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USA

The years of 9/11

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The decade opened with the attacks of September 11, 2001 may have symbolically closed with the elite U.S. death-squad assassination of Osama bin Laden. But the turmoil of these post-9/11 years, notably the self-inflicted wounds of U.S. capitalism, have exceeded the terrorist mastermind's wildest dreams. There are the wars that George W. Bush, with the support of congressional Democrats, launched in Afghanistan and Iraq — wars that the government promised wouldn't have to be paid for — leading to a major U.S. defeat in Iraq, a defeat all the more damaging because it is not acknowledged as such, and a quagmire in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

There was the drowning of New Orleans by the sheer racist and cynical neglect of its Black and poor population in the wake of Hurricane Katrina — and the followup catastrophe of the 2010 BP Gulf blowout, the product of regulatory negligence over the insane search for ever-more-remote sources of non-renewable planet-destroying fossil fuels.

Then came the financial meltdown and housing crash that helped bring on the Great Recession, as the dismantling of banking regulation (another product of the much-praised “bipartisan” spirit) enabled those exotic derivatives, credit-default swaps and other instruments certified by rating agencies like Standard and Poor's as the highest-grade investments — which were in fact the quality of used toilet paper. Now, those same rating agencies see fit to “downgrade” the credit status of the United States itself.

For those who choose to look, these years have brought our society face to face with its real condition, and it's not pretty. We try to explore a few pieces of the picture in our tenth anniversary coverage in this issue of *Against the Current* — from John O'Connor's overview of imperial strategy and Julie Hurwitz's survey of the assaults on democratic rights, to Richard Lichtman's assessment of the prophetic warnings of Chris Hedges, to the powerful poetry and reflections on language of Martin Espada.

From Blowback to Irrationality

It's tempting to review the long sordid history of the classic blowback that turned our anti-Soviet clients into the 9/11 attackers. OBL's al-Qaeda network was enlisted by the CIA, Saudi Arabia and the intelligence service of Pakistan to wage jihad against the Soviet occupiers of Afghanistan in the 1980s.

In the glory days of Ronald Reagan, mujahidin was a term of endearment for our proxy warriors in Central Asia, with little thought to the potential that these “anti-Communist freedom fighters” — as well as our other loyal friends in Pakistan's military elites and fundamentalist Islamists — might have their own agendas. But that's old news.

The Bush-Cheney gang shredded the Bill of Rights of the United States Constitution, from extraterritorial prisons at Guantanamo and Bagram to “extraordinary rendition,” torture and hundreds of cases of people (U.S. citizens and others) rounded up, tried and imprisoned with virtually no media coverage in most cases. But what's more sinister is that the bulk of these practices — even if without the notorious practices of waterboarding and sexual torture that produced the big Bush-era public scandals — have been continued, consolidated and routinized under the presidency of Barack Obama.

Secret, undeclared war on presidential orders, along with the destruction of due process, judicial openness and elementary norms of fairness in domestic law, are now all-but-permanent features of a national hyper-security state consumed with terrorist threats whether real or imaginary. After the Iraq debacle, we're probably done for a while with that kind of massive preemptive invasion "and that's an excellent thing" but we now live in the era of secret war with drones and Special Forces assassination teams that draw no attention except when their helicopters get shot down or large-scale civilian deaths are uncovered.

See <http://www.solidarity-us.org/atc/current> for this article and the others referred to within it.

There are other casualties. Despite the public's concern over global warming, this has been largely a lost decade at a critical stage of the battle to prevent catastrophic environmental degradation and climate change. The evidence pointing to the dangerous consequences of climate change, up to and including the potential for civilizational collapse, has piled up even while effective action is blocked by diversionary climate-change-denial mythologies claiming it's all a hoax designed to strip away American security and sovereignty. This summer's massive droughts and now horrifying famine in East Africa, to say nothing of weather extremes in the southern and western USA, like last year's peat fires in Russia, look to become regular features of coming years.

During this time the massive inequalities in U.S. society have grown enormously, unions have been almost gutted and industrial wages for new hires reduced by half, prison populations have exploded with convictions for nonviolent drug use, immigrant communities have come under a reign of terror of raids and mass deportation, and state and local budgets have crashed with ruinous effects on basic public services and education.

In short, this first decade of the 21st century has seen the United States enter into sharp social decline and a notable erosion of its seemingly invincible former imperial authority. The issues confronting U.S. capitalism arise from the deeper crisis of global capitalism. Yet some aspects of today's stunning dysfunction of American bourgeois politics reflect aftershocks of September 11, 2001. These include not only the unchecked ascendancy of corporate and banking greed, but also the growth of a weird pseudo-populism on the right, combining billionaire funding with fanatical anti-tax and anti-regulation elements, which in the recent deficit-ceiling game of chicken seemed to partly escape the normative channels of ruling-class political discipline.

At a certain level of abstraction, the 9/11 attacks assaulted rationality itself "and in the immediate aftermath rationality sure enough lost.

We've mentioned Bush-Cheney-Rumsfeld's promise of war without cost. This was most certainly not the first U.S. war launched on lies ("Remember the Maine" in 1898, the Gulf of Tonkin in 1964, Saddam Hussein's WMDs and al-Qaeda connections in 2003), but it was the first time the government told the people they could have their flagwaving victory cake and lower taxes too. This myth that defied all reason, and caused more economic damage "to say nothing of lost lives" than the 9/11 attacks themselves, would have been all but impossible before 9/11.

How do we account for the imperial adventure in Iraq, which was not only criminal but also quite stupid, strengthening only the regime in Iran at the expense of Washington's regional clients? Was it an absurd, ideologically-driven neocon pipe dream to "transform the Middle East" with a series of improbable pro-imperialist regime changes "or did it reflect some thought-out strategic notions of how to consolidate U.S. domination of the post-Cold War world as outlined in John O'Connor's article in this issue?

The question has prompted considerable debate because both factors were in play. There was actually considerable resistance to George W. Bush's war drive among traditional pro-imperialist policy elites "but these objections were overridden by promises of a quick victory and the bonanza of conquering Iraq's oil riches, and also by the cultural

pathology of post-9/11 America.

“Why do they hate us? Because of our freedoms,” was a common mantra. This literally mindless formula wasn’t only a whitewash of the depredations that have made the United States rightfully the target of popular anger in the Middle East, Africa and Latin America – it became the pretext for assaults at home on precisely the democratic freedoms and civil liberties that the war was supposedly defending.

Another disturbing irrationalist sideshow was the mushroom growth of “9/11 truth” conspiracy theories, most of which were absurd on the basis of their mind-numbing complexity alone. The myths of an inside government job, of vanished airliners, of plots by Israeli intelligence and so forth had currency not only within rightwing subcultures but also regrettably in parts of the left. There was, and remains, good reason for skepticism over the received accounts of 9/11 – not about the undoubted fact that the attack was carried out by the religious-totalitarian fanatics of al-Qaeda, but about the full extent of what the Bush administration should have known in advance from its own and other intelligence services. It is unlikely, barring some new whistleblowing heroes, that the full background hidden in closed archives will be known for decades if ever.

Islamophobia and Other Paradoxes

A contradictory feature of the post-9/11 years has been the eruption of anti-Muslim bigotry in U.S. society at both the popular and intellectual (if it deserves such a title) levels. This phenomenon has certainly fuelled the growth of the religious and secular right wing and the wave of anti-immigrant repression, not only against Muslims. Yet the government, even under Bush-Cheney, had to disavow anti-Muslim sentiments given its close alliance with fundamentalist regimes (Saudi Arabia) which the United States deems to be moderate, friendly, etc.

Official Washington doctrine is that Islam is a religion of peace and that Muslim citizens in America are overwhelmingly peaceful, productive and loyal; the state’s practice has been ethnic and religious profiling and surveillance of Muslim mosques, communities and especially charities. Some of these, notably the Holy Land Foundation, have been closed and their officers – Ghassan Elashi, Shukri Abu-Baker, Mufid Abdulqader, Abdulrahman Odeh and Mohammed El-Mezain – given 15-65 year prison sentences on the retroactive and arbitrary application of post-9/11 laws about “material aid to terrorists,” meaning hospitals in Gaza.

Vicious tracts, books, DVDs and religious broadcasts on Islam as “the terrorist religion” proliferate. One particularly sick argument that circulates in religious right broadcasts exactly echoes al-Qaeda’s ranting: “Yes, most Muslims are peaceful, but truly faithful Muslims who obey the tenets of Islam are required by their religion to be terrorists.” Yet the majority of the U.S. electorate voted in 2008 for Barack Hussein Obama, despite all the widely circulated disinformation calling him a secret Muslim, not a U.S.-born citizen, educated in an Indonesian madrassa, etc. – because they preferred his stated policy positions. (What president Obama has done in office is another topic.)

In this limited sense at least, rational thought prevailed when given a democratic chance. The rise and yet the rejection of Islamophobia is one among many paradoxes of post-9/11 America. This is a society in profound crisis and gripped by political reaction, but capable of producing, for example, the 2011 rebellion that shook Wisconsin. Its political elites govern on the basest appeals to fear and paranoia, but popular support for their military adventures is visibly withering. Its ruling class preaches the “necessity” of austerity through every media outlet, but the majority of people do not want to see social security and Medicare or public education gutted.

The working people of the United States, in short, have the normal and predictable concerns that are to be expected in any society. The political system, on the other hand, teeters toward self-destruction as a direct function of the

smashing of the unions, the weakness of social movements and the unchecked influence of corporate cash in elections and the mass media. Karl Marx's observation that the struggle for basic reforms (e.g. the eight-hour work day) is necessary to discipline capital's wildest extremes, and important for the functioning of the system itself, seems strikingly relevant.

As this issue of ATC was in preparation, the self-wounding of U.S. capitalism reached another level with the debt-ceiling "compromise" that slashes the budget at the worst possible moment — on the eve of a double-dip recession — and promises even more savage cuts to come under the aegis of the "bipartisan Congressional commission."

In the absence of large-scale social resistance, the Obama-Boehner-Reid program — a rightwing Republican initiative in all but name — offers a longterm slide toward deeper U.S. decline, deeper class and racial inequality, and may eventually help produce a severe global depression. Alternatively there's the Tea Party program, which would bring about these results right away.

Both the immediate and the lasting impacts of the 9/11 events and the imperial response were incisively foretold on that very day by a comrade, working at the time as a flight attendant out of Boston, who remarked when contacted by an alarmed editor of this journal: "We've entered a whole new world of shit." Indeed. That remark if anything may be even more true in September 2011 than it was on September 11, 2001.