

20 years since 9/11 and the “war on terror”

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10 September 2021

Today marks 20 years since the horrific attacks of September 11, 2001, in which two hijacked planes were flown into New York City’s World Trade Center, one into the Pentagon and a fourth into a field in Pennsylvania after passengers fought to wrest control from the hijackers. In all, nearly 3,000 people were killed, the largest number of violent deaths on a single day on American soil since the Civil War.

Once again, the media is bombarding the US and world public with the wrenching images of the horrific crime and tragedy of 9/11, while talking heads are called upon to speculate on the supposed potential for renewed terrorism after the debacle of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and indeed the entire 20-year “global war on terrorism”.

What is most remarkable about the events of 9/11, a day that we are told incessantly “changed everything”, is how much remains unknown and murky about how they happened.

One does not have to be a conspiracy theorist or believe that someone planted explosives in the Twin Towers to recognize that the official story that 9/11 was the result of a “failure of imagination” on the part of US intelligence agencies is shot through with contradictions, omissions and cover-up.

On the eve of the anniversary, US President Joe Biden issued an executive order in response to the demands made in court by thousands of survivors and families of 9/11 victims for the release of information related to the multiple connections of the Saudi monarchy to the attacks, which successive administrations have gone to extraordinary lengths to keep secret. “The American people deserve to have a fuller picture of what their Government knows about those attacks,” Biden stated. While the order calls for a “declassification review”, it allows the Justice Department, the CIA, FBI and other agencies to keep information secret “in the interest of the national security”.

As is well known, 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudis, as was Al Qaeda’s leader Osama bin Laden, the former ally of the CIA in its proxy war in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Saudi officials, diplomats and intelligence agents are implicated in financing the hijackers, enrolling them in flight schools and finding them housing, including in the home of the main FBI informant on the Muslim community of San Diego.

The Saudi connection is so sensitive not only because it involves US imperialism’s principal ally in the Arab world, but because the intimate ties between Saudi and US intelligence agencies raise troubling questions about how it was possible that no one in the CIA, FBI or other agencies was aware of the hijackers’ plans, even though several of them had been under CIA surveillance and were on FBI watch lists as they freely entered and moved about

the United States.

Described as the “greatest intelligence failure” in US history, the obvious question is why not a single official, from the CIA director down to the consular agents who granted the hijackers visas, suffered so much as a demotion after 9/11. By contrast, in the wake of Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor, senior US commanders were relieved of their commands and driven out of the military.

There has never been a serious credible investigation of how 9/11 was allowed to happen, despite ample warnings of impending attacks and many of its perpetrators under active surveillance. And there is no reason to expect that the Biden administration will reveal the secrets that the US government has so aggressively guarded for two decades.

Whatever the precise origins of the 9/11 attacks, they were immediately welcomed as a pretext for sharply escalating a longstanding agenda of US imperialism. In the aftermath of the Moscow Stalinist bureaucracy’s 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union, the US ruling class determined that it could use its unchallenged military superiority to offset the decline of US global economic hegemony and reorder global politics.

The 9/11 terrorist attacks provided not only a *casus belli*, but also a means of intimidating and confusing the population and suppressing its broad antiwar sentiments. The media did its part, relentlessly terrorizing the population with the alleged threat of further acts of terrorism.

Within weeks, the US military invaded Afghanistan, dropping thousands of tons of munitions on its population and massacring thousands of captured Afghan fighters. Less than a year and a half later, it launched a second war against Iraq justified with lies about “weapons of mass destruction” and non-existent ties between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda.

These wars were aimed not at protecting the US population from terrorism, as Washington claimed, but at securing US hegemony over the principal energy-producing regions of the Persian Gulf and Central Asia.

With its near unanimous passage of the Authorization for the Use of Military Force immediately after 9/11, Congress fully ceded power to the US President to launch “preemptive” wars against any country deemed a threat to US security or economic interests, without the slightest consent of the American people.

As the Obama administration launched new wars for regime change in Libya and then Syria, the pretext of the “global war on terrorism” became ever more preposterous. In both countries, Al Qaeda-linked militias served as Washington’s proxy ground forces.

The attacks also provided an opportunity to introduce far-reaching changes that involved wholesale attacks on democratic rights. This included the Homeland Security Department, the Patriot Act, the introduction of wholesale spying on the population, warrantless searches, detentions without charges and “extraordinary renditions”. Methods of torture were prescribed from the White House and hideously implemented from Guantanamo to Abu Ghraib, Bagram and CIA “black sites” scattered across the globe.

Under Obama, the White House institutionalized assassination as state policy, arrogating to itself the power to murder so-called “enemy combatants”, including US citizens, anywhere in the world without any explanation, much less charges or due process. Thousands, including many civilians, have died in these “targeted killings”.

Justified in the name of combatting terrorism, this massive increase in the police powers of the state unfolded amidst the fastest rise in social inequality in US in history, reaching levels that are inherently incompatible with democratic forms of rule.

What have been the consequences of the 20 years of uninterrupted war that followed 9/11? Somewhere between one and two million people lost their lives in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Yemen and other countries subjected to US attacks. The wounded number many millions more, and tens of millions were turned into refugees from societies decimated by war. Some 7,000 US troops were killed along with roughly twice as many military contractors, while tens of thousands were wounded, and many more suffered the psychological scars from participating in dirty colonial-style wars.

The financial cost of these wars has been staggering. In his August 30 speech announcing the end of the US occupation of Afghanistan, US President Joe Biden said that it was “time to be honest with the American people,” tacitly acknowledging that they have been fed a steady diet of lies in the interest of war. He stated that the US had spent \$300 million every day for the last 20 years on the Afghanistan war alone.

Brown University’s Costs of War Project places the total price tag for the post 9/11 wars, including long-term care for veterans, at over \$8 trillion. This does not include trillions more owed on the debt incurred by the US government to finance its military adventures. What could that have achieved had such vast sums been spent on bettering the conditions of life for the people of the US and the world, instead of killing and maiming millions?

What has US imperialism accomplished in 20 years of war? Nowhere did it realize its objectives. While it was able to lay waste to entire societies, it proved incapable of imposing viable puppet regimes in any of the countries it attacked. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan in the face of the Taliban’s taking Kabul represents not merely one humiliating military defeat, but a shattering setback for the entire US global strategy pursued over the course of decades. This is what explains the semi-hysteria within the US ruling establishment over the evacuation of Kabul.

Such an historic debacle cannot be explained by military miscalculations or intelligence failures, but rather expresses the profound economic and social crisis gripping the entire US capitalist system.

The social and political legacies of 9/11 and the “war on terrorism” are far-reaching. Repeated wars of aggression based upon lies have discredited every institution of American society from the White House to Congress, both the Democratic and Republican Parties, the media which sold these wars, the financial elite which profited off of them, as well as academics and pseudo-left upper middle class layers who provided apologies for them.

Unrestrained violence abroad, including routinized torture and assassinations, with US presidents talking about “taking out” their enemies like Mafia bosses, has contributed to a brutalization of American society at home, marked by regular mass shootings and other eruptions of violence. It has played a major role in creating the political environment in which a figure like Donald Trump could become president of the United States and attempt a coup to overturn a US election.

The debacle of US imperialism’s 20-year war on terror has coincided with its homicidal policy in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has resulted in hundreds of thousands of preventable deaths because of the subordination of public health to profit interests. The US ruling elite places no more value on American lives than those of Iraqis or Afghans.

US imperialism has been humiliated in war, the policies of the ruling class have produced hundreds of thousands of completely unnecessary COVID deaths and it has no policy to confront climate change, even as two coasts are ravaged by flooding and the West is beset by fires. Meanwhile, an increasingly financialized economy based on the printing of trillions of dollars in fictitious capital and handing them over to the super-rich is preparing an economic disaster. Taken together these developments have profoundly revolutionary implications.

The debacle of the “war on terrorism” signals no end to US militarism. Rather, as Biden has made clear, the withdrawal from Afghanistan is aimed at shifting US military power toward confrontation with what the Pentagon describes as “strategic competitors” or “great power” rivals, i.e., nuclear-armed China and Russia. In other words, there is a growing threat of a third world war.

Under these conditions, the most burning task is the building of a mass anti-war movement. If the past 20 years have taught us anything, such a movement cannot be based on the Democratic Party or the existing institutions of American society. It must be rooted in the working class, united with workers all over the world and joined with the struggle for socialism.



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