

Cheering for war and empire

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After years in which its wars have become more and more unpopular, the U.S. political and military establishment finally has a “success” to celebrate.

May 3, 2011

THE ASSASSINATION of Osama bin Laden is being celebrated as rough justice by U.S. politicians across the spectrum and a mainstream media that is glorying in every grisly detail.

It is nothing of the sort. Bin Laden’s death did not make the world “safer” and “a better place,” as Barack Obama claimed in his televised speech Sunday night. On the contrary, this political killing will be used to make the world less safe—by building support for more violence committed by the U.S. government in the name of the “war on terror.”

The hunt for bin Laden while he was alive was never about justice, but justification. Revenge for al-Qaeda’s September 11 attacks was the most effective selling point for U.S. wars and occupations that weren’t designed to make the world safe from terrorism, but to safeguard the flow of Middle East oil and ensure the continued domination of the U.S. empire.

Now that bin Laden is dead, this former U.S. ally-turned-public enemy number one will be exploited again—his killing proclaimed as a vindication of 10 years of bloodshed on a scale far more horrible than anything al-Qaeda was ever capable of.

News of bin Laden’s death produced an outburst of jingoism and anti-Muslim bigotry in the U.S. The New York Daily News printed “Rot in hell!” across its front cover. In Portland, Maine, the words “Osama Today Islam tomorrow (sic)” were found spray-painted on a mosque. As Obama was announcing the killing on television, crowds of people gathered outside the White House to chant “USA, USA, USA”—the very image of callous arrogance that stokes bitter anger toward the U.S. around the world.

Anyone who cares about peace and justice needs to raise their voice against these celebrations, because they only pave the way for more war. “Whenever America uses violence in a way that makes its citizens cheer, beam with nationalistic pride, and rally around their leader, more violence is typically guaranteed,” wrote Salon.com’s Glenn Greenwald.

THE OPERATION to kill bin Laden—carried out by Navy SEAL commandos inside Pakistan with no notification to a supposed ally, apparently ending with bin Laden being summarily put to death—was typical of the “war on terror.” The U.S. government claimed the right to be judge, jury and executioner far beyond its borders—a calculated message to the world that the U.S. recognizes no limits on its actions, either from international law or the norms of civilized behavior.

But this is nothing new. For 10 years, America's military machine has been judge, jury and executioner for tens of thousands of Afghans who did nothing more than go to a wedding or travel in the wrong area—and that's not to mention the victims of the U.S. who are labeled "rebel fighters," and whose only crime was to resist an occupation of their country.

The toll of the "war on terror" has been compounded many times over with invasions and assaults carried out or backed by the U.S. in Iraq—the greatest killing field for the American empire in recent years—in Palestine, in Pakistan and Yemen and Sudan, and now in Libya.

No reader of SocialistWorker.org will mourn bin Laden's death in and of itself. He was a political reactionary whose ideology and actions set back the cause of democracy and freedom.

The victims of al-Qaeda's attacks against U.S. targets have almost always been ordinary people who bore no responsibility for the crimes of imperialism. In the Middle East and elsewhere, bin Laden and his followers have been equally vicious, if not more so, toward fellow Arabs and Muslims who oppose their hard-line version of Islam. The U.S. and its allies around the world have not been weakened by September 11 and other such attacks—on the contrary, al-Qaeda's violence has been used as a pretext to advance the imperial project.

But bin Laden's assassination is already being used to renovate the "war on terror."

According to the Bush administration's plan following September 11, the U.S. overthrow of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the ouster of Saddam Hussein in Iraq would be the springboard for a transformation of the Arab and Muslim world—at the point of U.S. guns. But the resistance in Iraq made a mockery of Bush's claim of "Mission Accomplished"—just as the continuing opposition to the U.S. and NATO in Afghanistan has frustrated Obama's troop "surge" there.

For the last five years, the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have grown steadily more unpopular. But now, at last, the U.S. war machine and its cheerleaders have a "success" to celebrate. That is the importance of bin Laden's killing to the U.S. political establishment—and the reason the fawning media relishes the grotesque stories of his corpse being dragged away from the murder scene and dumped in the sea.

Obama's speech announcing the killing included not a single word about the lies used to justify invading and occupying countries halfway around the world—nor the least recognition of the terrible toll on the region. On the contrary, as antiwar activist Phyllis Bennis pointed out, Obama equated the operation to kill bin Laden and the ongoing "war on terror" with, among other things, the "struggle for equality for all our citizens." As Bennis wrote, "In President Obama's iteration, the global war on terror apparently equals the anti-slavery and civil rights movements."

This twisted hypocrisy must be exposed and opposed—along with future operations of the U.S. military machine undertaken in the name of stopping terrorism.

ONE INCONVENIENT truth you won't hear much about in the media's celebration of bin Laden's death is the fact that the U.S. government helped him form al-Qaeda.

When the former USSR invaded Afghanistan in 1979, the U.S. saw an opportunity to turn the country into a battlefield in the Cold War. The Democratic Carter administration and then the Republican Reagan administration supported fundamentalist rebel groups, known as the mujahideen, against the USSR's occupation. According to James Ingalls and Sonali Kolhatkar's book *Bleeding Afghanistan*, "The amount of U.S. and Saudi assistance to these groups started at around

\$30 million in 1980, and increased to over \$1 billion per year in 1986-89.”

The U.S. ignored progressive and secular forces in Afghanistan, instead funneling support to fundamentalist groups that were not only anticommunist, but notorious for their brutality—warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, for example, was known for throwing acid in the faces of unveiled women. These were the rebels who Ronald Reagan praised as “freedom fighters.”

The Taliban emerged in 1994 and took power in the war-ravaged country a few years later. Its members were trained in religious schools set up by the Pakistani government—with U.S. support—along the border. The Taliban’s ultra-fundamentalist view of Islam—including denying women the right to work or even show their faces in public—wasn’t condemned by the U.S. government at the time.

As for Bin Laden, he was a businessman from a wealthy family in Saudi Arabia and one of the first non-Afghan volunteers to join the mujahideen. He recruited some 4,000 of the 35,000 non-Afghan Muslims who fought in Afghanistan, and developed close relations with the most radical rebel leaders. He also worked closely with the CIA, raising money from private Saudi citizens.

“In 1988, with U.S. knowledge, bin Laden created al-Qaeda (The Base): a conglomerate of quasi-independent Islamic terrorist cells spread across at least 26 countries,” wrote Indian journalist Rahul Bhedi. “Washington turned a blind eye to al-Qaeda, confident that it would not directly impinge on the U.S.”

Now that bin Laden has been executed, there will be no trial to examine the U.S. government’s connections to the man whose murder allegedly makes the world “safer.” Nor will there be any difficult questions about the Taliban’s offers in 2001 to turn over bin Laden to the U.S. for trial if Washington provided evidence of his crimes.

The Bush administration wasn’t interested in a peaceful solution. It wanted the “war on terror” to project U.S. power around the globe. September 11 wasn’t a tragedy to the leaders of the U.S. government, but an opening. Thus, then-National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice urged aides to speculate about “how you capitalize on these opportunities” from September 11, as she told New Yorker magazine writer Nicholas Lehmann.

During the Cold War era, the U.S. had justified its stockpile of nuclear weapons capable of destroying the planet, its war on national liberation movements, and its support for repressive regimes as a means of combating “communism.” But after the collapse of the USSR, the U.S. struggled to find an enemy that could justify its efforts to expand its empire.

September 11 was the “catastrophic and catalyzing event—like a new Pearl Harbor”—that neoconservative supporters of the Bush administration had openly longed for one year previously to make Islam the new enemy, with their old ally Osama bin Laden front and center.

THUS, WHILE most people were still dealing with the enormity of what happened on September 11, the U.S. political and military establishment was demanding blood. But as Socialist Worker wrote in an editorial that night:

In their rush to assign blame and demand revenge, no politicians or journalists bothered to ask a simple question: Why would someone target the U.S.?

The answer is the devastation and misery wreaked around the world by the U.S. in its role as the

world's biggest superpower. In the last two decades alone, the U.S. has launched military attacks on Grenada, Libya, Panama, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan, Afghanistan and Yugoslavia—and this is not even to count wars where the U.S. backed a proxy force.

In the Middle East, U.S. policy has left millions embittered and angry. America's support for Israeli repression of Palestinians is one part of the picture. So is the 1991 Gulf War against Iraq. The war killed as many as 200,000 Iraqis—most of them civilians—and left the country in a “pre-industrial state,” according to the United Nation. Since then, UN sanctions against Iraq—backed most strongly by the U.S.—have killed more than 500,000 Iraqi children.

In a chilling 1995 interview, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright justified these deaths, saying, “We think the price is worth it.” We should remember Albright's words when we hear the drumbeat about “terrorists” who “have no regard for human life.” To the Bushes and Albrights of this world, such rhetoric is only an excuse to justify atrocities far worse than the ones committed in New York and Washington, D.C.

The nearly 10 years of the “war on terror” have taken an even greater toll—at least 1 million people are dead as a result of the U.S. war and occupation of Iraq alone. U.S. military action has spread from Afghanistan to Iraq, and now to Pakistan, Libya and many more countries. The “devastation and misery wreaked around the world” by the American empire is greater today than 2001.

The “war on terror,” justified as the only way to stamp out bin Laden and al-Qaeda, has made the world a more violent and dangerous place. With every bomb that falls on an Afghan wedding party or every carload of Iraqis slaughtered at a checkpoint, the world's only superpower created more despair and bitterness toward the U.S. and its allies—creating the circumstances in which terrorism can thrive.

Since the beginning of this year, the Middle East has become a focal point for the world for very different reasons. From Tunisia and Egypt in northern Africa to Bahrain in the Persian Gulf and many countries in between, masses of people have risen up against dictators and regimes that uphold the imperialist order—some of them backed wholeheartedly by the U.S. and others more tentatively.

Bin Laden and al-Qaeda were made irrelevant by the actions of millions of people who rebelled on the basis of mass action and solidarity, not the violence of a small minority seeking to impose its religious views.

The assassination of bin Laden will help Washington in its attempts to retake the initiative with a revitalized “war on terror.” We need to stand up against the grisly celebrations of bin Laden's killing—and insist, as Martin Luther King did more than 40 years ago, that the “greatest purveyor of violence in the world” is the U.S. government.

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P.S.

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