

Oil and “conspiracy theories”: a reply to a liberal apologist for the US war in Afghanistan

Part two

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Below is the concluding part of a two-part article replying to a recent commentary attacking so-called “conspiracy theories” about the US response to the September 11 terror attacks, including an article posted last November on the World Socialist Web Site. The first part appeared Friday, September 20.

Ken Silverstein begins his article with what he presents as a summation of the conspiracy theories about September 11 and the war in Afghanistan now circulating on the Internet:

“The war in Afghanistan is a sham. The Bush administration had advance knowledge of the September 11 attacks but took no action, using the assaults on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon as an excuse to topple the Taliban regime and legitimize the takeover of Afghanistan. Well-placed government insiders, knowing of the impending attacks, made fortunes by betting on a huge fall in airline stocks. The war is not about terrorism but about America’s desire to control energy in Central Asia and promote corporate plans to plunder the region’s reserves. The chief US concern all along has been to help Unocal Corporation build a pipeline across Afghanistan, which would carry natural gas from Turkmenistan to Pakistan.”

The first sentence is a puzzle, since no one denies that there is a real war going on and that real Afghan men, women and children are dying. Presumably he means that opponents of the war in Afghanistan regard the Bush administration’s rationale for waging war in Afghanistan as a sham. Whether you agree or disagree with that assessment, it is hard to see how this could be characterized as a “conspiracy theory.”

Imperialist governments lie, especially about war. The Johnson administration utilized an alleged North Vietnamese attack on American PT boats to gain passage of a congressional resolution authorizing intervention in Vietnam. It later emerged that the Tonkin Gulf incident was manufactured to provide a pretext for war—in other words, it was a sham.

Silverstein recites these charges as though they were self-evident absurdities, only discussing the oil issue at any length, as we have seen. He avoids any detailed examination of what must be the main element of any “conspiracy theory,” the claim that the Bush administration had extensive foreknowledge of the September 11 terrorist attacks, but allowed them to take place anyway.

The popularity of conspiracy theories about September 11, circulated through such web sites as www.rense.com, www.tenc.com, www.fromthewilderness.com and others, reflects the instinctive and healthy distrust among millions of working people of the US government and the American media. This distrust, however, falls well short of political consciousness, which requires the development of a scientific

understanding of the social and class basis of the actions of the US government. This neither the muckraking sites nor repentant ex-radicals like Silverstein are capable of providing.

It is not necessary to believe that the American government planned every detail of the terrorist attacks or anticipated the scale of the destruction and loss of life to conclude that the most important unexplored aspect of September 11 is the behind-the-scenes role of the American intelligence agencies. As the WSWs article of November 20, 2001 observed: “[T]he least likely explanation of September 11 is the official one: that dozens of Islamic fundamentalists, many with known ties to Osama bin Laden, were able to carry out a wide-ranging conspiracy on three continents, targeting the most prominent symbols of American power, without any US intelligence agency having the slightest idea of what they were doing.”

This assessment has since been proven true, in the flood of revelations, beginning last May, about advance warnings provided to US intelligence agencies, not only from other countries, but from many of their own personnel who believed, however wrongly, that Washington was actually interested in preventing a major terrorist attack on the United States. Instead, as has since become clear, top FBI and CIA officials blocked any serious effort against Al Qaeda until after September 11.

Both bureaucratic inertia and incompetence, and the longstanding personal and business ties between the Bush and bin Laden families may have been involved. But the lack of a response to clear warnings of impending terrorist attacks using hijacked airplanes goes beyond what can be explained by such considerations. There were elements within the state that welcomed a major atrocity—perhaps without imagining its full extent—in order to provide the necessary pretext for a long-planned US military intervention in Central Asia and the Middle East.

Prior to Silverstein, the best example of what we might call conspiracy denial was an article by David Corn, the Washington correspondent of *Nation* magazine. Corn employed the same method as Silverstein: selecting the most bizarre and unconvincing examples of conspiracy theories to block any questioning of the official account of the September 11 attacks.

Corn expressed outrage over the widespread circulation of conspiracy theories about September 11 on the Internet. He declared openly that, in his opinion, the US government was not morally capable of organizing and carrying out the mass murder of thousands of its own citizens.

He wrote: “I won’t argue that the US government does not engage in brutal, murderous skullduggery from time to time. But the notion that the US government either detected the attacks but allowed them to occur, or, worse, conspired to kill thousands of Americans to launch a war-for-oil in

Afghanistan is absurd.... Simply put, the spies and special agents are not good enough, evil enough, or gutsy enough to mount this operation” (*Nation*, March 4, 2002).

Corn concedes that the US government engages in murder “from time to time”—a remark that he does not appear to have thought through, since it describes the conduct of a serial killer. But it is not “evil enough” to kill 3,000 Americans, he claims. This is disingenuous, to put it mildly, given the bloody record of American imperialism in the twentieth century, from Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to the wars in Korea and Vietnam, to atrocities in Guatemala, Indonesia and dozens of other countries.

Nor is there any reason to believe that the American ruling class and its police and spy agencies develop conscience qualms when their victims are American citizens rather than foreign nationals. Tens of thousands of Americans were sent to their deaths in Korea and Vietnam, mainly youth from the working class, sacrificed to the strategic interests of US imperialism. American corporations routinely kill thousands of workers each year through industrial accidents, chemical poisoning and other workplace and environmental hazards. American police shoot and kill several thousand people every year. And the American government leads the world in its willingness to execute its own citizens.

Are Donald Rumsfeld or Richard Cheney capable of sanctioning the mass killing of Americans on the scale of September 11? Without question and without the slightest hesitation, if they thought it served the interests of the American state. As for George W. Bush—assuming he was even permitted input into the decision—his belief in the sanctity of American lives is well documented from his tenure as Texas governor, where he approved 150 executions in six years.

In times of social crisis, the US government unhesitatingly kills its own citizens to defend the interests of the wealthy and powerful and uphold the authority of the state: from the Ludlow massacre of 1912, to the assassination of Black Panther members in the 1960s, to the military occupation of entire urban neighborhoods in the riots of that decade, to the bombing of the MOVE home which destroyed an entire Philadelphia block in 1985, to the Waco massacre of 1993.

While Silverstein characterizes the November 20, 2001 article in the WSWS as typical of the “conspiracy theory” approach to the Afghan war, he never addresses the substance of that article: that the US government systematically prepared the military intervention in Afghanistan over several years, and did not devise it hastily as a response to the September 11 terrorist attacks, which only provided the pretext.

The WSWS article was headlined “US planned war in Afghanistan long before September 11,” and it sought to document these plans through an examination of fragmentary reports which had appeared up until that time in the US and international press. There were citations from the *Washington Post*, the British-based *Jane’s International Security* and the *Guardian*, the British Broadcasting Corporation, the magazine *IndiaReacts*, and the then newly published French book, *Bin Laden: The Forbidden Truth*, by Jean-Charles Brisard and Guillaume Dasquie.

Such a detailed sifting of the evidence is hardly necessary today. Six months after the publication of the WSWS article—and two months before Silverstein’s piece appeared—the White House itself confirmed the principal thesis of our analysis. In the midst of the public uproar over the reports that Bush was briefed on the danger of Al Qaeda hijackings a month before September 11, administration officials revealed that a National Security Decision Directive calling for American military intervention in Afghanistan, including massive aid to the Northern Alliance, was approved by the National Security Council September 3, 2001 and was on Bush’s desk for his signature when the first hijacked jet struck the World Trade Center.

After that admission, there can no longer be any debate about the proposition that the US planned war in Afghanistan long before September 11. The only question is why a radical journalist like

Silverstein should so strenuously insist that to believe this is “paranoid,” “delusional,” etc.

An entire cottage industry of such pseudo-left debunking has grown up over the past year. Its purpose is to cover up the material causes of the war in Afghanistan—and the larger drive for US global dominance—and to deny the legitimacy of any investigation into the role of conscious, behind-the-scenes preparation (i.e., “conspiracy”) in the aggressive actions of American imperialism.

It is significant that Silverstein does not mention that the article he denounces was written for the *World Socialist Web Site*. Instead, he portrays it as appearing on www.rense.com, a web site that combines exposures of the lies and distortions of official accounts of September 11 and the war on Afghanistan with reports of UFOs and other alleged paranormal phenomena.

The WSWS is not politically responsible for the views espoused by Jeff Rense, or any other site that re-posts material written by supporters of the Socialist Equality Party (US) and its international co-thinkers. Rense.com clearly attributed the article to the *World Socialist Web Site*, and gave its readers a link to editor@wsws.org if they wished to reply to the author or comment on the article.

Silverstein is not so forthcoming. He is a well-informed radical journalist who knows the WSWS is the organ of the International Committee of the Fourth International. But for his own purposes—i.e., to smear and discredit the analysis made by the WSWS—he conceals the source and attributes the article to a site where it appears alongside accounts of flying saucers and other fantasies.

There is another, more important reason to avoid mentioning the source of the article. Doing so would compel Silverstein to address the issue of the Marxist analysis of imperialism, first elaborated by Lenin in his classic work *Imperialism*, and carried forward by Leon Trotsky and the Fourth International that he founded.

The Marxist method focuses on the crucial class questions in evaluating any war: in whose social interests is the war being waged? Who stands to profit from it? In what historical context has the war emerged? Is one side in the war historically an imperialist or oppressor nation, and the other historically an oppressed or former colonial country?

Silverstein is one of many former radicals and supporters of the “left” who have long since abandoned any consistent or principled opposition to American imperialism. Denying the deeper causes of the war in Afghanistan allows them to evade the issue of a more fundamental assessment and response to imperialist war, one that challenges the capitalist system itself. Hence his adamant hostility to any attempt to probe beneath the surface of events.

Silverstein and his co-thinkers leave the capitalist system itself off the hook, concealing the fact that US wars are pursued, not in the interest of the American people as a whole, but in the interest of a narrow elite—the ruling class that monopolizes the means of production and the wealth of society.

This superficial approach gives the radical commentator the luxury of supporting American wars which they deem to be carried out for worthy motives: for the promotion of “human rights” (Yugoslavia); to “punish terrorism” (Afghanistan); or, soon, in “self-defense” (Iraq). But no serious historian would seek to analyze the wars of the twentieth century on such a basis. It would be like trying to portray the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand as the fundamental cause of World War I, when it was merely the trigger for the conflagration. Or worse, explaining World War II on the basis of the rantings of Hitler and Goebbels about the alleged crimes of Poland, Czechoslovakia, etc.

By rejecting any analysis of the underlying material interests behind the US war drive, Silverstein, Corn & Co. are left with no other explanation than that offered by the Bush administration and the media: that the US government is invading country after country in reaction (or, at the worst,

overreaction) to the terrorist attacks.

There is another pernicious political consequence: by portraying war as merely a policy choice of a particular government, and not a material necessity for a reactionary social system, radicals like Silverstein leave themselves free to support a supposedly anti-war faction of the ruling class, should such an element emerge in or outside the Democratic Party.

It is an elementary proposition of Marxism that history, while it is made by men and women, is not made by them under conditions of their own choosing, but under definite material conditions bequeathed by antecedent development. This materialist principle should not, however, be understood mechanically. Marxism has nothing in common with a fatalistic worship of objective forces that proceed unmediated by human consciousness and will.

The bourgeoisie is a conscious class, far more conscious, except in times of mass revolutionary upheaval, than the working class, because it is the ruling class, and is possessed of enormous resources for the development of a class political strategy. Trotsky examined this question in a brilliant speech after the Second Congress of the Communist International in 1920:

“The bourgeoisie, even though it finds itself in a complete contradiction with the demands of historical progress, nevertheless still remains the most powerful class. More than that, it may be said that politically the bourgeoisie attains its greatest powers, its greatest concentration of forces and resources, of political and military means of deception, of coercion, and provocation, i.e., the flowering of its class strategy, at the moment when it is most immediately threatened by social ruin...”

“Europe and the whole world are passing through a period which is, on the one side, an epoch of disintegration of the productive forces of bourgeois society, and, on the other side, an epoch of the highest flowering of the counterrevolutionary strategy of the bourgeoisie. We must understand this clearly and precisely. Counterrevolutionary strategy, i.e., the art of waging a combined struggle against the proletariat by every means from saccharine, professorial-clerical preachments to machine-gunning of strikers, has never attained such heights as it does today” (*First Five Years of the Communist International, vol. 2, New Park, pp. 5-6.*)

Conspiracies cannot change fundamental world-historical processes: no conscious effort of the ruling class, for instance, could transform capitalism into a progressive system once it had reached the point of breakdown, as it did with the onset of World War I. But to say that history cannot be explained by conspiracy does not mean that there are no conspiracies in history.

On the contrary, conspiratorial methods have played an important role in the political struggle of the ruling class against the development of the world socialist revolution. The history of the twentieth century is rife with military coups, assassinations, anti-democratic provocations and CIA-backed counterrevolutions, many of them carefully organized ahead of time by conspirators whose names are well-known: Kissinger, Dulles, Helms, Casey, to cite only a few.

One example of a ruling class conspiracy is perhaps the closest historical analogy to September 11. On February 27, 1933 the Nazis organized the burning of the German parliament building. Hitler blamed the Reichstag Fire on the Communist Party. A former party member was arrested and executed, the party was outlawed and its leadership put on trial. Years later, after the fall of the Nazis, evidence emerged that the arson fire had been supervised by Hermann Goering, Hitler’s deputy. The whole affair was a stage-managed provocation that provided the pretext for banning other political parties and imposing Hitler’s totalitarian dictatorship.

Conspiratorial methods have played an ever-greater role in the affairs of the American ruling elite over the past half century: from the Kennedy assassination, whose murky origins in the intersection of the Mafia, the CIA, southern white supremacists and phony, government-sponsored

“left” groups have never been explained; to Watergate, the Iran-Contra affair and the ultra-right campaign to destabilize the Clinton administration. Hillary Clinton’s famous remark about a “vast, right-wing conspiracy” was perfectly accurate as a characterization of the methods being employed against her husband.

Such methods are the hallmark of a period in which the bourgeoisie is no longer capable of making any genuine appeal to the masses, but must seek to manipulate events behind the scenes in an increasingly anti-democratic fashion. The result of this protracted decomposition of bourgeois democracy is the Bush administration. This government was installed in office by the anti-democratic intervention of the Supreme Court to suppress vote-counting in Florida. Its leading personnel were drawn from the most rapacious and criminal elements of the ruling elite, the same milieu that produced Enron, WorldCom, Tyco, and the like. It gravitates naturally to methods of provocation and gangsterism towards its enemies, both at home and abroad.

Those like Silverstein who cover up or sugarcoat this bitter truth only reveal that, for all their radical rhetoric, they have hopeless illusions in the permanence of American democracy. They truly believe that “it can’t happen here,” even when the process of transformation is already well under way.



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