

Why is the New York Times defending Bush's September 11 cover-up?

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22 May 2002

Two revelations that emerged in the mass media last week threaten to topple the entire edifice of lies that has been used to justify the Bush administration's policy of open-ended war and political repression. The first is the fact that Bush was briefed weeks before September 11 that Al Qaeda was preparing to hijack US commercial jets. The second is that the administration had already drafted a detailed plan for a global "war on terrorism" which included an attack on Afghanistan—the very plan Bush implemented in the aftermath of the hijack-bombings in New York and Washington.

This is only a small sample of critical information that has been concealed by the government and the press. The facts have been covered up because the official story of September 11 has been crucial in justifying all of the sweeping measures enacted by the government since that day. The Bush administration has declared the events of September 11 a watershed in world history, necessitating US military intervention all over the world and a radical restructuring of the political system at home, giving semi-dictatorial powers to the executive branch and gutting constitutionally guaranteed civil liberties.

Once the official version of September 11 is called into question, the political and moral legitimacy of everything the government has done over the past eight months collapses. What then emerges is not merely some "failure of intelligence," but rather the existence of a conspiracy organized at the highest levels of the state.

Were a serious investigation to be conducted, it would rapidly reveal that the Bush administration failed to prevent the terrorist attacks because it had already elaborated plans for war and internal reaction long advocated by the most right-wing sections of the ruling elite, and was looking for a suitable provocation to justify their implementation.

That is why after more than eight months there has been no investigation, and the government has responded so vitriolically to growing calls for a public inquiry—issuing threats to silence its critics and lurid warnings of new terror attacks to divert and disorient the public.

The response of leading organs of the US media to last week's revelations has been aimed precisely at preventing a serious investigation. Among those sections of the American media that have echoed the threats and sophistries of the White House and sprung to its defense, the most significant from a political standpoint is the *New York Times*.

The "newspaper of record," for decades the principal press representative of liberal public opinion, has published three major commentaries since the news broke last week of the August 6 CIA briefing. All of them echo the White House propaganda line, employing the *Times*' inimitable combination of cynicism and

dishonesty.

The thrust of the *Times*' commentaries is twofold: first, the newspaper trivializes the controversy over what the Bush administration knew prior to September 11, reducing it to the small change of partisan maneuvering in advance of the November congressional elections; second, it frames the entire issue as a technical and organizational failure of the US intelligence apparatus, ignoring and excluding the more fundamental political issues.

On May 17 the *Times* published an editorial entitled "The Blame Game." Its main theme is that the furor over Bush's concealment of the August 6 briefing is little more than a partisan squabble, blown out of proportion by Democrats seeking political gain at the White House's expense.

The *Times* does not address the question of the Bush administration's opposition, from day one, to an investigation of the September 11 attacks. It seeks to evade the sticky issue of Bush's failure to reveal his August 6 CIA briefing with the injunction: "The White House should long ago have told the country about the briefing Mr. Bush received last August..." But why didn't it? This is a road the *Times* does not choose to go down.

The *Times*' conclusion—which again tracks the administration line—is that a general, abstract acknowledgment of a governmental failure of intelligence and security is permissible, so long as no specific blame is placed on any leading figure in the Bush administration. We must, according to the *Times*, at all costs avoid the "blame game."

Why? Any serious investigation of a disaster—whether it be the explosion of the Challenger or what is generally acknowledged to be the greatest intelligence failure in US history—must, as one of its aims, determine who is to blame, and, where appropriate, those so named must be censured, removed from office, or even criminally prosecuted. Anything short of this is not an investigation. It is a whitewash.

Two days after the appearance of this editorial, the *Sunday Times*, in its Week in Review section, took another shot at providing political cover for the Bush administration. This was a column by its senior political analyst, R.W. Apple, Jr., entitled "Gotcha! One Cheer for Politics as Usual."

Again, the *Times* tries to reduce the question of government culpability in the September 11 tragedy to partisan back-biting. This is how Apple describes the previous days' controversy: "...Democrats and reporters sensed an opportunity—the first of Mr. Bush's administration—to polish up their gotcha politics and gotcha journalism." He continues: "It was pure gotcha: The determination to seize on a previously hidden personal or political foul-up, the more of

a doozie the better, to change the public perception of a leader.”

The aversion of Apple and the *Times* to “gotcha politics” is of recent vintage. During the year-long political witch-hunt against Bill Clinton mounted by the Republican right and headed by Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr—which culminated in the first-ever impeachment of an elected president—the *New York Times* consistently backed Starr against his critics. It defended all of the efforts to pollute public opinion with salacious gossip and endorsed Starr’s pornographic report on the Lewinsky affair, which included the most intimate details of Clinton’s private life. The *Times* played an indispensable role in the attempted political coup, providing a cloak of legitimacy to the conspiracy to undermine the Clinton White House and ultimately bring it down.

In his zeal to defend Bush, Apple makes an assertion that is demonstrably false. “Condoleezza Rice, the president’s national security adviser,” he writes, “made an earnest case that the information Mr. Bush had received was general and that it pointed more toward the possibility of attacks abroad than at home, and no one came forward with anything to contradict that.”

In fact, the previous day’s *Washington Post* (May 18) carried a front-page article co-authored by Bob Woodward with the headline “Aug. Memo Focused on Attacks in US.” The article exposed Rice’s characterization of the August 6 memo as a lie, noting that the memo carried the headline, “Bin Laden Determined to Strike in US.” The *Post* cited “senior administration officials” as saying the CIA briefing paper “was primarily focused on recounting al Qaeda’s past efforts to attack and infiltrate the United States.”

While claiming to support the people’s right to know about the actions and character of the president, Apple is careful to make a significant qualification. “[T]he nation needs to know all it can *legitimately* learn about the person in the Oval Office” he writes (emphasis added). What is the meaning of this caveat, “legitimately”? What are its parameters? Apple does not say.

In the end, Apple alludes to the political conceptions that underlie the impulse on the part of himself and his newspaper to shield the Bush administration. They are profoundly anti-democratic and reactionary.

He complains that “full-throated debate about such matters comes with costs: to national unity, to confidence in the electoral process and to respect for leaders in general.” He returns to this theme in his conclusion: “We shall soon discover, in all likelihood, what mistakes the White House made and how it sought to cover them up, as all White Houses do. The question is, will we feel at the end that the price in unity and, perhaps, dignity, was worth paying to find these things out in wartime?”

In other words, the democratic accountability of the government to the people, and the people’s right to know the truth, must be subordinated to the war aims of the American ruling class and the stability of the existing social and political system. Apple would far more readily see the establishment of an authoritarian government than a social and political challenge to the status quo from an angered and aroused public.

On May 21 the *Times* published another editorial, entitled “Distractions and Diversions.” Once again echoing the Bush administration, the newspaper declares that “what really matters” is “preventing another assault by Osama bin Laden and his followers.” This means, according to the newspaper, focusing not on what the Bush administration knew and what political motives underlay its actions both before and after September 11, but rather on technical

and organizational weaknesses of American intelligence agencies.

“It doesn’t take a PhD in government to recognize,” the editorial declares, “that the real subject for discussion should be the government’s chronic failure to assemble, review and act on information about potential terrorist plots.”

This manner of posing the issue is a diversion, calculated to thwart public demands for an investigation and conceal the far-right political agenda and conspiratorial methods at the core of the Bush administration’s actions. If the central issue were merely a technical question of “assembling and reviewing” information, the *Times* would not hesitate to press for a full and open investigation.

Moreover, the *Times*’ presentation begs the more serious question: why did the Bush administration not act on the information that it had?

The United States spends tens of billions a year to maintain the most extensive intelligence apparatus on the planet, employing a network of spy satellites and highly sophisticated electronic eavesdropping devices. It coordinates with spy organizations all over the world, including the Israeli Mossad, and has informants firmly planted in Al Qaeda and every other terrorist group.

As the government admits, it was receiving warnings for years of plans by bin Laden and others to attack targets in the US. It had specific knowledge of previous attempts to use hijacked planes as flying bombs.

It is undeniable that on September 11 suspected Al Qaeda terrorists, who were being tracked by the FBI, the CIA and other agencies, were allowed to board four commercial airplanes, and no jets were scrambled to intercept them until after they had hit their targets. There is no innocent explanation for these facts.

There are historical analogies to September 11—dramatic events that were seized on by governments to implement a radical and predetermined shift in national policy. Hitler had his Reichstag Fire. Closer to home, Lyndon Johnson had his Gulf of Tonkin incident, the 1964 Vietnamese “attack” on US ships that became the pretext for a massive military escalation and undeclared war in Southeast Asia. Subsequent investigations proved that the entire incident was fabricated. The fact that the Vietnam War was launched on the basis of a lie was critical to an understanding of its imperialist character.

The far-reaching character of the measures implemented by the government since September 11 lends even greater urgency to an exposure of the lies surrounding that event. It is critical that the government be called to account. It must be forced to make a full disclosure of its actions before and after the events of last September, and explain why it failed to prevent the single most deadly attack on American civilians in US history.

As the *Times*’ opposition to such an inquiry demonstrates, no section of the political or media establishment, the “liberals” and Democrats no less than the Republican right, can be entrusted with such a task. The prerequisite for an exposure of the political conspiracy at the heart of September 11 is the independent political mobilization of the working class in defense of its democratic rights.



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