

Pacifist moralizers rally behind the US war drive

David Walsh
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As various commentaries posted on the *World Socialist Web Site* have explained, the American establishment has seized upon the tragic events of September 11 as an opportunity to implement policies both at home (attacks on democratic rights) and abroad (expansion into Central Asia) it had formulated long before the terror attacks.

Likewise, for certain social layers within the US the hijack-bombing of the World Trade Center merely accelerated processes that were long maturing. An entire corps of former radicals, leftists and liberals has found in support for the Bush administration's "war against terrorism" the means to cement its relationship with the American ruling elite.

Such types now abound. Their repentant and banal statements fill the opinion pages of certain newspapers. For its part, the *WSWS* has been the recipient of numerous letters from individuals who begin along the following lines—"As a former socialist," or "As someone who has always considered himself to be a liberal"—and then proceed to explain why the attack on the World Trade Center has caused them to rethink (and discard) their previous political outlook.

The *Wall Street Journal* recently carried an opinion piece by Scott Simon, the host of National Public Radio's "Weekend Edition With Scott Simon," which seems to sum up the thinking and mood of this politically unsavory crowd.

In his commentary, titled "Even Pacifists Must Support This war," Simon explains that he became a Quaker and a pacifist in the late 1960s. His experiences as a war reporter in various conflicts in the 1970s and 1980s apparently did not shake his convictions. However, in covering the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s, he came to the profound conclusion that "All the best people can be killed by all the worst ones."

He continues: "It seems to me that in confronting the forces that attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, American pacifists have no sane alternative now but to support war. I don't consider this reprisal or revenge, but self-defense: protecting the world from further attacks by destroying those who would launch them."

It has been noted by more than one observer that the garden-variety pacifist is for peace, except in times of war.

From a social standpoint, pacifism represents the response of a section of the middle class that is appalled by the worst excesses of imperialist aggression, but hostile to the revolutionary mobilization of the working class. By Simon's own account, he

remained a pacifist during the Vietnam War and the Reagan administration's proxy war in Central America. In other words, as US bombs rained down and Washington's surrogates tortured and murdered thousands, Simon was all for the Vietnamese and El Salvadorans turning the other cheek. But now that US citizens have been the victims of a violent attack, he feels he has no choice but to support the call to arms.

Simon's piece suffers throughout from the false assumption that pacifism is the only possible basis for opposition to the war in Afghanistan in particular, and US imperialist policy in general. He cites the famous Oxford Student Union debate in 1933 over whether it was moral for Britons to fight for king and country—which concluded with the famous resolution that it was not—as a symptom of the moral depravity of the "exquisite intellects of that leading university."

It is entirely beyond Simon that broad sections of the intelligentsia in the 1930s understood the conflict between Britain and Germany to be a clash between two rival imperialist powers, and that the most advanced elements conceived of counterposing socialist working class struggle to both German fascism and the British empire.

The most striking feature of Simon's commentary is its ahistorical character. He rules out the consideration of history: "People who try to hold certain American policies or culture responsible are trying to decorate the crimes of psychotics with synthetic political significance."

He conveniently makes the September 11 attack the work of "psychotics," thus removing the tragedy from the chain of events out of which it emerged. This Manichean view of things, shared by Bush and his cronies, reduces one's enemies to "forces of evil."

The ruling elite and its hangers-on are hoping that the American population will be satisfied with such simple-minded explanations. The evidence suggests that many Americans, on the contrary, are beginning to recognize that an attack as serious as the one that occurred in New York and Washington must have complex political and social roots.

By his reductionism, Simon eliminates the danger of having to explain the event. The irony is, however, that the conceptual method of those who carried out the atrocity is not so far removed from the ahistoric, quasi-religious approach of Simon himself. After all, is it terribly difficult to work out their thinking? Islamic fundamentalists consider the US a monolith that oppresses, a power that throws its weight around to have its own way, the

embodiment of evil. They consider that the only way to strike back against the “Great Satan” is through terrorism, the weapon of the weak.

Socialists condemn the September 11 attack not because it is “evil” in some abstract moral sense, but because it is politically reactionary. It is detrimental to the development of a unified and politically conscious struggle of the international working class.

The forces involved in the attack are not legitimate fighters against American imperialism. They have an utterly false concept of social dynamics, rooted in bourgeois nationalism. While they attack or bomb, they would really prefer to strike a deal with Washington. They categorically reject a struggle based on the international action of working people.

There is another specious aspect to Simon’s position. He, like the other liberal and “radical” defenders of the Bush administration, dismisses the notion that US policy is responsible for the terror attacks and the thousands of victims of the attacks in New York and Washington. Nothing that the US government has done bears examination, neither its support for Israeli repression on the West Bank and Gaza Strip, nor its cultivation of Islamic fundamentalism, nor its support for the Taliban, nor its alliance with the ultra-reactionary Saudi regime, without which Osama Bin Laden would not have made his millions.

Only those who flew the airplanes and masterminded the operation are culpable. But this moral stricture does not apply, in the slightest, to the actions of Americans.

Hence, the American public will be told that the death of thousands of Afghans from US bombs or the destruction of infrastructure and medical facilities is “regrettable,” but by no means to be blamed on US pilots or the American war machine. All responsibility, although it is indirect and the consequence of past activities, is to be laid at the feet of the Taliban and bin Laden. In similar manner the Clinton administration defended its murderous sanctions policy against Iraq.

Washington never holds itself responsible for anything. Death and destruction are always the product of someone else’s actions.

Contrary to Simon’s implication, the US government and military have themselves carried out horrific crimes, resulting in the deaths of tens and hundreds of thousands of innocents around the globe. The standpoint of moral outrage, so in vogue among philistine middle class elements at present, is worthless under all conditions. It is particularly inappropriate at present, when one considers the pre-history to the September 11 events, particularly US foreign policy over the past several decades in the Middle East.

Simon’s view seems to be that the suicide hijackings were so horrific, war or virtually any course of action is justified. Individuals who share the view that the attack was of such a character as to call into question everything they may have once believed should be asked point blank: what universe were they living in prior to September 11?

Where were they when the US was invading Lebanon and Somalia, destroying Iraq as a modern society and killing masses of people through sanctions, launching cruise missiles against Sudan and Afghanistan and supporting unstintingly the Israeli suppression of the Palestinians? Either they were so self-satisfied and blind to reality that none of this registered, or their present

astonishment is a disingenuous pose.

The unhappy fact of the matter is that the September 11 attack is not difficult to understand in any of its aspects, not the political circumstances or the thinking that produced the tragedy. It is possible to reject the perspective of those who carried out that horrific crime without descending to moralistic claims that they represent the zenith of human evil.

Given the character of American policy, why should anyone be surprised that such a deadly attack has taken place? In the Persian Gulf and Balkan wars of the 1990s, the US killed great numbers of people and devastated entire nations, while in the process suffering virtually no casualties. Could there be any doubt that sooner or later some nationalist or fundamentalist group would decide to launch a lethal assault on the US?

To explain an event is not to condone it. Our opposition to the September 11 attackers is far more profound and principled than that of Simon and his co-thinkers, because it is not based on platitudinous apologies for US imperialism.

Simon writes: “The war against terrorism does not shove American power into places where it has no place. It calls on America’s military strength in a global crisis in which peaceful solutions are not apparent.”

This is errant—and reactionary—nonsense. The war in Afghanistan is not primarily aimed against terrorism or its perpetrators. The war is a consequence of various policies carried out by the US in the past—its nurturing of Islamic fundamentalism as part of the effort to destabilize the Soviet Union, as well as its predatory pursuit of oil reserves—and has as its goal the assertion of American interests in a strategically critical part of the world.

Simon’s positions shed light on a particular milieu, those “independent” voices at National Public Radio and the Public Broadcasting System, who have assiduously sought to accommodate themselves to the Republican right over the past two decades. His column simultaneously reflects a more general social category—the intellectually bankrupt layer of ex-radicals, liberals and pacifists who have found their rightful place in the camp of American militarism and imperialism.



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