

Harold Pinter's Nobel Prize speech: a brave artist speaks the truth about US imperialism

By Barry Grey
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British playwright Harold Pinter, this year's Nobel laureate for literature, delivered a passionate, truthful and courageous acceptance speech to the Swedish Academy on Wednesday. The renowned author of such plays as *The Homecoming* and *The Caretaker*, Pinter has spoken out tirelessly and powerfully against the war in Iraq and the depredations of American imperialism in the Balkans, Central America and elsewhere that preceded it.

He utilized his acceptance speech to extend and develop that struggle, giving a blistering critique of the entire course of US foreign policy in the period since World War II, and indicting Britain for its role as Washington's junior partner and accomplice. Mincing no words, Pinter called Bush and Blair war criminals, and made an impassioned call for mass political resistance to militarism and war.

The 75-year-old playwright, screenwriter, poet, actor and antiwar activist gave his address in the form of a videotape, made in Britain and shown on screens to the assemblage in Stockholm. Pinter was recently treated for cancer of the esophagus and remains in fragile health. On the advice of his physicians, he refrained from making the trip to Sweden.

He appeared on tape sitting in a wheelchair, with a rug over his knees. His voice was hoarse, but, according to published accounts, no less commanding for that.

Pinter's address, entitled "Art, Truth and Politics," was refreshing and even liberating in its honesty and bluntness about the catastrophic impact of US subversion, violence and aggression over many decades and in many parts of the world. Even sections of the establishment press in both Britain and the United States, such as the *Guardian* and the *New York Times*, which have fully participated in the dissemination of lies and the coverup of crimes associated with US foreign policy, were obliged to register in some measure the powerful impact of Pinter's words.

Pinter prefaced a discussion of his body of dramatic work and his approach to art with the following observation:

"In 1958 I wrote the following: 'There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false.'

"I believe that these assertions still make sense and do still apply to the exploration of reality through art. So as a writer I stand by them but as a citizen I cannot. As a citizen I must ask: What is true? What is false?"

Pinter proceeded to give some insight into the complex and elusive process by which he composed his dramas, making clear that his primary concern was the utilization of language, plot and character to discover important human and social truths.

Concerning the relationship between art, language and truth he said: "So language in art remains a highly ambiguous transaction, a quicksand, a trampoline, a frozen pool which might give way under you, the author, at any time.

"But as I have said, the search for the truth can never stop. It cannot be adjourned, it cannot be postponed. It has to be faced, right there, on the spot."

This theme of the responsibility to seek and present the truth was the connecting link between his remarks on drama and his remarks on history and politics. He said: "Political language, as used by politicians, does not venture into any of this territory since the majority of politicians, on the evidence available to us, are interested not in truth but in power and the maintenance of that power. To maintain that power it is essential that people remain in ignorance, that they live in ignorance of the truth, even the truth of their own lives. What surrounds us therefore is a vast tapestry of lies, upon which we feed."

He continued: "As every single person here knows, the justification for the invasion of Iraq was that Saddam Hussein possessed a highly dangerous body of weapons of mass destruction, some of which could be fired in 45 minutes, bringing about appalling devastation. We were assured that was true. It was not true. We were told that Iraq had a relationship with Al Qaeda and shared responsibility for the atrocity in New York of September 11, 2001. We were assured that this was true. It was not true. We were told that Iraq threatened the security of the world. We were assured it was true. It was not true."

Pinter then moved to a discussion of US foreign policy since the end of the Second World War. "Everyone knows what happened in the Soviet Union and throughout Eastern Europe during the post-war period: the systematic brutality, the widespread atrocities, the ruthless suppression of independent thought. All this has been fully documented and verified.

"But my contention here is that the US crimes in the same period have only been superficially recorded, let alone documented, let alone acknowledged, let alone recognized as crimes at all.... Although constrained, to a certain extent, by the existence of the Soviet Union, the United States' actions throughout the world made it clear that it had concluded it had carte blanche to do what it liked."

Pinter then spoke of Washington's record of international subversion: "In the main, it has preferred what it has described as 'low intensity conflict.' Low intensity conflict means that thousands of people die but slower than if you dropped a bomb on them in one fell swoop. It means that you infect the heart of the country, that you establish a malignant growth and watch the gangrene bloom. When the populace has been subdued—or beaten to death—the same

thing—and your own friends, the military and the great corporations, sit comfortably in power, you go before the camera and say that democracy has prevailed. This was commonplace in US foreign policy in the years to which I refer.”

He then went on to describe the mass murder and destruction wreaked by the US-backed Contra terrorists in Nicaragua in the 1980s. “I should remind you,” he said, “that at the time President Reagan made the following statement: ‘The Contras are the moral equivalent of our Founding Fathers.’”

Pinter elaborated on the US role in Nicaragua and Central America as a whole. Noting the social achievements of the left-nationalist Sandanista regime that overthrew the US-backed dictator Somoza in 1979—the abolition of the death penalty, land reform, gains in literacy and public education, free health care—he said:

“The United States denounced these achievements as Marxist/Leninist subversion. In the view of the US government, a dangerous example was being set. If Nicaragua was allowed to establish basic norms of social and economic justice, if it was allowed to raise the standards of health care and education and achieve social unity and national self respect, neighbouring countries would ask the same questions and do the same things. There was of course at that time fierce resistance to the status quo in El Salvador...”

“President Reagan commonly described Nicaragua as a ‘totalitarian dungeon.’ This was taken generally by the media, and certainly by the British government, as accurate and fair comment... The totalitarian dungeons were actually next door, in El Salvador and Guatemala. The United States had brought down the democratically elected government of Guatemala in 1954 and it is estimated that over 200,000 people had been victims of successive military dictatorships....

“The United States finally brought down the Sandinista government. It took some years and considerable resistance but relentless economic persecution and 30,000 dead finally undermined the spirit of the Nicaraguan people. They were exhausted and poverty stricken once again. The casinos moved back into the country. Free health and free education were over. Big business returned with a vengeance. ‘Democracy’ had prevailed.

“But this ‘policy’ was by no means restricted to Central America. It was conducted throughout the world. It was never-ending. And it is as if it never happened.

“The United States supported and in many cases engendered every right-wing military dictatorship in the world after the end of the Second World War. I refer to Indonesia, Greece, Uruguay, Brazil, Paraguay, Haiti, Turkey, the Philippines, Guatemala, El Salvador, and, of course, Chile. The horror the United States inflicted upon Chile in 1973 can never be purged and can never be forgiven.” [*Editor’s note*: There are other countries that could be added to Pinter’s list, including Argentina, Iran and Pakistan].

Moving on to the US establishment’s well-honed and sophisticated propaganda methods, Pinter said: “Language is actually employed to keep thought at bay. The words ‘the American people’ provide a truly voluptuous cushion of reassurance... This does not apply of course to the 40 million people living below the poverty line and the 2 million men and women imprisoned in the vast gulag of prisons, which extends across the US.”

Pinter continued: “The United States no longer bothers about low intensity conflict. It no longer sees any point in being reticent or even devious. It puts its cards on the table without fear or favour. It quite simply doesn’t give a damn about the United Nations, international

law or critical dissent, which it regards as impotent and irrelevant. It also has its own bleating little lamb tagging behind it on a lead, the pathetic and supine Great Britain.

“What has happened to our moral sensibility?... Look at Guantanamo Bay. Hundreds of people detained without charge for over three years, with no legal representation or due process, technically detained forever. This totally illegitimate structure is maintained in defiance of the Geneva Convention...”

“The invasion of Iraq was a bandit act, an act of blatant state terrorism, demonstrating absolute contempt for the concept of international law... A formidable assertion of military force responsible for the death and mutilation of thousands and thousands of innocent people.

“We have brought torture, cluster bombs, depleted uranium, innumerable acts of random murder, misery, degradation and death to the Iraqi people and call it ‘bringing freedom and democracy to the Middle East.’

“How many people do you have to kill before you qualify to be described as a mass murderer and war criminal? One hundred thousand? More than enough, I would have thought. Therefore it is just that Bush and Blair be arraigned before the International Criminal Court of Justice. But Bush has been clever. He has not ratified the International Criminal Court of Justice. Therefore if any American soldier or for that matter politician finds himself in the dock Bush has warned that he will send in the marines. But Tony Blair has ratified the Court and is therefore available for prosecution. We can let the Court have his address if they’re interested. It is Number 10, Downing Street, London....

“The 2,000 American dead are an embarrassment. They are transported to their graves in the dark. Funerals are unobtrusive, out of harm’s way. The mutilated rot in their beds, some for the rest of their lives.”

Summing up, Pinter said: “I have said earlier that the United States is now totally frank about putting its cards on the table. That is the case. Its official declared policy is now defined as ‘Full spectrum dominance.’ That is not my term, it is theirs. ‘Full spectrum dominance’ means control of land, sea, air space and all attendant resources...

“Many thousands, if not millions, of people in the United States itself are demonstrably sickened, shamed and angered by their government’s actions, but as things stand they are not a coherent political force—yet. But the anxiety, uncertainty and fear which we can see growing daily in the United States is unlikely to diminish...

“I believe that despite the enormous odds which exist, unflinching, unswerving, fierce intellectual determination, as citizens, to define the real truth of our lives and our societies is a crucial obligation which devolves upon us all. It is in fact mandatory.

“If such a determination is not embodied in our political vision we have no hope of restoring what is so nearly lost to us—the dignity of man.”

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