

September 11 and the "war on terror": Responses to inquiries and criticisms

6 June 2002

The World Socialist Web Site has received scores of letters and inquiries about our reports that the Bush administration had substantial advance warning of the September 11 terrorist attacks and was making preparations for war in Afghanistan well before the World Trade Center was destroyed. Below, editorial board member Patrick Martin replies to three letters from readers.

I have just finished reading the article "Why is the *New York Times* defending Bush's September 11 cover-up?" I was especially interested in the comments about the Bush administration's plans for war before September 11 and was wondering if you could tell me where on the web I might find evidence of these plans. I have been trying to avoid all forms of media recently as it's all too depressing, so I hadn't seen any stories about it, but I would certainly believe it of them.

Thanks in advance and keep up the good work.

NK

Dear NK,

Last November 20 the *World Socialist Web Site* published an article bearing the headline, "US planned war in Afghanistan long before September 11". The article made reference to insider accounts from India, Britain and France that gave details of US war plans drawn up before the World Trade Center attack.

The Indian report came in the June 26, 2001 issue of the magazine *India Reacts*:

<http://www.indiareacts.com/archivefeatures/nat2.asp?recno=10∓ctg=policy>

Three British sources contributed, including *Jane's International Security* of March 15, 2001, which I saw quoted elsewhere (the publication is available online but only at prohibitive cost). The other two citations were a September 18, 2001 British Broadcasting Corp. report:

http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/world/south_asia/newsid_1550000/1550366.stm

and a September 22, 2001 article in the daily newspaper *Guardian*:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4262511,00.html>

The French source is the book which was published just as my article was being completed, *Bin Laden, the Forbidden Truth*, written by Jean-Charles Brisard and Guillaume Dasquie. I relied on initial Reuters accounts of its contents, but the book has now been reviewed and extensively summarized in the *Village Voice*, *Salon.com* and many other publications.

At the time the WSWS article was published, more than six months ago, the existence of such US war plans was a controversial topic, since the American media and the US government were maintaining that the bombing and invasion of Afghanistan were carried out solely in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, as part of a global "war on terrorism" declared by Bush. Several readers wrote in challenging our claims and asking for our sources.

In the past two weeks, however, the Bush White House has itself repeatedly confirmed that a plan for a global war against Al Qaeda, which

included US military action in Afghanistan, was approved by top national security aides the week before September 11. A National Security Decision Directive, the document giving formal approval to this program of covert and military action, was on Bush's desk for his signature when the jetliners struck the twin towers and the Pentagon. It is this plan that was subsequently carried out in Afghanistan.

Dear Mr. Martin,

Good afternoon Sir. I have a quick question regarding your article below ("September 11 cover-up crumbles: Who was covering for Moussaoui, and why?")

Can you please direct me to your resources regarding the outlined phrase, "*peasant villages and urban centers that were destroyed along with thousands of innocent civilians*" (and the lives lost here?... have you already forgotten?). Can you provide proof of this...? Usually, anytime there is a campaign of this magnitude, and there are significant number of casualties, documentation follows (pictures, videos, etc...). Now, I will admit, even one innocent life lost is so sad... to say the least. Nevertheless, we were protecting the sovereignty of this beautiful and *F-R-E-E* USA and during war (which I am almost certain you have never participated in and I hope you never have too) you are going to have casualties.

So, I ask you Mr. Martin... this should not be a difficult task for you, seeing as you took the time to write this article, I am relatively certain you will be able to provide me with some reliable resources.

Thank you,

DP

Dear DP,

The sarcastic tone of your letter suggests that you believe that evidence of the scale of casualties in Afghanistan from American bombing is difficult or impossible to provide. This is hardly the case. Let me first note, however, that you have changed the quotation from my article. I did not write of "*peasant villages and urban centers that were destroyed, along with thousands of innocent civilians.*" While in a number of cases entire villages were destroyed by American bombing, and major urban centers suffered extensive damage, no urban centers were "destroyed." Such a catastrophe would have produced casualties in the tens of thousands, at least, rather than the thousands.

The actual passage in the article states that, following the September 11 attack, "The administration launched its long-planned war against Afghanistan, bombing and then invading that impoverished country, killing thousands of people—from Taliban rank-and-file soldiers to civilians in peasant villages and urban centers—who had no demonstrable connection to the destruction of the World Trade Center."

You don't seem to dispute the claim that those killed had "no demonstrable connection to the destruction of the World Trade Center," so let us take that as given. You have thus conceded, whatever your intention, that the Bush administration is guilty of killing large numbers of innocent people. The only issue is to estimate the number killed.

There can be no serious dispute that thousands of Taliban soldiers were killed in their trenches by the US bombing. This was widely reported in

the American, European and South Asian media. An army estimated at 40,000-60,000 soldiers disintegrated and was rapidly overwhelmed by the opposing Northern Alliance, which probably could not mobilize more than 10,000-15,000 troops. While many of the former Taliban soldiers deserted and went home to their villages, or transferred their loyalties to the Northern Alliance, and it is believed that some 8,000 are being held as prisoners, that still leaves many, many deaths.

Those killed were, for the most part, young peasants or sons of the urban poor, many of them unwilling draftees who had never before traveled outside their home provinces, let alone having any connection with terrorist attacks on the other side of the world. These young men were incinerated in large numbers. One military technique particularly boasted of by the US was for CIA and military spotters on the ground with the Northern Alliance to call in the exact coordinates of Taliban front-line trenches, and then have them saturation-bombed by American B-52s using bombs retrofitted with precision guidance. There would be few survivors of such attacks.

For civilian casualties, there are varying estimates, but only official US government spokesmen suggest that the deaths were fewer than 1,000. Perhaps the most widely circulated estimate of the death toll, prepared by Professor Marc Herold of the University of New Hampshire, put the figure at nearly 4,000 civilian deaths in the first two months of the US bombing. You can read his report, "A Dossier on Civilian Victims of United States' Aerial Bombing of Afghanistan: A Comprehensive Accounting" archived at:

<http://www.media-alliance.org/mediafile/20-5/index.html>.

Professor Herold prepared an update several months later, which is available at:

<http://www.media-alliance.org/mediafile/20-5/dossier/herold12-6.html>.

A more conservative figure of about 1,300 civilian deaths is provided by Carl Conetta of the Project on Defense Alternatives, comparing the casualties in Afghanistan to those from the US bombing campaign against Serbia in 1999. This report, "Operation Enduring Freedom: Why a Higher Rate of Civilian Bombing Casualties," is available at:

<http://www.comw.org/pda/0201oef.html>.

A detailed and lengthy compilation of press and eyewitness reports of bombing deaths between October 2001 and March 2002 appears on the following web site: http://www.cursor.org/stories/civilian_deaths.htm

For the official US media "take" on civilian deaths, you might consult the *Washington Post* article of January 18, 2002, "More Bombing Casualties Alleged." Reporter Karen DeYoung cites Red Cross accounts of burying "hundreds" of bodies around Mazar-e-Sharif and Kandahar, without being able to determine which were civilians and which Taliban soldiers, certainly suggesting that many more than that have died. The article is at:

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A59457-2002Jan3?language=printer>

The *New York Times* took up the same subject February 10, 2002 in an article by Barry Bearak, "Uncertain Toll in the Fog of War: Civilian Deaths in Afghanistan." Bearak cites Pentagon claims of pinpoint accuracy in bombing, and notes conflicting claims about specific incidents of large-scale loss of life, concluding that "certainly hundreds and perhaps thousands of innocent Afghans have lost their lives during American attacks." This article has been archived by one think-tank at: <http://www.globalpolicy.org/wtc/analysis/2002/0211fog.htm>

The *World Socialist Web Site* has examined a number of specific incidents in which US forces or their allies recklessly killed what turned out to be innocent Afghan civilians. These include:

- Afghan villagers killed and prisoners beaten in US military "mistake"
- British shooting of civilians heightens tensions in Afghanistan
- Two more cases of coldblooded murder in Afghanistan
- More questions about who Australian troops are killing in Afghanistan

You attempt to justify this level of killing by referring to the deaths on September 11 and claiming that "we were protecting the sovereignty of this beautiful and *F-R-E-E* USA." This remark only demonstrates that patriotic platitudes are a barrier to serious and critical thinking. What threat did Afghanistan, one of the poorest and weakest countries on earth, pose to the sovereignty of the United States, the richest and most heavily armed? Were Taliban troops poised to invade Washington DC and replace George W. Bush with an Islamic fundamentalist? On the contrary, it is the United States which has invaded and overthrown the government of Afghanistan, and imposed its nominee, Hamid Karzai, a longtime CIA collaborator and US oil company adviser, as ruler, thereby violating the sovereignty of the Afghan people.

The *World Socialist Web Site* is implacably opposed to the reactionary politics and Islamic fundamentalist ideology of both the Taliban regime and Osama bin Laden. We condemned the September 11 terrorist attacks as monstrous acts of mass murder. But concern over the deaths of innocents in Afghanistan. Moreover, it must be pointed out that, nearly nine months after September 11, the available evidence suggests that the Bush administration knew far more about the preparation of this terrorist attack than the Taliban. Nor has the Bush administration yet provided a serious and convincing case that Osama bin Laden was responsible for organizing or directing the suicide hijackings.

In "New evidence that US government suppressed September 11 warnings," you state, about Zacarias Moussaoui, "He paid \$8,000 cash for the training, but was interested only in steering a jumbo jet in flight, not in learning how to take off or land."

This is what is usually reported in the mainstream media. However, according to a February 6, 2002, FBI Congressional Statement:

"Moussaoui had paid over \$8,000 in cash for flight simulator lessons on a 747-400, which far exceeded his training level as a pilot. Moussaoui showed unusual interest in the instructor's comment that airplane cabin doors could not be opened during flight. In addition, his flight instructor was concerned that Moussaoui expressed INTEREST ONLY IN LEARNING HOW TO TAKE OFF AND LAND (emphasis added) the 747-400" <http://www.fbi.gov/congress/congress02/watson020602.htm>.

What is the source for "but was interested only in steering a jumbo jet in flight, not in learning how to take off or land," which contradicts this FBI statement?

DK

Dear DK,

As you point out, there are two radically conflicting accounts of what Moussaoui said he wanted to learn at the Pan Am International Flight Academy in Eagan, Minnesota, when he sought to enroll there in August 2001. The FBI is the source for both accounts, which makes it somewhat difficult to judge.

Initially, FBI spokesmen told the media that Moussaoui had wanted to learn how to fly, but not to take off and land. This was the official version from September 17 to November 14, when FBI Director Robert Mueller, in the course of a press conference on the issuing of a warrant for another suspected terrorist, disputed the characterization of Moussaoui as the "20th hijacker" and indicated that he had sought to learn take off and landing skills, rather than simply to steer—the direct opposite of the previous story.

Nearly three months later, on February 6, 2002, Deputy FBI Director Dale Watson mentioned the subject in his testimony before a congressional committee. His remarks are not quite as categorical as you suggest in your letter. Here is the last part of the section you quote, and the sentence that follows it:

"In addition, his flight instructor was concerned that Moussaoui expressed interest only in learning how to take off and land the 747-400. In preparation for high fidelity simulator training, he expressed strong

interest in ‘piloting’ a simulated flight from London’s Heathrow Airport to John F. Kennedy Airport in New York.”

In other words, Watson appears to contradict himself, saying first that Moussaoui only wanted to learn how to take off and land, then that he “expressed strong interest” in steering a plane over a considerable distance, and specifically, steering it into the airspace over New York City.

Since then, the media has reverted to the original FBI story, that Moussaoui only wanted to learn how to steer, not how to take off and land. The only exception is a column May 22 in the online magazine *Slate*, which another reader has pointed out. This column noted Watson’s testimony and criticizes the press for retailing an “urban myth” about Moussaoui’s statements.

Have you considered the possibility that the FBI has an interest in downplaying the significance of the statements made by the arrested man? It is, of course, far more common for policemen to exaggerate, distort or fabricate incriminating statements of the kind attributed to Moussaoui, in order to make the prosecution case look stronger than it really is and to secure a conviction. But in this case, the principal concern of the FBI is to explain why the Washington headquarters blocked efforts by local agents in Minneapolis to pursue a more far-reaching investigation. The more damning the statements made by Moussaoui, the more difficult is the FBI’s effort to limit the political damage caused by the exposure of the cover-up last August.

In any event, Moussaoui made his comments to the Pan Am flight instructors, not to the INS or FBI. Until the instructors tell their story before the public—up to now they have refused to do so, on FBI instructions—it is not possible to make a definitive judgment. At least one press account, in the December 21 issue of the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, seems to bear out the concerns raised in your letter. The newspaper reports that the instructors discussed the issue when they briefed two Minneapolis-area congressmen: “A person familiar with the briefings said Pan Am denies the most widely reported remark attributed to Moussaoui: that he wanted only to learn to operate the aircraft in flight, and did not need takeoff or landing instructions.”



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact