

The US terror scare

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In a commentary published December 17 in the *Washington Post*, columnist David Ignatius, who has close connections with the US military-intelligence apparatus, comments on the debate within US ruling circles about the scale and timing of an escalation of the US military intervention in Iraq and Syria.

After noting that President Obama has so far rejected calls to deploy substantial numbers of US ground troops against ISIS, Ignatius poses this revealing question:

“What would cause Obama to change his mind and treat the war against the Islamic State as an existential crisis requiring a major US military intervention? Probably the trigger would be a big, orchestrated terrorist incident that so frightened the public that it began to prevent the normal functioning of America. At that point, Obama might decide there was no alternative to taking ownership of the Middle East mess with tens of thousands of US troops.”

This observation explains far more about the political significance of the November 13 terrorist attacks in Paris and the December 2 killings in San Bernardino than the feverish denunciations of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS) by American politicians and the corporate-controlled media.

The US ruling elite is mulling over its options in Iraq and Syria, well aware of the powerful domestic opposition to the expanding war in the Middle East. Wall Street, the Pentagon and the CIA know that to embark on a major escalation, including the use of large numbers of ground troops, they will need a suitable pretext to overcome popular anti-war sentiment. The media firestorm following San Bernardino has served as something of a dress rehearsal for how this would be done.

Terrible and tragic as it was, the killing of 14 people in San Bernardino was only one of dozens of such mass shootings in the United States over the past few years, and only the second—following the Ft. Hood, Texas killings by Major Nidal Hassan in 2009—in which the attackers were apparently motivated by Islamic extremism. In the period since the 9/11 attacks, white supremacist and

Christian fundamentalist terrorists have killed more people in America than Islamists, yet there is no political or media firestorm demanding state repression of such right-wing fanatics.

San Bernardino has been seized upon to roll out a political agenda prepared well in advance, with demands for the elimination of encryption in Internet services, mass surveillance of all social media postings, a crackdown on visa waivers and a dramatic escalation of US military operations in the name of a war against ISIS. This despite the fact that the two killers, husband and wife, did not prepare their attack using encrypted communications, did not (contrary to press claims) announce their terrorist intentions on social media, did not make use of the visa waiver program, and had no direct connection to ISIS at all. Syed Farook was apparently radicalized before ISIS had even taken its present shape as an organization.

This is a recurring pattern over the past 15 years, going back to the murky origins of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which have never been the subject of a serious and independent investigation. Terrorist attacks take place that are attributed to shadowy Islamist organizations that have longstanding ties to the CIA and other imperialist intelligence agencies. (Al Qaeda, for example, arose out of the US-backed guerrilla war against the pro-Soviet regime in Afghanistan in the 1980s.)

These attacks become the pretext for the launching of predatory wars long planned by the imperialist powers and needing only a suitable pretext. Thus 9/11 became the launching pad for the US invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. The Paris attacks have brought a French aircraft carrier into the bombing campaign in Syria along with the participation of British bombers and a substantial troop deployment by Germany.

War abroad is inevitably accompanied by repression at home, with police-military mobilizations that are carried out in the name of fighting “terrorism,” but whose real purpose is to suppress domestic anti-war sentiment and working class opposition to the austerity measures required by the deepening crisis of world capitalism. Thus

the Paris attacks were followed by a savage crackdown by the French government, whose first victims were environmental protesters outside the climate summit earlier this month.

According to Ignatius, who participated in a closed-door briefing at the White House with a group of editors and columnists on December 15, the Obama administration does not view San Bernardino as providing a sufficient *casus belli* for a full-scale US war in Syria. Something bigger would be required.

This should be taken as a warning. There are many in the vast US intelligence apparatus with the experience and ruthlessness required to manufacture such an incident, either by permitting an ongoing terrorist plan to go forward without disruption—as was apparently the case in the 9/11 attack—or by directly organizing such an operation under a false flag. At the very least, they consider events such as the Paris and San Bernardino attacks as a political godsend.

It is instructive to recall the words of former national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, who played a key role in the Carter administration’s anti-Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, in his book on US imperialist foreign policy, *The Grand Chessboard*, published just four years before 9/11:

It is also a fact that America is too democratic at home to be autocratic abroad. This limits the use of America’s power, especially its capacity for military intimidation. Never before has a populist democracy attained international supremacy. But the pursuit of power is not a goal that commands popular passion, *except in conditions of a sudden threat or challenge to the public’s sense of domestic well-being* [emphasis added]. The economic self-denial (that is, defense spending) and the human sacrifice (casualties, even among professional soldiers) required in the effort are uncongenial to democratic instincts. Democracy is inimical to imperial mobilization.

When such an event occurs, the faster the media reaches unanimity on what organization was responsible and what country must be bombed or invaded to “defend” the American people, the more certain it is that a long-prepared contingency plan is coming to fruition.

This reality underscores the completely manipulated and

stage-managed character of the 2016 presidential election. An event such as San Bernardino can be dropped on the US public like a bomb at any time for the purpose of provoking a war, tipping an election or even calling off voting altogether. It is worth remembering that in 2004 there was open discussion within the Bush administration of the possible postponement or cancellation of the presidential election, using a possible terrorist attack as the pretext. (See: “Bush administration takes steps to cancel US election”)

Last week’s debates by the Republican and Democratic presidential candidates displayed bipartisan agreement on the essential political rationale for a new imperialist war in the Middle East. All the capitalist politicians, from the pseudo-socialist Bernie Sanders to the libertarian Rand Paul, adhered to the media narrative that the San Bernardino killings are the central issue in the election, that the American people are completely preoccupied with the danger of terrorism, and that every action of the US government, foreign and domestic, must be judged through this lens.

The Socialist Equality Party entirely rejects this political framework. We call on workers not to be deceived or swayed by the barrage of pro-war propaganda disguised as anti-terrorism. We fight for the independent political mobilization of the working class against imperialist war, against mounting state repression, and against austerity policies and the destruction of jobs and living standards and advance a socialist and internationalist program to guide this struggle.



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