

Obama at Ground Zero

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President Barack Obama's brief visit to New York City's "Ground Zero" Thursday is part of an orchestrated campaign to exploit the killing of Osama bin Laden for the most reactionary purposes.

Even as more details emerge making it clear that the operation mounted by Navy Seals and the CIA in Pakistan represented the extra-judicial execution of an unarmed man, there are growing indications that domestic political considerations have played a major role in the entire affair.

Under conditions of unending wars without results, a protracted economic crisis and a tremendous deterioration of the social conditions of American working people, popular anger is growing, much of it directed at the Obama administration. A major consideration in the decision to kill Bin Laden was the idea that a successful operation could be exploited to shore up Obama's political position and divert this anger through the promotion of jingoism and militarism.

It is no mere coincidence that Obama's "victory lap" over the killing of Bin Laden comes barely a week after the humiliating spectacle of the American president releasing his "long-form" birth certificate. In both instances, as in so many of his administration's policies, the actions of Obama are driven by an accommodation to and cowering before the politics of the Republican right.

Obama initially sought to make his Ground Zero visit a bipartisan affair by inviting George Bush, who exploited the events of 9/11 to launch wars of aggression and a frontal assault on democratic rights, which his Democratic successor has continued and escalated.

After Bush declined, Obama came up with a Republican who is arguably an even more grotesque personification of political reaction—former New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani, who accompanied

Obama on his rounds to a New York City fire station, a police station house and then Ground Zero.

In his remarks at the police station, Obama emphasized that Giuliani's presence was "testimony that we may have our differences, politically, in ordinary times, but when it comes to keeping this country safe, we are, first and foremost, Americans."

What nonsense! Giuliani has denounced Obama in the most vitriolic terms ever since he was elected, charging him with being soft on terrorism and mishandling the war in Afghanistan. The decision to carry out the cold-blooded assassination of Bin Laden was driven in large part by Obama's desire to deflect such criticism by adopting the methods demanded by the right.

Obama, a constitutional lawyer and former president of the Harvard Law Review, is deepening the assault by the US government on international law and constitutional principles. There exist a whole series of precedents that apply to the case of Osama bin Laden and underscore the politically revolting character of the US administration's claims that murdering him represented an exercise of "justice."

At the end of the Second World War, the US government insisted that there be no summary executions of Nazi war criminals. Based on the spurious claims made by Obama's Justice Department in relation to the Bin Laden killing—that he was a combatant in war and therefore subject to being summarily shot—they too could have been put to death without trial.

But in dealing with individuals who shared responsibility for the deaths of millions, the US government insisted that they be brought to trial at Nuremberg to expose and redress the war crimes committed by Hitler's regime.

The trial of Adolf Eichmann, which was based on the Nuremberg principles, established a similar precedent.

Israeli agents who captured Eichmann in Argentina did not summarily execute him, but captured him so he could face trial.

It is clear that Bin Laden could have been captured alive, but an order was given from the White House that he should be executed on the spot. The Obama administration had no desire to try the Al Qaeda leader on charges of terrorism and murder, to be proven in a court of law.

To do so would risk exposing Bin Laden's long-time and intimate ties to US intelligence agencies, going back to the US-backed Islamist insurgency in Afghanistan in the 1980s. It would also raise the threat of a legal forum in which the events of 9/11 could be exposed to scrutiny, endangering the concerted bipartisan effort to draw a veil over the terrorist attacks and what prior knowledge US officials and agencies had about them.

Nor did Obama have any desire to resurrect the debate over whether suspected terrorists should be tried before civilian courts—where Bin Laden faced federal charges—or military commissions. That is a debate he had already ceded to the Republicans when he ordered the resumption of the drumhead trials at Guantanamo.

Finally, extra-judicial execution has become standard operating procedure for the US government, carried out almost daily by means of Predator drone attacks in Pakistan and elsewhere.

The pseudo-legal rationalizations of these actions pose a direct threat. Methods used internationally will eventually be employed against those seen as enemies of the US ruling elite within the United States itself.

In carrying out this extra-legal and reactionary policy, Obama enjoys the full support of the media, which has dedicated itself to an obscene celebration of the killings in Pakistan, as well as the so-called liberals and “lefts,” who are ecstatic over the Democratic president's ability to cloak himself in the mantle of the “war on terrorism.”

The *New York Times* editorialized: “Mr. Obama's risky and audacious decision to attack the Bin Laden compound in Pakistan has demolished the notion that he cannot make tough decisions or cares primarily about the nation's image abroad.”

Similarly, the *Nation's* Eric Alterman proclaimed that Obama's “cool, calm decision-making and demeanor—coupled with the peerless professional

execution of the operation—can only impress world opinion with the mature and steely determination of America's post-Bush leadership.”

Such comments express the turn to the right by this entire socio-political layer, made up of privileged sections of the upper middle class that are rallying to the banner of US imperialism.

The attempt by Obama, echoed and amplified by the corporate media, to invoke the killing of Osama bin Laden as a touchstone of national unity has a deeply reactionary content. Some have suggested that the assassination could revive the much over-stated feeling of unity that followed 9/11, as if Bin Laden's death justified all of the crimes committed in the name of that tragedy, including aggressive wars that have killed over a million people.

It bears noting that Obama's celebratory trip to Ground Zero came 50 years to the day after NASA launched the first American—astronaut Alan Shepard—into space. The space flight came three weeks after the Soviet Union sent the first human being into space—cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin—and the humiliating debacle for US imperialism of the CIA's abortive Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba.

Notwithstanding this Cold War overlay, the space launch captured the imagination of the American people. In welcoming Shepard to Washington four days later, President John F. Kennedy praised the astronaut as well as NASA's scientists and engineers for “an outstanding contribution to the advancement of human knowledge of space technology and a demonstration of man's capabilities in sub-orbital space flight.”

A half century later, it is a measure of the historic decline of US imperialism and the protracted political degeneration of the ruling establishment that its attempts to invoke national pride focus not on feats of science, technology and exploration, but on the dirty work of assassination squads.

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