

John Simpson of the BBC, “Doing My Best to Make Sense of a Crazy World”

by Hugh Fitzgerald



In the Telegraph, John Simpson, a journalist since 1966 with the BBC, and its World Affairs editor since 1988, upon whom all sorts of awards have been lavished, writes a [here](#). Notice the sneer in his description of Fortuyn’s “high-camp charm” and how the Dutchman “sat in his garden bower like an 18th century dandy whose wig had fallen off.” There’s a lot of this dismissive stuff, and hardly anything about what it was that made Fortuyn so apprehensive about Islam. Fortuyn is only quoted as saying that the Netherlands was already “too crowded,” but he had much more to say about Islam, which didn’t appear to interest John Simpson. Of course, even knowing exactly nothing about Fortuyn’s views on anything other than Islam, Simpson goes right ahead and pastes on

Fortuyn that all-purpose epithet “right-wing.” He doesn’t pick up on Fortuyn’s remarks about the treatment of women and homosexuals in Islam; apparently that wasn’t worth Simpson’s while. He was too busy describing Fortuyn – quite unfairly – as a supercilious and dandiacal coxcomb.

Four days after their meeting, Fortuyn was murdered by a man who resented his views on Muslims. John Simpson felt no need to stop and express dismay. Instead, he described Fortuyn as the “archetypical right-winger” (there was nothing to support this assertion unless you think that Fortuyn’s opposition to Islam is enough to make him “right-wing,” though all kinds of well-known left-wingers, including the late Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci, have been just as, or even more, anti-Islam than Pim Fortuyn) and ended with this bit of nastiness, very much in the john-simpson vein: Fortuyn, he concludes his “tribute,” is more likely to be remembered for “the hatred he gave rise to than for his own achievements.”

You will not be surprised to learn that John Simpson’s reports on Israel have been consistently, almost comically, unfair. This decades-long anti-Israel bias, with Israel being presented as an aggressive little Sparta, always hell-bent on making trouble for innocent Palestinians, is a staple of BBC reporting, usually on the lines of “the Israeli tail seems to wag the American dog.” In 2001 he described Ariel Sharon as “the architect of the massacre at Sabra and Chatila in 1982.” As everyone knows, it was not the Israelis, but the Christian Phalange, settling scores because of the PLO massacres of Christians in northern Lebanon, who were responsible for Sabra and Chatila. But twenty years after the massacre, John Simpson was still blaming the Israelis. You can find out much more about Simpson’s coverage [here](#). Let it be noted that this anti-Israel bias makes him no different from most of his colleagues at the BBC, such as Jeremy Bowen, about whom you can read [here](#), or Barbara Plett, who wept openly when she heard that Arafat died, or Lyse Doucet, whose presentation of the Arab-

Israeli conflict makes one wonder if she is merely taking dictation in Ramallah, as you can see [here](#). All in all, it's a hair-raising spectacle, and no matter how well-reasoned and soberly fact-based the torrent of complaints about its Middle East coverage may be, the BBC continues to largely ignore such criticism.

John Simpson has also been greatly impressed with one of the most insidious charges brought against Israel, one that is a favorite of antisemitic websites. This is the claim that in the middle of the Six-Day War, in all the confusion, anxiety, alarm, misidentification, miscommunication, exhaustion, contributing to the well-known "fog of war," Israeli planes deliberately attacked the ship, the U.S.S. Liberty, knowing it was American, and killed 34 Americans and wounded more than 100, and did so at the urging of the American government. Exactly why Israel would have wanted to attack a ship belonging to its closest ally no one has ever made clear, though that has not stopped conspiracy theorists from conspiracy-theorizing. The most detailed account of the whole affair, including material newly released, is that by the historian Michael Oren, which is well worth a careful read and can be found [here](#).

John Simpson, however, of the BBC, was so enamored of the story of a conspiracy, so convinced that Israel was guilty of deliberately attacking an American vessel, though he was no better at offering a plausible reason for such an attack than anyone else, that he chose to write an enthusiastic introduction to one of those books about a supposed U.S.-Israel conspiracy to "hush up" the real reason for the attack on the U.S.S. Liberty. John Simpson's respectful treatment of one of the favorite fantasies of antisemites apparently does not disqualify him from running the BBC World Services. The book for which he wrote the introduction, *Operation Cyanide*, is by Peter Hounam, a journalist who specializes in many sorts of conspiracy theories, as in his *Who Killed Diana*, which

purported to prove that she was “murdered” by shadowy figures. Here is the summary of this preposterous book, *Operation Cyanide*: “This hard-hitting investigation shows that on that day in 1967, the world came closer to all-out nuclear war than ever before – this incident made the Cuban Missile Crisis seem tame by comparison. Peter Hounam reveals that the attack was part of a clandestine plan between the US and Israel known as ‘Operation Cyanide,’ designed to ensure victory for Israel in the Middle East. By blaming the attack on the Arab world, retaliation on a grand scale would be justified.”

“This book will shock any reader interested in Middle-East affairs, as it shows that the U.S. was prepared to sacrifice its men and risk nuclear war to ensure victory for Israel.”

This is the kind of thing John Simpson apparently takes seriously. But it’s not his palpable antipathy to Israel that is now most disturbing. Even more alarming is his coverage of Islam or, rather, his failure to have the BBC cover the subject adequately. He is the man who mocked Pim Fortuyn, both before and after his death, and refused to engage with Fortuyn’s justified anxieties about the future of Europe. He is the man who called Aung San Suu Kyi a “monster,” because she doesn’t share his one-sided views on the situation in Myanmar. He is the man who a few days after the bombings in the London Underground and on buses, wrote that “Thursday was a terrible day for London; yet we mustn’t forget that much the same number of people died that day in Iraq, and no one dedicated acres of newsprint to them.” And he was all for minimizing the reaction to such attacks, belonging, as he does, to the “that’s-what-the-terrorists-want” school of idiocy, insisting that “If there is journalistic over-kill, there is also security over-kill.” A decade later, he was still at it, attacking the British press for paying too much attention to Muslim terrorism in Europe; “It’s [the press] grotesquely selective actually. Don’t get me wrong, it’s not that I think the [Paris attacks] don’t matter, it matters

hugely what happened in Paris. It's one of the most important things of this decade. It's just that you know, 130 people die in other countries and we shouldn't let ourselves be blinded to that simply because we're more interested in Paris." If you think the Western media is giving too much attention to Muslim terrorism, John Simpson is the man for you.

John Simpson has been misinforming people now for more than fifty years, on matters big and little, doing his best "to make sense of a crazy world." His best is not nearly good enough. It's time for a change. He deserves a rest. And more importantly, so do we.

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