

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

Part 3

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Below we are publishing the third part of a lecture given January 18, 2002 by Barry Grey, a member of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site. The lecture was delivered at an international school held in Sydney by the Socialist Equality Party of Australia. The first part was posted on March 8, the second part on March 9 and the fourth and concluding part on March 13.

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 fact 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 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.

To be continued



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