

Why we oppose the war in Afghanistan

Statement of the WSWS Editorial Board

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The *World Socialist Web Site* condemns the American military assault on Afghanistan. We reject the dishonest claims of the Bush administration that this is a war for justice and the security of the American people against terrorism.

The hijack-bombings of September 11 were politically criminal attacks on innocent civilians. Whoever perpetrated this crime must be condemned as enemies of the American and international working class. The fact that no one has claimed responsibility only underscores the profoundly reactionary character of these attacks.

But while the events of September 11 have served as the catalyst for the assault on Afghanistan, the cause is far deeper. The nature of this or any war, its progressive or reactionary character, is determined not by the immediate events that preceded it, but rather by the class structures, economic foundations and international roles of the states that are involved. From this decisive standpoint, the present action by the United States is an imperialist war.

The US government initiated the war in pursuit of far-reaching international interests of the American ruling elite. What is the main purpose of the war? The collapse of the Soviet Union a decade ago created a political vacuum in Central Asia, which is home to the second largest deposit of proven reserves of petroleum and natural gas in the world.

The Caspian Sea region, to which Afghanistan provides strategic access, harbors approximately 270 billion barrels of oil, some 20 percent of the world's proven reserves. It also contains 665 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, approximately one-eighth of the planet's gas reserves.

These critical resources are located in the world's most politically unstable region. By attacking Afghanistan, setting up a client regime and moving vast military forces into the region, the US aims to establish a new political framework within which it will exert hegemonic control.

These are the real considerations that motivate the present war. The official version, that the entire American military has been mobilized because of one individual, Osama bin Laden, is ludicrous. Bin Laden's brand of ultra-nationalist and religious obscurantist politics is utterly reactionary, a fact that is underscored by his glorification of the destruction of the World Trade Center and murder of nearly 6,000 civilians. But the US government's depiction of bin Laden as an evil demiurge serves a cynical purpose—to conceal the actual aims and significance of the present war.

The demonization of bin Laden is of a piece with the modus operandi of every war waged by the US over the past two decades, in each of which—whether against the Panamanian "drug lord" Manuel Noriega, the Somalian "war lord" Mohamed Farrah Aidid, or the modern-day "Hitlers" Saddam Hussein and Slobodan Milosevic—the American government and the media have sought to manipulate public opinion by portraying the

targeted leader as the personification of evil.

In an October 8 op-ed column in the *New York Times*, Fawaz A. Gerges, a professor at Sarah Lawrence College, pointed to the real aims that motivate the US war drive. Describing a conference of Arab and Muslim organizations held a week ago in Beirut, Gerges wrote:

"Most participants claimed that the United States aims at far more than destroying Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda organization and toppling the Taliban regime. These representatives of the Muslim world were almost unanimously suspicious of America's intentions, believing that the United States has an overarching strategy which includes control of the oil and gas resources in Central Asia, encroachment on Chinese and Russian spheres of influence, destruction of the Iraqi regime, and consolidation of America's grip on the oil-producing Persian Gulf regimes."

"Many Muslims suspected the Bush administration of hoping to exploit this tragedy to settle old scores and assert American hegemony in the world."

These suspicions are entirely legitimate. Were the US to oust the Taliban, capture or kill bin Laden and wipe out what Washington calls his terrorist training camps, the realization of these aims would not be followed by the withdrawal of American forces. Rather, the outcome would be the permanent placement of US military forces to establish the US as the exclusive arbiter of the region's natural resources. In these strategic aims lie the seeds of future and even more bloody conflicts.

This warning is substantiated by a review of recent history. America's wars of the past 20 years have invariably arisen from the consequences of previous US policies. There is a chain of continuity, in which yesterday's US ally has become today's enemy.

The list includes the one-time CIA asset Noriega, the former Persian Gulf ally Saddam Hussein, and yesterday's American protégé Milosevic. Bin Laden and the Taliban are the latest in the chain of US assets transformed into targets for destruction.

In the case of Iraq, the US supported Saddam Hussein in the 1980s as an ally against the Khomeini regime in Iran. But when the Iraqi regime threatened US oil interests in the Persian Gulf, Saddam Hussein was transformed into a demon and war was launched against Baghdad.

The main purpose of the Gulf War was to establish a permanent US military presence in the Persian Gulf, a presence that remains in place more than a decade later.

Even more tragic is the outcome of US sponsorship of bin Laden and the Taliban. They are products of the US policy begun in the late 1970s and continued throughout the 1980s, of inciting Islamic fundamentalism to weaken the Soviet Union and undermine its influence in Central Asia. Bin Laden and other Islamic fundamentalists were recruited by the CIA to wage war against the USSR and destabilize Central Asia.

In the chaos and mass destruction that followed, the Taliban was helped along and brought to power with the blessings of the American government. Those who make US policy believed

the Taliban would be useful in stabilizing Afghanistan after nearly two decades of civil war.

American policy-makers saw in this ultra-reactionary sect an instrument for furthering US aims in the Caspian basin and Persian Gulf, and placing increasing pressure on China and Russia. If, as the Bush administration claims, the hijack-bombing of the World Trade Center was the work of bin Laden and his Taliban protectors, then, in the most profound and direct sense, the political responsibility for this terrible loss of life rests with the American ruling elite itself.

The rise of Islamic fundamentalist movements, infused with anti-American passions, can be traced not only to US support for the Mujahedin in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but also to American assaults on the Arab world. At the same time that the CIA was arming the fundamentalists in Afghanistan, it was supporting the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. This was followed in 1983 by the US bombing of Beirut, in which the battleship New Jersey lobbed 2,000-pound shells into civilian neighborhoods. This criminal action led directly to retribution in the form of the bombing of the US barracks in Beirut, which took the lives of 242 American soldiers.

The entire phenomenon associated with the figure of Osama bin Laden has its roots, moreover, in Washington's alliance with Saudi Arabia. The US has for decades propped up this feudalist autocracy, which has promoted its own brand of Islamic fundamentalism as a means of maintaining its grip on power.

All of these twists and turns, with their disastrous repercussions, arise from the nature of US foreign policy, which is not determined on the basis of democratic principles or formulated in open discussion and public debate. Rather, it is drawn up in pursuit of economic interests that are concealed from the American people.

When the US government speaks of a war against terrorism, it is thoroughly hypocritical, not only because yesterday's terrorist is today's ally, and vice versa, but because American policy has produced a social catastrophe that provides the breeding ground for recruits to terrorist organizations. Nowhere are the results of American imperialism's predatory role more evident than in the indescribable poverty and backwardness that afflict the people of Afghanistan.

What are the future prospects arising from the latest eruption of American militarism? Even if the US achieves its immediate objectives, there is no reason to believe that the social and political tinderbox in Central Asia will be any less explosive.

US talk of "nation-building" in Afghanistan is predicated on its alliance with the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance, with whom the Pentagon is coordinating its military strikes. Just as Washington used the Albanian terrorist Kosovo Liberation Army as its proxy in Kosovo, so now it utilizes the gang of war lords centered in the northeast of Afghanistan as its cat's paw in Central Asia.

Since the Northern Alliance will now be portrayed as the champion of freedom and humanitarianism, it is instructive to note recent articles in the *New York Times* and elsewhere reporting that the vast bulk of the Afghan opium trade comes from the meager territory controlled by the Alliance. The military satraps of the Northern Alliance are, moreover, notorious for killing thousands of civilians by indiscriminately

firing rockets into Kabul in the early 1990s.

The sordid and illusory basis upon which the US proposes to "rebuild" Afghanistan, once it is finished pummeling the country, was suggested in a *New York Times* article on the onset of the war. "The Pentagon's hope," wrote the *Times*, "is that the combination of the psychological shock of the air strike, bribes to anti-Taliban forces in Afghanistan covertly supported by Washington and sheer opportunism will lead many of the Taliban's fighters to put down their arms and defect."

Given the nature of the region, with its vast stores of critical resources, it is self-evident that none of the powers in Central Asia will long accept a settlement in which the US is the sole arbiter. Russia, Iran, China, Pakistan and India all have their own interests, and they will seek to pursue them. Furthermore, the US presence will inevitably conflict with the interests of the emerging bourgeois regimes, in the lesser states in the region, that have been carved out of the former Soviet Union.

At each stage in the eruption of American militarism, the scale of the resulting disasters becomes greater and greater. Now the US has embarked on an adventure in a region that has long been the focus of intrigue between the Great Powers, a part of the world, moreover, that is bristling with nuclear weapons and riven by social, political, ethnic and religious tensions that are compounded by abject poverty.

The *New York Times*, in a rare moment of lucidity, described the dangers implicit in the US war drive in an October 2 article headlined "In Pakistan, a Shaky Ally." The author wrote: "By drafting this fragile and fractious nation into a central role in the 'war on terrorism,' America runs the danger of setting off a cataclysm in a place where civil violence is a likely bet and nuclear weapons exist."

Neither in the proclamations of the US government, nor in the reportage of the media, is there any serious examination of the real economic and geo-strategic aims motivating the military assault. Nor is there any indication that the US political establishment has seriously considered the far-reaching and potentially catastrophic consequences of the course upon which it has embarked.

Despite a relentless media campaign to whip up chauvinism and militarism, the mood of the American people is not one of gung-ho support for the war. At most, it is a passive acceptance that war is the only means to fight terrorism, a mood that owes a great deal to the efforts of a thoroughly dishonest media which serves as an arm of the state. Beneath the reluctant endorsement of military action is a profound sense of unease and skepticism. Tens of millions sense that nothing good can come of this latest eruption of American militarism.

The United States stands at a turning point. The government admits it has embarked on a war of indefinite scale and duration. What is taking place is the militarization of American society under conditions of a deepening social crisis.

The war will profoundly affect the conditions of the American and international working class. Imperialism threatens mankind at the beginning of the twenty-first century with a repetition on a more horrific scale of the tragedies of the twentieth. More than ever, imperialism and its depredations raise the necessity for the international unity of the working class and the struggle for socialism.