

The political depravity of journalist Christopher Hitchens

David Walsh
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A historical turning point has this benefit: it brings out an individual's true political physiognomy. What has been extraneous or cosmetic falls away, and the essence emerges.

Such is the case with journalist Christopher Hitchens (*Nation*, *Vanity Fair*), who has in the past been known as a left critic of American society, a dispenser of piquant comments about the foibles of the establishment. Most of those who followed his writing did so for that reason.

However, Hitchens' recent comments on the September 11 World Trade Center attack indicate that he has irretrievably passed over to the extreme right. His permanent and final political identity, which was always the essential one, has now solidified.

The British-born Hitchens hitched his wagon to the star of the US political and military establishment during the Bosnia and Kosovo conflicts, as one of the most fervent advocates of American intervention in the Balkans against the Milosevic regime in Serbia. The columnist cultivated a relationship with the ultra-right through his promotion of the anti-Clinton impeachment drive. He served on one occasion as finger-man for the House Republicans, signing an affidavit at their request alleging that Sidney Blumenthal, a Clinton aide, had provided him with information disparaging to Monica Lewinsky. This was part of an effort to set Blumenthal up on perjury charges.

Similarly, Hitchens lined up with the Bush forces in the aftermath of the theft of the November 2000 election, making "liberal self-pity" and "mobish Democrats" his chief targets.

In two recent articles in the *Nation* ("Against Rationalization" and "Of Sin, the Left & Islamic Fascism") and one in the British *Spectator* ("The Fascist Sympathies of the Soft Left"), Hitchens has taken to task "leftists" whom he asserts are rationalizing the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center as a just, or partially just, payback for US policies in the Middle East.

Hitchens singles out the following comment of Sam Hussein of the Institute of Public Accuracy in Washington DC: "The fascists like bin Laden could not get volunteers to stuff envelopes if Israel had withdrawn from Jerusalem like it was supposed to—and the US stopped the sanctions and bombing on Iraq."

Hitchens is outraged by the suggestion that the attack in New York had any connection to US policy in the Middle East. He prefers to attribute the actions of the suicide pilots to the Islamic fanaticism of a sect whose "grievance and animosity predate even the Balfour Declaration, let alone the occupation of the West Bank. The gates of Vienna would have had to fall to the Ottoman *jihad* before any balm could begin to be applied to these psychic wounds."

This is ahistorical and, at its heart, racist-chauvinist nonsense. There

is not a great leap from his position to the Bush administration's worldwide crusade of "good versus evil," or the ravings of Silvio Berlusconi, Italy's notoriously corrupt right-wing prime minister, who proclaimed the need for a "Western crusade" for "civilized values." By proclaiming the absence of any socio-historical circumstances that might have played a role in the recent attack, Hitchens evades making any assessment of the Middle Eastern political and economic situation.

Any such analysis would have to take into account the responsibility of the US and the other major powers for the denial of Palestinian democratic rights and national aspirations, the mass murder of Iraqis, and the horrible conditions that generally prevail in the region. This does not mean that the Islamic fundamentalist movements are progressive or have any genuine anti-imperialist credentials. They are, in fact, deeply reactionary and hostile to the interests of the working class and oppressed masses. However, it is ludicrous to deny any link between American policies and the ability of such movements to find recruits and even, in some countries, a degree of popular sympathy.

In his recent articles Hitchens also attacks Noam Chomsky, the linguist and radical critic of US foreign policy, for comparing the cruise missile attack launched by the Clinton administration on Sudan in August 1998 to the September 11 terror attack on the World Trade Center. Hitchens writes: "To mention this banana-republic degradation of the United States in the same breath as a plan, deliberated for months, to inflict maximum horror upon the innocent is to abandon every standard that makes intellectual and moral discrimination possible."

The *World Socialist Web Site* has clearly defined political differences with Chomsky, but his response to Hitchens is appropriate. He notes that the cruise missile raid on Khartoum "destroyed half the pharmaceutical supplies of a poor African country and the facilities for replenishing them, with an enormous human toll." He cites an article in the *Boston Globe* which reported that a year after the attack, "without the lifesaving medicine [the destroyed facilities] produced, Sudan's death toll from the bombing has continued, quietly, to rise.... Thus, tens of thousands of people—many of them children—have suffered and died from malaria, tuberculosis, and other treatable diseases..."

We part company with those elements on the petty-bourgeois left, including Chomsky, when they suggest that the terrorist attack was in some fashion or another a legitimate act of retribution for past crimes committed by the US government and military. However, we regard with contempt—as "moral eunuchs," in Trotsky's words—those who feel sympathy only for innocent Americans who are killed, and turn a blind eye to the victims of US atrocities around the world, whether it

be the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the carpet-bombing of North Vietnam, the deliberate killing of hundreds of Iraqi women and children in the Al-Amariya bomb shelter in the Persian Gulf War, or the bombing of bridges and trains in Serbia—and the list could be considerably extended.

Hitchens concludes his attack on Hussein and Chomsky in this fashion: “I have no hesitation in describing this mentality, carefully and without heat, as soft on crime and soft on fascism. No political coalition is possible with such people and, I’m thankful to say, no political coalition with them is now necessary. It no longer matters what they think.”

This is not political polemic. What is Hitchens hinting at? Either that patriotic vigilantes, with the “innate fortitude” which he elsewhere suggests leftists lack, should deal with his radical opponents, or that they should be rounded up by the FBI. As we noted, Hitchens has already proven himself a finger-man for the Republican right.

In his recent articles Hitchens describes the Taliban and bin Laden-type movements as “Islamic fascism.” The term is applied too loosely and without concrete historical analysis. Moreover, his use of “fascism” as an epithet reeks of insincerity, given that (a) Hitchens was prepared to make common cause with American quasi-fascists in the Republican Party during the impeachment scandal and (b) Washington has never broken off relations with a government or party because of its fascistic leanings (whether in Spain under Franco, South Africa, Chile, Central America or elsewhere).

Socialist opposition to Islamic fundamentalism is of a principled character. We do not outsource the task of defeating these reactionary movements to the imperialist bourgeoisie.

Moreover, when one supports a policy, one assumes responsibility for its consequences. Hitchens has reached the point where he does not demarcate himself in any fashion from the Bush administration and its drive to war.

In regard to the “Islamic fascists,” Hitchens takes up the arguments of his leftist opponents in the following manner: “Did we not aid the grisly Taliban to achieve and hold power? Yes indeed ‘we’ did. Well, does this not double or triple our responsibility to remove them from power?” And further: “Very well then, comrades. Do not pretend that you wish to make up for America’s past crimes in the region. Here is one such crime that can be admitted and undone—the sponsorship of the Taliban could be redeemed by the demolition of its regime and the liberation of its victims.”

And finally: “This [the present situation in Afghanistan] is another but uniquely toxic version of an old story, whereby former clients like Noriega and Saddam Hussein and Slobodan Milosevic and the Taliban cease to be our monsters and become monstrous in their own right. At such a point, a moral and political crisis occurs. Do ‘our’ past crimes and sins make it impossible to expiate the offense by determined action?”

The logic is unimpeachable. Since the US ruling elite and its political servants have inflicted misery on the population of Afghanistan and the region by their past reckless, blind and predatory policies, they should be given a blank check to intervene once again—and in a far more overwhelming fashion. Any honest or minimally principled individual who acknowledged the consequences of past policy as Hitchens does would surely ask: if the US government and its agencies are chiefly responsible for nurturing these monstrous forces in Afghanistan, why should they be entrusted with the task of resolving the resulting disaster? Hitchens’ argument is reactionary, but it is also absurd and unconvincing.

The overthrow of the Taliban is the responsibility of the masses of Afghanistan and the region, in cooperation with the international working class. If the Afghan people are politically disoriented and presently unprepared for the job, that is in large measure due to the role of Soviet Stalinism, whose invasion in 1979 permitted the propaganda of the Islamic-clerical forces to bear fruit. This only underlines the critical importance of the program of socialist internationalism. There is no way out of the crisis in the region on the basis either of welcoming imperialist intervention, or supporting any of the political forces (Islamic, military, nationalist) that currently dominate.

US policies in Afghanistan have proven disastrous not only for the people of that region. In the final analysis, some 6,000 people in New York and Washington have lost their lives as the result of criminal and irresponsible policies pursued by various American administrations. The September 11 tragedy was the end product of a political process set in motion in the late 1970s and early 1980s when Washington decided to incite Islamic fanaticism against the former Soviet Union.

None of those who initiated that policy—Jimmy Carter, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Ronald Reagan, Henry Kissinger—or their supporters in the media, such as CBS’s Dan Rather, who traveled to Afghanistan and posed before the TV cameras in Mujahaddin robes, have come forward to assume responsibility. The mind-numbing media barrage, the flag-waving and the threats against dissenting voices are all aimed at preventing the historical facts from becoming known to the public.

There is a continuity between the wars of the 1990s—chiefly, in the Persian Gulf and the Balkans—and the impending conflict in Central Asia. The US, the self-proclaimed sole superpower, is seeking to reorganize the world in line with its geopolitical agenda, establishing its hegemony over oil-rich regions such as the Middle East and the Caspian basin. A continuity also exists in the conduct of an international layer of former radicals and protesters who—from a combination of opportunism and cynicism—have thrown in their lot with the various ruling elites. Hitchens is merely one of this breed who has traveled farthest and fastest.



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