

# 'Does Wales have a Resistance?'.(News)

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**Phil Rees** has travelled the world meeting with some of its most wanted terrorists. Here, as his new book **Dining** with Terrorists is published, he tells Daniel Davies how all sides need to escape emotive language in the War on Terror

IT WAS words that got **Phil Rees** into the situation he was in, so it was going to have to be words that would get him out of it.

Admitted to the inner sanctum of Hizbollah commander Shaykh Muhammad in southern Lebanon in 1993 while Israeli jets criss-crossed the sky above their position, Brynmawr-born journalist and documentary maker **Rees** found himself on the receiving end of a long speech about colonialism.

Sensing that things could get worse, **Rees** said, 'I announced to the shaykh that I am Welsh and I also told him, in a playful manner, that Wales had been colonised by the English for almost 500 years, much longer than the Israelis or anybody else had occupied Arab lands.

'Shaykh Muhammad fell silent for a moment. Then he became rather excited. 'Do you have a Resistance?' he asked.

'He wanted names of people in Wales that he should contact. I'm afraid that I never followed up the shaykh's request. But we did have a few good days filming.'

In the past 17 years, **Rees**, now 46, has sat down for meals with some of the most feared men in the world in his time working for the BBC and as reporter for the World Service.

In that time he has met and eaten with terrorists in countries including Afghanistan, Spain, Sri Lanka, Palestine, Kashmir and Indonesia. He is the only Western journalist to have travelled with Algeria's Islamic Militants.

He moved to America, where his father worked for General

Motors, aged three. After leaving Oxford University he went to work for the BBC as a news trainee.

His experiences since are contained in his book **Dining With Terrorists**. Partly, the book is an account of visits to the world's most dangerous hotspots and accounts of how to wriggle out of them.

But it is also about 'the importance of language', **Rees** says. It is a calling to escape the emotive language on all sides of the War on Terror, and seek more measured perspectives.

The words terrorist and terrorism are inescapable now. We hear them so often they are taken for granted. Terrorism is often defined euphemistically as 'political violence'.

But having met so many terrorists on their own terms, **Rees** says his book is an attempt to understand the term terrorist.

World Service reporters were banned from using the word before 9/11, **Rees** says, because if you described violence as terrorism then you were identifying with the victims when the aim is to be objective.

But as journalists need to be on their guard more than ever, circumstances are conspiring to make objective reporting more difficult, he says.

He believes that the pressure of complying with a 24-hours news agenda has stilted output. It leaves less time for reflection and analysis and makes challenging governments more difficult.

BBC political editor Andrew Marr has said the same recently - that constrained journalists rely too heavily on Google to drum up stories that fit, rather than walking around in the fresh air doing proper research.

**Rees** says if the language reporters use is not independent then how are they to do the job of questioning what they are told?

'People have been very lax in using phrases like the War on Terror. It's not a war on terror. It's a policy of the US government. We might be with them, we might not.'

Blanket use of the word terrorism 'just implies that they have got no legitimacy', says **Rees**.

'It's a very fine point, but terrorism isn't just a means of fighting,' he says. The danger is reporters will unwittingly buy into government policy, he believes.

'Phrases take meaning without us really thinking about what they really mean.'

The best example he has is Northern Ireland. One of his most striking recollections is of a pub full of people on the Ulster border, celebrating the death of Lord Mountbatten, his 14-year-old grandson and 18 British soldiers who were all blown up by the IRA in August 1979.

How could these normal-looking people have such a different point of view?

'Coverage of Ireland was disgusting in the British Press because nobody accepted there was a political debate there. You had to read the Irish Press.

'I lived in Belfast for a while. Time magazine used to call the IRA volunteers.'

To strengthen his claim his book contains an extract from the New York Times that says the UK's broadcast ban on Gerry Adams' voice sullied British democracy.

He cites other examples of how the language of news reports changes when the news happens closer to home. But after militant Islam used something as mundane as two passenger planes to strike at the centre of New York, all acts of terrorism are close to home for the West.

The upshot, **Rees** says, is suddenly all acts of political violence are acts of terrorism.

'None of the British Press called Eta terrorists before - they were separatists.

'So what has happened is there has been a universality of this

word now as if there are only two views.'

But what is wrong with using 'terrorist' as a by-word for 'baddy'?

There is a multiplicity of views on invading Iraq, but for almost every viewer of the BBC or reader of the Western Mail, the terrorists of 9/11 were bad guys. Why not call them that and give people what they want?

The problem, says **Rees**, is what comes afterwards. Not every act of violence against America in the aftermath of terrorism's new dawn will be as abhorrent as what happened on 9/11. American policy is directed towards ensuring there will not be another 9/11.

Some people will disagree with the means and the ends of this, and will attack America and her allies to show it.

Journalists have to remind people that making moral judgements is rarely as easy as it was when they saw the horrible sight of the second plane flying across Manhattan. This is why he wrote the book.

'If 65% of Americans believed that Saddam Hussein was responsible for the 911 attacks, that's a staggering failure of American journalism. That impoverishes democracy. Something is going wrong,' he says.

He thinks using the word terrorist makes the world a dangerous place. But for this reason some reviewers have found his book unpalatable.

If you are not prepared to condemn every act of political violence as terrorism, then are you acknowledging that some terrorism is good?

As **Rees** says, the American media is powerful. It has largely taken one view on foreign affairs since 9/11. ('Our media is better in general,' he says, perhaps unsurprisingly for someone who has worked for the BBC since leaving university). When Americans hear the word terrorism, it means not just violence, but an attack on America or an American ally.

By showing terrorists eating and at leisure, he believes he is

injecting them with some humanity, to restore balance and perspective to reporting.

Does he think the most dangerous consequence of 9/11 is it allows the American right to believe its own superiority? A sense that everything we do is right because we have suffered so badly?

'I am not a pacifist, but every death should be justified in the highest level in my view. And what has happened since 9/11, what it has done, is lowered the bar for acceptable state violence,' he says.

'Each of these civilians are just as innocent as the people who died in the World Trade Centre. But they are considered collateral damage in the War on Terror.'

He adds, 'If you are going to violently attack a country, it's not surprising that there have been some violence coming back to you.'

He says the British Army now tells documentary makers to surrender editorial control of their output if they want to travel as an embedded reporter with British troops. Governments are keen to present wars as wars without death, he says.

**Rees** keeps an Iraqi helmet from the first Gulf War on his desk at his home in London to remind him this is not so.

**Dining With Terrorists** is out now, published by Macmillan

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