SEP public meeting in Wellington

Causes and consequences of the “war on terror”

Part 2

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On September 28, the World Socialist Web Site *held a public meeting in Wellington, New Zealand entitled “Five years since September 11: Causes and consequences of the ‘war on terror’” (see “WSWS holds public meeting in Wellington, New Zealand”). The meeting was addressed by Nick Beams, Socialist Equality Party (Australia) national secretary, and John Braddock, New Zealand correspondent for the WSWS (see* “The New Zealand Labour government and the ‘war on terror’”*).*

The following is part two of Beams’s address to the meeting. Part one *was published on October 4.* Part three *will be published on Friday.*

According to the Bush administration’s latest National Strategy for Combating Terrorism, the “war on terror” has involved a break from “old orthodoxies that once confined our counterterrorism efforts primarily to the criminal justice domain.” Now the US confronts a “transnational movement of extremist organizations, networks and individuals—and their state and non-state supporters—which have in common that they exploit Islam and use terrorism for ideological ends.” They are united by a “common set of ideas about the nature and destiny of the world, and a common goal of ushering in totalitarian rule.” Not only do they seek to “expel Western power and influence from the Muslim world and establish regimes that rule according to a violent and intolerant distortion of Islam”, some go even further and aim to establish “a single, pan-Islamic totalitarian regime that stretches from Spain to Southeast Asia.”

Anyone labouring under the misconception that this “analysis” is merely the deranged ravings of the Bush administration should think again. The Murdoch media, which functions as an international propaganda machine for the “war on terror”, has taken it up with a vengeance.

In a September 11 editorial, the *Times* in London insisted that the terrorist actions of Osama bin Laden were “rooted in a desire to recapture a lost Islamic world, not a forensic and bloody assessment of American foreign policy.” The sheer drama of what took place five years ago had blinded people to the history of what came before. “The actual account of what has brought contemporary terror about can be found in the expulsion of Muslims from Spain in the 15th century (a deed done before Columbus set sail for the Americas) or, at the latest, a defeat outside the gates of Vienna 200 years after. That a creed can combine a vision of the caliphate centuries old while employing the internet and satellite telephones to advance its ambitions will strike most Americans and Europeans as incredible. Even so, this was and is the essence of the September 11 story. To ignore this, and place the blame on Israel-Palestine, Afghanistan and Iraq is to misunderstand the creature that is al-Qaeda. It is the product of a very long history.”

The plans of Al Qaeda were the subject of a speech delivered by Bush on September 5. The terrorists, he declared, hope to “establish a violent political utopia across the Middle East, which they call a ‘Caliphate’—where all would be ruled according to their hateful ideology. ... This caliphate would be a totalitarian Islamic empire encompassing all current and former Muslim lands, stretching from Europe to North Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia. We know this because al Qaeda has told us.”

According to those who have studied them, the real motivations of today’s terrorists are somewhat different. One of the most in-depth research projects has been that carried out by Robert Pape, professor of political science at the University of Chicago. In an article published in the *Chicago Tribune* of September 12, he wrote: “Amid prognostications of doom, we have lost sight of the truth: that suicide terrorism is a tactic, not an enemy, and that beneath the religious rhetoric with which it is perpetrated, it occurs largely in the service of secular aims. Suicide terrorism is mainly a response to foreign occupation rather than a product of Islamic fundamentalism.”

Pape’s conclusions are based on a detailed analysis of suicide-terrorist attacks around the world since 1980.

“Since suicide terrorism is mainly a response to foreign occupation and not Islamic fundamentalism,” he noted in an interview with the *American Conservative* in July 2005, “the use of heavy military force to transform Muslim societies over there ... is only likely to increase the number of suicide terrorists coming at us.

“Since 1990, the United States has stationed thousands of ground troops on the Arabian Peninsula, and that is the main mobilization appeal of Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. People who make the argument that it is a good thing to have them attacking us over there are missing that suicide terrorism is not a supply-limited phenomenon where there are just a few hundred around the world willing to do it because they are religious fanatics. It is a demand-driven phenomenon. That is, it is driven by the presence of foreign forces on the territory that the terrorists view as their homeland. The operation in Iraq has stimulated suicide terrorism and has given suicide terrorism a new lease on life.”

These conclusions have been confirmed by US intelligence agencies. According to the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), completed in April, the US invasion of Iraq has played the central role in inspiring the establishment of new terrorist networks. The various terrorist groupings, the NIE declared, carried out their recruitment campaigns on the basis that the Iraq war was an attempt to conquer Islam by first occupying Iraq and establishing a permanent presence in the Middle East.

Robert Pape pointed out that during the 1990s, the chief focus of bin Laden’s speeches was the presence of tens of thousands of American

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combat forces on the Arabian Peninsula. “In 1996, he went on say that there was a grand plan by the United States—that the Americans were going to use combat forces in Iraq, break it into three pieces, give a piece of it to Israel so that Israel could enlarge its country, and then do the same thing to Saudi Arabia. As you can see, we are fulfilling his prediction, which is of tremendous help in his mobilization appeals.”

In fact, if one examines the events of the past five years they reveal something of a symbiotic relationship between Al Qaeda and the Bush administration. Every action of the United States provides the basis for new recruits to terrorist organisations, while whenever the Bush administration faces political difficulties—an election, a painful anniversary, further military disasters—Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden always seem to be on hand with another video tape and terrible warnings about new attacks in store. How convenient for the administration that bin Laden managed to escape in December 2001 and has eluded capture ever since.

Aside from the terrorist groups, a far broader movement has developed against the imperialist foreign policies of the US and the other major powers, which tends to assume a religious form. The reason for this lies in the collapse of the secular anti-imperialist national liberation movements and, more broadly, the crisis of perspective in the international working class.

Vast changes in the nature of capitalist production over the past two decades—the globalisation of production—have meant that the perspective of national liberation, which inspired the anti-imperialist movements of an earlier period, has been rendered completely anachronistic. The terminal crisis of the PLO is just one of the most dramatic expressions of this process. Moreover, the Soviet Union, which at one time provided a measure of support for such movements, has gone.

But, in the absence of an alternative international socialist perspective, mass opposition to foreign domination and oppression by the US and other imperialist powers has taken religious, and sometimes extremely reactionary, forms.

This is by no means inevitable, nor is it permanent, as a study of history reveals. Deep hostility to imperialist domination has assumed backward religious forms before. At the turn of the twentieth century, for example, the struggles against colonial oppression in both India and China were initially dressed in religious garb. It was not until the Russian Revolution in 1917 opened the way for an international struggle by the working class against imperialism and colonialism that the religious movements were pushed into the background.

Organisations such as the Muslim Brotherhood were consciously revived in order to try to head off the influence of socialism and have been used to perform that role ever since. Today, the chief factor that has enabled them to win adherents is the absence of a broad-based socialist movement of the working class.

The semi-deranged ravings of the Bush administration and its publicists in the media are remarkably similar to an ideology that was to play a significant political role in the service of reaction in the first decades of the twentieth century. I am referring to the infamous Protocols of the Elders of Zion, the forged document prepared in 1897, which purported to be the record of a discussion among Jewish leaders of a plot to exercise world domination.

In his masterful biography of Adolf Hitler, published in 1944, the German socialist author Konrad Heiden paid particular attention to the role of the Protocols in the formation of the ideology of Nazism and other reactionary movements. The authors of the forgery regarded their chief political problem to be devising the means to dominate the masses and, above all, defeating the growing influence of the socialist movement.

With the development of such methods, Heiden noted, history turned over a new leaf. While the forgers did not need to invent anti-Semitism, their achievement was to fashion it into a weapon in the class struggle.

History of course does not repeat itself, and there are many differences between the present day and the conditions of a hundred years ago. But there are, nevertheless, real parallels. While the capitalist powers do not, as yet, confront a socialist movement, the political situation in every country is characterised, above all, by the alienation of large sections of the population from the official political establishment. In no country does any government rule through positive support for its program, which is invariably aimed at undermining the social position of the vast majority. That is why the politics of fear have emerged.

And this is the significance of the “war on terror”. It is the political banner for the pursuit of militarism and conquest, combined with ever-deeper attacks on basic democratic and legal rights at home.

The invocation of “Islamofascism” is not only aimed at creating a climate of fear. It also provides the justification for one-time liberal intellectuals to abandon the last remaining semblance of a critical outlook, and justify aggressive, pre-emptive war.

In a recent article on the death of “liberal America”, entitled “Bush’s useful idiots”, New York University historian Tony Judt remarks that the once critical intelligentsia have fallen silent, the moral and intellectual arteries of the American body politic have hardened, and the magazines and newspapers of the liberal centre have fallen over themselves “in the hurry to align their editorial stance with that of a Republican president bent on exemplary war.”

What distinguishes Bush’s liberal allies, he writes, is that “they don’t look on the ‘War on Terror’, or the war in Iraq, or the war in Lebanon and eventually Iran, as mere serial exercises in the re-establishment of American martial dominance. They see them as skirmishes in a new global confrontation: a Good Fight, reassuringly comparable to their grandparents’ war against Fascism and their Cold War liberal parents’ stand against international Communism. Once again, they assert, things are clear. The world is ideologically divided; and—as before—we must take our stand on *the* issue of the age. Long nostalgic for the comforting verities of a simpler time, today’s liberal intellectuals have at last discovered a sense of purpose: they are at war with ‘Islamo-fascism.’”

Five years after the launching of the “war on terror” the lies and falsifications on which it is based stand exposed. No one, with even a modicum of political literacy believes the official version of the September 11 events: that 19 hijackers, many of them well-known to American intelligence agencies managed, undetected, to fly jet liners into buildings while, mysteriously, the US Air Force, honed and developed in decades of Cold War to meet a surprise attack, took no action.

In February 2003, the millions all over the world who took part in the largest demonstrations in history in opposition to the launching of an invasion of Iraq were already aware that the claims of “weapons of mass destruction” and connections between the regime of Saddam Hussein and the Al Qaeda network were crude lies.

Now the lie machine is once again in action as the US prepares for war against Iran. Our task is not simply to expose the new round of lies and falsifications piled up on top of the old ones, but to lay bare the objective social processes which underlie them.

Here we must recall that the lie in politics serves as a function of the class structure of society. In this case we have not just particular lies, but a system of lies, built into the very structure of the social and political order. Therefore we need to turn to an examination of the structure of this social order.

Our investigation starts not with 9/11, but rather 11/9: that is, November 9, 1989. This was the day the Berlin Wall came down, signifying the collapse of the East European Stalinist regimes, the impending demise of the Soviet Union and the ending of the post-war division of Europe, which had formed the foundation of international politics during the Cold War.

At the time, these events were hailed as the triumph of capitalism and the victory of the “free market”; the end of socialism, even the end of

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history. Above all, it was claimed, they signified the death of Marxism. In fact, the power and viability of Marxism, which had long before explained that the Stalinist regimes did not represent socialism and were destined to restore capitalism unless they were overthrown by the working class, was demonstrated in the analysis made by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). Far from representing the end of socialism, we explained, the collapse of the Stalinist regimes signified the breakdown of the entire post-war order. It had been shattered by the growing contradiction between the integration of the world economy—the process now known as globalisation—and the nation-state system.

At a meeting of the ICFI in May 1990, the following point was made:

"The political map is being redrawn as dramatically as it was in the period after 1914. The question is: how is it going to be redrawn and who's going to do the redrawing? Is it going to be redrawn on a capitalist basis, that is, through wars and bloody annexations, which is what the future will hold, or is it going to be redrawn by the working class through the abolition of national boundaries and the establishment of a worldwide socialist federation."

The issue was further elaborated as follows:

"The question is: will the imperialists be able to work out a new and stable equilibrium peacefully? Clearly, the old equilibrium which was established after World War II on the basis of the global supremacy of US imperialism is utterly unviable. This supremacy has been deteriorating over an extended period, but the framework of the Cold War still endowed it with a certain legitimacy. The United States-Soviet antagonism provided the means for suppressing the inter-imperialist rivalries. If there exists any possibility of working out a new inter-imperialist status quo 'peacefully', it first of all depends on the willingness of the United States to accept a relationship which, in one way or another, given the changes in the relationships economically between the major capitalist powers, would represent a diminution of its world position. The question is: should we expect such a dignified retreat on the part of American imperialism? The evidence so far strongly suggests that we should not" (*Fourth International* Volume 18 Number 1 Summer-Fall 1991).

This analysis was powerfully confirmed in just a matter of months. In August 1990, following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, the US began preparations for the first Gulf War, which was launched in January-February 1991. Fifteen years earlier, in response to the oil price spiral of 1973-74, US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger had canvassed the possibility of US forces seizing control of the Middle East oilfields. One of the problems with this proposal was that there were no American forces stationed in the Middle East. The Gulf War solved that question. Tens of thousands of US forces were moved on to the Arabian Peninsula and new bases established.

The defense secretary at the time, now vice-president, Dick Cheney explained war's significance: "Given the enormous resources that exist in that part of the world, and given the fact that those resources are in decline elsewhere, the value of those resources is only going to rise in the years ahead, and the United States and our major partners cannot afford to have those resources controlled by somebody who is fundamentally hostile to our interests."

In 1992, in the wake of the Gulf War, the implications of the new global situation confronting US imperialism were set out in a policy statement called the Defense Planning Guidance. Drafted by Paul Wolfowitz, who went on to become the Deputy Defense Secretary in the first administration of George W. Bush and a major architect of its foreign policy, the document insisted that the overriding goal of post-Cold War US political and military strategy had to be to prevent the emergence of any rival powerful enough to challenge its position.

"Our first objective is to prevent the re-emergence of a new rival. This is a dominant consideration underlying the new regional defense strategy and requires that we endeavor to prevent any hostile power from dominating a region whose resources would, under consolidated control, be sufficient to generate global power. These regions include Western Europe, East Asia, the territory of the former Soviet Union, and Southwest Asia.

"There are three additional aspects to this objective: First the US must show the leadership necessary to establish and protect a new order that holds the promise of convincing potential competitors that they need not aspire to a greater role or pursue a more aggressive posture to protect their legitimate interests. Second, in the non-defense areas, we must account sufficiently for the interests of the advanced industrial nations to discourage them from challenging our leadership or seeking to overturn the established political and economic order. Finally, we must maintain the mechanisms for deterring potential competitors from even aspiring to a larger regional or global role."

To be continued

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