at the beginning of my film, 'This is a film about an extraordinary resistance.'

'Resistance' is not a word you often hear spoken, or see in the media. It is considered an 'other' word, not used by polite people, respectable people. It's a hard word to twist and change. The resistance I found in Okinawa is inspirational.

M.S.: Yes, I suppose when you are a part of the resistance it isn't so easy to see its effectiveness so well. So often, when I'm doing field research, interviewing, taking notes, and writing, it takes some time for me to take a step back and look at the details more objectively to understand the larger story I'm seeing. I wonder, during the editing process for this new film, if you can talk about any new and important insights—you've already gained—as the storyline has come together.

J.P.: Well, making a film like this is really a voyage of discovery. You start off with an outline and a collection of ideas and assumptions, and you never really know where it's going to go. I had never been to Okinawa, so here were new ideas and experiences: a new sense of people, and I want the film will reflect this.

The Marshall Islands were also new to me. Here, from 1946, the U.S. tested the equivalent of one Hiroshima every day for twelve years. The Marshallese are still used as guinea pigs; ICBMs are fired at the lagoons in and around Kwajalein Atoll from California. The water is poisoned, the fish inedible; people survive on canned processed junk. I met a group of women who were survivors of nuclear tests around Bikini and Rongelap atolls. They had one terrible thing in common. They had all lost their thyroid glands. They were women in

their sixties; they had survived, incredibly, and they had the most generous characters and dark sense of humor. They sang for us and presented us with gifts, and said they were pleased that we had come to film. They, too, are part of the resistance.

D.B.: I was going to ask one more question, but you've broached the topic early on, about the upcoming election. Since I'm such a political junkie, maybe we can close up by reflecting on this whole theatre of absurd with the super delegates and Hillary Clinton. We'd love to hear your impression of the theatrics and what has happened to this thing we perceive to be democracy. Clinton now seems to be heir apparent to the throne, which appears to bode well for the status quo.

J.P.: Democracy is a noble word; it's probably one of the most abused words in English. There's a strictly controlled democracy in the US, a democracy of money. If you have money, you are rewarded with certain freedoms; if you are poor, there is no democracy for you. The Chinese political scientist Eric Li put it well: 'In China, the government doesn't change, but basic policies change. In the United States, the government changes, but basic policies don't change.' That may sound glib, but there is quite a lot of truth there. The ideology that seldom speaks its name, Americanism, never changes, except in name and disguise; old capitalism is now neo-liberalism, a more extreme version of the power of money.

D.B.: We're actually writing about neo-liberalism, right now, trying to pin down a definition too. So, it's a good question.

J.P.: I think it was Noam Chomsky who described the U.S. system as socialism for the rich and capitalism for the poor. That's never been truer. Take the arms industry [as an example]. In 2014, the arms companies received 444 billion dollars in Federal grants; that's American socialism in action. It has nothing to do with free markets; this is a command economy for the corporate and powerful: a genuine welfare state that excludes the majority.

What I always appreciate in the United States is the *samizdat* of the web. There's some fine critical journalism there: for example, the work of Gareth Porter and Robert Parry. Some political commentary is in the same class—in contrast to the so-called mainstream media, which is mostly unreadable and unwatchable. What distinguishes the 'underground' from the 'overground' is truth, which is always subversive.

Bios

John Pilger is a world-renowned journalist, documentary filmmaker and author. He has twice won Britain's highest award for journalism. His films have won television academy awards in Britain and the United States. Two of his films on Cambodia and East Timor are rated with the most important of the 20th century. *The Coming War on China* is his 60th film.

Maki Sunagawa is a post-graduate research fellow in the Graduate School of Intercultural Communication at Okinawa Christian University. She is presently co-authoring a forthcoming book based on her research of state and corporate propaganda and their uses and effects in Okinawa since the end of World War II.

Daniel Broudy is Dean of the Graduate School of Intercultural Communication and Professor of Rhetoric and Applied Linguistics at Okinawa Christian University. He is co-editor of *Under Occupation: Resistance and Struggle in a Militarised Asia-Pacific* (Cambridge Scholars, 2013) and co-author of *Rhetorical Rape: The Verbal Violations of the Punditocracy* (Waldport Press, 2010). He has taught in the U.S., Korea, and Japan. His research activities include analysis of textual and symbolic representations of power that dominate post-industrial culture. He serves as a co-editor of *Synaesthesia: Communication Across Cultures* and writes about discourse practices that shape public opinion.