

The war in Afghanistan and the crisis of political rule in America

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A case can be made for the following axiom: the more absurd and disingenuous the official justifications given by a political elite for its policies, the greater the crisis of the regime. A regime in deep crisis cannot tell the truth—or anything approaching the truth—not only to the people, but also to itself. The underlying social contradictions, and the intensity of the conflicts within the ruling layers themselves, simply do not permit it.

This conception is useful in beginning to consider the state of bourgeois rule in the United States at the onset of the twenty-first century. Let us recall that the political crisis that convulsed the American political and media establishment for more than a year in 1998-99 was officially attributed to the fact that Bill Clinton had a sexual liaison and lied about it. Any attempt to seek more profound causes for the first-ever impeachment of an elected president was generally dismissed by official opinion-makers as moral lassitude, pro-Clinton propaganda, or both.

Now we confront a brutal war in Afghanistan that is only the initial front in an open-ended global military crusade against terrorism, combined with the most far-reaching assault on democratic rights in US history. This historical turning point, we are told, is to be explained simply as the response of the Bush administration to the terror attacks of September 11—attacks that were unforeseen and unforeseeable, and which dictated to the American government all of the measures it has taken since, both internationally and at home.

There is ample and mounting factual evidence that the official version of September 11, which depicts the American CIA, FBI, Pentagon and White House as innocent, if hapless, victims, is a compilation of lies and evasions. We will return to this question in due course.

More fundamentally, the government-media line is a crude attempt to deny the fact that the eruption of American militarism and implementation of authoritarian methods of rule are the outcome of historical processes that have been at work for a protracted period, culminating in the political wars of the 1990s and the stolen election of 2000. Anyone who cares to read the statements and commentaries carried by the *World Socialist Web Site* since its inception four years ago, and those published in the antecedent publications of the Socialist Equality Party, will see that a definite political logic underlies the traumatic events of today—a logic that can be, and has been, rationally uncovered and analyzed by the Marxist movement. There are tens of thousands of readers of the WSWS around the world who can attest to this fact.

In the space of four months the American ruling elite has effected the most far-reaching attack on democratic rights in US history. The measures enacted by the Bush administration go far beyond a mere quantitative

expansion of certain investigative powers. They constitute a basic restructuring of the police and intelligence apparatus to vastly expand its scope and reach.

The United States has undergone a radical transformation in the structure of the government, in the relationship between the people and the police and armed forces, and in the legal and constitutional framework.

Allow me to quote from a statement posted November 7 on the WSWS:

“The White House has assumed vast new powers for internal repression, establishing by executive order an Office of Homeland Security that is not subject to either congressional oversight or any vote on the personnel appointed to run it. An all-encompassing political police agency is coming into being, through the passage of an ‘anti-terror’ law that effectively amalgamates the FBI and CIA and abolishes the longstanding separation between overseas spying and domestic policing.

“Side by side with the bombing of Afghanistan, the Bush administration has declared that there is a second front in the war, the war at home. The federal government issues vague and unsubstantiated ‘terror alerts,’ which fuel anxiety while providing no protection to the public. Government spokesmen urge the population to get used to measures like random police searches and roadblocks as a permanent feature of life. National Guard troops patrol the airports, harbors, bridges, tunnels and even the US Capitol.

“Fundamental constitutional safeguards—the right of *habeas corpus*, the right of the accused to know the charges against them, the right of arrested persons to see a lawyer, even the presumption of innocence—have been set aside for millions of immigrants from the Middle East and Central Asia. The right to privacy has been all but abolished for the entire population, with government intelligence agencies given the green light to plant bugs and wiretaps, monitor financial transactions, and conduct other forms of spying, virtually at will.

“If the average American had been shown on September 10 a picture of the United States as it is today, the response would likely have been: ‘This is not the America I know. This looks more like a police state.’

“The bitter irony is that such a sweeping attack on democratic rights has been perpetrated in the name of a war to defend ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’ against terrorism. But neither the Bush administration, nor its Democratic Party collaborators, nor a compliant and complicit media bother to explain the following contradiction: the United States government never secured powers such as these at any point in the twentieth century. Not in World War I, World War II or the Cold War, when the antagonists were powerful and heavily armed states, was such a radical restructuring of the government and legal framework carried out. Why is this happening today, when the alleged enemy is a small band of terrorists operating out of caves in one of the poorest countries in the world?”

The measures listed above have been carried out within the context of a massive police dragnet that has resulted in the imprisonment of some

1,200 people, many of whom have been held at secret locations without being charged and without proper access to legal representation. The United States has seen nothing like this since the Red Scare of 1919-1920, when the American ruling class reacted to the Bolshevik Revolution by imprisoning and deporting thousands of immigrants.

Since the above-quoted article was posted, Bush has announced the establishment of military tribunals where non-citizens designated by the White House as terrorists can be tried in secret without any of the basic protections guaranteed by the US Constitution. The star chamber proceedings set forth in Bush's executive order make the 1999 show trial of Kurdish separatist leader Abdullah Ocalan in Turkey seem a model of due process, by comparison. Under Bush's pronouncement a reputed terrorist can be tried, convicted and executed in secret on the basis of a two-thirds vote by a jury handpicked by the president.

Attorney General John Ashcroft has enacted, also by executive order, a measure giving him the power to overrule immigration courts and keep aliens in jail indefinitely. The government has leaked reports to the press that it plans to lift restrictions on police spying on domestic political organizations.

Congress, with bipartisan support, has authorized the posting of armed soldiers at the Capitol building, and the Supreme Court has announced it will bar the public from its hearings.

In order to acclimate the public to a government that operates largely in secret, the White House has, with great fanfare, announced that the vice president, Dick Cheney, will spend most of his time in secret, secure locations away from Washington.

From a constitutional standpoint, the measures enacted by the Bush administration represent the dismantling of the system of checks and balances established by the Constitution's framers, according to which the state consists of three coequal branches—the executive, the legislative and the judicial. Bush has arrogated to himself and his administration unprecedented powers, relegating the other branches to the status of little more than a rubber stamp.

This is being done with the enthusiastic support of the Republican congressional leadership and the tacit connivance of the Democrats. It is worth noting that at the height of the anthrax scare, in mid-October, congressional Republicans favored shutting down Congress and adjourning indefinitely, the better to give Bush, the FBI, the CIA and the military a free hand, both abroad and at home.

Administration spokesmen have justified these measures with statements that reveal a combination of ignorance of basic constitutional principles, and contempt for the democratic content lodged in these safeguards. Bush, for example, has repeatedly declared that he has no intention of telling the generals how to conduct their war—an explicit repudiation of the core principle of civilian control over the military.

In his testimony last month before the Senate Judiciary Committee, Ashcroft issued a threat to any congressmen who might dare oppose Bush's authoritarian dictates. Employing one of the standard tactics of the Republican right—accusing your enemies of the crimes you are committing—he denounced critics for pitting “Americans against immigrants and citizens against non-citizens.” He continued: “[T]o those who scare peace-loving people with phantoms of lost liberty, my message is this: your tactics only aid terrorists, for they erode our national unity and diminish our resolve. They give ammunition to America's enemies, a pause to America's friends. They encourage people of good will to remain silent in the face of evil.”

Under the Bush doctrine, anyone who “aids terrorists” is guilty of terrorism and subject to the full repressive powers of the state. The implication could not be more clear.

In a breathtaking repudiation of basic democratic conceptions, Ashcroft went on to say that Bush had no obligation to consult Congress because “the Constitution vests the president with the extraordinary and sole

authority, as commander-in-chief, to lead our nation in times of war.” This crude falsification of the Constitution amounts to an open justification for presidential dictatorship.

At a speech in Portland, Oregon on January 6, Bush set forth a rationale for conducting a full-scale political witch-hunt, declaring he intended to prosecute not only terrorists, but anyone “who espouses a philosophy that's terrorist and bent.” This followed the assertion that congressional Democrats could only reverse the tax breaks for the wealthy passed last year “over my dead body.” Aside from the implied threat of physical violence, this pronouncement suggests that the Bush White House has no intention of abiding by congressional action that cuts across its program for further enriching the financial elite. It raises a further question: will Bush permit a mere technicality, such as electoral defeat, to drive him from office, or must this also be accomplished “over my dead body”?

The Bush administration has made clear that, as far as it is concerned, the battery of authoritarian measures it has imposed are not temporary changes. They are, it insists, essential components of the global war on terrorism, a war that must be fought both abroad and at home, and which has no endpoint in time and no geographical boundaries.

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, in a column in the November 1 edition of the *Washington Post*, baldly stated that not only should the American people accept an open-ended war against terrorism, but they must “prepare now for the next war—a war that may be vastly different not only from those of the past century but also from the new war on terrorism that we are fighting today.” In other words, America is going on a war footing, not only for the duration of a specific conflict in Afghanistan, but indefinitely. Consequently, the domestic police measures being taken now by the government must also be accepted as a permanent state of affairs.

The sum total of measures enacted since September 11—and no one should doubt that even more extreme actions are on the drawing boards—constitute the legal and political framework for a bonapartist dictatorship, resting primarily on the police and military apparatus.

During the Republican campaign to remove Clinton from office, the *World Socialist Web Site* noted the apparent incongruity of ultra-right forces, who have for years sought to strengthen the police powers of the state, deliberately humiliating and degrading not only the president, but also the institution of the presidency. We made the point then that this political wrecking operation, while revealing the recklessness of the Republicans, by no means meant that the Republican right had become hostile to a “strong” executive. What they were setting out to destroy was the last vestiges of an “activist” presidency, in the sense that this term had acquired since the days of Franklin Roosevelt, i.e., a presidency that promoted reformist measures which to some degree limited the prerogatives and power of the corporate oligarchy.

Once they had their man in the White House, we predicted, the Republican right would insist on a vast expansion of the powers of the executive branch to crack down and repress social and political dissent at home, and wage war abroad. Recent events have fully confirmed this prognosis.

To conclude this review of the post-September 11 domestic measures, let me return to the WSWWS statement of November 7 cited above: “The Bush administration's domestic ‘anti-terror’ campaign must serve as a sharp warning. After the Florida debacle of November and December 2000, there were complacent commentaries in the press declaring that, unlike many other countries, the bitter political struggle in the United States did not end with tanks in the streets. Now the tanks *are* in the streets, and soldiers surround the Capitol, in what might be called a slow-motion coup d'état.”

Central to the government-media propaganda campaign is the myth that on September 11 “everything changed.” But, as numerous commentators have demonstrated—most incisively the WSWWS—the plans for US military intervention in Afghanistan and Central Asia were well developed and the

preliminary stages of something akin to “Operation Enduring Freedom” were already under way prior to the terror attacks on New York and Washington. Similarly, the most right-wing sections of the political, financial and military elite were pressing for authoritarian domestic measures to accompany a massive expansion of US imperialist aggression abroad and deal with the growing danger of social unrest at home.

What was lacking was a suitable pretext, a *casus belli*. The events of September 11 provided the *casus belli* that the cabal around Bush was seeking. To substantiate this claim one can, as they say, go to the horse’s mouth. Consider the words of Zbigniew Brzezinski, one of the primary authors of the US policy of subversion and destabilization in Afghanistan that provoked the 1979 Soviet invasion and led to decades of war and civil war in that unfortunate country. As President Carter’s national security adviser, Brzezinski spearheaded the policy of inciting Islamic fundamentalism and allying with elements like Osama bin Laden to undermine Soviet influence in Afghanistan and Central Asia.

In his 1997 book *The Grand Chessboard*, Brzezinski wrote: “It is a ... fact that America is too democratic at home to be autocratic abroad. This limits the use of America’s power, especially its capacity for military intimidation. Never before has a populist democracy attained international supremacy. But the pursuit of power is not a goal that commands popular passion, *except in conditions of a sudden threat or challenge to the public’s sense of domestic well-being*” (emphasis added).

In reality, the frontal assault on traditional bourgeois democratic methods and institutions is the culmination of more than two decades of political reaction and attacks on democratic rights in the US. This period has seen a steady buildup of the repressive forces of the state—two million Americans in prison, thousands on Death Row, legal restrictions on the rights of defendants, expanded powers of police spying and domestic surveillance. This has been accompanied by the emergence of a fascistic right wing with little popular support, but enormous influence in the Republican Party, in Congress, and now in the White House.

The decay of American democracy reached a culmination in the political wars of the 1990s. We have written a great deal about this complex and immensely significant process, but I will try to recapitulate its basic features.

Ultimately, the death agony of American democracy is rooted in fundamental shifts in the social structure of the US, which in turn are expressions within the US of changes in the structure of world economy and the relation between American and global capitalism. The most significant feature of these changes domestically is the growth of social inequality, particularly over the past two decades.

Bound up with the growing chasm between a highly privileged elite and the broad masses of the population are other critical developments—the proletarianization of large sections of the middle classes and the decline in the social and political weight of the traditional middle class, the narrowing of the social base of the two bourgeois parties and their ever more pronounced shift to the right, the insulation of the entire political and media establishment and its alienation from the general population, the impact of centrifugal tendencies on all layers of society, including the corporate and political elite. With the end of the Cold War, the basic pillar of political consensus—the struggle against Soviet “communism”—was removed, and the ruling elite was suddenly deprived of its most important ideological means for holding together an increasingly complex, socially polarized and ethnically diverse society.

Even as the Democratic Party and the liberal establishment sought to adapt themselves to the rightward movement of large and powerful sections of the corporate oligarchy, abandoning any lingering commitment to social reform and adopting the *laissez faire* nostrums of the Republican right, the conflicts within the ruling layers intensified. As is now manifest, this phenomenon was rooted in the fact that substantial sections of the ruling class were not simply demanding a quantitative expansion of

reactionary social policies and attacks on democratic rights, but were, in fact, breaking with the entire framework of American bourgeois democracy. As the Republican insurgents around former House Speaker Newt Gingrich often proclaimed, they considered themselves “revolutionaries,” and, indeed, they were the shock troops of a profoundly anti-democratic tendency that aimed at a counterrevolution in political methods and forms of rule.

An important factor in this process was the demise of the AFL-CIO trade unions as a significant political and social force. To the extent that the labor movement was rendered impotent and the working class deprived of any organized expression of its interests on a mass scale, even in the severely limited form of its traditional trade unions, the most predatory sections of the ruling elite felt themselves free to pursue their policies unhindered by the threat of resistance from what passed for “organized labor.”

This political process was bound up with the growth of parasitism and corruption within the ruling layers of unprecedented proportions. Two decades of stock market boom and social reaction were marked by swindling and criminality in business and political circles on a scale far beyond the worst days of the robber barons. Together with the wholesale looting of the economy came a fixation on the most short-term gains and a decline within the ruling class of any long-term, more far-sighted strategy for maintaining its rule.

We have in the past noted the nodal points in this process. The Republican shutdown of the federal government in 1995-96, carried out in an attempt to impose the social agenda of the extreme right in the teeth of popular opposition, boomeranged, enabling Clinton to win reelection in 1996. This only strengthened the hostility toward democratic forms building up within ruling class layers allied with the Republicans, and heightened their sense that history was moving against them. They concluded that they had to adopt extra-parliamentary means—the methods of political conspiracy, dirty tricks and usurpation—to obtain their ends. Hence the escalation of their covert war against the Clinton administration, culminating in the Paula Jones lawsuit, the Monica Lewinsky provocation, and the impeachment of Clinton in late 1998.

The mid-term election of November 1998 dealt a further blow to the Republicans and heightened their frustration and recklessness. Popular hostility toward the Republican impeachment drive and Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr was reflected in a defeat for the Republicans, who lost seats and barely hung on to their majority in the House of Representatives. Gingrich resigned his seat in Congress only days after the election.

But the popular verdict on impeachment only reinforced the conviction of the right wing that it had to employ extra-parliamentary and pseudo-legal means to achieve its ends. The Republicans proceeded with their coup attempt, and the following month the House, in a strictly partisan vote, impeached Clinton.

In the end, the attempt to remove Clinton from office failed. In the face of overwhelming popular opposition to the Starr witch-hunt, the Senate refused to convict Clinton. However, the craven response of the Democrats, who refused to turn the tables and expose the conspiracy against democratic rights at the heart of the impeachment campaign, and the outright complicity of the liberal media in the sordid and reactionary affair, emboldened the forces involved in the plot. They concluded, correctly, that they would face no serious opposition from within the political establishment to their assault on democratic rights.

For these forces, the 2000 election was a decisive battleground. It was their last best chance to achieve what they had failed to achieve in the Clinton years. Hence the decision to nominate as their standard bearer a political and intellectual cipher—George W. Bush—with acceptable right-wing credentials and blood ties to one of the most corrupt political families in American history.

The election revealed a country deeply split, but one in which the most vibrant centers of industry and urban life, where the bulk of the working class was concentrated, repudiated the nostrums of the Republican right. The Democratic candidate, Al Gore, made a populist appeal to the electorate, campaigning as the spokesman for the “people” against the “powerful,” singling out certain sections of big business and attacking Bush’s plan to slash taxes for the wealthy. Gore’s populism was timid, inconsistent and dishonest, and it was combined with capitulation to the Republican impeachment drive—signified by his selection of Senator Joseph Lieberman as his running mate. Lieberman had distinguished himself by denouncing Clinton in the well of the Senate early on in the Starr investigation of the Lewinsky affair.

Nevertheless, Gore won the popular vote and carried most working class districts. Combined with the protest vote for Green Party candidate Ralph Nader, the election result showed a significant majority in favor of what, in American political terms, constitutes a left-liberal social policy. Popular anger over the impeachment drive was reflected in the defeat of Republican congressmen prominent in the campaign to remove Clinton, and the election of Hillary Clinton to a Senate seat from New York.

Even before the final vote tally was in, the Republican campaign had decided to utilize its support in the media, the military and the courts to overturn the voters’ mandate and steal the election. In numerous articles and statements the WSWS has detailed the methods employed by the Bush campaign. It is not necessary to repeat our analysis of the events of November and December 2000 here. However, one thing should be said: beginning on election night, when Bush held an extraordinary press conference at the governor’s mansion in Austin, Texas to denounce the networks for putting Florida in the Gore column, the Bush campaign never considered allowing the outcome of the election to be decided by the vote of the electorate. It set in motion a massive operation to hijack the White House.

In the course of the five-week struggle over the Florida vote that ended with the intervention of the US Supreme Court, the Republican Party organized a mob attack on election officials in Miami-Dade County that had the intended effect of convincing them to shut down their recount of the disputed ballots. Republican officials and Bush campaign spokesmen made direct appeals to the US military to oppose the recounts that were requested by the Democrats and sanctioned by the Florida Supreme Court. They sought to whip up a pogromist frenzy within the fascist right, employing the technique of the “big lie” to accuse the Democrats of doing precisely what they themselves were doing—stealing the election.

When the right-wing majority on the US Supreme Court handed down its December 12 decision overturning the Florida Supreme Court, halting the counting of votes and handing the White House to Bush, it did so on the basis of a reactionary interpretation of the Constitution that held the American people had no constitutional right to vote for the president of the US.

In light of recent events, one aspect of our analysis of the 2000 election emerges as particularly important. The WSWS pointed to a crucial feature of the election crisis in a November 15, 2000 article entitled “The Bush campaign and the rise of the political underworld.” This is a portion of what we said:

“The events which have taken place in the past week in the US presidential election, beginning with Election Night itself, have cast light on a political phenomenon of immense significance: the rise to the pinnacle of the American political system of elements of a gangster character.

“These extreme-right elements, who now control the Republican Party, know very well that they cannot take control of the American government by democratic means, because there is widespread popular opposition to their policies. Entrenched in the Republican congressional leadership and the judiciary, they are now seeking to seize control of the presidency

through what amounts to a political putsch.

“The right-wing cabal includes operatives for the Bush campaign and the Republican Party, steeped in the method of political ‘dirty tricks’; media spokesmen like the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Post* and an array of talk-radio hosts, for whom no lie is too brazen or absurd; and the network of extreme-right lawyers, like the sinister Theodore Olson [who is now the solicitor general of the United States, appointed by Bush], who played central roles in the Paula Jones lawsuit and the impeachment and trial of President Clinton.”

This article was important because it highlighted a fact that is essential to an understanding of contemporary events, not only in the US, but internationally—the coming to power of a government not only quantitatively more reactionary, but qualitatively of a different character from previous governments, including previous Republican governments. This is a government of the radical right, whose main social base is the most reactionary and parasitic sections of the economic elite and the upper middle class—precisely those elements that acquired enormous wealth and influence in the speculative boom of the 1980s and 1990s. Bush himself, the failed oilman who cashed in on his daddy’s name and was handed a small fortune by Bush family cronies, is very much a man of this social element.

As for the outlook and methods of this underworld element, let me recall an article we posted November 24, 2000 entitled “The Republican right prepares for violence.” We wrote: “The frenzied response of the Bush campaign and its allies in the media to Tuesday’s ruling by the Florida Supreme Court has highlighted a political fact of immense significance: the Republican Party has become the organ of extreme right-wing forces that are prepared to use extra-parliamentary and violent methods to achieve their aims.

“Spokesmen for George W. Bush and pro-Republican media outlets reacted to the court’s decision, which simply affirmed the constitutional requirement that all votes be fairly counted, with calls for the Florida legislature to defy the court and appeals to the military of a semi-insurrectionary character.”

The article went on to cite a column in the *Wall Street Journal* headlined “The Democratic Party’s War on the Military,” which spoke in the language of fascism of the “twitching carcass” of the Democratic Party’s “left”—“teachers’ unions, feminist activists, gay victimologists, black churches, faculty clubs.”

The WSWS also cited an earlier editorial from the *Wall Street Journal* that carried the provocative and sinister headline: “The Squeamish GOP?” The *Journal* wrote: “The conventional wisdom is that if with this hassle Governor Bush does become President he will be a crippled one. Perhaps. But we find it equally plausible that facing down the kind of assault now being waged in Florida would be precisely the best preparation for what may lie ahead. It is Governor Bush’s nature to extend the velvet glove, but he will be much more successful if he and his party can show that within it there is some steel.”

The WSWS commented: “Significantly, the editorial was entitled ‘The Squeamish GOP?’ The *Journal* chooses its words advisedly, in this case employing a term that connotes an aversion to bloodshed. The meaning of the newspaper’s editors was unmistakable—a Republican president must be prepared to use violence and repression to impose his reactionary social agenda. Gaining the White House by suppressing votes and riding roughshod over the popular will is an excellent preparation for dealing with ‘what may lie ahead’—i.e., widespread popular opposition.

“It is high time to stop masking the character of the Republican right with the complacent term ‘conservative.’ These are fascistic elements who are breaking with the traditional methods of bourgeois democracy.

“There is a logic to politics. Once influential sections of the ruling elite conclude they cannot achieve their aims through democratic means and take the path of conspiracy and repression, they are well on the way to

civil war.

“It is not here a matter of predicting the imminent imposition of a military dictatorship. But it would be the height of folly to ignore the signposts of such a danger looming ahead. If the campaign the Republicans are waging to gain the White House begins to resemble a covert operation akin to those mounted by the CIA against US imperialism’s liberal and leftist opponents in Latin America—for example, in Chile—then it must follow that an option under serious consideration is the Pinochet solution.”

The assessment we made of the 2000 election has been richly vindicated by the events of the past four months. One year ago, I said in a lecture here in Sydney: “The 2000 election in the United States is a historical watershed. It marks an irrevocable break with the forms and traditions of American democracy.... [America’s] ruling elite has embarked on a course that must lead either to authoritarian rule of a fascist type, or social revolution.”

More recently we wrote: “Future generations will look back on the election of 2000 as the definitive point at which the American ruling class embarked on the road to dictatorship. All of the authoritarian impulses that have assumed such ominous and concrete forms since September 11 were already revealed in the methods employed by the Bush campaign and the Republican Party to effect an electoral coup d’état...”

“A government that seizes power by means of fraud and usurpation must rule by the same means. It is, in objective terms, a government of provocation and coercion, with no democratic mandate and no constitutional legitimacy. Lacking a serious social base of public support, and facing a deepening economic and social crisis, it was inevitable that the Bush administration would turn to repression and violence to defend itself against the threat of resistance from below.”

The 2000 election demonstrated that there is no longer any significant constituency within the American corporate and political establishment for the defense of democratic rights. Powerful and politically dominant sections of the American ruling elite have broken with democratic procedures. Within the liberal sections of the establishment, which long ago abandoned any commitment to social reform or a lessening of economic inequality, the prevailing attitude is a combination of cowardice and indifference. The Democrats’ half-hearted and conciliatory response to the theft of the election demonstrated conclusively that they fear a movement of the masses far more than they fear the fascistic methods and aims of the Republican right. The only social force capable of defending democratic rights is the working class.

How can one sum up the character of the Bush administration? Its watchwords are corruption, reaction and criminality. Of course, these are not novel features of American politics or American governments. But they so thoroughly pervade this administration, and on such a colossal scale, as to distinguish it from previous governments.

In general, the leading personnel consist of either military figures, veterans of the Reagan and Bush (the elder) administrations, who parlayed their political influence into personal fortunes in the corporate world, especially big oil, or ideologues of the extreme right with ties to the Christian fundamentalists, the anti-abortion fanatics, militia elements, and outright racist and anti-Semitic organizations.

For the purposes of this lecture I will focus on certain aspects of Bush’s political team. First there is the CIA-terrorist faction. George W. Bush has brought back into government several key figures from the Iran-Contra crisis of the 1980s. To refresh everyone’s memory, Iran-Contra became the designation for a secret and illegal operation sanctioned by Reagan to sell missiles to Iran and use the proceeds to finance the Contra death squads in Nicaragua. Lt. Colonel Oliver North, from an office in the basement of the White House, headed up this “off-the-shelf” operation. The entire project was in violation of the Boland Amendment, which had been passed by Congress to prohibit US aid to the Contras. North’s cabal

of CIA operatives, military men and Latin American assassins reported to Reagan’s national security chief, John Poindexter, who reported to Reagan. It was a secret branch of the government, dedicated to supporting right-wing terrorism on a mass scale.

George Bush the elder, at that time Reagan’s vice president, was deeply involved in this dirty operation. One of his last actions before leaving the White House after his loss to Clinton in 1992 was to pardon Reagan’s Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger for Iran-Contra-related offenses, as well as Elliot Abrams, an assistant secretary of state under Reagan who was heavily implicated in the crimes of the Contras. Abrams lied shamelessly in congressional testimony and pleaded guilty to perjury in 1991. Last June, Bush the younger appointed Abrams to his national security council as director of its office for democracy, human rights and international operations.

Then there is John Negroponte, who was quietly installed as US ambassador to the United Nations just a week after the September 11 attack. As ambassador to Honduras in the 1980s, Negroponte played a key role in supplying and supervising the Contras, who were based in Honduras. During the same period Honduran military death squads, operating with Washington’s support, assassinated hundreds of opponents of the US-backed regime.

Finally there is Otto Reich, an anti-Castro Cuban émigré whom Bush installed last week, over the objections of some congressional Democrats and while Congress was in recess, making him the new assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs. As head of the Office of Public Diplomacy in the Reagan State Department, Reich worked as the propaganda chief for the Iran-Contra conspirators, floating false reports to the American media to justify the US aggression against Nicaragua. He was subsequently named US ambassador to Venezuela, where he became an advocate for Orlando Bosch, a fellow Cuban émigré who was jailed in Venezuela for 11 years for organizing the 1976 bombing of an Air Cubana flight that claimed the lives of 73 people. Bosch was released from prison a year after Reich arrived in Caracas.

These appointments alone make clear that were Bush to seriously pursue his “war on terrorism,” he would begin with his own administration and his own father.

In the Carlyle Group, the multibillion-dollar private equity firm whose leading lights include George Bush the elder, former Secretary of State James Baker and a number of other US and British military and political figures, corruption and right-wing terrorism converge. This shadowy business entity specializes in defense and aerospace investments. It has long had close relations with the billionaire bin Laden family, whose estate in Saudi Arabia has been visited by both Bush the elder and Baker.

The chairman of the Carlyle Group is Frank Carlucci, who served as secretary of defense and national security adviser to Reagan. Those who have seen the new film *Lumumba* may recall the scene in which an American named Carlucci is present, along with the US ambassador and top Congo leaders, at a meeting where a vote is taken to order Lumumba’s murder. This is the same Carlucci, then an up-and-coming foreign service officer, who today heads the Carlyle Group and socializes with his good friend, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.

Finally there is the Enron connection. The Enron fiasco has particular significance because this company and its leading personnel embody the social layers that dominate the Bush administration, and which Bush himself very much personifies. The rise and fall of Enron is almost an allegory of the speculative bubble that boosted to the top of the corporate and political world the most predatory, rapacious, parasitic, narrow-minded and criminal social elements within the ruling circles of American society.

Enron, under its chairman Kenneth Lay, became the toast of Wall Street by producing nothing. One of its major outlays was the systematic bribing of politicians—of both parties—to speed up the deregulation of the utilities,

so that it could play the role of middleman and market-maker in the chaotic and feverish selling and buying of electricity and natural gas contracts. In Lay and Enron were concentrated the socially destructive, irresponsible and reckless attitudes that became the hallmarks of the so-called “new economy” and stock market boom of the 1990s.

Bush and Enron are virtual twins. Kenneth Lay was Bush’s biggest financial backer, beginning in Texas and continuing in Bush’s bid for the White House. A recent press report noted how Bush left the campaign trail in April of 2000, during a critical swing through California, the country’s most populous state, in order to be with his buddy Kenneth Lay for the opening of Enron Stadium in Houston, which, interestingly enough, was built by Halliburton, the giant oil construction firm then headed by Dick Cheney.

The intimate ties between Bush administration officials and Enron are numerous and, by now, fairly well documented. Just to note a few: Bush’s top economic adviser, Lawrence Lindsey, is a former adviser to Enron; Attorney General John Ashcroft has recused himself from the recently announced federal probe of Enron because his unsuccessful Senate reelection campaign in 2000 received \$55,000 from Enron, including \$25,000 from Lay personally; Presidential Adviser Karl Rove sold more than \$100,000 in Enron holdings in June of 2000.

As for Enron’s criminal activities, here are some highlights: concealing hundreds of millions of dollars in losses and debts from shareholders, government watchdog agencies and the general public by shifting them to scores of off-the-book “partnerships”; allowing 29 Enron executives and directors, including Lay, to sell 17.3 million shares of Enron stock from 1999 through mid-2001, thereby pocketing \$1.1 billion; blocking Enron employees from selling their 401k holdings in Enron stock, resulting in the destruction of the retirement savings of thousands of Enron workers. Hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of other workers have lost much of their retirement nest egg as a result of Enron’s fraudulent practices.

Meanwhile, Lay and other Enron executives were meeting with Cheney and his energy task force in closed-door sessions to formulate the Bush administration’s energy program. Lay pressed Bush to remove the Clinton administration holdover and had his handpicked man, Pat Wood, installed as head of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. As this was taking place, Enron was playing a key role in jacking up the price of electricity and natural gas in California, resulting in months of rolling blackouts last spring and summer, with the consequent economic and social havoc.

The Bush administration has refused to comply with an order from the General Accounting Office, the watchdog agency of the Congress, that it reveal the names of those involved in Cheney’s energy task force. Bush chief economic adviser Lindsey recently called the Enron bankruptcy “a tribute to American capitalism.” Treasury Secretary Paul O’Neill, who admitted over the weekend to having spoken privately with Lay last fall about the company’s dire financial condition, without alerting either the Securities and Exchange Commission or the public, told “Fox News Sunday”: “Companies come and go. Part of the genius of capitalism is people get to make good decisions or bad decisions, and they get to pay the consequences or enjoy the fruits of their decisions.”

One last point on Enron: the company’s business practices and political connections cast an instructive light on the United States’ international crusade for corporate “transparency” and against “crony capitalism.”

Whether the unfolding scandal surrounding the bankruptcy of Enron will undermine the Bush administration remains to be seen. To date the liberal press and the Democrats have done what they can to shield Bush from the fallout from the Enron debacle, but this crisis has deep objective roots and even the best efforts of Bush’s loyal opposition may ultimately fail to save his government.

In any event, the Enron crisis highlights a crucial aspect of the events of September 11 and all that has followed. In my lecture to the school last year [The world historical implications of the political crisis in the United

States], I sought to demonstrate from a historical perspective that the decay of American democracy, which reached a turning point in the 2000 election, was an expression not of the strength of American capitalism, but rather the decline in its world position. Further, that the erosion of US capitalism’s economic hegemony was a concentrated expression of the intensifying crisis and mounting contradictions of the world capitalist system.

What was the basic point of this analysis? That American capitalism, in the period of its rise to preeminence as an industrial and financial power, in the first third of the twentieth century, and in its period of economic hegemony, in the first decades after World War II, generally responded to political and social crises with an extension of constitutional safeguards and an expansion of the scope of political democracy. Of course, such measures were punctuated with brutal repression and violence whenever the ruling class felt its rule was in imminent danger, and the formal extension of democratic rights went hand in hand with chronic police brutality and severe economic deprivation for tens of millions of Americans. Still, such reforms as women’s suffrage, popular election of senators, the civil rights acts of the 1960s and the extension of voting rights to 18-year-olds had a progressive, democratic content.

This trend came to an abrupt halt in the 1970s, corresponding to the collapse of the Bretton Woods system, the removal of the gold backing from the dollar, and the mounting economic problems that besieged the US ruling class seemingly from all sides in the ensuing years. As the US confronted a growing challenge from its imperialist rivals in Europe and Asia to its control of markets, not only abroad, but also at home, it began to ever more openly attack the democratic rights of the American working class. The attack on democratic rights at home went hand in hand with a predatory social and economic policy that redistributed the national wealth from the masses to the elites, fueling a new growth of economic inequality and further undermining the social foundations of bourgeois democratic institutions.

These tendencies expressed the mounting crisis of bourgeois rule in America. I would submit that in the Bush administration this crisis has reached an unprecedented level of intensity. A review of the record of this government, from its inauguration to the events of September 11, substantiates this assessment.

The foreign and domestic sides of government policy are inextricably linked and react upon one another. But for the purposes of this summary analysis, I propose to look at the two sides separately, beginning with domestic issues and events.

Looming above and dominating all of the events of the Bush administration’s first eight months were the collapse of the stock market bubble and the onset of mass layoffs and recession. This crisis was compounded by the fact that it was a global recession. For the first time since the mid-1970s, economic downturns were occurring simultaneously in the US, Europe and Japan—in fact, in virtually every part of the world.

Along with the stock market meltdown came the disappearance of the budget surplus and the exposure of all the claims that Bush had made in his State of the Union address in February 2001 to justify his massive tax cut for the rich. I don’t know if they showed this speech in Australia, but Bush was standing with a pointer showing how there was plenty of money in the federal till, and even if multimillionaires were given huge tax cuts, there would be lots of money left over for Social Security and Medicare. Nothing to worry about!

By the late spring and early summer of 2001 the surplus was already disappearing, and Bush officials were forced to admit they were breaking their promise not to raid the Social Security Trust Fund. They were, indeed, dipping into the fund to help pay for their tax giveaways to the rich.

The scale of losses on the stock market and the collapse of paper values was gargantuan. The combined losses on the New York stock exchanges

are estimated at approximately \$5 trillion. Largely as a result of this, US household wealth last year saw its first net decline since the federal government began keeping such figures in 1945.

To give an idea of the extent to which the incomes of ordinary people in the United States have been tied into the stock market, it is estimated that more than 60 percent of US household assets are accounted for by the stock market—that, at least, was the figure before the bubble burst. The plunge in share values has had a devastating impact on 401(k) retirement assets, under conditions where three-quarters of funds held by 401(k) plans are invested in the stock market.

The impact of losses in 401(k) accounts and individual investments is compounded by the unprecedented debt burden being carried by working people. Consumer debt in the US has doubled since 1990, to \$7.5 trillion, which is more than \$50,000 per household and over \$25,000 for every man, woman and child in America.

The average American family now has debts that exceed its average after-tax income. This debt is unequally distributed—in a manner diametrically opposite to the distribution of income. The top 10 percent of the population own over 70 percent of the national wealth, while the bottom 90 percent of the population, with less than 30 percent of the wealth, owe 70 percent of the consumer debt.

Corporate debt is also at all-time highs. In the boom of the 1990s, corporate debt increased rather than declining, as is usually the case during a sustained upswing in the business cycle. In this boom, companies did not issue stock to raise money, for fear of diluting share-holder value, i.e., causing a decline in the price of their stock. Instead, they went into debt to buy back their own stock so as to boost its price.

The response of corporate America to the onset of recession was to launch a new round of mass layoffs. By the end of 2001, some two million jobs had been wiped out in the course of the year. Retirement savings were gutted. Homelessness and hunger were sharply on the rise. No less important than the material impact of the recession were the consequences for the Bush administration and the ruling elite as a whole of the shattering of illusions in the capitalist market among broad layers of the population.

To better grasp the acute social contradictions exacerbated by the unfolding recession in the early months of Bush's term, it is necessary to focus on certain aspects of American life. First, and most important, is the growth of social inequality.

The Congressional Budget Office issued a report last year noting that, adjusting for inflation, the income of families in the middle of the US income distribution rose from \$41,400 in 1979 to \$45,100 in 1997, a 9 percent increase over the 18-year period. Over the same period, the income of families in the top 1 percent rose from \$420,200 to \$1.016 million, a 140 percent increase. The income of families in the top 1 percent was 10 times that of typical families in 1979, and 23 times and rising in 1997.

Another side of the same question is CEO pay. On May 2 of last year we posted an article headlined "Bonanza for US top executives continues despite falling corporate profits." We wrote:

"Chief Executive Officers of major US corporations extracted substantial increases in salaries, bonuses and stock options in 2000 even as stock prices fell, layoffs mounted and profits plummeted as a result of the economic downturn. While the typical hourly worker got a pay raise of 3 percent in 2000, the average CEO of a big company received a hike of 22 percent.... The continued rise in executive pay further undercuts the rationale that has been used to justify this gross waste of society's resources—that the massive payouts serve as an incentive to improve corporate performance. In many cases corporate executives receive huge payouts while presiding over substantial declines in the value of their company's stock.

"For example: William Esrey, the CEO of the US long distance phone

company Sprint, was paid \$53 million in cash and stock last year, even as the company's stock dropped 70 percent. Dennis Kowalski of Tyco International netted \$125 million last year while his company's share values fell 24 percent.... According to an April 1 special report on executive pay in the *New York Times*, salaries and bonuses for CEOs increased 'while typical investors lost 12 percent of their portfolios last year, based on the Wilshire 5000 total market index, and profits for the Standard and Poor's 500 companies rose at less than half their pace in the 1990s.'"

The article gave another instance of the parasitism and criminality that have become rampant in US corporate circles: "One example cited was the case of financial wheeler-dealer David Rickey, boss of Applied Micro Circuits. While the shares of his company's stock were plummeting in 2000, Rickey sold them as fast as he could. Between July 2000 and March 2001 he unloaded 800,000 shares in the company, 99 percent of his holdings, making some \$170 million in the process. At the same time AMC share prices dropped from \$100 to just \$29 per share. Rickey was meanwhile urging unwary investors to buy. 'I am very bullish about the company,' he told one CNBC interviewer."

Even as tens of millions of working people watched the corporate elite indulge its greed in the midst of mass layoffs and growing social distress, they faced the consequences of the shredding over the past two decades of the social safety net. To give one indication of the degree to which government-subsidized benefits have been slashed, less than one in three unemployed workers in the US today receives unemployment benefits. Only 18 percent of low-wage workers receive such benefits, and only 12 percent of part-time workers.

Simultaneous with a rise in the unemployment rate, the recession brought to the fore the dark reality that had been obscured by record low official jobless rates during the boom of the 1990s: the enormous growth in the ranks of the working poor. The government unemployment figures conceal an unprecedented increase in part-time labor and the use of temps, day laborers and independent contractors. Overall, such workers now make up over 29 percent of the American workforce, i.e., some 34 million workers.

One study concluded that more than 70 percent of the new jobs created in the 1990s paid less than a livable wage.

The social crisis is compounded by the fact that the five-year deadline for welfare benefits under Clinton's so-called welfare reform has now arrived. This means hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people are facing destitution, with no prospect for a job and no access to government assistance.

As the economic situation unraveled in the opening months of the Bush government, it was patently clear that the administration had no answer to the mounting social crisis. Its one and only domestic policy was to make deeper cuts in taxes for the wealthy and further rollbacks in government regulations on big business, at a time when the free-market nostrums of the previous two decades were being discredited in the eyes of broad sections of the population.

The combination of a rapidly worsening economic crisis and a government resting on an extremely narrow social base—one, moreover, tainted by the anti-democratic means by which it had come to power—was a formula for the eruption of social and political upheavals on a scale not seen since the 1960s, or even the Depression years of the 1930s.

The explosive implications of the economic and political crisis came to the surface in mid-April, less than three months into Bush's term and early on in the unfolding recession. For three days and three nights riots convulsed Cincinnati, Ohio following the killing of a black youth by a police officer. Martial law was declared and the city was occupied by National Guard troops. It was the biggest riot in the US since the Los Angeles upheaval of 1992.

Meanwhile, an escalating energy crisis was reaching the breaking point

in California—a crisis resulting from the deregulation in that state of the electricity and natural gas markets. Energy traders, most prominently Enron, had jacked up wholesale prices for electricity and gas and made a fortune, while major utility companies were being thrown into bankruptcy and consumers, both industrial and residential, were suddenly faced with soaring prices and dwindling supplies. California is the most populous state in the US. Were it an independent country, its economy would rank among the 10 largest in the world. Now the state was experiencing rolling blackouts, industrial shutdowns and power cutoffs affecting thousands of families.

The response of the Bush administration was to line up behind Enron, opposing price caps on electricity and gas, blaming California's Democratic governor, and attributing the disaster to a deregulation scheme that did not go far enough in freeing the hands of the energy speculators.

In late May, James Jeffords of Vermont, one of the few remaining moderate Republicans in the Senate, defected from the Republican Party in protest over the far-right social agenda of the Bush administration. He declared himself an independent, but the effect was to transfer control of the upper chamber of Congress, which had been evenly divided between the two parties, to the Democrats.

This move by Jeffords, a long-time senator and figure of some prominence within the political establishment, was not simply the action of an individual. It reflected very sharp divisions within ruling circles over Bush's course, both domestic and foreign. As we explained at the time, it constituted an attempt to impose a course adjustment on the Bush administration. The aim was to bring forward the Democrats to restrain Bush and contain a festering crisis that otherwise threatened to cripple the White House.

As one of the more perceptive observers of Washington affairs, columnist David Ignatius of the *Washington Post*, noted on May 27: "Jeffords' defection turned the United States momentarily into a parliamentary democracy. It was the equivalent of a vote of no confidence, and it shattered the conservative 'mandate' that the Republicans had imagined for themselves—oblivious to the fact that their candidate had actually lost the popular vote in last November's elections."

The government crisis simmering behind the scenes revealed itself in July, when the *New York Times* published an extensive exposé detailing how the military brass had worked with the Bush campaign in November and December of 2000 to steal the election in Florida. The article documented how, at the height of the crisis over the results of the Florida vote, military officials organized the mailing of absentee military ballots that had, in fact, been cast after Election Day. Hundreds of ballots of military personnel stationed overseas were received at the last minute by Florida election officials, who insisted that they be counted, despite the fact that they bore no postmark or failed to meet other legal requirements mandated by state election laws.

The facts set forth in the *Times* article made implausible any innocent explanation for the influx of faulty overseas ballots. Military officials were clearly involved in an illicit plot to give Bush an extra margin to overcome any additional votes Gore might pick up from recounts in contested districts.

True to form, the *Times* account included caveats asserting that there was no evidence of wrongdoing by anybody in the military—claims that flew in the face of the body of evidence outlined in the rest of the article. Nevertheless, the publication of the article underscored a political fact of immense significance: six months since officially taking office, the Bush administration had failed to dispel widespread doubts about its legitimacy. The stolen election of 2000 continued to haunt not only the Bush White House, but the entire bourgeois establishment.

There were other signs of dissension and disarray. In June, the US Civil Rights Commission issued a report denouncing the Republican

administration of Florida, which was headed by Jeb Bush, the president's brother, for disenfranchising thousands of black and other minority voters in the 2000 election.

In August, the Enron crisis began to emerge on the public stage. Newly appointed CEO Jeffrey Skilling suddenly resigned, citing "personal reasons." Shortly thereafter Texas Senator Phil Gramm, a right-wing Republican who has held a Senate seat for many years, announced that he would not run for reelection in 2002. His wife, Wendy, happens to be on the board of directors of Enron.

These events coincided with the eruption of an open conflict between Congress and the Bush White House. The General Accounting Office (GAO), which is the investigative arm of Congress, demanded that Vice President Cheney turn over information concerning closed-door meetings held the previous spring by his energy task force. This task force, set up by the White House under Cheney's leadership, had issued a policy statement calling for faster deregulation, the opening of the Arctic Wildlife Reserve in Alaska and other public lands to private exploitation, an expansion of nuclear power, and other measures for which the big oil and energy corporations had long lobbied. It had been widely reported that Cheney and his aides had met repeatedly with top oil executives, including Enron Chairman Kenneth Lay, in the process of drawing up the administration's energy policy.

Bush and Cheney refused to turn over to the GAO any information concerning the secret meetings with oil magnates.

These political conflicts in the summer of 2001 coincided with a growing panic on the stock market and a virtual explosion of corporate job-cut announcements. The economic traumas reached a high point of intensity in August and the beginning of September. On Friday, September 7, the Labor Department released the unemployment figures for August, reporting that the rate had jumped to 4.9 percent and the jobless total had risen by over 500,000 in just one month. The 500,000 figure was three times greater than the consensus among economists in surveys published the previous week.

The dramatic and unexpectedly large increase in unemployment unnerved the stock market, which fell 250 points on September 7. Big investors reacted above all to the prospect of a collapse of consumer spending, the only factor that had, up to then, prevented the downturn from turning into something far worse.

On the international front as well as the domestic, the opening months of the Bush administration presented a picture of deepening crisis, internal strife and political disarray. Within weeks of his inauguration in January of 2001, Bush found himself locked in a bitter confrontation with China that threatened to escalate into military conflict.

The strange affair of the downed US spy plane took place within the context of extraordinary saber-rattling by the new administration, which lost little time in poisoning relations with Peking by assuming a provocative posture toward North Korea, reiterating its intention to deploy a missile defense system, and threatening to sell Taiwan hi-tech destroyers equipped with Aegis radar and Patriot anti-missile systems. How an American spy plane flying in Chinese air space managed to collide with a Chinese fighter jet has yet to be explained.

The *World Socialist Web Site* drew the following balance sheet of the Bush administration's foreign policy initiatives in a comment posted June 2, 2001 on the defection of Vermont Senator James Jeffords from the Republican Party:

"Internationally, the Bush Administration in its first hundred days has managed the feat of simultaneously antagonizing Russia, China, Japan, Europe and the Arab world. It has signaled its intention to unilaterally repudiate the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty with Russia, while provoking a confrontation with China over US spy flights in the South China Sea and abruptly reversing the Clinton policy of rapprochement with North Korea, a slap in the face to both Japan and South Korea.

"In the Middle East, Bush tacitly encouraged a belligerent Israeli posture towards the Palestinian resistance that has raised tensions in the region to the level of 1967 or 1973, with open talk of war in many Arab capitals.

"The Bush Administration sparked widespread anger in Europe with its unilateral repudiation of the Kyoto protocol on global warming, its refusal to allow US military and intelligence personnel to be subject to the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court, and suggestions that US troops will be withdrawn from Bosnia, Kosovo and other peace-keeping operations.

"The rapid deterioration in the US international position was expressed in the May 3 vote to deny the United States a seat on the UN Human Rights Commission. Nominal US allies France, Sweden and Austria all refused to abandon their own candidacies and each won more votes than the American nominee. Meanwhile trade conflicts are multiplying between the US and Europe, the US and Japan, and the US and the bulk of third world countries."

To this summary it should be added that Washington's policy toward Iraq had reached an impasse. The US had failed to get its proposal for extending sanctions against Iraq through the UN Security Council because of opposition from Russia, China and France.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the crisis of American foreign policy was the state of relations between the US and Europe. Bush's belligerent and unilateralist posture—founded on the premise that the United States should no longer be bound by any international treaties, laws or institutions—had raised tensions between Washington and its nominal allies on the European continent to a point of conflict unprecedented in the post-World War II period.

Among the host of flash points in US-European relations, one can be cited as emblematic of the economic/geo-political strains tearing at the Atlantic Alliance. The European Union in the spring and summer of 2001 blocked a proposed merger between General Electric and Honeywell Corporation, an act considered by many within the American corporate and political establishment to constitute outrageous and presumptuous meddling in internal US affairs.

As international relations took on an ever more malignant form, the Bush administration, along with its counterparts throughout Europe, faced the growth of a protest movement that was increasingly taking on an openly anti-capitalist coloration. The so-called anti-globalization movement, notwithstanding its amorphous, confused and, in some respects, even reactionary politics, reflected the growing revulsion of broad layers of youth and intellectuals to the socially destructive policies of the transnational corporations and the bourgeois governments that do their bidding. It was an anticipation of a coming movement of social and political struggle by the working class.

By the time of the G-8 summit in Genoa in July of 2001, the movement was assuming the dimensions of an international protest that the capitalist governments seemed unable to either conciliate or suppress. The frightened and brutal reaction of the newly elected right-wing government of Silvio Berlusconi to the G-8 protesters only underscored the isolation and weakness of all of the major bourgeois governments, the narrowness of their social bases of support, and the chasm separating them from the broad masses of working people.

The summit was highly significant for another reason: it highlighted the breakdown of any consensus among the major powers. Under conditions of a recession that was assuming global dimensions, the assembled heads of state were unable to agree on any serious, concerted action. Instead, the various government leaders could barely conceal the antagonisms that were poisoning relations between the US and Europe, between Britain and the continent, among the continental powers, between the US and Russia, and between the US and Japan.

As the Bush administration neared its ninth month in office, it was a

government in deep crisis. Internally divided, it evinced perplexity and disorientation in the face of mounting problems abroad and the specter of social conflict at home. Whatever stability it might have enjoyed had been undermined by the collapse of the speculative boom on Wall Street, upon which Bush personally and the corporate layers for whom he fronted had been largely based.

This brief review underscores, I believe, why the tragic events of September 11 were so politically fortuitous for the Bush administration. They provided it with the pretext, under conditions of shock, fear and anxiety within the population, to launch the "war on terrorism" not only to seize new territories and secure vital oil reserves, but, perhaps even more critically, to create a massive diversion and paper over the social contradictions tearing at the foundations of American capitalism.

The WSWS focused on the relationship between the response of the American political and media establishment to the September 11 attacks and the underlying crisis of the Bush administration in a statement published within days of the hijack-bombing of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. In "Why the Bush administration wants war" (September 14, 2001), we wrote:

"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 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....

"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."

This brings us to the events of September 11. The hijack-bombings of that day rank among the most tragic occurrences of recent history, but also the most curious.

The first, and, from any objective standpoint, simply astonishing thing to note is that more than four months after the bloodiest terrorist attack on the United States in the nation's history, in which more civilian lives were lost than in any previous violent act—a disaster that unfolded without being in any way deterred by the American government, making it the most colossal intelligence failure in US history—there has been no official investigation.

None of the many anomalies and unexplained circumstances surrounding the bombing of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon have been probed, and no government body has offered a coherent account of what happened, how it happened, why the government failed to stop it, and which people in authority were responsible.

No government officials or agencies have been held accountable. Instead, the Bush administration has taken the extraordinary—and absurd—position that any in-depth probe of September 11 would be a diversion from the struggle to protect the American people against future terrorist acts. The government has sought to keep the public at a fever pitch of fear and patriotic frenzy, the better to divert public opinion and head off an examination of the events of that day and the period that preceded it.

This posture of evasion and cover-up—to which the media has willingly adapted itself—is itself a damning indication that people in high places having something to hide.

Congress has called no hearings. Two months ago, the Senate, which is controlled by the Democrats, voted to shelve plans to hold hearings on the September 11 disaster. This was justified on the grounds of bipartisanship and the need for “unity” in the war against Al Qaeda and the Taliban.

It is instructive to compare the present course of action with the response of the US government to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December of 1941. By December 16, 1941 the two officers in command of Pearl Harbor, Navy Rear Admiral Husband E. Kimmel and Army Major General Walter C. Short, had been stripped of their commands. Less than two months after the Japanese attack, an official board of inquiry appointed by President Roosevelt and headed by Supreme Court Justice Owen Roberts released the results of its investigation. The 500-page report was published by the US Senate. The board of inquiry censured Kimmel and Short, ending their military careers.

Roosevelt had his own political reasons for moving quickly against the military officials in charge of the fleet. Within isolationist sections of the political establishment there was already talk of the administration having in some way or other allowed the attack to take place in order to justify US entry into the war against Japan and Germany. But the fact remains, the government felt itself obliged to make a public accounting, and it therefore took as an urgent priority the organization of a high-level inquiry that published its findings within a matter of weeks and punished those held responsible for the debacle.

This was done under conditions in which the US had plunged into a war against Imperial Japan, the most powerful military force in Asia, and Nazi Germany, the economic and military powerhouse of Europe—at a time, moreover, when the US had just suffered a huge military setback as a result of the Japanese sneak attack. Needless to say, the Kimmel-Short inquiry did not in the slightest hamper the US war effort.

Today the designated enemy—bands of terrorists operating from caves in some of the most backward and impoverished regions of the world—would seem to be considerably less formidable than the Axis powers in World War II. Yet the current US government maintains it is impossible to organize an inquiry into September 11 without destroying internal unity and disrupting the war effort.

The anomalies surrounding the events of September 11, and the implausibilities in the official claim that the US government had absolutely no advance knowledge of the attack, or reason to believe that a hijack-bombing was being prepared, are too numerous to examine in detail in this lecture. In highlighting some of the more telling points, however, a good place to start is the case of Zacarias Moussaoui, the man alleged to be an Al Qaeda operative and co-conspirator of the September 11 hijackers.

This individual attended at least two flight training schools prior to September 11, including one in Minnesota, where he told his instructors he wanted to learn how to fly a commercial jet, but was not particularly interested in learning how to take off or land. Moussaoui, understandably, aroused the suspicions of the people at the training school and last summer they contacted the FBI, warning of a possible plot to use a commercial jet as a bomb. After some hesitation, the local FBI office began calling the agency’s national headquarters, urging a full-scale probe of Moussaoui. Headquarters, for reasons that have yet to be explained in any serious way, refused.

Moussaoui was arrested last August by the Immigration and Naturalization Service, and charged with visa violations. He was apparently never questioned by the FBI prior to September 11, and was not transferred to FBI custody until after the terror attack.

According to an article published in *NewsWeek* magazine shortly after September 11, five of the hijackers received flight training at secure US

military installations. This claim has never been either refuted or explained.

Numerous alerts were issued to Washington by various governments in the period leading up to September 11, including Egypt, France, Russia and Israel, warning of a major terrorist attack on the US mainland. Some spoke of plans to use commercial aircraft as the weapons of choice.

There was also testimony from two previous terrorism trials in the US revealing that Al Qaeda operatives were working up plans to hijack commercial planes and use them as bombs against US government or commercial buildings. At the 1996 trial of those charged in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, Abdul Hakim Murad said he was being trained to carry out a suicide bombing of the CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia. Similar revelations emerged from the trial held in 2001 in New York related to the bombing of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998.

Despite the fact that the US government has for some years labeled Osama bin Laden as the world’s most deadly terrorist mastermind, and carried out a massive intelligence effort to trace his every move and spy on his every communication, US officials claimed after September 11 that they had no advance knowledge that bin Laden was organizing the hijack-bombings. (This did not prevent them from asserting, within hours of the bombings, that bin Laden was the culprit.)

Yet on the day of the attack, September 11, Republican Senator Orin Hatch from Utah came before the microphones and told TV newsmen he had just been briefed by intelligence officials and informed that the United States had decoded bin Laden’s satellite telephone communications and monitored conversations in which bin Laden and his associates gloated over the successful terror attacks. This, of course, raised the question: if the US was able to monitor bin Laden’s conversations after September 11, then why not prior to September 11? The next day Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld called a press conference and denounced congressmen who released classified information, pointedly characterizing such lapses as criminal offenses.

There was, as well, extensive American surveillance of Mohammed Atta and other of the alleged hijackers. It is well documented that Atta, the alleged ringleader, traveled back and forth between Europe and the US frequently in 2000 and 2001. At one point he was stopped coming into the United States as a result of a visa violation, but US officials intervened to allow his entry—this for someone identified by German intelligence as a dangerous Islamic fundamentalist who had purchased large quantities of chemicals potentially usable in making explosives.

Then there’s the curious question of stock and US Treasury note speculation in the week prior to September 11. There was an unusual wave of short-selling of the stock of United Airlines, American Airlines, numerous tourism companies and a number of firms that had headquarters in the World Trade Center.

When you sell short, you’re betting that the price of a stock is going to go down. It just so happened that the extraordinary volume of short-selling involved precisely those companies that were to be hardest hit by the hijack-bombings.

There was also an unusually large move into US Treasury notes, the investment of choice for times of great crisis.

Then there’s the Bush-bin Laden connection. I noted earlier that Bush senior has visited the palatial estate of the bin Ladens in Saudi Arabia. The bin Laden company was a client and major shareholder in the Carlyle Group, only ending their relationship after September 11.

Bush, James Baker, Frank Carlucci and the bin Laden clan—these people know each other extremely well. Immediately after September 11 about two dozen members of the bin Laden family who live in the United States were, with the approval of the FBI, flown out of the country. Hundreds of Arab-Americans and Muslim immigrants were rounded up and thrown into prison on the flimsiest of pretexts, supposedly as part of an exhaustive

drive to prevent further terror attacks. But the kinsmen of the alleged terrorist mastermind were escorted out of the country, without even being interrogated!

President Bush's strange movements on September 11 are another unexplained anomaly. Why didn't Bush return to Washington until 7pm on the day of the attack? Why was he moved from one secure military location to the other?

Bush came under criticism for his perceived cowardice. For example, William Safire, the Republican columnist for the *New York Times*, on September 12 published a piece denouncing Bush for not going back to Washington, arguing that his absence sent the wrong type of signals to the American public as well as the rest of the world.

That day Carl Rove, Bush's political adviser, started calling reporters, telling them Bush had stayed away from Washington because a phone call had come in from someone who had the secret code for Air Force One, saying the presidential plane was being targeted by the terrorists. Bush's advisers, according to Rove's story, prevailed on the president to remain away from the capital as a result of the telephoned threat.

Safire then fired off a column in which he reported the story of a threat to Air Force One and raised some very interesting questions. How did the terrorists get the code, he asked. Is there a terrorist mole in Bush's White House?

The *World Socialist Web Site* took note of Safire's columns and suggested an alternative interpretation. If Rove's story were accepted as fact, and the telephone call actually occurred, perhaps the person who made the call wasn't threatening Bush, but tipping him off. Perhaps the mysterious caller was a US mole working among the hijackers.

In any event, the White House turned around two weeks later, after the controversy over Bush's curious behavior on September 11 had died down, and quietly retracted the entire story of a telephoned threat against Air Force One. However, Bush's strange actions, and the even stranger story and retraction from Rove, remain unexplained.

One plausible explanation for these murky circumstances is that Bush stayed away from Washington because he did not know who was in control of the capital, and his handlers felt there was a serious possibility that a military coup was underway.

Lest such a scenario be dismissed as the paranoid ravings of a conspiracy buff, consider the facts that have emerged about last autumn's anthrax attacks. As you may recall, at the beginning of October a series of envelopes containing anthrax were sent through the mail. Some were mailed to Florida and several people died. Then an envelope arrived at the office of Tom Daschle, the Democratic majority leader of the Senate, and another envelope was mailed to Patrick Leahy, the Democratic senator from Vermont and chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee. These are two of the most senior and politically prominent congressional Democrats. It has since been established that these were extremely lethal doses of anthrax, and their source was an American military installation.

When the anthrax attacks first occurred, they became the focus of media attention. The cable television networks all but abandoned the war in Afghanistan and switched gears to provide 24-hour coverage of what was presented as a dire threat to the entire population. It was all-anthrax, all-day on CNN, MSNBC and the Fox News Network. Every effort was made to link the anthrax mailings to Osama bin Laden or Saddam Hussein. The *Wall Street Journal* and the most frothing advocates of war against Iraq within the military and the Bush administration, for whom the *Journal* speaks, did their best to parlay the anthrax hysteria into a *casus belli* for an immediate invasion of Iraq. Unfortunately for them, there was no evidence linking Baghdad to the attacks.

Once it became clear that the source of the attacks was domestic, and the political nature of the main targets pointed to elements on the fascist right, the media suddenly lost interest and dropped the story as rapidly as it had taken it up. The silence became even more deafening when forensic

studies of the anthrax samples established that those responsible for the attacks on Daschle and Leahy were either in the military, or had the closest links to the military.

What is the story that has been universally dropped by the American media? The fact that extreme-right elements linked to the US military carried out the attempted assassination of the Democratic leadership of Congress. The basic aim of this attack was made clear by the Republican response to the mailings. The Republican-controlled House of Representatives voted to adjourn indefinitely, and urged the Democratic-controlled Senate to do the same. The House actually closed down, but the Senate, after vacillating, refused to follow suit.

Thus the anthrax plotters came very close to achieving their goal—disbanding Congress and enabling the Bush administration to establish a presidential quasi-dictatorship, giving the Republican right and the military an even freer hand to pursue their war aims abroad and attacks on democratic rights at home.

Any serious examination of the events of September 11 establishes one fact beyond dispute: the least plausible explanation for what occurred is the one given by the government and its media propaganda outlets. It is impossible to consider the strange and tragic circumstances of the terror attacks without concluding that from within the American state a high-level decision was made to "stand down" and allow the hijackers to carry out a major attack.

Perhaps those who made the decision to allow the attack to go forward did not anticipate the dimensions of the disaster that was in the offing. But they had good political reasons, above all the mounting economic and social crisis in the US and the political impasse facing the Bush administration, to permit an attack that would traumatize the population and provide a pretext for military aggression abroad and repressive measures at home. The fact remains: the perpetrators were known, they were being tracked, and US intelligence and police agencies opposed any action to stop them.

The Bush administration is a concentrated expression of the mortal crisis—economic, social and political—of American capitalism. Its main features—political and ideological reaction, hostility toward democratic rights, chauvinism and militarism, criminality and parasitism—bespeak a ruling elite that is thrashing about in the face of a multitude of contradictions that it can neither comprehend nor resolve. It can only react by plunging mankind into the horrors of nuclear war and fascist barbarism.

The crisis of the American political system cannot, however, be understood as simply a national phenomenon. It is a concentrated expression of an international crisis. To a greater or lesser extent, every bourgeois government on the planet evinces the same retrograde tendencies. One of the most salient features of recent events is the alacrity with which capitalist governments on every continent have followed Washington's lead in laying siege to democratic principles and traditions. Over the past several months, Canada, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Australia—to name a few of the industrialized countries—have all passed laws or enacted measures undermining civil liberties and expanding the police powers of the state.

The speed and ease with which governments—whether social democratic or conservative—have dispensed with long-standing democratic safeguards, and the lack of any significant opposition from nominally liberal or "left" representatives of the political establishment and intelligentsia, testify to the profound erosion of bourgeois democratic institutions on a world scale. Underlying the collapse of bourgeois democracy is another phenomenon of contemporary capitalism—the unprecedented growth of social inequality.

In all of these countries, the social divide between classes has widened dramatically and the intermediate layers that served as buffers between the two main classes have atrophied. Along with the polarization of society

has come, inevitably, the breakdown of bourgeois democratic methods of rule. The traditional parties have withered as they lurched to the right and alienated themselves from the broad social layers that formerly constituted their popular base of support. More and more bourgeois governments around the world assume the form of Bonapartist regimes, resting ever more directly and openly on the police and military.

Nor is open criminality unique to the US government. One need only look at two of Bush's closest international allies—the Sharon regime in Israel and the Berlusconi government in Italy—to see the emergence of a more general trend.

Social inequality, the attack on democracy, the growth of inter-imperialist conflicts, the eruption of militarism—these features of contemporary capitalism all point to the buildup of a crisis of historic dimensions. In many respects world politics resemble the malignant conditions that preceded the eruption of World War I.

As the foremost Marxists of that era—above all Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky—were able to recognize, the outbreak of imperialist war between the great powers signified not simply a human catastrophe, but also the maturation of the objective conditions for world socialist revolution.

As Trotsky so eloquently and presciently explained in 1915, the imperialist war signified the collision between world economy and the intolerably narrow confines of the nation-state system to which capitalism was wedded. Lenin, in his monumental work of 1916 on *Imperialism*, demonstrated theoretically that the imperialist war signified, in objective historical terms, the arrival of an epoch of wars and revolutions. On this basis he made the political, theoretical and organizational preparations for revolution in Russia, which he saw as a link in the chain of world socialist revolution. Both, in somewhat different ways, traced the collapse of the Second International and its betrayal of the working class to the objective conditions of imperialist capitalism and the crisis of the capitalist system on a world scale.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 was the practical vindication of this grand and profound historical perspective. It was, notwithstanding the ultimately tragic fate of the Soviet Union, the historical antipode to capitalist barbarism, and the beacon for future generations.

Today, when the modern-day Mensheviks see nothing but triumphant reaction, as did their predecessors nearly 90 years ago, we see the emergence once again of the objective conditions for the rebirth of the socialist working class movement, and a new offensive by the international working class. Certainly the growth in the readership and influence of the *World Socialist Web Site* is an objective vindication of the correctness of this perspective. We are convinced that the WSWWS will play the crucial role in assembling and politically educating the leadership of a new revolutionary international movement of the working class.



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