

# Trump's Caribbean murders and the legacy of Nuremberg

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Theaters throughout the United States are currently screening *Nuremberg*, a film by director James Vanderbilt on the 1945 trial of the surviving leaders of Nazi Germany for “crimes against peace, war crimes, crimes against humanity and a common plan or conspiracy to commit those crimes.”

The Nuremberg tribunal created the current operative framework of international law, under which it is an individual crime for politicians and military leaders to wage aggressive war and commit war crimes.

The subject matter of the film could not be more timely. It has been released amidst a deepening crisis surrounding the Trump administration over a series of assassinations in the Caribbean Sea and Pacific Ocean. Since September 2, the Trump administration has killed at least 83 civilians in 21 missile strikes on 22 shipping vessels manned by unarmed and defenseless people, whom it has accused, without evidence, of transporting drugs.

On Friday, the *Washington Post* reported that, in the first of these murders, carried out by a missile strike on September 2, Secretary of War Pete Hegseth issued an order to “kill everybody,” and, pursuant to this order, a second missile was launched, killing the survivors from the first strike.

These revelations have come amidst a crisis within the American state that was intensified on November 18, when a group of Democratic lawmakers released a video reminding US soldiers of their duty to obey international law and refuse illegal orders.

Expanding on the video, Senator Elissa Slotkin on November 23 said on the “This Week” interview program that the video was prompted by Trump’s drone strikes in the Caribbean and his deployment of troops to US cities. Noting that there “are such things as illegal orders,” Slotkin said, “Going back to Nuremberg, ‘Well, they told me to do it, that’s why I murdered people,’ is not an excuse.”

The naked criminality of the Trump government has raised almost of necessity the issue of war crimes and international law. The level of gangsterism and filth spewing out of the White House marks a qualitative shift. However, there is no serious discussion from the Democratic Party or the media of the real political and historical context, and what has given rise to Trump.

In fact, for over two decades, the *World Socialist Web Site* has pointed to the significance of the Nuremberg precedent in the context of the eruption of American imperialism.

In 2004, in a debate at the Philosophical Society of Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland, *World Socialist Web Site* Chairman David North delivered remarks focused on the significance of the Bush administration’s proclamation of the doctrine of “pre-emptive” war. North noted that the Nuremberg trials laid down the principle that aggressive war is “the supreme international crime.”

The tribunal explicitly declared that it was setting a precedent that bound not merely the defeated Axis powers, but also the victorious Allied powers, including the United States. North quoted Supreme Court Justice Robert Jackson, who headed the American prosecution staff, as saying:

If certain acts in violation of treaties are crimes, they are crimes whether the United States does them or whether Germany does them, and we are not prepared to lay down a rule of criminal conduct against others that we would not be willing to have invoked against us.

Jackson added, “To pass these defendants a poisoned chalice is to put it to our own lips as well.”

North noted that “Much has changed since those words

were uttered.” Today, he wrote:

American imperialism, in pursuit of global hegemony, is the principal instigator of violence, exploitation and inhumanity in the world today. Its foreign policy has assumed the character of a vast international criminal exercise.

The context of this assessment was the illegal invasion of Iraq, begun in 2003 under the Bush administration, which followed a series of wars of aggression during and after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, including the first Gulf War in 1991 under Bush Sr. and the war against Serbia in 1999 under Clinton.

The war against Iraq was part of the “war on terror,” begun in 2001, which was used to legitimize not only aggressive war—first against Afghanistan and then against Iraq—but assassination, torture and mass warrantless domestic surveillance. Vice President Dick Cheney declared at the time, “We have to work on the dark side... We’re going to spend time in the shadows.”

As part of the Second Gulf War, the Bush administration set up a series of “black sites” around the world, into which it whisked thousands of people who were illegally kidnapped through the policy of “extraordinary rendition.” The White House instituted a policy of torture, branding as “interrogation techniques” such “tactics” as “waterboarding,” “walling” and “rectal rehydration.”

Summing up the crimes of the Bush administration, former President Barack Obama deadpanned, “We tortured some folks.” But Obama introduced his own innovations, including hundreds of drone strikes that killed between 2,500 and 4,000 people. The policy of assassination without due process, including of US citizens, was so widespread that a complex bureaucratic system was created for selecting victims at weekly “terror Tuesday” meetings.

The first Trump administration, building upon this legacy of criminality, pardoned Navy SEAL Eddie Gallagher, who stabbed a teenage prisoner to death and then photographed himself with the corpse. It escalated US aggression abroad, including the assassination of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani in Baghdad.

It was left to the Biden administration to reintroduce genocide—the most horrific and distinctive of the Nazi leaders’ crimes. Biden funded, armed and politically

defended the Israeli genocide in Gaza, providing Israel with thousands of 2,000-pound bombs used to massacre at least 60,000 Palestinians, whom Israeli Defense Secretary Yoav Gallant—indicted this year on war crimes charges—called “human animals.”

The second Trump administration sits atop this heap of corpses. Trump, an admirer of Adolf Hitler, openly defends torture, assassination and ethnic cleansing to a degree without precedent in American history. That he has been promoted to the head of the American state is a testament to all of the crimes that preceded his ascent.

To the extent that the murder of unarmed civilians in the Caribbean has produced a crisis within the US political establishment, it is because sections of the military see such unrestrained criminality as completely discrediting the entire project of US global domination. The more far-sighted sections of the US political establishment believe that if they are to succeed in dominating the world through military force, American imperialism must promote the pretense that it is upholding international law.

But this pretense is a fraud. The criminal means used by American imperialism in pursuit of its global domination are the result of its criminal aims. The entire strategic project of American imperialism, to use its military power to offset its declining global hegemony, is a conspiracy to wage aggressive war in what the Nuremberg tribunal defined as “crimes against peace.” And it is this project that has vomited up Donald Trump and his fascist coterie.

Working people throughout the United States and the whole world must draw the lessons of the experience of the eruption of American imperialism. The struggle to defend the democratic, economic and social rights of workers requires the struggle against imperialist war and the building of a global anti-war movement of the working class.



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