

Part two

Five years since 9/11: A political balance sheet

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12 September 2006

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This is a report 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.

The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq

The Bush administration responded to the events of 9/11 by proclaiming a “War on Terror.” Just one month after the 9/11 attack, the Bush administration began the invasion of Afghanistan, justifying this action on the grounds that the Taliban government had provided sanctuary for Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda. In its wild-eyed enthusiasm for war, the media showed no interest in investigating the history of American involvement in Afghanistan, its relations with the Taliban, the US role in promoting the activities of bin Laden, or the formation of Al Qaeda.

That the events of 9/11 could be directly traced to the decision of the United States, during the administration of Jimmy Carter, to promote an Islamic insurgency against a Soviet-backed regime in Kabul, was not a subject that the media was willing to explore. Indeed, during the 1980s the Islamic insurgents in Afghanistan were the recipients of massive American military and financial support. Representatives of the mujahideen had even been invited into the Oval Office and praised by President Reagan as the moral equivalents of America’s founding fathers.

As for bin Laden, he began his terrorist career as a CIA asset in Afghanistan. Finally, the Taliban movement—which emerged out of the US-funded carnage in Afghanistan—came to power in the mid-1990s with the support of the United States.

What was the real purpose of this war? In answering this question, I am reminded of a scene in the opening of the movie *Reds*, a cinematic biography of the great radical journalist John Reed. He has just returned from Europe, where he was covering the so-called Great War (as World War I was then known). Attending a meeting of the Liberal Club in Reed’s hometown of Portland, Oregon, he is called to the podium to give an eye-witness account of the war.

Reed is asked by the Liberal Club chairman to explain what the war in Europe is all about. Reed surveys the audience, and answers with one word: “Profits.” He then sits down.

One could give a no less concise explanation of the war in Afghanistan—but here the one word answer would be “Oil.” As the WWSW explained on October 9, 2001, in a statement entitled “Why we oppose the war in Afghanistan,”

“The Caspian Sea region, to which Afghanistan provides strategic access, harbors approximately 270 billion barrels of oil, some 20 percent of the world’s proven reserves. It also contains 665 trillion cubic feet of

natural gas, approximately one-eighth of the planet’s gas reserves.

“These critical resources are located in the world’s most politically unstable region. By attacking Afghanistan, setting up a client regime and moving vast military forces into the region, the US aims to establish a new political framework within which it will exert hegemonic control.”

The early, though superficial, successes achieved by the American military in Afghanistan in the autumn of 2001, culminating in the installation of a former Unocal oil executive—Hamid Karzai—as the head of a new puppet regime in Kabul, convinced the Bush administration that there was no limit to what could be accomplished through the use of military power. In October 2002, it unveiled a national security strategy that was based on the new doctrine of “preventive war,” which proclaimed the right and intention of the United States to take military action against any country which it identified as a potential threat to America’s security.

Embracing war as a legitimate instrument of foreign policy, applicable in a wide range of circumstances unrelated to immediate and direct self-defense against imminent military attack, the new National Security Strategy placed at the foundation of the foreign policy of the United States conceptions that had been denounced as criminal by the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal in 1946.

The stage was now set for the invasion of Iraq, a country whose government had nothing whatsoever to do with the events of 9/11. While fabricating links between the regime of Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda, the US government placed its main emphasis on Iraq’s alleged possession of so-called weapons of mass destruction. Between August 2002 and the beginning of the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, the American people were subjected to an unrelenting propaganda campaign of government and media-sponsored lies.

Despite the orgy of pro-war propaganda, popular and international opposition to the war plans of the United States and its British government allies found expression in massive demonstrations held all over the world in February 2003.

On March 20, 2003, the United States launched its war. One day later, the *World Socialist Web Site* declared,

“The unprovoked and illegal invasion of Iraq by the United States is an event that will live in infamy. The political criminals in Washington who have launched this war, and the wretched scoundrels in the mass media who are reveling in the bloodbath, have covered this country in shame. Hundreds of millions of people in every part of the world are repulsed by the spectacle of a brutal and unrestrained military power pulverizing a small and defenseless country. The invasion of Iraq is an imperialist war in the classic sense of the term: a vile act of aggression that has been undertaken on behalf of the interests of the most reactionary and predatory sections of the financial and corporate oligarchy in the United States. Its overt and immediate purpose is the establishment of control over Iraq’s vast oil resources and reduction of that long-oppressed country into an American colonial protectorate. ...

“The war itself represents a devastating failure of American democracy. A small cabal of political conspirators—working with a hidden agenda and having come to power on the basis of fraud—has taken the American people into a war that they neither understand nor want. But there exists absolutely no established political mechanism through which the opposition to the policies of the Bush administration—to the war, the attacks on democratic rights, the destruction of social services, the relentless assault on the living standards of the working class—can find expression. The Democratic Party—the stinking corpse of bourgeois liberalism—is deeply discredited. Masses of working people find themselves utterly disenfranchised.”

In conclusion, the WSWWS stated,

“The twentieth century was not lived in vain. Its triumphs and tragedies have bequeathed to the working class invaluable political lessons, among which the most important is the understanding of the significance and implications of imperialist war. It is, above all, the manifestation of national and international contradictions than can find no solution within ‘normal’ channels. Whatever the outcome of the initial stages of the conflict that has begun, American imperialism has a rendezvous with disaster. It cannot conquer the world. It cannot re-impose colonial shackles upon the masses of the Middle East. It will not find through the medium of war a viable solution to its internal maladies. Rather, the unforeseen difficulties and mounting resistance engendered by war will intensify all of the internal contradictions of American society.”

The bourgeoisie and its apologists proclaim incessantly that Marxism has failed. The refutation of these claims requires only that one compare the analysis of contemporary events made by the *World Socialist Web Site*, on the basis of the Marxist method, to those offered by the leaders of world imperialism. On May 1, 2003, President Bush proclaimed aboard a US aircraft carrier that the American mission in Iraq had been accomplished. In reality, the disaster predicted by the WSWWS was only just beginning.

Five years of the “War on Terror”

Three years after the invasion of Iraq, the so-called “War on Terror” proclaimed by the Bush administration is in utter disarray. The Iraq campaign—the centerpiece of the global war proclaimed by Bush in the aftermath of 9/11—has been a military and political failure. An invasion that began under the title “Shock and Awe” has proved “shocking” only in the degree of incompetence and stupidity that has characterized the management of the entire wretched exercise. And judging by the scale of the insurgency, the Bush administration grossly overestimated the ability of the American military to awe and intimidate the masses of Iraq.

The hegemonic project launched by the Bush administration has suffered a major setback in Iraq. Outside the immediate precincts of the Bush White House, the Iraq invasion and occupation is assessed almost universally as an operational and strategic disaster. The prevailing view of the American intervention in Iraq is summed up in the title of a new book on the war: *Fiasco*.

More than 2,600 American soldiers have lost their lives in Iraq. The number of Iraqis that have been killed as a result of the violence unleashed by the US invasion is in the area of 100,000. Despite the brutal pacification campaigns undertaken by the American military, all objective indices indicate that the strength of the insurgency continues to grow.

Aside from the horrible toll in human lives—more than 1,000 Iraqis are being killed every month in Baghdad alone—the economic impact of the invasion and the resistance it provoked has been devastating. The Bush administration’s expectation that the unimpeded flow of Iraqi oil would

finance the cost of the war failed, like so many other calculations of the US government, to survive contact with reality. Since the invasion of Iraq, insurgents have carried out as many as 700 attacks on oil facilities. According to a study produced by military analyst Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies,

“Oil production dropped by 8 percent in 2005, and pipeline shipments through the Iraqi northern pipeline to Ceyhan in Turkey dropped from 800,000 barrels per day before the war to an average of 40,000 barrels per day in 2005. In July 2005, Iraqi officials estimated that insurgent attacks had already cost Iraq some \$11 billion. They had kept Iraqi oil production from approaching the 3 million barrel a day goal in 2005 that the Coalition had set after the fall of Saddam Hussein, and production had dropped from pre-war levels of around 2.5 million barrels a day to an average of 1.83 million barrels a day in 2005, and a level of only 1.57 million barrels a day in December 2005. These successes have a major impact in a country where 94 percent of the government’s direct income now comes from oil exports” [*Iraq’s Evolving Insurgency and the Risk of Civil War*, p. viii].

The conduct of the war has exposed the almost unfathomable stupidity and incompetence of not only the president but also of all the key personnel in his administration. The assessment made by Cordesman of the pre-invasion planning and subsequent conduct of the war is a shattering indictment of the entire administration. His report, issued on June 22, 2006, states,

“Much has been made of the intelligence failures in assessing Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. These failures pale to insignificance, however, in comparison with the failure of US policy and military planners to accurately assess the overall situation in Iraq before engaging in war, and the risk of insurgency if the US did not carry out an effective mix of nation building and stability operations. This failure cannot be made the responsibility of the intelligence community. It was the responsibility of the President, the Vice President, the National Security Adviser, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs.

“All had the responsibility to bring together policymakers, military planners, intelligence experts, and area experts to provide as accurate a picture of Iraq and the consequences of an invasion as possible. Each failed to exercise that responsibility. The nation’s leading policymakers chose to act on a limited and highly ideological view of Iraq that planned for one extremely optimistic definition of success, but not for risk or failure.

“There was no real planning for stability operations. Key policymakers did not want to engage in nation building and chose to believe that removing Saddam Hussein from power would leave the Iraqi government functioning and intact. Plans were made on the basis that significant elements of the Iraqi armed forces would turn to the Coalitions’ side, remain passive, or put up only token resistance.

“No real effort was made to ensure continuity of government or stability and security in Iraq’s major cities and throughout the countryside. Decades of serious sectarian and ethnic tension were downplayed or ignored. Actions by Saddam Hussein’s regime that had crippled Iraq’s economic development since the early years of the Iran-Iraq War—at a time when Iraq had only 17-18 million people—were ignored. Iraq was assumed to be an oil wealthy country whose economy could quickly recover if the oil fields were not burned, and transform itself into a modern capitalist structure in the process” [*Iraq’s Evolving Insurgency and the Risk of Civil War*, p. xv-xvi].

Cordesman is, in so many words, accusing the leading personnel in the American state—President Bush, Vice President Cheney, Secretary of State Colin Powell (who held that post at the time of the invasion), former National Security Adviser (and now Secretary of State) Condoleezza Rice, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Joint Chiefs Chairman Richard Meyers (who held that post when the invasion began)—of dereliction of

duty that, in the context of war, rises arguably to the level of criminal incompetence. This accusation is entirely justified. However, he fails to provide an explanation for how such a situation could exist within the highest levels of the state.

If the real aim of the American invasion had truly been the establishment of a stable democracy in Iraq, the absence of any serious planning for the situation that the US military would encounter after the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime would seem to defy rational explanation. However, the failures seem far less incomprehensible when they are examined in the context of the real war aims of the Bush administration.

The invasion of Iraq was not about democracy; it was about plunder—the establishment of US control over Iraqi oil reserves. To be sure, the Bush administration grossly underestimated, or didn't even seriously think about, what would be required to establish the minimum political and social prerequisites in Iraq for the success of the American looting operation. But, in the final analysis, the strategic and operational failures of the Iraqi war are rooted in the essential nature and aims of the enterprise. The Bush administration launched its war not to rebuild Iraq, but to rape it.

The Iraqi catastrophe is not merely the failure of a military plan. It is a comprehensive systemic failure involving all branches of government, the two corporate-controlled political parties, the media, and an entire system of class rule in which those who make decisions affecting the lives of millions of people, in their own country and beyond its borders, operate in an environment which imposes upon them few democratic and popular constraints nor holds them accountable for the consequences of their actions.

Five years have passed since the beginning of the “War on Terror.” That represents a longer period of time than the duration of the War of 1812 (three years), the Civil War (four years), the Spanish-American War (several months), the American involvement in World War I (a year and a half), the US participation in World War II (less than four years), and the US-led so-called “police action” in Korea (three years). Clearly, this new war, in terms of duration, is already a substantial event in the history of the United States. This makes it all the more remarkable that the Bush administration is still trying to explain what the so-called “War on Terror” is really all about. Even after the passage of a half-decade, the government is still unable to concoct a plausible, let alone rational, explanation of what it is fighting for, and against whom or what it is fighting.

In one of several speeches that Bush has given during the past two weeks aimed at rallying support, he proclaimed, “The war we fight today is more than a military conflict; it is the decisive ideological struggle of the 21st century.”

Upon reading these words, one is compelled to ask how the ideological struggle being waged by the Bush administration has found practical expression.

The “War on Terror” has been from its very first days accompanied by efforts to undermine and destroy the whole structure of constitutionally-guaranteed democratic rights that is the legacy of the genuinely democratic ideology that inspired the leaders of the American Revolution of the eighteenth century. The principles to which the Bush administration is devoted are those of incipient dictatorship. They have been most clearly articulated not only in the words of such open advocates of presidential tyranny as Supreme Court justices Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas, but also in the deeds committed by American military and intelligence personnel in the torture chambers of Abu Ghraib and in the secret CIA prisons, the existence of which has now been publicly acknowledged by Bush nearly five years after they were first put into operation.

Bush's attempt to defend his “War on Terror” abounds in the most glaring and absurd contradictions. For example, he stated on August 31,

“To understand the struggle unfolding in the Middle East, we need to

look at the recent history of the region. For a half-century, America's primary goal in the Middle East was stability. This was understandable at the time; we were fighting the Soviet Union in the Cold War; and it was important to support Middle Eastern governments that rejected communism. Yet, over the decades, an undercurrent of danger was rising in the Middle East. Much of the region was mired in stagnation and despair. A generation of young people grew up with little hope to improve their lives, and many fell under the sway of radical extremism. The terrorist movement multiplied in strength a resentment that had simmered for years and boiled over into violence throughout the world.”

What Bush seems to be saying—and in this he is correct—is that the emergence of terrorist movements in the Middle East is the result of the repressive policies pursued by the United States for more than a half-century during its struggle against the growth of communist and socialist influence among the masses.

In passing, Bush cited, as an example of the growth of extremism, the seizure of American hostages in Iran—though he failed to note that this occurred in the midst of a revolution that had just overthrown a military-police dictatorship that had come to power as a result of an anti-democratic coup staged by the CIA in 1953.

Putting aside all the demagogic claims made by the Bush administration, the real purpose of the “War on Terror” remains the establishment of the global hegemony of the United States. Notwithstanding the failures and setbacks that it has suffered since 2001, the objective of the “War on Terror” remains world domination. This is the perspective not only of the Bush administration, but of all major factions, Democrat as well as Republican, of the political establishment.

The drumbeat for war against Iran grows louder each day, even though the consequences of such a war would be catastrophic. An attack by the United States against Iran would set into motion a cataclysm of global dimensions. That such an action is even contemplated—even as the US has yet to come to grips with the consequences of its fiasco in Iraq—is an indication of the disoriented and delusional state of mind that exists in the highest levels of the American state.

It is necessary to examine the material and social conditions of American society that have produced this level of recklessness.



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