

Bianca Jagger

A Conversation with Bianca Jagger, Human Rights Advocate with Kurt Jacobsen

Bianca Jagger is a prominent spokeswoman for human rights, social justice and environmental protection in a wide variety of threatened locales. Born in Nicaragua, she studied political science in Paris, married and divorced Mick Jagger, and became deeply involved in upheavals across Latin America. From the late 1970s onward she worked unstintingly with humanitarian organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the Washington Office for Latin America. Among other honors, Ms. Jagger received the 1994 United Nations Earth Day award, the 1997 Green Globe award from the Rain Forest Alliance for her efforts on behalf of saving tropical rain forests and securing the rights of indigenous peoples, and an “Abolitionist of the Year” award from the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty.

Ms. Jagger also spent a great deal of time and energy in the embattled Balkans and in AIDS-afflicted Africa. She visited Baghdad in January 2003 together with a peace delegation of American academics and was a strong antiwar voice in the run-up to the Anglo-American invasion. She is a member of the Executive Director’s Leadership Council for Amnesty International, a member of the advisory Committee of Human Rights Watch/America, the advisory Board of the Coalition for International Justice, a member of the Twentieth Century task Force to Apprehend War criminals, a board member of People for the American Way and the Creative Coalition and a special advisor to the Indigenous Development International at Cambridge University. This interview was conducted in September 2003.

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Q: *You were born in Nicaragua which historically has been a very tense and troubled place. Does politics run in your family?*

Jagger: My father was a businessman and he was not political. My mother was a housewife and she was very political. There is no question that her views influenced my vision of the world when I was an adolescent; she was a staunch opponent of the Somoza regime. After I left Nicaragua to study in

France, she actively opposed the regime during the insurrection. Later on she became disillusioned with the Sandinistas and left Nicaragua to live with us in the U.S.

Q: Would you call what you had a privileged upbringing?

Jagger: During the first ten years of my life, while my parents were married, I enjoyed a privileged upbringing. After their divorce my mother found herself single, without a profession and with three small children to care for. In the Nicaragua of the 1960s, life was difficult for a divorced woman. It was then that I learned the meaning of discrimination. It was a traumatizing experience. She worked to put us through school. The child support she was receiving was not enough to keep us in the Catholic school we attended.

Q: Were you politically aware in your youth?

Jagger: Yes, very much so. In the 1960s, before I left Nicaragua, I participated in student demonstrations against the Somoza regime to protest against the student massacres perpetrated by Somoza's National Guard. We were tear-gassed and took refuge in a church. My father had to rescue me.

Q: You won a university scholarship in Paris. Why political science?

Jagger: I wanted to have a political career and I thought studying political science would be the best way to achieve it. I didn't want to face my mother's fate—to be discriminated against because of my gender and status. I promised myself I was never going to be treated as a second-class citizen.

Q: What impact did Paris have on your view of the world?

Jagger: I was avid to learn, to discover a new world, a new culture and wanted to escape the narrow perceptions of the women of the Nicaragua of the 1960s. I cherished French literature, and the first book I read in French was *L'étranger* by Albert Camus which had a profound influence on my adolescent life. In Nicaragua liberty, equality and the rule of law were the stuff of dreams. But in Paris I discovered the value of those words, their precious meaning. I arrived in Paris on Bastille Day, July 14, in the mid-1960s, a very significant time. I will say that I am closer to a European viewpoint of the world than an American one. I mean, my ethics and ideals

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are based on European concepts. At the same time my links to Latin America and the developing world are very strong. My umbilical cord was never cut. I feel great identification with the developing world.

Q: Who were the main influences on you there?

Jagger: Philosophers from the 18th century like Voltaire and Rousseau. Later on, Gandhi became my role model. I have always been interested in Eastern philosophy. Since early in my life I've been fascinated by India and I have spent a great deal of time traveling in that country. The more I know about Gandhi the more I [value] his success through his power of persuasion by non-violent action. There was so much he was able to achieve. But today when we think about state terrorism—we talk a lot about terrorism, but rarely talk about state terrorism—we sometimes see how state terror can drive people to terrorism, but it still would be important to highlight the achievements of Gandhian non-violence.

Q: The usual objection is that Gandhi wouldn't have done so well against the SS as he did against the British.

Jagger: I ask myself the question, would it be possible to achieve success if you adopt a Gandhi-like attitude to state terror? Would that really be successful when confronting the imperialistic and ruthless tactics of the Bush administration, who have absolutely no regard for the international rule of law and human rights. Are they capable of being persuaded? I don't know.

Q: You met Mick Jagger, and married him in 1971. Were you politically active during that period?

Jagger: I was politically active as I was before and after my marriage? Perhaps not. What I can say is that it was a very politicized period of my life. I don't think there was really a time when I have not been politically aware. I inevitably became concerned with women's rights.

Q: So you returned to Nicaragua in 1972 after the earthquake?

Jagger: In 1972, on Christmas Eve we were having dinner in our house in London. The television was on in the next room. Suddenly I heard the announcement that there had been a devastating earthquake in Nicaragua. I rushed to see the news. I tried to contact my parents and couldn't reach

them. All flights were suspended. So we decided to fly to Jamaica the following day and from there we took a shipment of medicine in a small charter plane into Managua airport. When we landed, the airport was partially destroyed, and was shut down. There were no immigration authorities in view and there were hundreds of boxes scattered on the runway.

The airport, and surrounding area, was teeming with National Guards. They were making sure the supplies went to the government warehouses. Not far from the airport, there were hundreds of people pleading with the guards in front of the warehouses to let them have access to food and water. It became apparent to me from the moment we landed that the aid that was pouring in from the U.S. and other nations was not going to the intended victims. Only Somoza and his cronies had access to it. People had to put red flags on their doors to proclaim they were supporters of Somoza in order to get access to food and water.

I was anxious to find my parents. Fortunately, I found a British journalist to help us go through the city of Managua. I still remember the stench of burned flesh. There were many fires still burning and I couldn't find my parents. During that period I witnessed the outrageous mismanagement of the aid. Three days later I finally found my parents in Leon. I came back to the U.S. and I urged Mick and the Stones to do a relief concert to raise funds for the victims. They raised \$280,000. So I went back to Nicaragua with the intention of building a small clinic with the relief. The Somoza regime did everything not to allow that to happen. In fact, we had a meeting with Hope Somoza. Mick was present at that meeting. There, Mrs. Somoza said, "I am in the process of building a children's hospital and we would be delighted if you would donate the money to help with the construction."

I said, unfortunately, the money raised is American tax-exempt money and we are obligated to the American people to make sure the earthquake relief will get to the intended recipients. I don't think they will be satisfied if we gave the donation to your government. Mrs. Somoza wasn't very pleased and after that meeting I became persona non grata in Nicaragua. She was head of social security and consequently had some measure of control over doctors. Most of the doctors I tried to secure to help with the clinic were apprehensive because she had taken my rebuff personally. In the end, that clinic turned out to be an impossible task. So we donated the funds to a Nicaraguan foundation to build homes for earthquake victims. For many years I was afraid to go back to Nicaragua.

Q: *The Sandanistas were taking power, or about to take power in 1979. Is that why you went?*

Jagger: The victory of the Sandinista revolution coincided with the end of my marriage. Sometime in the spring of 1979, the British Red Cross asked me to help them spearhead a fundraising campaign for the victims of the war in Nicaragua. After I was done helping them, I went to Nicaragua with an International Red Cross delegation to visit victims of the war and political prisoners. It was toward the end of the Somoza regime. I saw first-hand evidence of the brutality and oppression carried out by the Somoza regime against my countrypeople. It was a turning point in my life. It began my commitment to justice and human rights issues.

Q: *What did you make of the Sandanistas?*

Jagger: The Sandinista revolution was without any question a popular insurrection, I think the difference between El Salvador and Nicaragua is that in Nicaragua you had a popular insurrection and in El Salvador you had a revolution. The revolution in Nicaragua only began to take place after the Sandinistas overthrew Somoza. There is a question for which we will never know the answer: had the U.S. not launched the Contra war to overthrow the Sandinista government, would they have succeeded in bringing socio-economic justice to the people of Nicaragua? Would they have succeeded in generating prosperity? Or would they have failed even without a U.S. intervention? We will never know.

I think for the U.S. government the Sandinistas represented a threat to their dominance of Latin America. First, you had the Cuban revolution. The Sandinista revolution represented a further threat to their economic monopoly in the region. U.S. government officials always invoked the domino theory. They feared that if the Sandinistas succeeded, that what happened in Nicaragua would [spread to] other countries and shake the economic dominance that America enjoyed.

Q: *You also were critical of some Sandanista policies.*

Jagger: At first I supported the revolution, like millions of people throughout the world. However, I became disillusioned after a while. In the

end some of the leaders betrayed the very principles for which they fought the revolution. It was a great missed opportunity.

Q: Chomsky observes that a counterrevolution always forces the revolutionary regime to become authoritarian—works like a charm.

Jagger: Not only did they force them to become authoritarian but they were forced to invest a disproportionate amount of their budget on military spending instead of focusing on what they initially tried to do, which was invest in education, eradicate illiteracy, health care reforms, and economic improvements. The Sandinista government became consumed with fighting a war of survival. They were up against the biggest superpower in the world.

I think it is important to point out that the U.S. embargo imposed on Nicaragua, rather than weakening the Sandinistas, actually maintained them in power. It was only when the embargo was lifted that the Sandinistas were voted out of power. When the U.S. government imposes these immoral and counterproductive embargoes and sanctions, the people rally to support their government even when they otherwise oppose them, because they consider their sovereignty is under threat. Those who suffer are not those at the top, but are the less privileged members of society. I saw the same mistakes in Iraq where the sanctions were even more inhumane and cruel. I saw the appalling effects of two wars, 12 years of UN Security Council sanctions and the Food for Oil program.¹ Today people in the U.S. fail to understand the Iraqis' resentment and hostility toward them. It is very much based on the sanctions, which affected millions of innocent Iraqis. As a consequence, hundreds of thousands of children died. The Iraqis never forgot Madeleine Albright's statement that it was worth the lives of half a million children. When I left Iraq [in January 2003] I was convinced that American would not be regarded as liberators, but as occupiers and that the Iraqis would profoundly resent the occupation.

Q: How did the Sandanistas go wrong?

Jagger: When a government has to face a situation like you had in Nicaragua, they become isolated. I often traveled to Nicaragua to speak against repressive policies by the Sandinista government, such as the imprisonment of members of COSEP [members of the private sector who publicly opposed their policies] and their attacks on the press, particularly the closing of *la Prensa*. Some members of the National Directorate regarded me

with suspicion notwithstanding my vocal opposition to the Contra war in the U.S. When you have an embargo and a Contra war you put moderate voices in an untenable position. I could not allow the Reagan and [George H.W.] Bush administrations to use me as a tool. They offered me a green card if I was prepared to apply for exile in the U.S. Of course, I declined. If I had accepted I would have become the most prominent Contra.

I could bring my criticisms to the Sandinistas, but I could not use the criticism to fuel the actions of the Contra-revolution. I know there were a lot of other people in my situation who disagreed with some of the policies of the Sandinistas, but at the same time couldn't let themselves be manipulated by imperialistic forces. I was distrusted by some of the Sandinistas because I spoke plainly to them about their mistakes; I was trying to make them see what the stakes were. The Sandinistas couldn't deal with criticism. In the last years, they were incapable of accepting even constructive criticism and that contributed to their failure..

Q: Very sad. Didn't you have an especially dramatic experience in Honduras in 1981?

Jagger: In 1981, I was asked to visit a refuge camp in Honduran territory. At the time the U.S. government was providing economic and military aid to a Salvadorian government that was engaged in killing its own people. They were bombing wide areas of Morazan in the northern countryside. People were trying to cross the border to reach Honduras. A river divides the border between El Salvador and Honduras and many drowned attempting to cross it. Thousands of people came to Honduras seeking refuge and the UN set up refugee camps all along the border.

I traveled to Honduras as part of a fact-finding mission with a U.S. congressional staff on Salvadoran death squads, and the Salvadoran army was crossing the border with the Honduran Army's blessing, entering the refugee camp, abducting young male refugees, taking them back to El Salvador to be killed. I traveled to Colomoncagua situated quite a remote area, quite an inaccessible area in the mountains [about 20 kilometers from the Salvadoran border] with a five person delegation. When I arrived I first went to the village. A few minutes later, I was urgently called back because the death squads had entered the refugee camp. I rushed back and saw approximately 35 death squad members, some wearing military clothes, and all of them

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carrying M16s and wearing bandanas. They had tied the thumbs of 30 to 40 male refugees and started marching them out of the camp.

We, the members of the delegation and the relief workers, had only a few minutes to make up our minds. We had nothing to defend ourselves with. We decided to run behind them. Along with us came the mothers, wives and the children of these refugees. We ran along a dry riverbed for about half an hour. Some of us had cameras and we were screaming that we had evidence that we were going to present to the world. At one point we got close to them, and the death squad members turned around pointed their M16s, They were near enough for us to hear them [saying], “*Esto hijos de puta ya nos estan controlando*” (“These sons of bitches are going to catch us”). They pointed their guns at us and we yelled that they would have to kill us all. They talked among themselves. At that moment I thought we would be killed. A few seconds later, which seemed like hours, they turned around and let everyone go. I realized how a small act of courage can save lives. The mere fact of an American being present, or someone perceived to be an American could help save the lives of innocent people. That’s why I believe in the importance of bearing witness, to become a voice for the voiceless.

Q: *Was that the end of the episode?*

Jagger: When I came back to Colomoncagua the press was saying I had been killed along with everyone else. We went back to the capital where a very strange incident occurred. When I first arrived in Honduras, I was a day later than the rest of the delegation. There was no room in their hotel and I had to go another one. After we returned to Tegucigalpa we first went to my friend’s hotel and I waited in the car. At the reception desk members of the Honduran army were looking for me and since they didn’t believe the hotel receptionist and they proceeded to look through the guest book. As soon as they left we made calls to the American and the British embassies to ask them to meet us when we appeared at the Honduran airport. There the Honduran army general said that they wanted to interrogate me and didn’t want me to leave. So both the U.S. and U.K. representatives objected that they didn’t understand why I was prevented from leaving, if five members on the delegation were allowed to go. The other delegation member said they were not going to leave unless I would leave with them. The Americans stressed to them that it wouldn’t be a good public relations move to hold me for questioning. They finally let me go.

When I arrived in Washington I was invited to testify before the Congressional Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs. At the hearing I spoke about the dangers of widening, of regionalizing the conflict. At the time there weren't many people talking about collaboration between the Honduran and Salvadoran armies and the role the Honduran army was playing in the contra war in Nicaragua. Many eyebrows were raised in Washington at my statement. However what I said turned out to be a sad fact in the tragic history of Central America. That began my fact-finding missions, from Honduras to Guatemala to remote rainforests in Brazil, to Bosnia, Kosovo, Zambia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and many others.

Q: *Did you ever find yourself harassed in the U.S. by officials for your activities?*

Jagger: No, I must say no.

Q: *Any other notable events in Central America before I move on to Yugoslavia?*

Jagger: There is an important incident. In the early 1990s, I wrote an op-ed for the *New York Times* about a logging concession Mrs. Chamorro's government was granting to a Taiwanese company. Her government was selling, I think, 280,000 kilometers of land. I discovered that Somoza had started it and Antonio Lacayo, Mrs. Chamorro's son-in law, and Pedro Juaquin Chamorro, director of la Prensa and a former member of La Contra became involved in this scheme. I was surprised that General Humberto Ortega, head of the army and an archenemy of Lacayo and Chamorro also became involved in this shady deal to sell out the territory of Nicaraguan Miskitos. It took me a while to get a hold of the contract. I was finally able to break the deal by launching a campaign to inform the international community and foreign donors concerned with environmental issues. I found the contract had it translated and analyzed by an American environmental law professor. I brought it to Congress and launched a campaign of faxes [and e-mails] to Mrs. Chamorro and General Ortega. I lobbied house members in the Appropriation Committee of the U.S. congress, to stop the aid that the U.S. government was going to give to Nicaragua. There is a clause that stipulates that aid from the U.S. to developing nations can only be given to nations which pursue sustainable development policies. That enabled members of Congress to threaten to stop the aid.

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Q: *The treatment of the Miskito was a great propaganda ploy for the U.S. against the Sandanistas at the time. Do you think there was mistreatment?*

Jagger: The Miskitos have been mistreated by every government in Nicaragua and not just by the Sandinistas. Most governments in Latin America have failed to recognize the rights of indigenous people and their right to their own traditional territories. So although the issue was exploited and exaggerated, the Sandinistas engaged in serious abuses against the Miskito. But this mistreatment is not unusual. The Miskitos still are being discriminated today and the Atlantic coast where they live in one of the poorest areas of Nicaragua.

Q: *Did you have more success in northeastern Brazil defending the Yanomammi tribe against the invasion of gold miners?*

Jagger: We had only a measure of success in Brazil with our work to demarcate the ancestral lands of the Yanomammi people, but their struggle continues. I am concerned at present by a project in Peru called the Camisea Gas Project, which is being developed by five oil companies and has all the makings of a potential disaster. The American Development Bank [(ADB)], just approved a loan. After the devastation left behind by Chevron-Texaco in the Ecuadorian Amazon, the Camisea project is set to destroy invaluable rainforests in the heart of the Peruvian Amazon, which contains precious biodiversity, and it will affect the lives of remote and vulnerable indigenous people. This area in Peru has a reserve comparable to that of the Galapagos, and there are plans to build a plant 30 kilometers away to refine gas. Halliburton will be building the plant to liquefy the gas that will be exported to the U.S.

The U.S. abstained from voting at the International Development Bank because they knew that the political price for voting yes would have focused attention on the connection between George W. Bush's administration and Halliburton and Hunt Oil. Both companies are closely connected to George W. Bush and Dick Cheney. Hunt Oil was one of the biggest financial supporters of George W. Bush, and Dick Cheney was the CEO of Halliburton. I've been told that Vice President Cheney was lobbying for the Camisea project to go through.

Q: *How do you get past your celebrityhood in getting people to listen to you?*

Jagger: Early on when I began my humanitarian work I understood that in order to gain credibility I needed patience, commitment and unwavering perseverance. And I needed to ignore the skeptics. I thought there would come a time when they couldn't deny my accomplishments. I find it disturbing that the media keeps referring to my marriage, since I got divorced in 1979. But the media never wants to let me forget. A man who gets divorced is not forever going to be talked about for it. There are very different standards that we have for women than we have for men.

Q: You make appearances on mass media stations. How are you treated and how do you handle the flak from the right?

Jagger: I will gladly do debates on television versus doing written interviews because live interviews are more difficult to distort. When I do political debates I find it challenging but interesting. It doesn't matter to me if my opponents have totally different views, I can deal with it. What I find hard to deal with are journalists that misrepresent or distort my words.

Q: Are there any differences in how you are treated by interviewers? Wolf Blitzer, for example, versus Bill O'Reilly?

Jagger: I've enjoyed doing Wolf Blitzer's program, and I even enjoyed having a heated debate with Bill O'Reilly. I will do it any time. I must tell you that just as I don't believe in lobbying only progressives and liberal members of Congress, I don't believe in doing interviews only with those who share my views. I want to reach a wider audience.

Q: How did you get involved in the new Balkan wars and what did you experience?

Jagger: I first arrived in Bosnia in 1993, to document the mass rape of women in the former Yugoslavia. I had been asked to testify before the Helsinki Commission in the U.S. Congress. During my visit to Bosnia and Croatia I traveled with members of UN personnel and I listened to hundreds of shocking testimonies of women who were used as [spoils] of war. I visited refugee camps in both countries.

I learned about the horrific conditions people in Srebrenica were living under. That year a UN Security Council resolution had declared the enclave a "safe area," guaranteeing protection, and demanding that all military or paramilitary units withdraw from the demilitarized zone or surrender their

arms. In February 1995, Srebrenica was placed under the care of a Dutch battalion operating under the UN. Instead of a “safe area”—the people in Srebrenica lived under relentless shelling—it became a nightmare zone teeming with refugees, many living on the street. For two years, the Serbs blocked most United Nations convoys to Srebrenica, cutting off food, medical supplies and clothing. They even confiscated cooking salt from United Nations convoys, replacing it with industrial salt to poison the townspeople.

In July 1995, Srebrenica was overrun by Bosnian Serb troops. Eight thousand civilians, literally the entire male population, were systematically massacred in cold blood in four days—delivered to their executioners by the international community. It was the worst massacre on European soil since the Third Reich. The title “safe area” became an obscenity. It was a legitimized concentration camp. The international community was aware that the Serbs were preparing the extermination of Srebrenica. There was only one voice who refused to be an accomplice to the cover-up: Thaddeus Mazowiecki, former prime minister of Poland, who was the United Nations envoy for human rights.²

General Ratko Mladic and Radovan Karadzic have been indicted but never been arrested. Is it because they know too much about the cover-up of the international community and the UN? There were consistent lies, duplicity, cowardice, intrigue, appeasement and deals like General [Bernard] Javier’s deal at Zvornik. The international community wants to forget Srebrenica and is reluctant to apprehend the war criminals. It knows that to bring to trial those responsible for the massacres will highlight its own liabilities.

Governments are mandated by international law to protect people from genocide. The Clinton administration always insisted they were unaware that tens of thousands were massacre in cold blood. But only a few days after the fall of Srebrenica the U.S. reportedly presented to the Security Council satellite photographs of men kneeling on the soccer fields before they were killed, and of mass graves where they were buried. Human rights organizations have requested those photographs under the Freedom of Information Act and the U.S. Government refused to hand the photographs over. One of the shocking aspects of the Srebrenica genocide is that it occurred against a background of warnings and intelligence updates.

Q: Have any governments behaved any better?

Jagger: The only government that has done a thorough investigation, and admitted wrongdoing, has been the Dutch. A minister had to resign recently because of the shameful role the Dutch played in the fall of Srebrenica. The French have continued to try to cover up. An investigation took place in the National Assembly to find out whether General Bernard Janvier, commander of UNPROFOR troops in Srebrenica, had struck a deal with Bosnian Serb General Mladic that in exchange for release of hostages—450 French soldiers had been taken hostage—and a promise not to shoot at UN troops that he would not call for air strikes against the Bosnian Serbs?³ A promise which is believed to have given the green light for the Bosnian Serbs to go ahead in Srebrenica.

Q: What did you do about it?

Jagger: For many years I lobbied UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and various UN undersecretaries to establish a commission of inquiry to investigate Srebrenica and determine whether its personnel should be held accountable for crimes against humanity. When that failed, I began to urge members of the General Assembly to pass a resolution that the secretary general establish a commission of inquiry. I went to the General Assembly because I knew it would never be approved in the Security Council since most of the members were involved in the cover up. When a number of states agreed to support the effort, I was told that Bosnia needed to make the official request. I went to see the Bosnian ambassador to ask if he was prepared to make the request. He said, “It will cost me my job, it may ruin my career, but I would do it.” He did it and to my great surprise in November 1998, the resolution passed, and today he is in jail in the U.S.

Once the resolution was approved, Kofi Annan had two options: one, to call for an independent commission of inquiry by a panel of independent experts or, two, to call for a UN internal commission of inquiry. He did the second. He appointed two people to prepare the report. When the report was ready to be published I got a call from one of the two people involved. He told me that the UN wanted to scratch the report or do a whitewash. In the end all the names were taken out from the report. The irony is that Kofi Annan took credit for the report, although, for years he was adamant against calling for an investigation or establishing a commission of inquiry. When the report was published he gave the impression that the report was done under his

initiative because of his commitment to reform the UN. Furthermore, he gave the appearance that the UN was prepared to admit mistakes when what he did was to eliminate names from the report in order to make those guilty of collaboration with the culprits immune from prosecution. I believe the people in Srebrenica need to know and have the right to know what happened and who the culprits are, and why the international community failed them, allowing this terrible genocide to happen. We need to know in order to prevent it from happening ever again.

Q: *So did you find yourself on the side of the NATO bombing in 1995 and again in 1999?*

Jagger: I was against bombing Serbia. I called for the use of ground troops. I must add to that that if the international community had responded to earlier signs that genocidal activities were underway in Bosnia and later Kosovo there wouldn't have been the need for military intervention.

What are we human rights campaigners supposed to do in the face of genocide? The international community simply procrastinated, pretended it was not happening, turned their backs and closed their eyes in the face of the atrocities. There was a big debate among human rights organizations, who until then believed their role was to monitor human rights violations. The question was whether they should continue to monitor atrocities and count the bodies or should they call for intervention? I felt that one simply cannot watch genocide unfold without calling for intervention. But I am against indiscriminate bombing, the bombing of Serbia was wrong; the killing of innocent people is always wrong.

Q: *In Iraq in January, you were in the delicate position of opposing an invasion of Iraq while at the same time trying not to provide yourself as a prop for the Saddam Hussein regime. That was a precarious tightrope walk. How did you feel while doing it?*

Jagger: I felt it was important for those who opposed the war not to accept the status quo. I believed we needed to put pressure on Saddam Hussein. I urged the Iraqi government to pass a law allowing political pluralism. I called for freedom of expression and dissent, for a proactive approach with regards to weapons inspection and for allowing opposition factions like the Kurds, Shias and others to participate in new UN supervised parliamentary elections. I made that clear in meetings I held with Iraqi officials, such as Foreign Minister [Nagi Sabri], Member of the Regional Command Council [Hoda

Ammash], Speaker of the House [Saadoon Hammadi and Minister of Health Omeid M. Mebarak]. I brought a request from Amnesty International to allow human rights monitors inside Iraq. I said, "I am here to oppose the war. However, I am here to urge you to start a process of democratization. Your government needs to engage in significant changes if you want to avoid the war." I was very conscious from the moment I landed that I was facing the danger of being used by the Iraqi government. I informed them that I was not going to talk to the Iraqi media and would do no interviews. I urged them not to try to use me as a propaganda tool.

Q: It's very tricky, isn't it?

Jagger: Definitely. I am always conscious of that. During the Contra war in Nicaragua I found myself in a very difficult position. On one hand, I publicly opposed the Contra war and, on the other, I wanted the Sandinistas to know that I opposed their crackdown on freedom of the press and on freedom of expression. I walked a very difficult and fine line. In Nicaragua the poor campesinos found themselves caught between both sides. I understood that many joined the Contras because they were upset by mistaken policies of the Sandinistas. You had innocent people on both sides who were used as tools in the war.

I went back to Nicaragua and spoke on behalf of Contras for redistribution of land and I spoke for them when the United States tried to force them out of the U.S. after they had incited them to fight against the Sandinistas. When they were of no use anymore the U.S. government wanted to repatriate them to Nicaragua.

Q: Weren't the Contras just a bit bewildered to have you as their advocate?

Jagger: Maybe some did but others accepted me. I have always been willing to admit when I made a mistake. I made a mistake in my understanding of the composition of the Contras, not on my opposition to the Contra war. I went back to Nicaragua to film a documentary just after the Sandinista defeat in the elections against Violet Chamorro, during the repatriation and disarmament of the Contras. I came to the sad realization that many Nicaraguans who died in the war on both sides, particularly among the campesinos, had been tools of either the U.S. and Contra leaders, or leaders of the Sandinista government. I am still profoundly troubled by the war in

Nicaragua. The United States, a superpower, launched a covert war against another nation in violation of international law, a war that was wrong and immoral.

Q: Bush rampaged right into Iraq despite massive international opposition and is now caught in a very dirty war.

Jagger: Why was this war so wrong? The war in Iraq was not about weapons of mass destruction, not about non-compliance with weapons inspectors, not about the connection between Saddam Hussein and September 11, and certainly not about the liberation of the Iraqi people. It was about oil and world dominance.⁴ George W. Bush and Tony Blair had to convince the world that Saddam Hussein represented an imminent threat. That is why Tony Blair lied when he claimed in last September's dossier that Iraq could launch a chemical or biological attack within 45 minutes. And George W. Bush lied when he mentioned the Iraq-Niger uranium connection. What he failed to say is that the British were relying on their intelligence white paper based on the same false information that Joseph Wilson [former ambassador to Niger] had already refuted.⁵ The IAEA's Mohamed El Baradei told the UN Security Council that the allegations were unfounded.⁶ Despite this, Bush and his administration claim they had proof that Saddam Hussein was reconstituting his weapons program when clearly they did not.

Since by now it is evident there were no WMD, George W. Bush and Tony Blair are desperately trying to find new arguments for going to war in Iraq. I was surprised to read in an interview of Paul Wolfowitz where he said that the decision to highlight weapons of mass destruction as the main reason for invading Iraq was only a "bureaucratic" choice. For George W. Bush to invoke human rights as a justification for war is cynical, opportunistic and laughable. When he appeared shocked by crimes by Saddam Hussein against the Kurds and Iranians, he failed to tell us that when those crimes were committed during the '80s, the U.S. and the U.K. supported Saddam Hussein and were selling the weapons that gave him the ability to annihilate them. There is that famous photograph of Rumsfeld shaking hands with Saddam Hussein in [1983].

Bush and Blair combined their efforts to deceive both nations, both peoples in a carefully coordinated manner, more so than anyone is willing to point out in the media. Did Tony Blair release his famous dossier to support

George W. Bush when he was going through a thorny patch? The media in the U.S. let Bush and his administration get away with lies and deceptions.

The bottom line is that the decision to overthrow Saddam Hussein was clearly defined in the documents published in 1997 by a small clique of neoconservatives, members of a think tank, the Project for a New American Century. The members of this cabal are now in the inner circles in the Bush administration [Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Richard Perle, Paul Wolfowitz, Feith, I, Lewis Libby, Elliot Abrams, Jeb Bush and many others]. The project was concerned with world dominance and particularly with getting hold of Middle East oil. For someone born in Nicaragua who has seen the U.S. government at work overthrowing governments in Latin America, now I see a similar pattern of deceptions used by George W. Bush to overthrow Saddam Hussein. Bush invoked the threat to national security and WMD. The only difference between now and then is that now the threat is terrorism instead of communism. The media continues to accept some of these arguments [and the concept of pre-emptive strikes appears to have become an acceptable argument to attack another state].

Q: How do you see the Iraqi situation playing out?

Jagger: In order to try to salvage this experiment George W. Bush will have to come to the UN and admit that he was wrong.

Q: Now that would be a sight.

Jagger: There is a need for some admission of wrongdoing. What I cannot understand is why George W. Bush and his administration are not being more pragmatic in their approach to what's happening in Iraq. It's not a question of whether he likes or dislikes the UN or whether the UN is a perfect institution. His political future is at stake unless he's prepared to admit that he was wrong in going to war against Iraq in violation of international law and the UN Charter. The only hope we have for the experiment in Iraq to succeed is for the UN to be in charge of nation-building.

Q: Do you ever feel that you perhaps have dispersed your energies among so many causes—AIDS, the death penalty, and so on?

Jagger: The work that I do is all related to issues of social and economic justice. It might not seem so to an outsider but they are all intricately connected. It's all to do with issues of justice: the debate between developed nations and developing world, the oppressed and the oppressors, crimes committed by Chevron-Texaco against indigenous populations in the Ecuadorian Amazon, or speaking about AIDS, the massacre in Srebrenica, the war in Iraq, inequalities of resources, or the death penalty. I am always talking about justice.

Notes

¹ According to Oxfam, "There was clear evidence that sanctions had brought Iraq to the brink of a humanitarian disaster. . . . Water and sanitation system was on the verge of collapse, the system they were using depended on an electric supply that was crippled during the 1991 air strikes." In 1999 UNICEF reported child mortality rates had dramatically increased for children under five reaching 131 deaths per 1000.

² In his letter of resignation shortly after the massacre, Mr. Mazowiecki wrote: "One cannot speak about the protection of human rights with credibility when one is confronted with the lack of consistency and courage displayed by the international community and its leaders. The very stability of international order and the principle of civilization are at stake over the question of Bosnia. Crimes have been committed with swiftness and brutality and, by contrast, the response of the international community has been slow and ineffectual."

³ See Samantha Powers, *A Problem from Hell: America in the Age of Genocide* (London: Flamingo, 2003), pp. 396-398.

⁴ "Controlling Iraq is about oil as power, rather than oil as fuel," says Michael Klare, professor of peace and world security studies at Hampshire College and author of *Resource Wars*.

⁵ “That information was erroneous, and they knew about it well ahead of both the publication of the British white paper and the president’s State of the Union address,” Wilson said on “Meet the Press.”

⁶ Mohamed El Baradei, told the UN Security Council: “Based on thorough analysis, the IAEA has concluded, with the concurrence of outside experts, that these documents—which formed the basis for the reports of recent uranium transactions between Iraq and Niger—are in fact not authentic. We have therefore concluded that these specific allegations are unfounded.”