

September 11—exploiting grief to prepare for war

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The official commemoration of the first anniversary of the terrorist atrocities of September 11 was the occasion for a cynical exploitation of the grief felt by tens of thousands who lost loved ones in the attacks, as well as the sorrow shared by millions across the globe over the wanton destruction of innocent life.

In a calculated attempt to make the most of the reopening of the emotional wounds of that day, the Bush administration seized upon the anniversary to further its drive for a war of aggression against Iraq.

To intensify tensions produced by the anniversary, Attorney General John Ashcroft and Homeland Security Director Thomas Ridge announced in a nationwide television broadcast the raising of the government's terror alert to "code orange" based on unsubstantiated reports that unnamed groups in Asia had reportedly been acquiring explosives.

This bid to terrorize the American people combined with Bush's appearances with grieving families in Washington, Pennsylvania and New York City amounted to a setup for a bellicose speech the following day demanding that the United Nations grant Washington a legal fig leaf to launch another colonial-style war in the Persian Gulf.

Collaborating with the administration, the mainstream media subjected the population to a barrage of saturation coverage that managed to combine an almost prurient recycling of the violent images from the World Trade Center's collapse with empty sentimentality and phony patriotism.

Even the docile White House press corps, however, could not ignore the real purpose of this exercise. As the *New York Times* commented on the day of the commemoration: "Mr. Bush seems determined to transform Sept. 11 into a milestone on the road to war with Iraq, and to use last year's attack by Osama bin Laden ... to justify this year's pursuit of Saddam Hussein."

The White House had an even crasser and more immediate purpose. Faced with the threat of losing the House of Representatives to Democratic control in November, the Republican administration is desperately seeking to rally support through appeals to patriotism and war, hoping that it can drown out growing popular anger over a declining economy.

Beyond these political motives, the commemoration ceremonies themselves were marked by a stark contrast between the quiet dignity of family members of those lost in the catastrophe and the banality of the officiating politicians.

In New York, it was agreed that no one at the ceremony would

deliver any remarks dealing with September 11 itself, but merely offer readings of famous oratory ripped from the pages of US history. In other words, none of them had anything to say about an event that they all agree "changed everything."

New York's Governor George Pataki kicked off the event with a schoolboy-like rendition of Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. Later in the day, New York City's billionaire mayor, Michael Bloomberg, offered a reading of Franklin D. Roosevelt's "four freedoms" speech, which provided a rationale for US entry into World War II. Bloomberg's mouthing of the words "freedom from want" and "freedom from fear" rang all too hollow in a city that has relegated the homeless to empty prison cells.

There was even grosser irony in the misuse of Lincoln's eloquent invocation of the democratic and revolutionary ideals of human equality and freedom by politicians who are engaged in a determined assault on precisely those ideals.

The power of Lincoln's speech at Gettysburg was its ability to place the immense and tragic loss of life in that battle in the context of the whole course of American history and, indeed, the worldwide struggle of mankind against tyranny and oppression.

It was a politically pointed address, directed in the midst of a civil war against the forces of privilege, both in the Confederate slavocracy and among those in the North seeking a compromise with the South.

The solemn, eloquent cadence of Lincoln's address, its poetic inspiration, was not an accident. Its form flowed from the profoundly democratic content of the ideals for which he fought. It hardly needs to be said that no major politician today, Democratic or Republican, is animated by any similar ideals or capable of any such oratory.

Pataki, former New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and Bloomberg are all committed defenders of government of the rich, by the rich and for the rich. Their interest in the words of Lincoln's famous 1863 address was restricted to his use of the words "war" and "battlefield," which they believed harmonized nicely with the administration's constant refrain that "we are at war."

What is meant by this phrase is never explained. There has been neither a declaration of war, nor any evidence in the past year that the US is under continuing attack. Iraq, the target of US war efforts, has never been linked in any way with the events of September 11. In reality, this invocation of a permanent state of war is a transparent ploy designed to justify unfettered US military

aggression, the ramming through of unpopular social measures and a far-reaching assault on civil liberties.

Combined with the talk of war was the continuous description of those who died in the terrorist attacks as “heroes” who “sacrificed” their lives for the nation. It is no disservice to the memory of those who perished to say that, while indeed some lives were lost in acts of heroism, none of the victims volunteered to serve in any war and most died with little understanding of what had happened.

Meanwhile, those who were responsible for the greatest acts of heroism—New York City’s firefighters and other emergency service workers—have been treated with contempt since the attacks. The city government has fought relentlessly to deny them a decent salary increase, while the Bush administration vetoed appropriations to improve outmoded communications equipment that firefighters have blamed for the deaths of up to 100 of their coworkers who never heard orders to evacuate the Twin Towers.

The widow of an office worker killed in the trade center collapse aptly summed up a key rationale behind the repeated use of the word “heroes” in describing the victims. “If you have 3,000 people slaughtered, you have to say, who’s responsible for the slaughter,” she said. “But you don’t have to look at who’s responsible if they’re heroes, do you?”

The Bush administration has steadfastly opposed any investigation to determine who is responsible. It is not only the unanswered questions of how the terrorists were allowed to carry out the attacks, and why efforts to investigate their activities were suppressed, but how the policies pursued by Washington led to this tragedy.

The basic truth that no section of the media or a single leading politician dares speak is that those who died on September 11 were the victims not only of terrorist hijackers, but of definite US policies carried out over the previous decades.

It not a matter of justifying terrorism to recognize that the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were the culmination of a dreadful chain of causality rooted in American foreign policy.

For decades, Washington, acting together with Israel, financed and supported Islamic fundamentalists as a counterbalance to secular nationalism in the oil-rich Middle East and Central Asia.

Just 20 years ago, Ronald Reagan was praising the Islamic mujahedin fighting Soviet forces in Afghanistan—Osama bin Laden prominent among them—as “freedom fighters,” while the CIA poured hundreds of millions of dollars in money, arms and supplies into the hands of these forces. After playing a central role in fomenting a civil war that claimed 1.5 million lives and left the country in ruins, Washington turned its back on Afghanistan. Its sole purpose was to bleed the USSR in a debilitating conflict.

Meanwhile, the US continued its military support for despotic regimes in the Middle East, most centrally the monarchy in Saudi Arabia. At the same time, it has pursued a policy of unrelenting hostility toward the democratic aspirations of the Palestinian people and unqualified support for Israeli occupation and repression.

The cumulative effect of these policies was the strengthening of reactionary Islamic organizations and the creation of an ample pool from which they can recruit. The official denunciations of

anyone who dares attribute the resulting acts of terrorism to anything but “evil” is designed to obscure Washington’s intimate responsibility in this regard. That it served as midwife in the birth of these organizations is historically irrefutable.

In the words of Lincoln subjected to meaningless repetition at the New York commemoration there was not an ounce of anger, or the slightest appeal for vengeance for the thousands of Union dead. The official commemoration of September 11 was another matter. The politicians and the media both appealed to the worst human instincts—nationalist hatred and lust for retaliation.

Yet, a deeper understanding of September 11 requires placing it in an international context. With last year’s criminal attacks, one can see the devastating impact of 3,000 deaths in a country of 288 million people, as well as the nationwide fear and trauma created by buildings collapsing in flames in a single city.

What does it tell us about the meaning of 100,000 deaths in the atomic bomb blasts that leveled Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, or the million Vietnamese lives lost in 10 years of US war from 1965 to 1975? What must be the impact of the estimated one million deaths in Iraq as a result of the 1991 Persian Gulf War and the draconian trade embargo that continues to this day?

Those who oppose imperialism from the standpoint of international socialism do not place a higher value on the lives of Americans than those of other working men and women subjected to war and death around the globe.

In the final analysis, the slaughter of September 11 was a terrible price paid for reactionary and criminally reckless international policies pursued by successive US administrations, acting on behalf of a financial elite whose interests are completely at odds with those of working people in America and throughout the world.

This same ruling elite must not be allowed to exploit the sorrow over those who died to drag the world into another eruption of imperialist war that can only produce even greater tragedies both at home and abroad.



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