

## EPILOGUE

# THE SWORD AND THE SHIELD

*Democracy Now!* has far outlived its original nine-month projected life span covering the 1996 presidential race as the only daily election show in public broadcasting. It has been my privilege these past two decades to be part of the largest independent media collaboration in the country, bringing out the voices of people building movements that have changed the world.

Independent media is the oxygen of a democracy. It is not brought to you by the oil or gas or coal companies when we talk about climate change. It's not brought to you by the weapons manufacturers when we talk about war and peace. It's not brought to you by the insurance industry or big pharma when we talk about health care.

I see the media as a huge kitchen table that stretches across

the globe that we all sit around and debate and discuss the most important issues of the day: war and peace, life and death.

Anything less than that is a disservice to the servicemen and women of this country.

People on military bases can't have these debates. They rely on us in civilian society to have the discussions that lead to the decisions about whether they live or die, whether they kill or are killed.

Anything less than that is a disservice to a democratic society.

## GOING TO WHERE THE SILENCE IS

I think back to the event that cemented my lifelong commitment to independent media—where I experienced its power, its importance, and the responsibility that journalists have to go to where the silence is. It happened in 1991, when I survived a massacre in occupied East Timor, a tiny country on the other side of the world.

In 1975 President Gerald Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger traveled to Indonesia and met with the long-reigning dictator Suharto, who had presided over the killing of perhaps more than a million of his own people from 1965 to 1967. During their trip, Kissinger and Ford gave Suharto the go-ahead for Indonesia to invade East Timor, about three hundred miles north of Australia.

As the president and secretary of state flew out of Indonesia to meet with Philippines dictator Ferdinand Marcos, the Indonesian military invaded East Timor by land, air, and sea. It was December 7, 1975. Ninety percent of the weapons used in the invasion were from the United States. Indonesia closed East Timor to the outside world and commenced one of the great slaughters of the twentieth century.

I first got a chance to go to East Timor in 1990 with my colleague, the remarkably brave journalist Allan Nairn. What we found there was a hell on Earth. Everywhere we went, the military was surveilling the people, disappearing many. One-third of the population had been killed. It was truly terrifying.

We returned to East Timor in October 1991. Allan was writing for the *New Yorker*. I was doing a radio documentary for Pacifica. For the first time, the United Nations had brokered a deal with Indonesia to send in a delegation to investigate the human rights situation. We wanted to see if the Timorese were going to be able to talk to the UN delegation.

When we arrived, we went to the main church in Dili, the capital of East Timor. A mass was being held, and the women were crying. We didn't know if it was the standard sorrow of this occupied country or if something terrible had just happened. After mass, we learned that the Indonesian military had surrounded the church the night before and shot into it, killing a young man named Sebastião Gomes. Many young people had taken refuge in the churches of East Timor so they could speak to the UN delegation. They didn't want to be arrested. The church was the only place where they could assemble.

The next day there was a funeral for Sebastião. A thousand people came out. Following the service, they walked to the cemetery. We'd never seen anything like it. In this land with no freedom of assembly, no freedom of the press, no freedom of speech, the people of East Timor put up their hands in the V sign and shouted, "Viva East Timor! Viva independence! Viva Sebastião!"

Amid this unprecedented act of defiance, they buried Sebastião Gomes.

Allan and I traveled around East Timor seeing how the Indonesian military was preparing for the UN delegation. Everywhere we

heard the same story. They told the villagers, “If you speak to the UN delegation, we will kill you after they leave and put your body in a mass grave.” Bishop Carlos Filipe Ximenes Belo, who would win the Nobel Peace Prize in 1996, told us that the line most commonly used was, “We will kill your family until the seventh generation.” A nationwide death threat had been issued.

We learned that the delegation would not be coming. We found out later that it had been canceled at the behest of the United States.

On the two-week anniversary of Sebastião’s death, the people of East Timor decided to march once again, retracing their steps to the cemetery.

It was early in the morning on November 12, 1991. So many people turned out for mass in the main Catholic church that the priests had to hold communion outside under the trees. Afterward, people streamed into the street. But this time students unfurled banners that they had written on bedsheets, hidden under their Catholic school blouses. You’d see an older woman in her traditional Timorese garb holding up one end of a sign and a girl in her Catholic school uniform holding up the other.

They marched through the streets of Dili through a geography of pain. Every other building had a story: perhaps it was a military barracks where prisoners were killed. Or the back of a hotel where Timorese were held. Or officers’ homes where Timorese women were raped.

We followed thousands of East Timorese as they marched through the streets of Dili and made their way to the cemetery, the same place where Sebastião and so many other victims were buried. The peaceful protesters were risking so much. The Indonesian military had lined the route.

At the cemetery we asked the marchers, “Why are you doing this?”

“For my mother,” one responded.

“For my father.”

“For my village—it was wiped out.”

Then from the direction the procession had come, we saw hundreds of Indonesian soldiers marching down the dirt road holding their US M16 rifles at the ready position. We were in the middle of the crowd, interviewing people. Allan suggested we walk to the front, because although we knew they had committed many massacres in the past, they’d never done it in front of Western journalists.

We had always hidden our equipment, because if people were caught talking to journalists, they could be arrested, disappeared, or killed. But this time we took out our equipment. We wanted to make clear who we were. I put on my headphones. I held up my microphone like a flag. Allan put the camera above his head, and we walked to the front of the crowd. The people were trapped because there were high walls on either side of the road. People at the back could run away. Some could run through a small opening in the cemetery wall.

## MASSACRE

The Indonesian soldiers marched up, ten to twelve abreast. It got very quiet. They rounded the corner, and—without any warning, without any hesitation, without any provocation—the soldiers swept past us and opened fire on the crowd, gunning people down from right to left. The first to go down was a little boy behind us. He just exploded from the gun-fire. The soldiers kept shooting. A group of them came at me and they took my microphone, waving it in my face as if to say, “This is what we don’t want.”

They slammed me to the ground. Allan took a photograph of the soldiers opening fire. He threw himself on top of me to protect me, but then they took their M16s like baseball bats and slammed them against his head until they fractured his skull. We were lying on the ground. Allan was covered in blood. They were killing everyone around us.

A group of soldiers that weren't killing the others lined up in firing squad fashion and put their guns to our heads. They'd stripped us now of everything. The only thing I had left was my passport. They were shouting, "Australia? Australia?" and "*Politik! Politik!*" as if to say we were political if we were witnessing this, and they wanted to know if we were from Australia.

We understood what was at stake with this question. Just before Indonesia invaded East Timor, Indonesian soldiers executed five Australia-based television journalists who were covering events leading up to the invasion. On December 8, 1975, Australian journalist Roger East, the only other Western reporter left in East Timor, was dragged out of a radio station in Dili. As he shouted, "I'm from Australia!" they dragged him down to the harbor and shot him dead.

The Australian government hardly protested the killing of its journalists. We believe that's because years later, Indonesia and Australia would sign the Timor Gap Treaty, dividing up occupied Timor's oil between them. Oil is the source of so much pain in the world.

I threw my passport at the soldiers. We shouted, "No, we're from America! America!" They kicked me in the stomach. When I got my breath back, I shouted again, "America, America!" More soldiers joined the firing squad line.

At some point, they lowered their guns from our heads. We believe it was because we were from the same country that their

weapons were from. They would have to pay a price for killing us that they had never had to pay for killing the Timorese. They moved on.

A Red Cross Jeep pulled up. The driver got out. They had beaten an old Timorese man into a ditch. Every time he picked up his head in prayer, they took the butts of their rifles and smashed his face. Then they had moved on to kill others. The Red Cross driver picked him up and put him in the Jeep.

We climbed into the Jeep. Scores of Timorese jumped on top of us as we rode on top of the vehicle. We drove away from this killing field to the hospital, where the doctors and nurses were working furiously to save those who had not died immediately.

There were incredibly brave young people who could have run. But when one of their friends or sisters or brothers had fallen, they would stop and hold them so they wouldn't die alone. The hospital was overflowing. When the doctors and nurses saw us, they started to cry. Not because we were in worse shape than the Timorese—we weren't. It was what we symbolized to them as Americans, as Westerners—not just to people in Timor but also to people all over the world.

They see us in two ways: as the sword and the shield. The sword, because the United States provides weapons to human-rights-abusing regimes like the Indonesian government, or uses the weapons itself, like in Iraq or Afghanistan.

But they also see the American people as a shield. That day, they saw that shield bloodied. It just deepened their despair.

We made it to the compound of Bishop Belo. Thousands of terrified people were taking refuge there. We certainly had not succeeded in stopping the killing: the Indonesian military killed 270 people that day. And this was not one of the larger massacres in Timor.

We could still hear gunshots. We knew the only way to stop the killing was if we left the country and got word to the outside world. There was one plane leaving that day. The bishop helped me clean up Allan. He gave him a new shirt. I took Allan's bloody shirt and wrapped it around my waist under a towel. We had someone take pictures of us. We knew the Indonesian military would deny there was a massacre, but at least they would have to explain what happened to us. I hid the film on my body. We could not take anything with us because soldiers had surrounded our hotel.

Allan's head was just glistening with blood, as if he were wearing a red bathing cap under his matted dark mop of hair. If we could clean him up and get to the airport fast enough, maybe we could get out on the only plane leaving that day.

The city was now shut down. We raced to the airport, where soldiers behind the counter started to shout. Did they realize we'd been at the massacre site? Had they officially decided not to kill us there, and now they wanted us out? We didn't know, but we demanded to get on the flight.

On the tarmac, we walked very slowly to the plane, escorted by the military. Pain was shooting through Allan's body. I didn't want it to be obvious that he was badly injured, so I kept pausing to say I was admiring the view of this beautiful country. We were the last ones on the plane. When we got on board and the door closed, the flight attendants handed me a silver bowl with water and said gently, "Clean him."

We were able to fly to West Timor, which is part of Indonesia, and on to Bali, where Allan made a phone call to Western media. I took the towel that I had wrapped around my waist and wiped the blood off the phone as he spoke. He said, "There's been a massacre."

Then we boarded an international flight to the United States



that stopped in Guam, a US territory. We had to argue with the airline officials to let us on the flight, because they were concerned that our condition would scare the other passengers.

Once we took off and were no longer on Indonesian soil, the flight attendants asked over the loudspeaker if there was a physician on the plane. Doctors checked Allan and urged us to go to the US naval hospital on Guam, but we said no. We knew they would restrict our access there. So we requested to go to a civilian hospital. An ambulance from Guam Memorial Hospital met us at the gate. Once at the hospital, while doctors were stitching Allan's head, he had the phone to his ear as we fielded calls from media around the world. Allan would occasionally shout out in pain in the midst of an interview as doctors closed up his head. He never stopped talking.

An ambulance took us to the cable network station that linked up with CNN. While we were at the hospital, someone got my film developed, and we were then able to show the photographs on the broadcast as we were interviewed and explained how scores of people had been killed. The Indonesian military denied that a massacre had taken place.

Allan was operated on again in Washington, DC. We then held a news conference at the National Press Club. We described what we saw: Indonesian soldiers armed with US M16s gunned down innocent civilians. From the beginning of the invasion of East Timor in 1975, the Indonesian military was armed, trained, and financed by the United States.

The massacre was the first time that the major nightly network newscasts in the United States mentioned East Timor since the day after Indonesia had invaded sixteen years before, despite the fact that this was one of the worst genocides of the late twentieth century.

Compare that to Pol Pot's Cambodia, where the genocide from 1975 to 1979 was proportionally similar. Hundreds of articles exposing Pol Pot's atrocities appeared in the US media. The difference? Cambodia was an official enemy of the United States; Indonesia was a close ally. The president and the secretary of state denounced Pol Pot's Cambodia regularly, and the press echoed that criticism. But what about when the United States remains silent on atrocities and supports the regime in power?

We need a media that does not simply serve as a stenographer to those in power.

The massacre took place November 12, 1991. Eight years later, the people of East Timor voted for their freedom in a UN-supervised referendum. For the next three years, the United Nations would run East Timor as it transitioned. On May 20, 2002, East Timor became the newest nation in the world.

Allan Nairn and I returned to Timor for this celebration of independence. One hundred thousand people gathered outside of Dili in a place called Tasitolu. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and world dignitaries gave speeches. Finally, Xanana Gusmão—the rebel leader of occupied East Timor who had been imprisoned by the Indonesians for years and was now the founding president—addressed the crowd in many languages. He then unfurled the flag of the Democratic Republic of East Timor.

As fireworks lit the sky, you could see the light reflected in the tear-streaked faces of the people of Timor. They had resisted, and they had won—at an unbelievably high price. One-third of their population—two hundred thousand people—was killed. Yet this nation of survivors had prevailed.

As they celebrated their victory, the Timorese thanked people, especially those from the most powerful countries, for

pressuring their governments to stop supplying weapons to human-rights-abusing regimes.

The Timorese have always served as a remarkable lesson to me. Whether we are doctors, nurses, professors, lawyers, farmers, or businesspeople; whether we're librarians, journalists, or students; whether we're artists, employed, or unemployed—we have a decision to make every hour of every day: whether we want to represent the sword or the shield.

Democracy Now!