



## HIDDEN TRUTHS: JOHN PILGER AND THE POWER OF DOCUMENTARY

# The Last Day

### The Last Day

Director: Richard Stroud

Production Company: BBC TV

Executive Producer: John Purdie

[Written] by: John Pilger

Lighting: Dave Sydenham

Designer: Martin Collins

Sound: John Delaney

Cast:

Dan O'Herlihy (*The American Ambassador*)

David Suchet (*Howard*)

Charles Dance (*Alan*)

David de Keyser (*Secretary of State*)

Lawrence Davidson (*French Ambassador*)

Ron Berglas (*Sam*)

John Cassady (*Flaherty*)

Christopher Good (*Carl*)

Fred Lee Own (*uncle*)

Eugene Lipinski (*TV reporter*)

Raymond Marlowe (*Deputy Ambassador*)

Barry Dennen (*Tad*)

Me Me Lai (*'shop steward'*)

Wei Wei Wong (*bar girl*)

Al Matthews (*embassy guard*)

Stuart Milligan, Russell Sommers (*embassy aides*)

Major Wiley (*communications officer*)

Wendy Raebeck (*embassy secretary*)

Edward Wiley (*Ralph*)

Christopher Malcolm (*American at airport*)

Peter Banks (*processor*)

Fiesta Mei Ling (*girl at airport*)

Hal Galili (*Smith*)

Bruce Boa (*general*)

Vincent Wong (*South Vietnamese general*)

Robert Lee (*doctor*)

Yves Aubert (*French TV cameraman*)

Christopher Muncke (*missionary*)

Nadim Sawalha (*money changer*)

Andy Ho (*old man Nha*)

Michael John Paliotti (*marine*)

Kristopher Kum (*Giggles*)

Joe Praml (*American in embassy*)

Jonathan Stephens (*general's aide*)

Pat Michon (*Ambassador's secretary*)

Blain Fairman (*disc jockey*)

Bob Sherman (*marine colonel*)

Jay Benedict (*marine sergeant*)

Michael Fitzpatrick (*marine captain*)

BBC2 tx 30.3.1983

75 mins

Digital

+ intro with author Anthony Hayward

The story of the United States' final withdrawal from Vietnam was one that John Pilger was inspired to turn into a screenplay, based on those events that he covered for the *Mirror* and in his book *The Last Day*. The result, also titled *The Last Day*, eventually reached the screen as a 75-minute BBC television play in March 1983, but not until after it had been turned down by major Hollywood studios. Pilger had planned it as a feature film and shown a 'treatment' to British producer David Puttnam, who liked it and offered it to the major studios in Los Angeles. 'I saw the assessment reports from the studios and all were highly favourable,' recalled Pilger, 'but there is a box they had to tick at the end about political content and most carried the comment that the film would never be accepted politically, that the time was wrong.'

In February 1979, *The Deer Hunter* was screened at the Berlin Film Festival, only weeks after the Chinese had attacked Vietnam, following similar incursions from Cambodia over a long period by Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge. Delegations from the Soviet Union, Cuba, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and East Germany withdrew from the festival in protest at the film's screening at such a time. But *The Deer Hunter* won five Oscars. It was certainly a powerful film, but its portrayal of the Vietnamese as 'gooks' and Oriental sadists was, as Pilger later wrote, a falsehood of history and racist. In one sequence, they were seen forcing American prisoners to take part in a game of Russian roulette. Pilger had never come across this and neither had any other correspondent. Much later, director Michael Cimino admitted that it had been added for dramatic effect.

'*The Deer Hunter* was a very ambiguous film,' explained Pilger, 'but it was basically peddling the old John Wayne message that the Vietnamese were Oriental bastards and the Americans were tragic heroes. It presented the invaders as victims. It was one of the most manipulative films ever made. I went to see it in Leicester Square, in London's West End, and Scarth [Flett], my then wife, had to restrain me from protesting there and then. I was so incensed by the film's rank dishonesty.'

Pilger's own screenplay, which he had written 'on spec' after the idea had been rejected in the United States, was then taken up by BBC special features producer John Purdie, who had made *Sailor*, the popular documentary series about the Royal Navy, and *The Hong Kong Beat*, which followed the British Colonial Force in Britain's last colony. For budgetary reasons, *The Last Day* was shot on videotape in a BBC studio at Shepherd's Bush, with a handful of sets, over 14 hours in just one day. This drama was mixed with actuality footage. Dan O'Herlihy played the American ambassador, David Suchet was the CIA station chief and Charles Dance a British journalist who was based partly on Pilger himself. 'He was meant to look like me, but his character was a conglomerate of four or five correspondents,' explained Pilger. 'As the production progressed, I realised that the character was becoming more and more like me. So, rather embarrassed by this, I hacked away at Charles's part and reduced it to a minor character. I fear I may have upset him.'

The play, shown on BBC2 in March 1983, was generally well received. Philip Jacobson, who had known Pilger as a fellow reporter in Vietnam, wrote in *The*

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### **I Am Not Your Negro**

Sat 26 Oct 20:35; Sat 9 Nov 15:30;

Thu 21 Nov 18:30

### **Seniors' Free Talk: The Quiet Mutiny + intro and Q&A with author Anthony Hayward**

Mon 28 Oct 11:45

### **Seniors' Free Matinee: The Last Day + intro with author Anthony Hayward**

Mon 28 Oct 14:00

### **The Pilger Effect**

Mon 28 Oct 18:15

### **The War You Don't See**

Mon 28 Oct 20:35; Sat 16 Nov 18:10

### **Death of a Nation: The Timor Conspiracy + Palestine Is Still the Issue**

Sat 2 Nov 15:00

### **The Golden Dream La Jaula De Oro**

Tue 5 Nov 20:45; Thu 14 Nov 18:10;

Sun 24 Nov 15:30

### **Lousy Little Sixpence + Utopia**

Sun 10 Nov 14:50

### **Year Zero: The Silent Death of Cambodia +**

### **Breaking the Silence: Truth and Lies in the War on Terror**

Mon 18 Nov 18:10

### **Burp! Pepsi v Coke in the Ice Cold War**

### **+ Flying the Flag: Arming the World**

Sat 23 Nov 17:45

### **The Coming War on China**

Sat 23 Nov 20:10; Fri 29 Nov 18:15

### **The Ballymurphy Precedent**

Tue 26 Nov 18:10 (+ intro by director Callum  
Macrae); Sat 30 Nov 12:20

**The documentaries in this season contain  
distressing scenes of both violence and racism  
related to the events they cover**

### **With thanks to**

John Pilger, Jane Hill, Sam Pilger, Christopher Hird,  
Matt Hird, David Boardman, Marcus Prince

Programme texts compiled by John Pilger,  
Jane Hill, Sam Pilger, Christopher Hird, Matt Hird,  
David Boardman, Maggi Hurt and David Somerset

Selections from Hidden Truths can be found on  
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go to [johnpilger.com](http://johnpilger.com)

*Sunday Times*, 'Pilger's début as a TV dramatist... is fairly successful in capturing the frenetic, often surreal, flavour of Saigon at the time... To my surprise, and pleasure, *The Last Day* resists the temptation to trumpet the broad, often irrational streak of anti-Americanism which I think has sometimes damaged Pilger's reporting from south-east Asia.'

Stanley Reynolds, who had received a torrent of abuse from readers when only a month earlier he had given Pilger's documentary *The Truth Game* a scathing review in *The Guardian*, was more generous about *The Last Day*. 'It would take an extremely silly man not to be engrossed by the film,' wrote Reynolds, but he continued his earlier theme of mocking Pilger's clothes and appearance by describing Charles Dance as 'a tall, handsome man in pressed jeans, an ironed shirt and flowing blond locks' and asking, 'Was this the Bondi Bombshell himself..?' (A reference to *Private Eye's* nickname for Pilger as 'the Blond Bombshell from Bondi Beach'.)

The right-wing *Daily Telegraph* still managed to continue its policy of slating almost every programme that Pilger made. 'Television's most favoured propagandist showed the Americans, especially ambassador Dan O'Herlihy, as deluded by their own rhetoric,' wrote Sean Day-Lewis. 'The Vietnamese who clung to US protection even as he flew away were labelled "scum". The Communist victory was accepted by implication as an historic inevitability that could only be opposed by the wicked and the foolish.'

Anthony Hayward, *Breaking the Silence: The Films of John Pilger*

(Profiles International Media, 2013)

**Anthony Hayward** is a journalist and author specialising in television and film. A regular contributor to *The Guardian*, he has written the books *Phantom: Michael Crawford Unmasked*, *Julie Christie* and *Which Side Are You On?: Ken Loach and His Films*. In 2013, he updated *In the Name of Justice: The Television Reporting of John Pilger*, originally published by Bloomsbury, as the e-book *Breaking the Silence: The Films of John Pilger*, available through Amazon.