Terrorism and the Present Danger: A Perspective for the American Left

By Carl Davidson

Osama bin Laden's al-Quaida committed an atrocious crime against humanity on September 11, 2001. In addition to slaughtering thousands in New York City and Washington, DC, this organization of theocratic fascists is campaigning for the destruction of Western "infidel" civilization generally, with special emphasis on Americans and Jews. To do so, it is trying to rally and mobilize the one-fourth of humanity that makes up the Islamic world for the reactionary "jihad" or holy war it has declared.

The horrendous attacks of Sept. 11 have thus thrown out a challenge to everyone -- to the U.S. ruling class, to the American public, and to the international community.

It has also thrown down a challenge to the American left. For if we are to present ourselves as an alternative to the current leadership and policymakers of our country, then it is incumbent upon us to define how we would do things differently, not only strategically, but also in the face of the immediate present danger. In doing so, we must also be willing to take responsibility for the consequences of our ideas, proposals and actions.

The terrorism confronting us is not simply aimed at political or military targets; it's also aimed at our society and economic life in the broadest sense. Thousands of families are struggling to survive after burying their loved ones. Hundreds of thousands are now unemployed, civil liberties are being constricted, public health and public safety facilities are being challenged, even the postal system is compromised. All this, in turn, has an even wider impact on the global economy and other urgent matters of international peace and security.

Coalition Effort

The Bush administration quickly moved to build a broad coalition of countries against terrorism with an emphasis on al-Quaida and those helping it. The president sent U.S. special forces into Afghanistan, formed an alliance with the anti-Taliban forces based among the Tajik and Uzbek nationalities, and launched a powerful air war against the Taliban's military forces and infrastructure. Also, U.S. security agencies have linked up with their counterparts in other countries, and have arrested dozens of suspected members of al-Quaida cells in the United Kingdom, Germany, France and Spain. In the U.S. several hundred foreign nationals are being held, with a smaller number under high suspicion of being linked to Bin Laden's network.

At the same time, the Bush White House talks about getting back to normal, getting on with our lives. But the fact of the matter is that we can't get back to where things were before Sept. 11. It's not just buildings and human bodies that were destroyed that day; a deep wound has been cut into our social fabric. The global conflict, despite the retreat of the Taliban from Afghan cities, is far from over; and most Americans expect more terror attacks to come.

Two Americas

What perspective can help make sense of this global emergency? What should be our response, as an American left, to the crisis now confronting us?

The reality is that two Americas find themselves in a basic conflict with al-Quaida and the forces it leads.

One is the America of Empire. It seeks security for its sources of energy, stability for its markets, reliable and expanding returns on its investments, fear and respect of its military power, and hegemony for its politics and culture.

The other is the America of Popular Democracy. It seeks peace and prosperity for itself and everyone else, freedom from the restrictions of racial, sexist and class privilege, democratic participation in political life, freedom of speech and tolerance of differences in creeds and styles of life, freedom of religion and freedom from the violence and intimidation of religious zealots.

Al-Quaida makes no distinctions between these two Americas; it has declared its holy war on both of them. The Bush White House, for its part, is delivering the American Empire's "first war of the 21st century" response-a response which, despite its immediate gains on the ground, is inherently compromised by hypocrisy, narrow economic interests, policy divisions and several self-defeating tactics. It is now widely known that successive U.S. administrations helped to form and nourish bin Laden's forces in the Afghan resistance to the Soviets, gave early support to the Taliban as a counter to Iran's influence, helped Unocal plot with various regional factions over access to the region's oil and gas resources, and fought within the U.S. establishment's own ranks to discredit earlier efforts to destroy al-Quaida. With this background, even when Bush says all the right things on the current crisis, his message is considerably compromised, especially in the Islamic world.

Our task is to define and put out an alternative. We need to take a clear stand for the destruction of al-Quaida's terrorist network, but within that struggle, to project a progressive voice and vision, a strategy and tactics, for the other America, in order to defeat the threat posed to us by reactionaries at home and abroad.

This is not a simple task. Nothing quite like this has ever happened before-the forces and contradictions involved are highly complex and the scale is enormous, covering the entire globe.

Getting Clear on What Happened

But the first thing we need to do in our work is clarity, starting with clarity about what happened to us on Sept. 11.

The White House and the media immediately described the hijackings and attacks as acts of war, and that the required U.S. response was to wage war in return.

This was their first mistake. It wasn't because the attack wasn't horrible enough to be labeled an act of war. Rather, it was wrong because it ceded to the terrorists exactly what they were trying to do: provoke a holy war between the U.S. and militant Islam, a war the al-Quaida network hopes will soon draw in all of the "infidel" West and Muslim civilization generally.

A better approach for our America is to name the Sept 11 events as a crime against humanity, a crime that has evoked a national and international security emergency. Because of its scope, all necessary forces-police, civil authority, national guard, intelligence and military, here and abroad-should be mobilized to deal with it. But the insistence on the criminal character of the perpetrators is required,

not only to deny them a political victory, but also to frame further action and response within the duties, limitations and constraints of law, national and international.

The British military historian Sir Michael Howard, in a recent speech now being widely circulated at top levels of Western governments, explains the importance of the matter this way:

"To use, or rather to misuse the term 'war' is not simply a matter of legality, or pedantic semantics. It has deeper and more dangerous consequences. To declare that one is 'at war' is immediately to create a war psychosis that may be totally counter-productive for the objective that we seek. It will arouse an immediate expectation, and demand, for spectacular military action against some easily identifiable adversary, preferably a hostile state; action leading to decisive results.

"The use of force is no longer seen as a last resort, to be avoided if humanly possible, but as the first, and the sooner it is used the better. The press demands immediate stories of derring-do, filling their pages with pictures of weapons, ingenious graphics, and contributions from service officers long, and probably deservedly, retired. Any suggestion that the best strategy is not to use military force at all, but more subtle if less heroic means of destroying the adversary are dismissed as 'appeasement' by ministers whose knowledge of history is about on a par with their skill at political management."

The fact that this conflict is not yet a war in any traditional sense came up immediately when Congress was queried about a declaration of war, and many replied, "Against Whom?" The perpetrator doesn't have a state, or an army, or a definite people, or even a fixed territory or location. Al-Quaida is more like a network of drug cartels or a politicized mafia with a large bankroll and terrible weapons than any comparison that might be made with a third world country or even a third world national liberation movement.

It fact Congress, in its declaration, called the crisis an emergency. But part of the problem of being an imperialist superpower is that it breeds an unrealistic arrogance in the national psyche, especially at the level of leadership. If something terrible happens to us, it has to have the most extreme label. It won't do to call it a crime, even a crime against humanity. That's too wimpish; it makes us too much of a victim, and we're not victims, we're the tough guys. Attack us and you've declared war and you'll get even tougher war from us in return.

Getting Clear on the Terrorists

Calling Sept. 11 a monstrous crime, however, doesn't belittle al-Quaida's dangerousness, strength, skill or political acumen. It has plenty of all these. It has obtained support of various kinds from a number of states, while being careful not to be dependent on any of them for anything. (Even with the Taliban, it is not certain in this symbiotic relationship who controls whom, or who has the ability to "turn over" whom.) It is united around a feudal-theocratic-fascistic ideology anchored in thousands of cult training schools. These schools, located in centers of Muslim populations around the world, supply a steady stream of recruits.

What about al-Quaida's fighters and cadres? Depending on which sources you read, Bin Laden in Afghanistan has an inner circle of 500 personal guards, surrounded by another circle of 2000 terrorists-in-training, surrounded by an outer circle of 5000-10,000 fighters more loyal to him than the Taliban. Now place these forces in the context of globalization: secret cells and allies in 60 or so countries, access to weapons and technology, enormous transnational wealth, and millions of active fundamentalist Muslim sympathizers on every continent.

This gives us some clarity about al-Quaida. It is neither a handful of fanatics nor a front for Iraq or some other country. This criminal "network of networks," nonetheless, is the present, immediate danger to the safety and security of American people. It is also a serious threat to other Western countries and to world peace and security generally. It is a serious danger not only because of its global reach and demonstrated use of terror, but also because it now claims possession of nuclear weapons. Bin Laden has for several years openly expressed the desire to acquire and use weapons of mass destruction, including biological warfare and ground-delivered "suitcase" nuclear devices.

Key Question Can't Be Ignored

How to stop and defeat this danger is the principal question on the minds of the American people. It can't be ignored or set aside by any progressive force working for peace that wants to be taken seriously. We may not yet have all or even a substantial part of the answers to the questions involved, but we must do our best to deal with it. Refusal to include a focus against al-Quaida's terrorism as a critical part of the struggle for peace dooms the movement, at best, to irrelevancy and failure.

We are already in a difficult situation. Thanks to the White House and the media, the Empire's rhetoric of war has started the anti-terrorism campaign off on the wrong foot, at the wrong pace and with all the attendant unrealistic expectations. After only a few weeks, the media lamented the lack of more spectacular victories and decisive engagements. The hard right's politicians and pundits clamored for massive troop deployments, harsher bombing with less concern for casualties among the Afghan people, and wider attacks on Iraq and Iran. Some are even raising the specter of tactical nuclear weapons to shatter hideouts embedded in Afghanistan's mountain ranges. Now, with the Taliban retreat to the mountains and success of the Northern Alliance and other anti-Taliban forces in the cities, new confusion reigns on how to reshape Afghanistan and pursue bin Laden at the same time.

This discord is reflected at the top. No secret has been made of the division in the Bush administration between Secretary of State Colin Powell and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz. Powell has maintained a "narrow the target" focus on al-Quaida and has worked to build a broad coalition of support, including many countries with large Islamic populations. Other terrorisms will be dealt with later on a case-by-case basis. For the Wolfowitz faction, taking on al-Quaida is just a stepping-stone to strike at Iraq, Iran and Syria, and the sooner, the better.

The Main Danger at Home

Clarity on these divisions is also important to us. The hard right and its policies are the most dangerous threat to peace and the most self-defeating response to terrorism in our country. Its opinion journals and think tanks, like the *National Review*, the *Weekly Standard* and the *New Republic*, are in open polemics against Colin Powell and his coalition-building efforts. This faction does not yet have the upper hand in the Bush administration, and it is extremely important for the left and the progressive forces generally to prevent it from gaining ascendancy.

Why is it to our advantage, as the democratic alternative to Empire, to focus on the hard right and the extremes it encourages, rather than, say, imperialism generally? What is our advantage in stressing the moderating constraints of criminal justice, even when we know apprehending the criminals and destroying their operations will require decisive and appropriate military force, which we should support, at the right time and place?

The reason is that the military defeat of the present immediate danger, al-Quaida, also requires concurrent victories against it on the political, cultural and economic fronts. These victories will require the broadest alliances-the vast majority of the American people, the peoples and governments of other countries, the UN, and elements of our own government and military.

New Thinking on Warfare

There is, in fact, an important discussion going in the U.S. military on the concept of "netwar." Spurred by RAND Corporation analysts John Arquilla and David Ronfelt, the non-traditional terrorist and drug cartel threats to peace and security require equally non-traditional responses. Arquilla introduces his views in a recent interview with the Foreign Policy Association:

"What we are seeing is a kind of dark league of networked non-state actors who have a great deal of capability to do harm. They capitalize upon a trend that is about a century long now, beginning with the rise of high explosives that has seen the increasing destructive and disruptive power of small groups. So some years ago, David (Ronfelt) and I came up with the notion that networks would fight in a particular way against hierarchical states, and other large institutional actors, and so we called that "netwar." The idea being that these networks didn't need a territory of their own, so that they distribute themselves across a global grid, could strike at will, could mass when they choose, and would hold the initiative, would remain shadowy, perhaps we wouldn't ever know exactly who they were, and that they could cause a great deal of increasing harm over the years. We caught this glimpse of netwar some years ago, and now I am afraid to say we are living in this period. The terror war is indeed the first full-blown netwar."

Arquilla describes al-Quaida, in information theory terms, as a "network of networks" chained together as a global "hybrid peer-to-peer network." Most computer networkers will know exactly what he means. But to put it briefly, it means each widely distributed cell or node can communicate directly with any other cell, yet at the same time gain access to and share centrally stored resources. There is also a high degree of redundancy, meaning that taking out one or even several nodes or resources doesn't necessarily bring down the whole network.

Arquilla and Ronfelt argue that "it takes a network to defeat a network," meaning that traditional military hierarchies are not very effective. The December 2001 *Wired Magazine* sums up their theory in five points:

Decentralize Intelligence. This means information needs to be shared and open, although without compromising sources. National and bureaucratic firewalls won't do. Case in point: A Middle Eastern man was detained in Minnesota on the tip of a flight school that had become suspicions because he paid cash and only wanted to learn to steer 747s, not takeoff and land. He was in jail on Sept. 11. But he was also at the same time being sought by French intelligence, who knew he was an extremely dangerous member of an Algerian terrorist group linked to al-Quaida. The U.S. and the French did not know about each others efforts on this matter until way after the fact.

Learn to Swarm. This is where small, dispersed forces quickly concentrate for attack, rather than the slower maneuvers of larger force structures. The Sept 11 hijackings are an example, as were the embassy bombings in Africa. The negative example on the other side is what the Soviets did in Afghanistan, bringing in large forces that could be bled to death.

Attack the Core. Although a peer-to-peer network, al-Quaida has core resources in training centers, money and leadership. Disrupt these, and the overall network is knocked down several levels. The local nodes are then easier to pick off.

Rethink Technology. Al-Quaida demonstrated the damage that could be done by fanatically combining boxcutters, know-how and the internet. Star Wars-type missile and anti-missile systems are a sink hole for resources and relics of a different era. It may be more cost-effective to spend more billions on the Peace Corps.

Manage the Story.

Terrorist groups all have a narrative, a story they tell about themselves to unite internally, bring in recruits and expand their supporters. Not only does their story need to be discredited and disrupted with accurate information, an honest counter-story needs to be projected by the anti-terrorists.

"I think that we have a terrible event that occurred a month ago," said Arquilla to the FPA, "but it is also one that should galvanize us to build a global network to confront terror. We have this opportunity to do so before terrorists can strike with, say, nuclear weapons. I think that is the real stakes in this conflict…I would suggest that as much as religious belief is a basis for cohesion in al-Quaida, so we can build an international network, and indeed a national network within our own country, that can fight nimbly against al-Quaida, and it can be held together by this overarching mission statement, which is 'We must defeat terror, before it acquires weapons of mass destruction.' I don't know how much time we have to wage that war, but I have a real sense of urgency about it. It seems to me that the real glue in a network is the belief and the loyalties of its members. Al-Quaida achieves this through religion and kinship ties. I believe global civil society and our various allies around the world can achieve a similar level of cohesion."

The nonmilitary, civil society methods of obtaining victories against terrorism and wider war-political mobilization, public discussion and education, participation in homeland defense, investigation and exposure, legal indictments and economic sanctions-are tedious and will try our patience and courage. There will be considerable contention and debate on how to proceed among the various class and social forces. Sometimes we will win and sometimes we will lose to other elements in the broad alliances we will find ourselves in. But these political and democratic methods are essential groundwork if our final victory is to affirm the values we want to defend in the first place.

Bin Laden's terrorism opposes our democratic values. It is basically a political and psychological weapon to manipulate, twist and control mass consciousness of both friends and enemies. The control of symbols and meanings are extremely important to its craft. With ruthlessness and stealth, it creates violent, irrational spectacles that shatter the ordinary rational patterns of life, spectacles that evoke fear in the enemy camp and courage among friends and allies-the more violent, intimidating and daring the spectacle, the greater the fear, disruption and admiration to be evoked.

Terrorism is also judo-like in its inclusion of the enemy's immediate reaction to the initial deed in its broader plan of changing public perception of the enemy among its potential friends. Terrorists often hope, for instance, to provoke an indiscriminant, violent response from the authorities so as to further expose the repressive, class character of the state in the minds of those they hope to win over, neutralize or agitate into greater confusion and division.

Osama bin Laden is playing this political game with considerable skill. In less than 20 years, he has transformed himself from an oil-rich Saudi playboy into an anti-Western hero in the eyes of millions

of Islamic youth around the world. The only way to defeat him and unravel his organization is to turn that equation around. His "freedom fighter" status must be changed to "criminal and mass murderer" through a protracted and resourceful public opinion battle, especially among his sympathizers. Some of the friends of al-Quaida know where the terrorist "heros" are hiding, in the Afghanistan mountains as well as in their safe houses in other countries. But if the hero status is stripped away and the more sinister nature revealed, even former friends can be convinced to give them up and help bring them to justice.

Terrorism and anti-terrorism, then, is all about "winning hearts and minds." As British military historian Sir Michael Howard puts it, "Without hearts and minds one cannot obtain intelligence, and without intelligence terrorists can never be defeated." Every military and economic action has to be measured with this yardstick. An air war can destroy its military targets, but it can still be turned into overall defeat with unacceptable civilian casualties. In the end, al-Quaida's forces have to be seized or destroyed on the ground. But it is next to impossible to do so amidst a civilian population that has been enraged and alienated by indiscriminate attacks destroying their lives and livelihood.

Critical Battles Ahead

It is also important to be clear about where the front lines are in this conflict. Strategically, they reach far beyond Afghanistan. The most important political battle exists all along the fault line revealed by the hundreds of thousands of Islamic youth that turned out in the streets in demonstrations supporting bin Laden, the Taliban and "jihad" against the West. The fact that the mullahs were rallying the poorest of the poor against the richest of the rich did not make the political thrust of these events any less reactionary.

What these demonstrations reveal is the depth of the problem: Corrupt and anti-democratic regimes persist throughout the Islamic world in a context where the medievalist, fascistic opposition to their rule is often far stronger than any democratic, progressive alternative.

One thing is certain. Strategically, the America of Empire is part of the problem, not part of the solution. To secure oil for bankrupt energy policies, it has spent billions after billions, decade after decade, to bankroll militarism in both Israel and the Arab oil-producing countries. Playing power politics in regional conflicts, it has manipulated Iraq against Iran, then Iran against Iraq-all the while indifferent to a million dead on the battlefield and mutual ruin of the peoples concerned. In the name of the Cold War, it went to every length to destroy a progressive Islamic left and nurture a traditionalist Islamic right. Globalization and technology, which hold the promise of overcoming North-South inequality, have expanded in the face of deep unemployment and harsh living conditions throughout the Islamic world.

"In a globalized world with instant communications, it is impossible to have excessive opulence alongside grinding poverty without something, sometime, somewhere, exploding," said William Van Dusen Wishard, a former official in the Commerce Department and president of WorldTrends Research.

Our America, on the other hand, can be part of the solution. With all the resources of civil society, of a broad movement against terror and war, we can severely limit, in the short run, the harm the American Empire could do by ignoring civilian casualties and suffering, expanding the war to Iraq or Iran, one-sidedly encouraging Israel against Palestine, or aggravating divisions between India and Pakistan. As an American left, we would do best to build a broad consensus, here and abroad, around the following points:

? No Wider War. Opposition to the hard right's efforts to subvert the global coalition against terrorism by invading Iraq and Iran. Change can be brought about in these countries by other means.

? Oppose the attack on civil liberties, especially Bush's new military tribunals. Oppose torture of prisoners and other detainees. Respect for the U.S. Bill of Rights at home and the UN Declaration on Human Rights abroad.

? Support an UN transitional government in Afghanistan that support basic human rights and would be representative of all Afghan nationalities. Support the development of oil and gas pipeline resources that would primarily benefit the peoples of the region, rather than the energy companies.

? End the food, medical and other nonmilitary sanctions against Iraq. These do little to weaken Hussein and cause great suffering to the people of Iraq.

? Support Palestinian Statehood and oppose Israel's ongoing seizure of Palestinian land through its "settlement" policies.

? Work to secure and then eliminate all weapons of mass destruction, especially nuclear and bacteriological weapons.

? Work for a Green Energy and Transportation Policy. Shift tax subsidies from nonrenewable carbon-based energy to wind, solar, geothermal and other renewable resources. Shift tax subsidies from air travel to high-speed intra-city rail systems.

In the long run, we can do even more. Since we are not constrained by a lust for profit or hegemony, we can take on the global plunderers who think global equality is a race to the bottom and everything human is a commodity. But this doesn't mean making alliances with the anti-modernist attack of the mullahs on globalization. There is a positive, progressive high road through globalization and beyond that can bring the benefits on modern science, technology and culture to the vast majority of humanity.

But we can't do so by ignoring the present danger. It is said that the mistakes and tragedies of war are caused by generals who try to fight today's conflicts with the battle plans of the previous war. Today the same danger faces the peace movement; it must not make itself a prisoner to old ideas formed when the only enemy was at home and the just cause was on the other side.

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