

The killing of Daniel Pearl

David North
23 February 2002

For reasons that have nothing to do with jingoism, let alone sympathy for the war policies of the Bush administration, the murder of reporter Daniel Pearl has been met not only with revulsion, but also with deep sadness. From the release of the initial photos that showed Pearl as a captive—his hands bound and with an automatic weapon pointed at his head—the young man was seen as a human being in a desperate situation, held responsible for events over which he had no control. Now comes the news that Daniel Pearl has been killed, and many people, far beyond the sphere of his family, colleagues and friends, mourn his death.

Daniel Pearl was a highly cultured man and a talented journalist. His writings exemplified the schizophrenic character of the *Wall Street Journal*, where the reactionary frothings of the editorial board are regularly contradicted by the conscientious dispatches of the newspaper's best reporters. A review of Pearl's writings shows that he maintained an objective and independent attitude toward the events that he covered, and was willing to present information that challenged the claims of both the US government and editorialists of the *Journal*.

In 1998 Pearl traveled to the Sudan in the aftermath of the destruction of the El Shifa Pharmaceutical Industries plant by US cruise missiles. The Clinton administration had justified the attack on the grounds that the plant was engaged in the production of chemical weapons. Pearl's investigation called the administration's claims into question. He wrote that "links in the chain of evidence outlined by US officials are weaker than past reports have suggested." Pearl noted that much of the information used by the administration to justify the attack had been obtained from Sudanese dissidents, who had their own interests and axes to grind.

Another notable series of articles dealt with allegations of Serbian genocide in Kosovo. While

acknowledging that the Yugoslav forces had done "heinous things," Pearl (in an article co-authored with Robert Block) wrote that "other allegations—indiscriminate mass murder, rape camps, crematoriums, mutilation of the dead—haven't been borne out in the six months since NATO troops entered Kosovo. Ethnic-Albanian militants, humanitarian organizations, NATO and the news media fed off each other to give genocide rumors credibility. Now, a different picture is emerging."

It is highly doubtful that Pearl's killers were in the least interested in what he wrote or thought. Those who murdered Pearl demonstrated not only an appalling degree of callousness, but also political bankruptcy. Even if one were to leave aside all considerations of a moral and humane character (which is hardly possible in serious politics), the murder of Pearl does not, in any conceivable way, undermine the war policies of the Bush administration. The cruel and pointless killing of an individual—one who obviously bears no responsibility for the actions of the American government—serves only to provoke disgust and perpetuate a political environment that facilitates far more terrible acts of mass violence by the United States against the people of Central Asia and the Middle East.

The efforts of the US government and the media to use the death of Pearl for their own reactionary and militaristic purposes must be resisted and rejected. To recognize that the murder of Pearl has political causes whose roots go far deeper than the immediate motives of those who plotted his kidnapping is to provide neither an excuse nor a justification for terrorism. The terrible truth is that Pearl's tragic end, however unjust and undeserved, is the consequence of the policies of American imperialism. When the *Wall Street Journal* writes in its eulogy of Pearl that "Danny is no different from the thousands of Americans who died on September 11," it is saying far more than it intends.

Daniel Pearl, like the 3,000 innocent people who died in the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, is a victim of policies pursued by the United States. Their deaths are the *consequence* of reckless and reactionary decisions made in Washington, in pursuit of oil and other imperialist geo-strategic interests, over the last 20 years.

We repeat: to explain the social and political roots of terrorism is not to justify it. The *Wall Street Journal's* declaration that Pearl's death "is a terrible reminder, like so many others since September 11, that evil still stalks this world" is Manichaeian nonsense that explains nothing.

Is it so difficult to understand that the violence meted out by the United States to all those who get in its way incites anger and rage among millions throughout the world? To cite one small example of American arrogance and brutality: on the very day that Pearl's murder was confirmed, US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld admitted that US troops had mistakenly killed 16 anti-Taliban Afghan fighters, but refused to apologize.

It does not require exceptional political insight to realize that in the decision to murder Pearl, the desire for revenge was a major subjective factor. At least in this respect, the outlook of Pearl's killers is not all that different than that of the most widely read columnists in the United States. Just one week ago, in a column praising Bush's "axis of evil" speech, Thomas L. Friedman of the *New York Times* had the following to say:

"Sept. 11 happened because America lost its deterrent capability. We lost it because for 20 years we never retaliated against, or brought to justice, those who murdered Americans ... innocent Americans were killed and we did nothing.

"So our enemies took us less and less seriously and became more and more emboldened...

"America's enemies smelled weakness all over us, and we paid a huge price for that."

By changing only a few words, the Pakistani terrorists could use Friedman's argument to justify their murder of Pearl: "We have failed to retaliate against America ... innocent Arabs, Afghans and Moslems were killed and we did nothing ... America took us less and less seriously and became more and more emboldened."

The thought patterns of the pompous and belligerent American columnist and the Islamic terrorist have far more in common than either imagine. Both think in terms of ethnic, religious and national stereotypes. Both believe in and are mesmerized by violence. And neither imagines for a moment that there exists the possibility of a world liberated from the quagmire of communal strife, based on genuine social equality and solidarity and cleansed of all violence and oppression.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact