The modus operandi of a coverup

9/11 hearings ignore political, historical issues behind terrorist attacks

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The public hearings conducted Tuesday and Wednesday by the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States made clear that the bipartisan panel is engaged in a cover-up of the fundamental questions surrounding the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

In the course of two days of hearings, televised by various cable news channels, leading figures in the current Bush administration and the preceding Clinton administration gave testimony and answered questions. These included the current secretary of state, Colin Powell, and his Democratic predecessor, Madeleine Albright; Bush's secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld and his deputy secretary, Paul Wolfowitz, and Clinton Pentagon head William Cohen; Clinton's national security adviser Samuel Berger (Bush's national security adviser Condoleezza Rice refused to appear); and Richard Clarke, the top White House counter-terrorism adviser to both Clinton and Bush, who resigned on the eve of the Iraq war and has published a book denouncing Bush for ignoring the Al Qaeda threat before 9/11 and then using the terrorist attacks as a pretext for invading the Persian Gulf country.

In his testimony on Wednesday, Clarke reiterated his charges against the Bush administration, declaring at one point: "By invading Iraq, the president of the United States has greatly undermined the war on terrorism." The Bush White House responded with a barrage of attacks aimed at discrediting the former aide.

Notwithstanding the heated controversy surrounding Clarke's appearance, the entire line of questioning from both the Democratic and Republican members of the commission showed that the basic premises of their investigation exclude any examination of the political and historical roots of the attacks that took the lives of some 3,000 innocent civilians.

Not one panel member broached the issue of US foreign policy in Afghanistan and the Middle East, and its role in fostering the growth of Islamic fundamentalist terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda. Nor was there any probing of the economic and geo-strategic interests that underlie the policy of succeeding US administrations toward Central Asia and the Persian Gulf. The word "oil" went virtually unuttered in the course of hours and hours of testimony.

Instead, the framework for the hearings was the assumption that 9/11 was the result of a "failure" of intelligence, or diplomacy, or military policy—or a combination of all three. From this narrow and disingenuous starting point, the thrust of both the witnesses' testimony and the questioning by the panel followed: namely, that the proper response to the threat of terrorist attacks is to remove all remaining restrictions on US spying and covert operations abroad, including assassinations, intensify government spying within the United States, and apply the Bush doctrine of preventive war on an even more massive and bloody scale in the future.

The gist of the criticisms made of both the Clinton and Bush administrations—including those made by Clarke—was that they were too timid and squeamish in the pre-9/11 period, and too bogged down by considerations of US and international law. They should have used military force and covert violence sooner, more often and on a larger scale.

The most rabid of the panel members was former Democratic senator and current president of the New School University in New York, Bob Kerrey, who, as a Navy Seal in the Vietnam War, led a death squad attack on a village in which the six enlisted men under his command killed 21 women, children and elderly men. In one revealing exchange, he berated Albright for failing to use military force to eliminate Osama bin Laden in the 1990s. She replied: "You, senator, I know, were the only person that I know of who suggested declaring war. You were, you know, in retrospect—you were probably right."

The 9/11 commission, whose formation President Bush initially opposed and only reluctantly authorized in November of 2002, has good reason to exclude any consideration of the historical and political origins of Al Qaeda, because an examination of this history reveals that the attacks of September 11, and the growth of Islamist terrorism more generally, are the outcome of US interventions in Central Asia going back to the late 1970s.

The Democratic Carter administration, responding to a decline in the global economic position of American capitalism and a deep economic and political crisis at home, inaugurated a shift in the Cold War policy against the Soviet Union from containment to "roll back". In 1979 Carter authorized a policy devised by his national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, to destabilize the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul by covertly providing funds and arms to Islamic fundamentalist mujaheddin guerrillas in Afghanistan. The aim was to draw the Soviet Union into a protracted and debilitating war in Afghanistan against anti-communist proxy forces who made their appeal on the basis of religious fanaticism.

Following the Soviet invasion, US backing for the mujaheddin was stepped up by the new Republican administration of Ronald Reagan. The US encouraged and helped organize the recruitment of Islamist fighters from other parts of the Middle East and beyond to join the anti-Soviet crusade in Afghanistan. Prominent among then was the multi-millionaire scion of the Saudi bin Laden family, Osama bin Laden. Thus, successive American administrations created the conditions for the eventual formation of Al Qaeda, which, under bin Laden and other former US assets, turned against Washington, in what is known in intelligence circles as a an example of "blowback".

The US intervention in Afghanistan was an unmitigated disaster for the Afghani people. The country disintegrated into civil war, fought by rival warlords at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives and the devastation of the country's social infrastructure. The US maintained, and continues to maintain, relations with many of the reactionary forces it sponsored as

part of its Cold War offensive against the USSR.

The intervention in Afghanistan is only one part of a more general policy that has fostered the growth of Islamist terrorism. The US has for decades propped up some of the most despotic regimes in the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia and the other Persian Gulf sheikdoms, in order to secure US access to and exploitation of the region's oil resources. It has simultaneously incited the hatred and desperation of millions of Arabs through its military, financial and political support for Israel, and its defense of Israel's ruthless policy of repressing and dispossessing the Palestinian people.

With the decline and fall of the Soviet Union—for which Washington had assiduously worked—the US political establishment embarked on a new and even more violent phase in its predatory foreign policy. Feeling itself freed from the limitations imposed by the Cold War standoff between the two "superpowers," Washington turned to an openly colonialist policy.

Beginning with the first Persian Gulf War in 1991, the US adopted a policy of using its military supremacy over all rivals to crush the resistance of the oppressed masses in the Middle East and secure complete US domination of the region's oil resources. This was considered essential to America's new policy of preventing the emergence of any challenger—including its nominal allies in Europe and Asia—to US global hegemony.

Whatever the tactical differences between the Democrats and Republicans, this quest for global domination became the consensus strategy of the American ruling elite and both of its parties. Hence the escalation of US military operations under Clinton—involving military strikes and interventions in Iraq, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Afghanistan, Sudan and Kosovo. With the coming to power of the Bush administration, this basic orientation assumed a new and even more explosive form. It has already dragged the American people, on the basis of outright lies, into a military quagmire in Iraq whose consequences for the Iraqi and American people alike are incalculable.

The 9/11 commission's failure to consider the historical and political context of September 11 goes hand in hand with its refusal to seriously examine the staggering and unexplained anomalies that surround both the preceding period and the events of that day.

One cannot credibly explain as a mere intelligence "failure" the apparent lack of response from the Bush administration to explicit warnings given to the White House in the summer of 2001 of a catastrophic Al Qaeda attack involving hijacked airliners. Nor can one on this basis explain the ability of known Al Qaeda operatives—and future 9/11 hijackers—to enter and leave the US and go about their business within the US, including taking flying lessons, with impunity. Similarly, mere incompetence cannot account for the astonishing delay in the deployment of aircraft to intercept the hijacked planes on the day of the attacks.

However, given the long-standing connections between Islamic fundamentalist terrorists and US intelligence agencies, and the by now well documented pre-9/11 plans of the war cabal in the Bush administration to invade and occupy Iraq, there is a highly plausible explanation. A number of the witnesses at this week's hearings, both Democratic and Republican, voiced a recurrent theme that points to the solution to the anomalies of September 11. When challenged by panel members on their failure to take stronger military action against Al Qaeda prior to the attacks on New York and Washington, Albright, Berger and some of their Republican counterparts replied that the political conditions for taking such action did not exist. American and international public opinion, they insisted, would have overwhelmingly opposed it.

Here they alluded to the decisive political significance of the events of September 11. Policy makers in both the Clinton and the Bush administrations wanted to unleash military force against either Afghanistan or Iraq, or both. They were acutely aware of being held back by the lack of popular support for such an undertaking. September 11 at a single stroke created the conditions—the *casus belli*—for the implementation of long-standing schemes for military aggression and conquest.

The public statements of ex-Bush administration officials such as former Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill and Richard Clarke have confirmed that leading figures, including Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz and Bush himself, immediately seized on the tragedy of 9/11 to set in motion their plans for the invasion of Iraq. They were utterly unfazed by the judgment of the entire US intelligence establishment that Saddam Hussein had nothing to do either with the hijack-bombings or Al Qaeda.

For the Bush administration, the invasion of Afghanistan was, from the first, only a way station on the road to Baghdad. The "war on terror" was conjured up to serve as the overarching justification for a sharp turn in both foreign and domestic policy—toward outright colonialism abroad and an unprecedented attack on democratic rights and the social conditions of working people at home.

Within the context of the preceding history and the political exploitation of September 11, the mysteries of that day find their most plausible explanation in a deliberate decision by elements within the US government and military-intelligence apparatus to allow a terrorist attack to take place, and block any effort to prevent it. It is possible, even likely, that those who gave their tacit assent to a terrorist action did not anticipate an atrocity on the scale of 9/11. They may have believed they were facilitating a "traditional" hijacking, for example, rather than the most deadly suicide bombing in history. But there are ample grounds for concluding that the events of September 11 involved a high degree of complicity by agencies of the US government.

One thing is beyond dispute—and this critical fact cannot and will not be even remotely touched on by the 9/11 commission—the tragic loss of life on that day and the wars and social reaction that have followed are the outcome of the predatory policies of a series of US governments. What is the fundamental character of these policies? They are imperialist, conducted in the interests not of the American people, but rather to advance the global economic, military and political interests of the US financial oligarchy.

It is US imperialism, and the governments and parties that serve it, that constitute the greatest threat to the peace, safety and well-being of the American people and the population of the entire planet. This threat can be ended only through the international revolutionary mobilization of the working people and oppressed masses against imperialism and for the democratic and egalitarian principles of socialism.

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