

# Media uses Pearl kidnapping to whitewash American society

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The kidnapping of *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl and the threats to murder him, as the *World Socialist Web Site* has made clear, are reprehensible and reactionary. Such actions contribute nothing to the defeat of imperialism and will only strengthen the hand of the US ruling elite, providing it with a new pretext for advancing its geopolitical agenda in Central Asia. Pearl's abduction is another expression of the bankruptcy of terrorism.

Pearl to a large extent has found himself a victim, like so many others in the region, of circumstances over which he has little control. Apparently investigating alleged connections between "shoe bomber" Richard Reid and Pakistani Islamic fundamentalist groups, Pearl went missing in Karachi on January 23. Pakistani police officials have arrested several individuals and claim to know the identity of the group, the banned Jaish-e-Mohammad (Army of Mohammad), responsible for his kidnapping. A representative of Jaish, however, denied any connection and condemned "such acts [of kidnapping]."

Friends and colleagues have expressed understandable concern and anger over the abduction. His wife, six months' pregnant, offered to exchange herself for her husband.

However, other voices in the US media are attempting to make use of the case once again to whitewash American society. The kidnapers, you see, are "evil" individuals who hate "freedom and democracy" and "everything America stands for."

A series of editorials along these lines has appeared in the print media. One of the worst appeared in the *Oregonian*, published in Portland and considered to be the Pacific Northwest's leading newspaper. Entitled, "The lost Pearl," the piece claims that Daniel Pearl "became a target because his life's work represents all that is anathema to groups that thrive on hate and ignorance: Freedom. Information. Global understanding. Truth."

The editorial later comments that violence against journalists "is a brutally efficient way to keep information, and therefore power, away from the people. The public stays in the dark, vulnerable to manipulation and lies. ... The next

step is directly controlling the presses, spoon-feeding lies to the public on government-run media."

Nothing justifies or excuses the Pearl kidnapping, but it emerges within a definite historical and political context. To make sense of it, in the first place, one would have to grasp why the US and, by extension, anyone associated with its government, military or media should be so despised in the region. Such an examination would have to take into account the last several decades at least of American policy in the Middle East, Pakistan and Afghanistan and the suffering it has inflicted on masses of people in the region.

It must be said that the circumstances of the case express, in their own fashion, the disproportion in the power exercised by the different parties involved. It is a reflection of the privileged position of the US that its mass media and layers of the population can be aroused by the potentially tragic fate of an individual, while the Pakistanis and Afghans experience mass death on a regular basis. During the time Pearl has been held captive, reports have circulated about the killing of hundreds of civilians, supposedly by mistake, by the US military in Afghanistan. No one in the American media turns a hair. Somehow, apparently, that is what the people of that country deserve, or at any rate are accustomed to.

It is precisely this reality, the utter indifference of the American establishment to their plight, that those under attack, or even those simply caught in the middle, feel all too clearly. Kidnapping and hostage-taking are the actions of the weak, those who feel overwhelmed by an immense sense of oppression.

Again and again, the American government and media demonize their enemies, all the more to avoid any and all responsibility for the conditions they have helped create. The media would have us believe that the US has no responsibility for conditions in Pakistan; for example, for the Zia ul-Haq Islamist dictatorship that came to power in 1977, legitimized itself by hanging the country's former prime minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, not long after and fomented Islamic fundamentalism in Afghanistan (generously

supported by the Reagan administration) following the Soviet invasion in 1979. Indeed the media conceals the entire catastrophic record of American involvement in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The ongoing and relentless attempt by the US to gain access to and dominance over the oil resources of the region has been the principal driving force behind policies that have resulted in the suffering of masses of people. The *Oregonian* editorial writers, complacent and philistine, entirely close their eyes to that.

“Freedom. Information. Global understanding. Truth.” Pearl may personally stand for that, but America certainly does not in the eyes of tens of millions. More like: “Colonial enslavement. Ignorance. Imperialist violence. Lies.”

The *Oregonian*’s callousness in regard to the consequences of US foreign policy is complemented by its dishonest view of American life and its own role.

The editorial is entirely devoid of self-criticism. It implies that there are “Blue skies, nothing but blue skies” over America. Where do these people live? The United States in 2002 is blighted by social ills: poverty, homelessness, drug addiction and disease among the poor, widespread illiteracy, the rise of racist violence and religious bigotry. The “social safety net” has been devastated; any measures that assist the disadvantaged or represent any obstacle to the accumulation of profits have come under attack. Masses of people get by from week to week, one pay-check away from the social abyss. The gulf between the wealthy handful and everyone else dominates social life.

The Republican Party has been taken over by the ultra-right and the Democrats have given up the pretense of defending the working population. The Bush administration has launched an unprecedented assault on democratic rights and civil liberties. No one would seriously look to the trade unions or the so-called civil rights organizations to lead any struggle against the giant corporations and their representatives at every level of government. As a result of both the economic conditions and the crisis of leadership in the working class, a sense of hopelessness afflicts great numbers of people.

To the well-heeled editorialists of the *Oregonian* or the *Dallas Morning News* (pontificating about “how little terrorists understand free societies”) or the *Kansas City Star* (“Extremists exploit human suffering for propaganda”), or, unsurprisingly, the Murdoch-owned *New York Post* (“Civilization Held Hostage”), however, US society is above reproach.

The ceaseless claims about America’s “free press” deserve their own specific response. The mass media is a privately-owned business operation that has always been dedicated to the defense of the profit system. The

degeneration of the American media in recent years, however, has been rapid and marked. It has demonstrated its utter incapacity to defend the basic rights of the American people. From fueling the manufactured sex scandal that dogged and destabilized the Clinton administration to covering up the hijacking of the Florida vote, secured by the vote of five right-wing Supreme Court justices, the American media has played a pernicious role. It has lied and lied again in the service of the most right-wing and authoritarian forces. The Bush administration is in part the result of its handiwork.

This media has sunk to new depths in its coverage of the September 11 attacks and the war in Afghanistan. Controlled by a handful of giant conglomerates, with the closest ties to the state, the American media has found its own methods of keeping “information, and therefore power, away from the people.” The mainstream media has refused to ask a single pertinent question about the terrorist attacks, the absence of an investigation into the attacks or the role of the US in Afghanistan, the legitimacy of the American military response, or any other critical matter. The US public is almost entirely “in the dark, vulnerable to manipulation and lies” about the brutal war in Afghanistan. The “next step,” “spoon-feeding lies to the public” is precisely what already occurs on a daily basis, as the major television networks in particular function more and more as simple conduits for White House, Pentagon and CIA misinformation and propaganda. And it must be said that Pearl himself writes for a publication whose editorial pages systematically call for the bombing of any number of countries and enthusiastically endorse US military violence.

A further point needs to be made. Inflammatory, provocative and cynical editorials like the one that appeared in the *Oregonian* and elsewhere will only enrage Pearl’s captors and put his life at greater risk. The irresponsible pouring forth of self-satisfied and chauvinist poison by the American government and media, which merely deepens the hatred felt for the US by great numbers of people all around the globe, increasingly endangers American citizens—journalists, aid workers and others—outside the country and, as September 11 tragically demonstrated, innocent civilians at home.



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