The pretext for a historic shift in world politics

Patrick Martin
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Eight years ago today, on September 11, 2001, some 2,700 people lost their lives in a coordinated act of mass terrorism, in which hijacked jetliners were crashed into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and an empty field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. The exact circumstances of the 9/11 attacks remain shrouded in mystery to this day, despite—or rather because of—the series of official whitewash investigations.

The least credible of 9/11 stories is the official one: that 19 Arab terrorists, recruited and directed by Osama bin Laden, entered the United States over a period of many months, underwent, in some cases, extensive training as pilots at private American flight schools, and then carried out their acts of suicide and mass murder without the vast US intelligence apparatus having the slightest knowledge of their presence or purpose.

Many established facts contradict this story: several of the terrorists, including Mohammed Atta, the reputed operational leader, and alleged 9/11 hijackers Nawaf Alhazmi, Khalid Almihdhar and Ziad Samir Jarrah, were under surveillance by US intelligence agencies during the time of the preparation of the attacks. The US government received repeated warnings of the impending attack—including the notorious briefing of President George W. Bush on August 6, 2001, with a CIA memorandum headlined, "Bin Laden Determined to Strike Within US"—which were ignored.

Just as significant is the historical pedigree of the terrorist organization blamed for the attack: its leader, Osama bin Laden, and many of its key cadres had been enlisted as Washington's allies and counted as CIA "assets" in a US-funded effort to overturn a Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan. The Taliban regime in Afghanistan, bin Laden's ally and protector, was also a product of US intrigues, albeit indirectly: it was established and promoted by the Pakistan intelligence service ISI, a key ally of the CIA in the anti-Soviet war of 1979-1989, to seize power after Soviet withdrawal.

For all the congressional and media criticism of an alleged CIA "intelligence failure," 9/11 far more likely represented a deliberate decision at some level of the US military/intelligence apparatus to allow known terrorists to go about their business, in the expectation they would provide the necessary pretext for a radical shift in American foreign and domestic policy.

There is no doubt 9/11 marked a watershed in terms of the policies of American imperialism. The Bush administration, with full support from Democrats and Republicans in Congress, placed the United States on a war footing. Each new outrage—invasions, torture, kidnappings, concentration camps, domestic spying, flouting of constitutional norms—was justified by the all-purpose argument that "9/11 changed everything."

Within a month of the attacks, the United States had attacked Afghanistan and within three months, the Taliban had been overthrown and a new US-backed regime installed in Kabul. Only six months after 9/11, the Bush administration made a final decision to go to war against Iraq, and the White House had issued orders to the CIA to torture Al Qaeda prisoners to extract the necessary "evidence" of a nonexistent link between Saddam Hussein and the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington.

The Bush administration utilized the first anniversary of 9/11 to push through a UN Security Council resolution against Iraq, followed by authorization for war against Iraq by Congress, including the Democratic-controlled US Senate. The Republicans won the 2002 congressional elections waving the bloody shirt of terrorism, and Bush won reelection in 2004 in a similar

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fashion, with a significant boost from a threatening video of bin Laden, conveniently released by the former CIA contractor on the weekend before the vote.

One of the most significant and revealing events was the adoption in 2002 of a national security strategy based on the new doctrine of "preventive war." It proclaimed Washington's right and intention to take military action against any country which it identified as a potential threat to US security. By embracing aggressive war as a legitimate instrument of foreign policy, the White House directive placed at the foundation of the foreign policy of the United States conceptions that had been repudiated as criminal by the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal in 1946.

While the Bush-Cheney cabal took the lead, this was not merely a transformation of the policy of one administration or one country, but a shift of world-historic dimensions. This is demonstrated by the fact that other imperialist powers, most notably Britain, Australia and Canada, have engaged in a similar change of course. Britain, Spain and Australia joined the US attack on Iraq. The whole of NATO has participated in the occupation of Afghanistan—many thousands of miles from the North Atlantic. Both Germany and Japan have deployed troops overseas in combat for the first time since World War II. And Russia and China, seeing the entry of American military forces into the Persian Gulf and Central Asia, have formed their own military bloc in opposition.

The source of these vast changes in international relations lies not in the events of September 11, 2001. These events must be placed in a broader historical context. The real origins go back to the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the dissolution of the USSR in December 1991, which the American ruling elite took as a green light for the unlimited assertion of its military power.

The events of 9/11 were utilized to make public and adopt as official policy the doctrines advocated in right-wing think tanks throughout the 1990s. Given the drastic decline in the economic position of American capitalism, Washington and Wall Street saw the resort to force as the only means of shoring up their worldwide interests. Their imperialist rivals, in Europe and Asia, have been driven in turn to reassert their own military power.

The most obvious opportunities for the expansion of US imperialist influence have been along the periphery of the former USSR—from Bosnia and Kosovo in the west, to the Caucasus, Iraq, Iran and Central Asia, to Korea in the Far East. These are the flash points of American foreign policy over the last two decades, under both Democratic and Republican administrations.

The historic character of this shift in imperialist policies on a world scale has been demonstrated most clearly in the policies of the Obama administration. The Democratic Party won control of Congress in the 2006 elections in large measure because of the growing popular hostility to the war in Iraq. Obama capitalized on that antiwar sentiment in his defeat of Hillary Clinton for the Democratic presidential nomination.

But as soon as he was elected, the erstwhile proponent of "hope" and "change" reappointed Bush's Pentagon chief Robert Gates and selected Clinton as his secretary of state. Within weeks of his inauguration, Obama announced that he would maintain the schedule of US troop deployments in Iraq set by the Bush administration, and that he would greatly escalate the US military intervention in Afghanistan, sending an additional 17,000 troops.

The world is set on a course that, without the intervention of the working class based on a socialist program, leads inexorably to new imperialist wars. What is required, and what the *World Socialist Web Site* fights for, is the mobilization of the working class as a conscious international force, to stop the threat of world war by putting an end to the social order—based on capitalism and the nation-state system—which is the fundamental cause of war.

Patrick Martin

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