

# *Turning Point: 9/11 And The War On Terror*—An account of the terror attacks and their aftermath

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The events of September 11, 2001, were deeply traumatic. Nearly 3,000 people died in the terror attacks, involving four airplanes, including two that brought down the World Trade Center in New York, the deadliest in US history.

Understandably, 9/11 has become the subject matter for numerous novels, films and television programs and series. A number have effectively described the character of the events and their psychological impact, few have shed much light on their deeper sources and larger implications.

“There’s before 9/11 and there’s after 9/11,” according to the trailer for Netflix’s *Turning Point: 9/11 And The War On Terror*, a new five-part documentary series, released on the 20th anniversary of the terror attacks.

The series presents valuable material and imagery. The creators take a generally critical attitude toward what the US government did in the wake of September 2001. However, on the whole, *Turning Point* accepts far too many of the premises of the “war on terror” and the rest of the official version. It points toward disturbing aspects of American domestic and foreign policy, but does not challenge the latter in a substantive manner.

The title of the series itself is problematic. 9/11 was not the “turning point,” the event that “changed everything.” As the WWSW has argued *and proven* time and again over the past two decades, whatever the precise origins of the attacks, they were instantaneously seized upon by the US ruling elite as a pretext for implementing a long-standing agenda, justifying the launch of decades-long wars in the Middle East and Central Asia and far-reaching attacks on democratic rights. The “war on terror,” embraced by the entire American political establishment and corporate media, became the rationalization for neocolonial wars and interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Sudan and Iran.

“Twenty years after 9/11,” *Deadline* cites director Brian Knappenberger (*The Internet’s Own Boy: The Story of Aaron Swartz*, 2014; *We Are Legion: The Story of the Hacktivists*, 2012; and *Nobody Speak: Trials of the Free Press*, 2017) as commenting recently, “the world is witnessing the shocking images of people clinging to the bottom of airplanes in a desperate attempt to leave the country. After the longest war in American history—with trillions of dollars spent, thousands of American lives lost, many more permanently damaged by the war and hundreds of thousands of Afghans killed—the Taliban have again seized control of Afghanistan.

“The breathtaking collapse happened just weeks after a U.S. withdrawal. How did the decisions in the war on terror lead us to this moment? As the American era ends on the 20th anniversary of 9/11 it is time to step back and ask in the most honest possible way, how did that day change us?”

Knappenberger and his colleagues, including Afghan crew members, conducted 88 interviews with, as Netflix explains, “a wide range of interviewees, including officials from multiple US presidential administrations, former CIA members, and US military veterans as well as

Afghanistan National Army soldiers, Taliban commanders, members of the Afghan government, Afghan warlords, and Afghan civilians. Many who had never spoken on camera before. [The series] also spotlights the voices of survivors of the attacks themselves.”

The miniseries opens with the “Soviet invasion of Afghanistan ... with the CIA kind of creating a proxy war with the Soviets by supporting the mujahideen there,” as Knappenberger told *Democracy Now!*

The encounter between the people of Afghanistan and US imperialism is a complex and tragic event, now spanning more than 40 years. Washington, collaborating with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, mobilized Islamist fighters from throughout the Muslim world for a “proxy war” against Soviet forces supporting a secular government in Kabul. Among the CIA’s closest collaborators, through Pakistani intelligence, was Osama bin Laden, who founded Al Qaeda with the backing of the US intelligence agency. In other words, the US created a Frankenstein monster.

After a cursory historical introduction, *Turning Point* moves on to 9/11 itself. The footage of airplanes crashing into Manhattan’s World Trade Center towers continues to horrify.

The series presents some genuinely distressing sequences, including a portion of a voice recording of flight attendant Betty Ong on board American Airlines Flight 11 speaking by phone with an airline agent. “The cockpit’s not answering ... Somebody’s stabbed in business class. And I think there’s mace that we can’t breathe ... I don’t know. I think we’re getting hijacked.”

The airplane, now being flown by lead hijacker Mohamed Atta, crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center, killing all 92 people aboard and leading to the deaths of 1,402 people at and above the aircraft’s impact zone.

Several survivors who were inside the Twin Towers tell their frightening stories, as do a number of family members of those who died. There is horrific footage of a throng of people, shocked and covered in soot, trying to escape a massive runaway cloud of dust and debris as the towers collapse.

The images are striking, but by themselves they do not reveal the truth of the event. For that, more than simply the “most honest possible” approach in the immediate sense is necessary. Serious historical knowledge, an understanding of geopolitics and the ability to submit events to penetrating analysis are also required.

In this regard, *Turning Point* falls down. It accommodates itself to the claim that the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan was merely retribution for the crime committed on September 11, even if overzealously and mistakenly conducted. In reality, the occupation of the Central Asian nation was aimed at establishing US hegemonic control over not only Afghanistan, but the broader region, with the second largest reserves of

petroleum and natural gas in the world. There is not a reference in the series to energy supplies or oil.

What tends to predominate instead are the comments of a succession of former US government officials, FBI and CIA agents, as well as military personnel. More than a few notable war criminals are on hand, such as Gen. David Petraeus, the former commander of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan and former director of the CIA.

The rogues' gallery also includes Alberto Gonzales, White House Counsel in 2001 and one of the legal architects of the torture program implemented in the name of combating terrorism. In Episode 3, entitled "The Dark Side," Gonzales remarks: "We went back and looked at the convention against torture, which was the genesis of the Anti-Torture statute... The head of the Criminal Division of the Department of Justice wrote that torture is that activity of which the very mention sends shivers up one's spine, such as needles under fingernails, such as piercing of your eyeball, such as electric shocks to your genitals. We weren't anywhere close to that."

By itself, *The Mauritanian*, currently airing on the Showtime television network in the US, which graphically dramatizes the torture and abuse of Mohamedou Ould Salahi, held from 2002 to 2016 without charge in the Guantanamo Bay detention camp, puts the lie to Gonzalez's disingenuous comments. The US military and CIA carried out the most grotesque forms of physical and psychological torture, primarily against individuals with no association whatsoever with terrorism. Gonzales is never confronted by the filmmakers over his criminal role.

"The Dark Side" episode describes how the White House justified and launched the Stellarwind warrantless surveillance program, allowing the authorities in essence to carry out electronic police raids on any individual on the planet, American citizens or not. Various critics, including Thomas Drake, a former senior executive of the National Security Agency (NSA), and James Risen, a former *New York Times* journalist, weigh in on the abuses and excesses committed as part of the "war on terror." Several interviewees denounce the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the Guantanamo Bay detention camp—housing "dirt farmers" and "bounty babies" (those turned in for the reward being offered)—and criticize aspects of the "Good War" in Afghanistan.

The filmmakers, however, insist on presenting September 11 as a failure of intelligence, arguing, for example, that there was "no effective communication between the FBI and CIA." Nothing much is made of the fact, for example, that two terrorists lived peaceably with an FBI informer in San Diego.

Nor do the documentarians ever touch upon how it was that not a single official, from the CIA director down to the consular officials who granted the hijackers visas, suffered so much as a demotion after 9/11.

The most compelling interviews in the series are those conducted with US troops who fought in Afghanistan. In Episode 4, entitled "The Good War," two former American soldiers reveal their psychological torment. James Laporta laments: "The person I shot didn't look older than 15." Painfully, Adam Linehan, now a journalist, speaks about the brutal conduct of US Army Specialist Jeremy Morlock and "the Kill Team," involved in the murder and mutilation of unarmed Afghan civilians in the Maywand District in Kandahar Province, Afghanistan, in 2010.

Linehan movingly explains that "in the absence of any coherent narrative about these wars, it's easy for a soldier to assume responsibility for things that aren't their fault and they shrink the war down to their own small horrific experience."

In addition, Brittany Ramos DeBarros—a young army captain in 2016—observes that "you can't take an institution that's built for violence and take it to build up safe and healthy communities." Another interviewee claims that the post-9/11 generation was fighting merely "not to die" on the battlefield, cutting through the patriotic rhetoric pushed by the military.

Maj. Jason Wright also addresses the camera. He was one of the lawyers assigned to defend Khaled Sheikh Mohammed, a Pakistani national captured in a joint raid by the CIA and Pakistani intelligence in March 2003, now facing a military commission at Guantanamo Bay and a possible death sentence. Mohammed was subjected to a range of "enhanced interrogation techniques" while in CIA detention, including almost 200 waterboardings.

Wright resigned from the army in 2014, accusing the US government of crafting a show trial. Knappenberger's *Turning Point* observes that 741 Guantanamo detainees have been released under the past three administrations, and of the 40 who remain, only two have been convicted by military commissions.

Zayn al-Abidin Muhammad Husayn (Abu Zubaydah), captured in Pakistan in 2002, was the first detainee to undergo enhanced interrogation and was infamously waterboarded eighty-three times in one month alone. Abu Zubaydah's chilling and effective drawings, shown in the series, provide visual testimony as to the dimensions of US torture. Never officially charged, he remains a prisoner.

It should be noted that those who did the most to expose US crimes, Julian Assange, Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning, receive no mention or airtime in *Turning Point*.

The miniseries calls out the Obama administration on certain issues. The seamless continuity between the Bush and Obama administrations in the prosecution of the "war on terror" earned Obama the title of "Drone President." Within his first year of office, more drone strikes were carried out by the president of "Change You Can Believe In" than during the entire Bush administration. This reached a qualitatively new stage on September 30, 2011, when Obama ordered the targeted assassination of a US citizen, Anwar al-Awlaki. Moreover, the administration ensured that there would be no accountability for the torture program, protecting the Bush-era officials from prosecution, including Gonzales and Cheney, and other warriors of death.

As noted above, the 9/11 terror attacks by themselves did not "change everything." They helped create the atmosphere in which wars could be launched and the Patriot Act, Homeland Security and the Stellarwind warrantless surveillance program brought into being. Moreover, there is considerable evidence that US intelligence agencies permitted the attacks to go forward in order to supply the necessary opportunity for introducing these authoritarian schemes.

A silver lining of the decades-long US occupation of Afghanistan, according to *Turning Point*, is that Afghan women are now better off. To argue the point, Afghan politician and former Vice President of the National Assembly Fawzia Koofi is trotted out. The reality is that the vast majority of the Afghan population, men as well as women, live in grinding poverty and oppression and despised the American presence. "Women's rights" and "human rights" are the banner under which imperialist wars and invasions have increasingly been waged in recent decades. The documentary does nothing to expose this falsehood.

At stake in Afghanistan, as the WSWS has explained, were "geostrategic interests in a country that provided US imperialism with a beachhead in energy-rich Central Asia and a potential launching pad for wars against China, Iran or Russia."

As the WSWS argued at the time of recent, ignominious collapse of the puppet regime, "Afghanistan is a metaphor for the entire rotting edifice of American capitalism. ... To the fictitious capital on which US capitalism's bubble economy is based, corresponds the fictitious power conferred on the Pentagon by 'smart bombs' and drone murder strikes in countries like Afghanistan."

The debacle in Kabul has coincided with the US authorities' homicidal policy in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of thousands because public health has been subordinated to profit interests. The American ruling elite places no more value on

American lives than those of Iraqis or Afghans.

*Turning Point* touches on a number of important and pressing issues. However, what it does not say and does not approach is even more significant.



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