Part one

Five years since 9/11: A political balance sheet

David North
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This report was delivered by David North, the chairman of the international editorial board of the World Socialist Web Site *and national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party of the US, to an SEP aggregate meeting held over the weekend of September 9-10.*

Monday marks the fifth anniversary of the events of September 11, 2001. On that morning, the total number of innocent civilian lives that were lost as a consequence of coordinated terrorist actions was over 2,500. It is difficult to think of another single event in recent history that had such a visceral effect on mass consciousness. The symbol "nine-slash-one-one" does not have to be translated anywhere in the world. It evokes universally not only the mental image of dense smoke billowing out of the Twin Towers, but also the sense that world politics, as a consequence what occurred on that date, veered off radically in new and dangerous directions.

However, the real significance of 9/11 is not as obvious as the Bush administration, the political establishment and much of the media would have everyone believe. There is no question but that September 11, 2001 marked *some sort* of major turning point in American and world politics. But it is necessary to distinguish between the visual and emotional impact of the events of that day, magnified by relentless state-orchestrated propaganda, and the objective role of the terrorist attacks in motivating the subsequent actions by the US government.

The question is: Were the actions taken by the Bush administration after 9/11 largely determined by the events of that day? Or did the terrorist attacks provide a pretext for the implementation of policies developed long before, but for which, without 9/11, there would have been no substantial popular support?

The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the assault on democratic rights, the violations of international law, and the ever-expanding scale of violence that the Bush administration (joined most conspicuously by the governments of Britain, Australia and Canada) is planning as part of its never-to-end "War on Terror" derive their legitimacy from the claim that brooks no argument: "9/11 changed everything."

And yet, for so fateful a date in world history, September 11, 2001 remains shrouded in mystery. Nothing remotely resembling a serious, professional and credible investigation has ever been conducted by any branch of government or government agency into the events of 9/11. The so-called 9/11 Commission was nothing more than a cynical and mendacious exercise in politically-expedient cover-up, organized with the more or less explicit purpose of blocking a real criminal investigation and preventing the discovery of evidence that 1) linked the 9/11 terrorists to US intelligence agencies, and 2) exposed criminal complicity on the part of elements within the state in facilitating and abetting the success of the 9/11 conspiracy.

The fraudulent character of the 9/11 Commission was guaranteed by the selection of its leading personnel, beginning with its chairperson, Thomas Kean. He brought to this investigation all the integrity and zeal for truth that one would expect of a former New Jersey governor and board member of Amerada Hess, the international oil corporation. Indeed, among Kean's special qualifications for serving as co-chairman of the 9/11 Commission may have been his own secretive business dealings with the Saudi-controlled Delta Oil Company, whose owners are believed to have provided millions of dollars in financing to Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden.

It is worth recalling that Kean received his appointment only after President Bush's first choice for the commission's chairmanship, Henry Kissinger, was compelled to withdraw because the stink surrounding his person was too great for even the none-too-sensitive nostrils of the Washington press corps.

Given the fact that more than 2,500 people lost their lives in the 9/11 attacks, the failure of Congress—the putative representative of the people—to conduct an official investigation, with witnesses called to testify under oath, is a damning indictment of that institution. Moreover, that not a single individual has been held accountable, in any way, for what was at the very least a massive failure of government security, intelligence and police agencies defies innocent explanation.

The only real investigation into 9/11 is that which has been undertaken entirely independently of the government and in opposition to its findings—including an important analysis written by Patrick Martin of the *World Socialist Web Site* that has been cited in a number of books which have exposed the falsifications and absurdities of the official version of events.

To cite only a very few of the facts that expose the cover-up orchestrated by the 9/11 Commission:

*The governments of Germany, Egypt, Russia and Israel gave the United States specific advance warnings of an impending attack using hijacked airplanes.

*President Bush received a CIA briefing on August 6, 2001, five weeks before the attacks, warning that Al Qaeda might be planning to hijack airplanes. The briefing referred to the existence of Al Qaeda cells in California and New York.

*The arrest of Zacarias Moussaoui in August 2001 placed at the disposal of the government information that could leave no doubt that a terrorist operation involving the hijacking of airplanes and their use as bombs was being set into operation. The Pan Am International Flight Academy in Minnesota informed the FBI of its concern that Moussaoui might be planning to hijack an airplane.

*Mohamed Atta, who has been identified as a leader of the conspiracy, was monitored by the German Police throughout 1999, and the FBI followed his movements in 2000. In January 2001, Atta was permitted to enter the United States even though his status as a student taking flying lessons—of which he informed immigration authorities—was in explicit violation of the terms of his tourist visa. The extraordinary ease with which Atta went about his work in the United States is summed up very well by writer Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed in his book, *The War on Truth*:

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"In summary, despite being well known to authorities, Mohamed Atta seems to have led a rather charmed life...He had been under surveillance by US agents between January and May 2000 due to his suspicious purchase of large amounts of chemicals, which might be used to make explosives. In January 2001 he was detained by INS agents at Miami International Airport for 57 minutes due to previously overstaying a visa and failing to produce a proper visa to enter the US to train at a Florida flight school. But that did not stop him. Despite the FBI's longstanding concern that terrorists might be attending flight schools in the US, Atta was allowed to enroll in the Florida flight school. By April 2001, he was stopped by police for driving without a license. He failed to show up in court in May and a bench warrant was issued for his arrest. But that did not stop him either, because the warrant was never executed—although he was subsequently arrested for drunk driving on two more occasions. Throughout this period in the US, Atta never made any attempt to operate under an alias, traveling, living, and studying at the flight school under his real name. Stranger still, Atta was in regular email contact with current and former employees of major US defense contractors, as revealed by the regular email list of some 40 individuals he maintained, discovered by the FBI in September 2001. ...

"It is hard to interpret this sequence of events in a benign light. In short, it seems to be an unavoidable—if inexplicable—conclusion that the US government knowingly and repeatedly granted free passage to a confirmed terrorist to enter the United States and undergo flight training" [Olive Branch Press, Northampton, Mass. 2005, pp. 205-06].

*No less extraordinary than the VIP treatment extended by the US government to Atta was the hospitality it offered other 9/11 hijackers. Nawaf Alhazmi and Khalid Almidhar were known by the CIA to have attended a so-called "summit meeting" of Al Qaeda in January 2000. Their movements were tracked by the CIA for more than a year, but neither had any problem entering the United States. Almidhar returned to the United States with a multi-entry visa that was renewed in June 2001, although he had been linked to the October 2000 bombing of the USS Cole.

*Another future participant in the 9/11 hijackings, Ziad Samir Jarrah, was detained for several hours for questioning on the explicit instructions of the US government when he arrived at Dubai International Airport on January 30, 2001. One must assume that this would not have occurred if the United States did not have serious reasons to be concerned about the activities of this individual. Despite this incident, Mr. Jarrah was able to enter the United States eight months later and enroll in a flight school.

Based on the facts that have already been established, it is beyond question that Mohamed Atta and the other hijackers prepared for 9/11 under a protective umbrella provided by influential elements within the CIA and other intelligence agencies of the US government. Their unhindered movements in, out and around the United States would not have been possible had they not enjoyed the protection of powerful individuals within the state apparatus. The information that has come to light about their clumsy and even reckless behavior while living in the United States, their carelessness in repeatedly drawing the attention of police, hardly suggests that Atta and his colleagues were master conspirators. They did everything but carry signs proclaiming their terrorist intentions. But it is evident that high-level "angels" were looking after them.

But for what purpose? It does not require a particularly conspiratorial imagination to conclude that those who were running interference for Atta and his associates knew that they were planning some sort of terrorist action, and, moreover, believed that the execution of such an act would serve certain policy objectives. What, then, were these objectives?

The global strategy of American imperialism

The answer to this question requires that the events of 9/11 be placed in a broader historical context. The real origins of the policies pursued by the United States during the past five years are to be found not in the events of September 11, 2001, but rather in an event that occurred almost exactly a decade earlier—the formal dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991. The collapse of the Soviet Union was interpreted by broad sections of the American ruling elite as an unprecedented opportunity to establish the unchallenged global geo-strategic hegemony of the United States. Without the Soviet Union, there existed no effective restraint on the projection of American military power anywhere in the world. Indeed, the American ruling elite believed that the overwhelming supremacy of the United States in terms of raw military power could be deployed to offset the long-term decline in the country's world economic position.

Among the most significant consequences of the Soviet collapse was the radical change in the physical balance of power in the vast landmass of Eurasia. The transformation of the Central Asian republics of the former USSR into independent states had created an immense power vacuum that the United States was eager to exploit. Moreover, that vacuum facilitated the aggressive projection of American power into the Middle East.

The American bourgeoisie had not failed to notice that the greatest portion of the world's strategic oil and natural gas reserves were located in these geographically contiguous regions. The outlines of a new strategy began to emerge in the mid-1990s. In an influential article written by Zbigniew Brzezinski, the former national security adviser under President Carter, and published in the September-October 1997 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, the critical importance of Eurasia for the world position of the United States was spelled out:

"Eurasia is the world's axial supercontinent. A power that dominated Eurasia would exercise decisive influence over two of the world's three most economically productive regions, Western Europe and East Asia. A glance at the map also suggests that a country dominant in Eurasia would almost automatically control the Middle East and Africa. With Eurasia now serving as the decisive geopolitical chessboard, it no longer suffices to fashion one policy for Europe and another for Asia. What happens with the distribution of power on the Eurasian landmass will be of decisive importance to America's global primacy and historical legacy. ...

"In a volatile Eurasia, the immediate task is to ensure that no state or combination of states gains the ability to expel the United States or even diminish its decisive role."

However, as Brzezinski himself realized, the establishment of American dominance in Eurasia was a daunting project. In a book entitled *The Grand Chessboard*, in which he elaborated upon the ideas initially presented in the *Foreign Affairs* article, Brzezinski described Eurasia as a "megacontinent" which was "just too large, too populous, culturally too varied, and composed of too many historically ambitious and politically energetic states to be compliant toward even the most economically successful and politically preeminent global power." There was yet another obstacle to the hegemonic aspirations of American imperialism. Brzezinski wrote:

"It is also a fact that America is too democratic at home to be autocratic abroad. This limits the use of America's power, especially its capacity for military intimidation. Never before has a populist democracy attained international supremacy. But the pursuit of power is not a goal that commands popular passion, *except in conditions of a sudden threat or challenge to the public's sense of domestic well-being*. The economic self-denial (that is, defense spending) and the human sacrifices (casualties even among professional soldiers) required in the effort are uncongenial to democratic instincts. Democracy is inimical to imperial mobilization" [*The Grand Chessboard*, Basic Books, pp. 35-36, emphasis added].

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The events of 9/11 provided precisely the sort of "sudden threat or challenge to the public's sense of domestic well-being" that created, at least in the short term, a constituency for the unleashing of American military power, justified in the name of vengeance and self-defense. This does not prove by itself that the attack on the World Trade Center was directly planned and engineered by elements within the state. But Brzezinski's analysis demonstrates high-level awareness that the vast geo-strategic ambitions of the United States, which entailed waging war thousands of miles from its own borders, required a dramatic and sudden change in public consciousness.

Whatever the actual degree of involvement and complicity of state operatives in the planning, abetting and execution of the 9/11 conspiracy, there is absolutely no question but that the events of that day were seized upon immediately as a pretext to set into motion a militaristic agenda that had been elaborated and perfected over the entire previous decade.

Let us not forget that the entire history of the United States provides numerous examples of dramatic episodes being used to justify military actions whose ultimate and essential aim was the realization of critical strategic objectives. These trigger events provided, at most, a "good" reason for military action, but not the "real" reason.

We are not being wise after the event. Within hours of the attack on the World Trade Center, the *World Socialist Web Site* warned of what was to come. On September 12, 2001, the WSWS, in condemning the attack, declared that "terrorism plays into the hands of those elements within the US establishment who seize on such events to justify and legitimize the resort to war in pursuit of the geopolitical and economic interests of the ruling elite."

On September 14, the WSWS stated: "The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon have been seized on as an opportunity to implement a far-reaching agenda for which the most right-wing elements in the ruling elite have been clamoring for years. Within a day of the attack, before any light had been shed on the source of the assault or the dimensions of the plot, the government and the media had launched a coordinated campaign to declare that America was at war and the American people had to accept all the consequences of wartime existence."

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