

September 11 Museum: An exercise in historical falsification

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National September 11 Memorial Museum opened to the public on May 21. It follows by roughly two and a half years the opening of the 9/11 Memorial. Both are located at the former site of the collapsed World Trade Center in lower Manhattan. The museum took nine years and \$700 million to construct, and is reported to have an annual projected operating cost of \$60 million. It is the most expensive such facility in the nation.

The museum, which is entirely subterranean, lies within the footprint of the Twin Towers, the pair of 110-story office buildings in lower Manhattan that collapsed after being struck by hijacked airliners on September 11, 2001. The resulting deaths, combined with those caused by the impact of another hijacked plane that was flown into the Pentagon building, headquarters of the U.S. Defense Department, in northern Virginia, and the fourth hijacked plane that crashed into a field in western Pennsylvania, numbered approximately 3,000.

The coordinated terrorist attacks were planned and carried out by members of Al Qaeda, an organization with its roots in the U.S.-supported insurgency against the Soviet-backed government in Afghanistan during the 1980s.

According to the museum's official web site, "The National September 11 Memorial Museum serves as the country's principal institution concerned with exploring the implications of the events of 9/11, documenting the impact of those events and exploring 9/11's continuing significance." The Mission Statement continues, "Demonstrating the consequences of terrorism on individual lives and its impact on communities at the local, national, and international levels, the Museum attests to the triumph of human dignity over human depravity and affirms an unwavering commitment to the fundamental value of human life."

A visit to the museum reveals that it is narrowly focused on the attacks themselves and the impact they had on the survivors, their families and friends, and the larger community. It seeks to accomplish this by overwhelming the visitor with massive physical remnants of the destroyed buildings, including *in situ* structural elements, large quantities of debris, including wrecked rescue equipment and personal belongings of the victims recovered from the rubble, as well as a plethora of still and video images and audio recordings. A wall covered

with photos of the victims, plus recorded phone calls, and video loops of television reports conveys the tragedy of so many lives lost. The effect is numbing.

The horror experienced by those involved is undeniable. However, the sensory overload created by the museum has the tendency, no doubt intentional, of emphasizing the emotional impact of the tragedy and its seeming irrationality, while crowding out any consideration of the larger historical context. It is, in fact, a deliberate attempt to overwhelm and mystify rather than educate.

The museum's presentation devotes a minimal amount of space to the background of Al Qaeda. A short video, "The Rise of Al Qaeda," placed at the very end of the exhibition, states that the US only supported the "moderate" opposition to the Soviet-supported Afghan government and not the "extremists" (a narrative that is being repeated today in Syria).

Completely ignored is the fact that Osama bin Laden worked hand-in-hand with the CIA and that Al Qaeda was, in effect, a creation of the United States, as a Cold War proxy force against the Soviet Union. To the extent that the video addresses Al Qaeda's motivation at all, it is attributed to the U.S. support of Israel. No mention is made of American imperialism's support of brutal dictatorships throughout the Middle East. A range of religious leaders have also criticized the video for presenting a distorted view of Islam.

The 9/11 Commission, which despite enormous limitations examined numerous inconsistencies and contradictions in the Bush administration's account of the terrorist plot, is barely mentioned (see "What the September 11 commission hearings revealed" Part 1, Part 2, Part 3, Part 4). The small amount of text devoted to discussing the organization and preparation of the plot states that most of the hijackers were unknown to US authorities, an allegation contradicted by 9/11 Commission testimony.

A copy of the August 6, 2001, CIA-prepared presidential briefing memo, "Bin Laden Determined to Strike Within US," which mentioned targets in Washington and New York City and cited threats to hijack aircraft, is displayed, but with no discussion of its implications or why the Bush administration chose to look the other way.

Perhaps the most grotesque explanation of the cause of the

9/11 attacks presented in the museum comes in another video, which features various “experts” expounding on the consequences of the attacks. Rudolph Giuliani, mayor of New York at the time, attributes the motivation of the hijackers to “envy” of American “success.” The arrogance and conceit of the US ruling class could not be stated more clearly.

The intentionally myopic presentation of 9/11 was re-enforced in President Obama’s speech at the dedication of the museum, which focused solely on the immediate tragedy, making no reference to the larger questions involved.

Considered without knowledge of the wider context, based on the museum’s presentation alone, one would be left with the impression that the 9/11 attacks were simply the result of irrational “depravity,” as the Mission Statement puts it, an expression of “pure evil.” There are no nuances; no possibility of varying interpretation is even suggested. This narrative has a definite political purpose. If there is no cause other than mindless hatred and “envy,” if irrational “terrorism” is the common enemy, then one is left with a simplistic “us versus them” view of the world. This narrow and biased rendering of 9/11 is tailored to facilitate the goal of the US ruling classes: to use the attacks to whip up a jingoistic nationalism in order to cover up its immense crimes both foreign and domestic.

Above all, the museum and the memorial seek to disguise the fact that the 9/11 attacks represented a massive case of “blowback,” in a double sense. The attacks were a politically reactionary response to crimes committed by American imperialism in the Middle East—propping up bloodstained monarchies and dictatorships, slaughtering hundreds of thousands in wars, upholding Israeli oppression and dispossession of the Palestinians—all in order to defend the profit interests of American corporations and the strategic domination of the United States over the vast oil resources of the region. The organization that carried out the atrocities of 9/11, Al Qaeda, was a direct creation of American imperialism, and was being monitored by US intelligence agencies when it targeted New York and Washington.

An honest attempt to understand 9/11 would include not only a full review of the events and historical processes that led up to the attacks, but also a full examination of their consequences, including the unending “war on terrorism,” the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, military interventions in Libya and Syria, and the erection of a massive police-state surveillance apparatus to spy on the population of the entire world. It would be delusional to expect that from institutions financed by Wall Street and the US government.

Instead, we are presented with a crass attempt to exploit a genuine tragedy, whose victims were predominantly ordinary working class people, to promote a political agenda aimed at domination of the working class and oppressed people around the world. Commemoration of the deaths and injuries caused by the attacks is a necessary and appropriate task. The cynical abuse of their memories is not.

The drive to finalize the memorial and museum also had more direct, financial motives—the construction of replacement commercial space, and the revenue and profits it will bring. In lower Manhattan, open land on which to erect new buildings is highly sought after, but extremely rare. The leveling of the World Trade Center property provided a golden opportunity for the wealthy real estate and banking interests who dominate the city to reap a windfall. The sponsors of the museum constitute a veritable Who’s Who of the city’s financial and corporate elite. Another video in the museum, which presents the “Rebirth” of the area known as Ground Zero, totally ignores this central aspect of the rebuilding process.

The opening of the museum was preceded by an invitation-only gala party. The black tie event for 60 of the museum’s wealthy donors was hosted by Condé Nast, a major international publisher of magazines based in New York City, and billionaire former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg. The participants were lavished with cocktails, crab cakes, and shrimp hors d’oeuvres. The *New York Daily News* described it as a “festive” and “alcohol-fueled party” with drinking, eating, and laughter.

The class divide inherent in the September 11 Memorial and Museum finds limited expression in the objections that many of the survivors’ families have voiced to the treatment of the unidentified human remains and to the crass commercialism of the museum’s \$24 admission fee and its vulgar gift shop, the latter two presumably necessary to defray the projected \$60 million annual operating cost.

Many families have expressed outrage at the placement of the large numbers of as yet unidentified human remains retrieved from the rubble of the collapsed towers into what is, effectively, a subterranean crypt, accessible only through the museum (though not open to the general public), instead of respectful interment. The remains of 1,115 out of the total of 2,749 victims at the World Trade Center have not been individually identified.

The museum’s gift shop is stuffed with tasteless and offensive trinkets (including a much-reviled cheese plate, now withdrawn), which the families of the victims and others have objected to as totally inappropriate for a place supposedly dedicated to the commemoration of the dead.

In sum, the September 11 Museum is a combination of gross historical falsification and propaganda alongside crass commercialism.



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