

Why the Bush administration wants war

Statement of the WSWs Editorial Board
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In the midst of the hysterical war mongering of the US government and a state-controlled media that knows no shame, it is more than ever necessary to retain not only one's composure, but also one's ability to think, analyze, and reason. It is surely appropriate to mourn the terrible loss of life on September 11. But sympathy for the victims, their families and friends should not blind anyone to the fact that powerful sections of the US ruling elite view this tragedy as a welcome opportunity to implement a militaristic agenda that has been in the works for more than a decade.

Modern wars require a pretext, a *casus belli* that can be packaged to the public as a sufficient justification for the resort to arms. Every major war in which the United States has been involved since its emergence as an imperialist world power—from the Spanish-American War of 1898 to the Balkan War of 1999—has required a catalytic event that inflamed public opinion.

But whatever the nature of such trigger events, they never proved, in the light of sober historical analysis, to be the real cause of the wars that followed. Rather, the actual decision to go to war—while facilitated by the change in public opinion produced by the *casus belli*—flowed in each instance from more essential considerations rooted in the strategic political and economic interests of the ruling elite.

“War,” said von Clausewitz in his oft-quoted aphorism, “is the continuation of politics by other means.” This means, in essence, that war is a means by which governments seek to secure political ends they could not achieve peacefully. There is no reason to believe that this profound truth does not apply to the events that are now unfolding in the aftermath of Tuesday's hijackings and bombings.

The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon have been seized on as an opportunity to implement a far-reaching political agenda for which the most right-wing elements in the ruling elite have been clamoring for years. Within a day of the attack, before any light had been shed on the source of the assault or the dimensions of the plot, the government and the media had launched a coordinated campaign to declare that America was at war and the American people had to accept all the consequences of wartime existence.

The policies that are now being advanced—an open-ended expansion of US military action abroad and a crackdown on dissent at home—have long been in preparation. The US ruling elite has been hampered in implementing such policies by the lack of any significant support within the American population and resistance from its imperialist rivals in Europe and Asia.

Now the Bush administration has decided to exploit the public mood of shock and revulsion over the events of September 11 to advance the global economic and strategic aims of American imperialism. He has the full support of a debased media and a Democratic Party that is more than happy to end any pretense of opposition to the Republican right.

On Thursday Bush all but admitted as much, declaring that the atrocity carried out two days before had provided “an opportunity to wage war against terrorism.” He went on to say that the conduct of this war would be the focus of his entire administration. Such a declaration of unabashed militarism would have been unthinkable

prior to September 11. But the assault on the World Trade Center had, in the parlance of imperialist real politik, created new facts.

Without having begun to seriously investigate, let alone explain, the very strange circumstances surrounding the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, the Bush administration and the media have declared that all-out war is the only possible response to these events. This is before the government has even established the political identity of the terrorists, or answered troubling questions about how such an elaborate plot—apparently involving dozens of conspirators operating within the United States—could have gone completely undetected by the FBI, CIA and associated intelligence agencies.

Nor have the Federal Aviation Administration, the Air Force or the FBI explained the failure to issue an alert or attempt to intercept the hijacked airliners as they swerved off course and made for the nerve centers of the US financial and military establishment.

For all the claims of sorrow and sympathy, there could not have been a more timely or fortuitous event for the Bush administration than the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. When George W. Bush awoke on September 11, he presided over an administration in deep crisis. Having come to power on the basis of fraud and the suppression of votes, his government was seen by millions both in the US and around the world as illegitimate.

The very narrow social base of support his administration had in the beginning was rapidly eroding in the face of a deepening economic slump in the US and around the world. Unable to advance any solution to the growth of unemployment and catastrophic losses on the stock market, facing criticism over the evaporation of the budget surplus and the reversal of its pledge not to spend Social Security funds, the administration was showing signs of internal dissension and disarray.

Some three weeks before, on August 20, the *New York Times* carried a front-page article expressing the fears within ruling circles that world capitalism was descending into a global recession of massive proportions. “The world economy,” the *Times* wrote, “which grew at a raging pace just last year, has slowed to a crawl as the United States, Europe, Japan and some major developing countries undergo a rare simultaneous slump.”

The *Times* continued: “The latest economic statistics from around the globe show that many regional economic powers—Italy and Germany, Mexico and Brazil, Japan and Singapore—have become economically stagnant, defying expectations that growth in other countries would help compensate for the slowdown in the United States.... [M]any experts say the world is experiencing economic whiplash, with growth rates retreating more quickly and in more of the leading economies than at any time since the oil shock of 1973. And this time there is no single factor to account for the widespread weakness, persuading some economists that recovery may be slow in coming.

“‘We have gone from boom to bust faster than any time since the oil shock,’ said Stephen S. Roach, the chief economist of Morgan Stanley, a New York investment bank. ‘When you screech to a halt like that, it feels like getting thrown through the windshield.’”

The *Times* derisively described the response of the Bush administration to the unfolding crisis: “The Bush administration still puts a relatively bright gloss on the picture.” It reported with unconcealed skepticism the White House projection of a sharp upturn in the US economy later this year or in early 2002.

On the same day the *Times* reported that Ford Motor Co. was preparing to announce more layoffs and quoted CEO Jacques Nasser as saying, "We don't see any factor that's going to restore the robustness of the economy" in the next 12 to 18 months.

The *Wall Street Journal* provided an equally gloomy assessment, writing: "Almost a year after the slump in high tech and manufacturing began, many of the other pillars that have been supporting the economy are starting to weaken. Businesses that started slashing spending on equipment and software late last year are now doing the same on office and industrial real estate..."

"Automobile sales, which were surprisingly healthy most of this year thanks to generous incentives and low interest rates, have started to slide.... Since April, most industry groups tracked by the Labor Department have been reducing payrolls.... Construction shaved 61,000 jobs between March and July, the clearest example of the spillover from high tech and manufacturing."

The mood of gloom within business circles turned to near panic last Friday when the Labor Department's jobless report for August showed a sharp rise in the unemployment rate, from 4.5 percent to 4.9 percent in a single month. Nearly one million jobs were wiped out in August, as job cuts hit every sector of the economy. Faced with the prospect of a collapse in consumer spending, investors rushed to dump their stock holdings. The Dow Jones Industrial Average fell 230 points, ending the day well below the 10,000 mark.

The economic crisis compounded a host of foreign policy dilemmas confronting the Bush administration. Washington's policy in Iraq was in a shambles, with sanctions crumbling and the US facing open opposition from France, Germany, Russia and China to its plans for maintaining sanctions and intensifying its vendetta against Saddam Hussein. On this and other major issues the US was finding itself unable to get resolutions through the United Nations Security Council and other international bodies. On a whole host of issues—missile defense, global warming, an international criminal court—the US was in open conflict with most of its nominal allies.

The growth of social protest and anti-capitalist sentiment was expressed in the wave of "anti-globalization" demonstrations, which revealed the extreme isolation of the governments of all the major powers and rising popular discontent over their right-wing policies, seen to be embodied above all in the Bush administration.

But in the aftermath of the September 11 terror attack the Bush administration, aided by a cynical and sophisticated media campaign, has been working to whip up a patriotic war fever that will enable it to overcome, at least temporarily, its immediate problems, while creating the conditions for profound and lasting changes on both the foreign and domestic front.

In the name of national unity, the Democratic Party has given Bush a blank check to wage war, increase military spending and curtail civil liberties. As one commentator aptly put it, "We will be operating as if we have a national unity party. That means alternative voices will be suppressed."

The *Washington Post* spoke for the liberal establishment in a September 14 editorial calling for the curtailment of democratic and civil rights. Entitled "New Rules," the editorial declared: "[I]f replying to that attack is truly to become an organizing principle of US policy, as we believe it should—if the United States is to

undertake the difficult and sustained campaign against those who threaten it—then neither politics nor diplomacy can return to where they were.... This is most of all true as Congress and others discuss the possible need to sacrifice privacy, freedom of movement or other liberties to the needs of domestic security."

Tens of billions of dollars will be pumped into the economy in the form of military and security spending, and to rebuild the devastated sections of New York City. The viability of what remains of the social safety net—Medicare and Social Security—will not be allowed to stand in the way of pursuing the twilight struggle of good versus evil proclaimed by the White House and Congress.

Every restriction on the exercise of US military might and the counterrevolutionary activities of the CIA will be lifted. For years the most reactionary sections of the ruling elite, in the editorial pages of the *Wall Street Journal* and the publications of right-wing think tanks, have been agitating for an end to the "Vietnam syndrome" and calling for the unbridled use of military force to secure the interests of US imperialism. Now they see the opportunity to realize their agenda.

Already leading spokesmen of both parties are demanding the rescinding of the presidential order banning the use of assassinations as a tool of foreign policy. The Democrats have agreed to vote for a resolution giving the White House virtually unlimited authority to go to war against any nation that it claims is aiding or encouraging terrorists. There is little doubt that one of the first targets for a massive bombing campaign, combined with a ground invasion, will be Iraq. But other countries are certain to follow.

As one military officer said on Wednesday, "The constraints have been lifted." Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said the contemplated military action will "not be restricted to a single entity, state or non-state entity."

Georgia Democrat Zell Miller was more blunt in expressing the bloodlust that prevails in government circles: "Bomb the hell out of them. If there's collateral damage, so be it."

Senator John McCain said the US should "not rule out any force short of nuclear weapons." *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, in a piece entitled "World War III," refused to make such a caveat, writing that while the September 11 attack "may have been the first major battle of World War III, it may be the last one that involves only conventional, non-nuclear weapons."

The American people, at a moment of enormous grief and anxiety, are being told they must accept the prospect of having their sons and daughters sent to distant parts to kill and be killed, to fight an enemy or enemies yet to be named, and at the same time acquiesce to the gutting of their democratic rights.

What they are not being told is that the American corporate and financial elite, in the name of a holy war against terrorism, intends to rain death and destruction on countless thousands of people in order to realize global aims it has long harbored. Can there be any doubt that this crusade for "peace" and "stability" will become the occasion for the US to tighten its grip over the oil and natural gas resources of the Middle East, the Persian Gulf and the Caspian? Behind the pious and patriotic declarations of politicians and media commentators stand the long-cherished designs of American imperialism to dominate new parts of the world and establish global hegemony.