

Margaret Thatcher and Augusto Pinochet: “Dictators willing to serve the West are sent Tanks, Guns and Christmas Cards”

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[Media Lens](#)

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The late American historian Howard Zinn wrote:

‘The truth is so often the reverse of what has been told us by our culture that we cannot turn our heads far enough around to see it.’ (The Zinn Reader - Writings on Disobedience and Democracy, Seven Stories Press, 1997, p.400)

What, for example, is the truth of the apparently intense ‘mainstream’ political and media dislike of dictators?

On the face of it, the loathing is visceral, absolute - newspapers are crammed with denunciations of the crimes of Saddam Hussein, Muammar Gaddafi and the like. The sensitivity is so acute that dissidents who compare these horrors with the West’s own crimes are reflexively accused of apologising for tyranny. Forget actions in support, journalists are outraged even by words that might be interpreted as expressing sympathy or support.

Readers will doubtless recall the media bile that greeted then Labour MP George Galloway after he told Saddam Hussein in 1994:

‘Sir, I salute your courage, your strength, your indefatigability.’

Galloway claimed his intention had been to salute the ‘Iraqi people’.

The press has never forgiven or forgotten these words. Our search of the Lexis media database (April 17, 2013) found 204 UK national newspaper articles containing the terms ‘Galloway’, ‘Saddam’ and ‘indefatigability’.



Last year, for example, the Independent [reminded](#) readers that ‘signs that Galloway’s views stretched the bounds of public acceptability’ had long been evident; for example, ‘he was memorably saluting the “indefatigability” of Saddam Hussein, long after the Kuwait invasion’. (Rob Marchant, ‘Is anyone in Britain still listening to George Galloway’s Respect

Party? And should they be?,' The Independent, November 9, 2012)

The Guardian also [commented](#) last year:

'Indefatigability was just a word with too many syllables until [Galloway] shamelessly rolled it out for the cameras in 1994. Of course the absurdity of the occasion – obeisance to Saddam Hussein – instantly gave the word itself a new meaning.' (Leading article, 'In praise of... indefatigability,' The Guardian, April 5, 2012)

However foolish, Galloway's comments were just that – comments, words. With this example in mind, it is interesting to compare how political and media commentators have responded to the words *and* deeds of Margaret Thatcher who died on April 8.

Barack Obama [declared](#) Thatcher 'one of the great champions of freedom and liberty'.

George HW Bush [described](#) her as 'one of the 20th century's fiercest advocates of freedom', whose 'principles in the end helped shape a better, freer world'.

The Economist agreed, [praising](#) Thatcher for 'her willingness to stand up to tyranny'.

The Telegraph's Defence Editor, Con 'Con' Coughlin, [opined](#):

'Mrs Thatcher's uncompromising approach to dealing with the world's dictators, from Argentina's General Galtieri to Iraq's Saddam Hussein, derived from her deep admiration of Churchill.'

According to Charles Powell in the Telegraph, Thatcher [was](#) driven by 'a determination to change the world for the better, a quality which she shared with President Reagan, probably the most important strand in their relationship.'

This was admirable indeed, Powell noted, although it 'involved being horrid to foreigners from time to time'. Well, nobody's perfect.

Perhaps inspired by such comments, a letter published in the Birmingham Mail responded to Galloway's [ugly](#) 'May she burn in the hellfires' reaction to Thatcher's death:

'That's a bit rich coming from the Cuban cigar-smoking MP (what a sick joke calling his party "Respect") who praised that tyrant Saddam Hussein for his "courage, strength and... indefatigability" and yet dishonours a British Prime Minister in the most disgraceful terms.' (Letters, Birmingham Mail, April 13, 2013)

The letter might itself be deemed 'a bit rich' in light of Thatcher's actual record.

Halabja - Twenty-Five Years Later

Coincidentally, the month prior to Thatcher's death marked the 25th anniversary of Iraq's March 16, 1988 gas attack on the Kurdish town of Halabja. It has been [estimated](#) that between 3,200-5,000 civilians died as part of Saddam Hussein's Anfal campaign.

The Halabja atrocity was mentioned frequently in 2002-2003 as Western politics and media propagandised for war on Iraq, ostensibly in response to the 'threat' of weapons of mass destruction. The Lexis database finds (April 17, 2013) no less than 1,227 UK national newspaper articles mentioning Halabja. As we [discussed](#) in 2003, the media mostly

managed to miss the damning details. By way of a rare exception, Dilip Hiro [wrote](#) in the Guardian:

'The images of men, woman and children, frozen in instant death, relayed by the Iranian media, shocked the world. Yet no condemnation came from Washington... [I]nstead of pressuring him [Saddam] to reverse his stand, or face a ban on the sale of American military equipment and advanced technology to Iraq by the revival of the Senate's bill, US Secretary of State George Shultz chose to say only that interviews with the Kurdish refugees in Turkey and "other sources" (which remained obscure) pointed towards Iraqi use of chemical agents. These two elements did not constitute "conclusive" evidence.

'This was the verdict of Shultz's British counterpart, Sir Geoffrey Howe [Thatcher's foreign secretary]: "If conclusive evidence is obtained, then punitive measures against Iraq have not been ruled out." As neither he nor Shultz is known to have made a further move to get at the truth, Iraq went unpunished.' (Hiro, 'When US turned a blind eye to poison gas,' The Observer, September 1, 2002)

Five months after Halabja, Howe noted in a secret report that 'opportunities for sales of defence equipment to Iran and Iraq will be considerable'. In October 1989, foreign office minister William Waldegrave wrote of Iraq: 'I doubt if there is any future market of such a scale anywhere where the UK is potentially so well-placed' and that 'the priority of Iraq in our policy should be very high'. (Quoted, Mark Curtis, Web of Deceit, Vintage, 2003, p.37)

Also in the immediate aftermath of Halabja, the US approved the export of virus cultures and a \$1 billion contract to design and build a petrochemical plant that the Iraqis planned to use to produce mustard gas. Profits were the bottom line. Indeed 'so powerful was the grip of the pro-Baghdad lobby on the administration of Republican President Ronald Reagan', Hiro noted, 'that it got the White House to foil the Senate's attempt to penalise Iraq for its violation of the Geneva Protocol on Chemical Weapons to which it was a signatory'.

Walter Lang, a former senior US defence intelligence officer [commented](#):

'The use of gas on the battlefield by the Iraqis was not a matter of deep strategic concern.' (Patrick E. Tyler, 'Officers say US aided Iraq in war despite use of gas,' New York Times, August 18, 2002)

In a little over a week after Saddam Hussein was executed on December 30, 2006, Halabja was mentioned 74 times in the US press and 29 times in the UK press. It was deemed a defining example of his criminality. In the week since Thatcher died, Halabja has not been mentioned in the UK press.

In 2003, the Guardian [described](#) 'the Thatcher government's duplicitous record' on Iraq:

'For more than a decade, yellowing paper files in a government store have hidden the story of the way £1bn of Whitehall money was thrown away in propping up Saddam Hussein's regime and doing favours for arms firms.

'It took place when many in both the British and US administrations were covertly on President Saddam's side.'

A leaked prime-ministerial brief [recommended](#) that the best way to avoid public outrage but

still profit from Iraq was to sell only non-lethal equipment but to 'define this narrowly':

"Contracts worth over £150m have been concluded [with Iraq] in the last six months including one for £34m (for armoured recovery vehicles through Jordan)," writes Thomas Trenchard, a junior minister, in a secret letter to Mrs Thatcher in March 1981.

'The letter also says that a meeting with Saddam Hussein "represents a significant step forward in establishing a working relationship with Iraq which... should produce both political and major commercial benefits".

'Mrs Thatcher wrote by hand at the top of the letter that she was "very pleased" by the progress being made.'

In 2002, Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT) [summarised](#):

'During the 1980's much of the Campaign Against Arms Trade's work focused on sales to Iran and Iraq, countries which had been at war with one another since September 1980...

'The UK was not in the big league as a supplier to either side, but nonetheless did play a vital role in maintaining both military machines.'

In 1982, for example, International Military Services, a company owned by the Ministry of Defence (MoD), 'was given permission to repair British-made Chieftain tanks captured by Iraq from Iran. The MoD said there had been no abandonment of neutrality, Britain would supply tank spares to both sides but no ammunition'.

Last year, the Guardian [reported](#):

'Foreign heads of state who received seasonal greetings from Thatcher in 1981 included the Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi - the card was addressed: "To the Leader of the Great First of September Revolution" - and the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein.'

The Super-Saleswoman

We have focused on Thatcher's arming and funding of Saddam Hussein because the media is supposed to despise him and anyone who supports him or so much as 'salutes' him. But Thatcher's arming and funding of the Iraqi tyrant at the height of his criminality is only the tip of a very bloody iceberg. As John Pilger commented:

'Although British companies have long sold arms, legally and illegally, to the world's leading tyrannies... it was Margaret Thatcher who brought a crusading zeal to the task of arming much of the world.

'She became a super-saleswoman, making deals, talking up the finer points of fighter aircraft engines, hard-bargaining with Saudi princes, cajoling buyers and sellers alike.' (Pilger, *Hidden Agendas*, Vintage, 1998, p.124)

Nima Shirazi, an independent researcher and political analyst, [explains](#):

'Thatcher was a staunch supporter of many of the world's most brutal regimes, propping up and arming war criminals and dictators in service to Western imperialism,

anti-Communism and neoliberal hegemony.'

Indeed, it is an astonishing list. For example, Thatcher praised the Shah of Iran as 'one of the world's most far-sighted statesmen, whose experience is unrivaled'. She added:

'No other world leader has given his country more dynamic leadership. He is leading Iran through a twentieth century renaissance.'

In defending the Shah, Thatcher was supporting a political system that had the 'highest rate of death penalties in the world, no valid system of civilian courts and a history of torture' which was 'beyond belief', according to Amnesty International. It was a society in which 'the entire population was subjected to a constant, all-pervasive terror'. (Martin Ennals, Secretary General of Amnesty International, cited in an Amnesty Publication, Matchbox, Autumn 1976)

Between 1971 and 1976 (before Thatcher became prime minister), the UK [sold](#) the Shah 1,500 state-of-the-art Chieftain main battle tanks and 250 repair vehicles costing £650 million.

Thatcher [described](#) Indonesian tyrant Suharto as 'One of our very best and most valuable friends.'

The 1965-1966 massacres that accompanied Suharto's rise to power claimed the lives of between 500,000 and 1 million people, mostly landless peasants. A 1977 Amnesty International report cited a [tally](#) of 'many more than one million' deaths. In the words of a leaked CIA report at the time, the massacre was 'one of the worst mass murders of the 20th century'. (Declassified US CIA Directorate of Intelligence research study, 'Indonesia - 1965: The Coup That Backfired,' 1968; <http://newsc.blogspot.com/>)

Suharto's US-armed invasion of East Timor in December 1975, killed 200,000 people out of a total of 700,000 - one of the worst genocides in history by proportion of population killed.

Britain granted Suharto hundreds of millions of pounds of [loans](#) to buy weapons before, during and after Thatcher's time as prime minister. On her watch, hundreds of fighter-bombers, tanks, armoured cars and numerous other weapons were [delivered](#) and used to kill civilians.

Thatcher [told](#) her close friend, the Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet, that she was 'very much aware that it is you who brought democracy to Chile, you set up a constitution suitable for democracy, you put it into effect'.

Three weeks after Pinochet's US-backed coup in 1973, a secret US briefing paper entitled 'Chilean Executions' put the 'total dead' from the coup at 1,500. The paper reported that the junta had summarily executed 320 individuals. After three months, 11,000 people had been killed. According to the Catholic Institute for International Relations (CIIR):

'the single-minded ferocity of the coup and the subsequent deliberate use of torture, "disappearances" and murder had at that time no parallel in the history of Chile or Latin America, a continent with a long experience of dictatorship and military brutality'. (Quoted, Mark Curtis, *The Ambiguities of Power*, Zed Books, 1995, p.130)

CIIR described how the Pinochet regime instigated a 'policy of permanent terror'.

Much of the military hardware used in the coup was [supplied](#) by UK manufacturers. In 1980, a year after she took office, Thatcher [lifted](#) the arms embargo on Pinochet – a flow of weapons, including fighter-bombers, followed.

Thatcher's list goes on and even makes the US look principled. CAAT [again](#):

'The bulk of the UK arms trade to Saudi Arabia resulted from the reluctance of the United States to supply the kingdom. Each tranche of the infamous Al Yamamah deal followed refusals by Congress to allow large packages of US arms to be sold to Saudi Arabia. Thatcher's government, however, had no qualms. The UK stepped eagerly into the gap, signing Al Yamamah I, the largest ever UK arms contract with a foreign customer, in 1986, and Al Yamamah II, "the biggest [UK] sale ever of anything to anyone", in 1988 (Financial Times, 9.7.88). The Al Yamamah sales were a UK endorsement of a country with a history of brutal repression and a "persistent pattern of gross human rights abuses" (Amnesty International Report 1999).'

Thatcher supported Israel in its atrocities against the Palestinians. She supported Egypt's tyrant, Hosni Mubarak, King Fahd of Saudi Arabia, P.W. Botha of South Africa, General Zia-ul-Haq in Pakistan, Pol Pot in Cambodia, and so on.

An obvious question arises: how has a media system incensed by Galloway's mere saluting of a tyrant responded to the arming, funding and diplomatic protection of some of the world's worst mass murderers as they were committing their worst crimes?

'A Strong Defence Policy' - The Missing Moral Compass

This, to remind ourselves of the media's supposed intolerance of all who support dictators, was David Aaronovitch on George Galloway in 2003:

'Galloway was once a genuine critic of Saddam's... By 1994, however, he was in Baghdad famously saluting Saddam's courage and indefatigability.' (Aaronovitch, 'Lies and the Left: Galloway and his supporters are foolish to believe that an enemy of America is necessarily their friend,' Observer, April 27, 2003)

In his recent article in The Times on Thatcher, 'She made many of us feel unwelcome in our own land' (The Times, April 9, 2013), Aaronovitch does discuss foreign policy issues: the Falklands war, nuclear disarmament, Greenham Common, and so on. But about the most blatant and lethal feature of Thatcher's foreign policy – her material support for many of the world's mass murderers – he has literally nothing to say. This doesn't make sense. How can mere words of support, a salute, be worthy of repeated condemnation, but actual arming and funding of tyrants be unworthy even of comment?

In fact, mentions of the issue have been few and far between since Thatcher's death.

Indicatively, according to Lexis, over the past month, there have been 461 UK national newspaper articles mentioning the word 'Thatcher'. There have been 29 articles mentioning 'Thatcher' and 'Saddam'. None of these has mentioned that Thatcher armed and financed the Iraqi dictator. Anyone interested in gauging the true extent of freedom of speech in the corporate press need look no further.

Viewing all of this through the BBC's ideological filters, political editor Nick Robinson [asserts](#) that Thatcher 'won' the argument for 'a strong defence policy', an analysis 'which few will

contest’.

A recent [leading article](#) in the Observer did at least mention Thatcher’s horrific policies:

‘the moral compass she deployed surveying the USSR and its client states served her less well on other international journeys. Among those she admired and supported were a number of men distinguished only by the craven brutality they showed in domestic affairs. Dictators such as General Zia-ul-Haq of Pakistan, Pol Pot of Cambodia and Chile’s Augusto Pinochet’.

Thatcher’s ‘moral compass’ merely ‘served her less well’, we are to believe. Readers were spared the damning evidence which we have only sampled here.

Returning to Howard Zinn’s observation, the truth is indeed both neck and mind-bending. The state-corporate system in fact does *not* loathe dictators, or people who support and salute them. It loathes dictators who obstruct Western power and profit. Tyrants willing to serve the West are sent tanks, guns and Christmas cards. Their crimes are buried out of sight, protected from censure at the United Nations. Likewise, outrage at dissidents’ alleged ‘support’ for tyranny is mostly a device used to attack voices threatening power and profit. The state-corporate moral compass is not malfunctioning or broken – there is no moral compass.

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