

September 11 and the American Conscience
By George Katsiaficas

After spending nearly a year in Korea, I returned to the USA on Christmas day, 2001. In this land of plenty, I was struck by the enormity of goods available to the spending public and the easy credit terms and low sale prices being offered as I walked through the aisles of cluttered department stores with stacks of boxed items towering over my head. But even more striking are dozens of new American flags—on cars and trucks, in front of homes and offices, inside corporate and government buildings, on TV and in the newspapers—in short, everywhere. To accomplish the patriotic makeover of America, manufacturers designed a variety of new display devices: extensions for car antennae from which flags fly; car window magnets strong enough to support large flags visible for blocks; suction-cupped flag poles with enough strength to bend in highway winds without coming loose; and a whole array of house flags, bumper stickers, lapel pins, t-shirts and miscellaneous fashion items.

Less visible to the eye is a growing closed-mindedness, one could almost say a revanchist nationalism. It seems as if the attacks of September 11, by killing innocent Americans by the thousands, has purged any moral hesitation about the preponderance of US wealth and power in a world where so many are hungry and marginalized. People increasingly talk of “us” versus “them” and seem to have little patience to probe the complicated question of how exactly to define “them.”

The upside to this phenomenon is the new neighborliness so much praised among normally self-centered New Yorkers. “United We Stand,” the slogan of t-shirts and bumper stickers, resonates widely. CNN reports that two out of three American households contributed an average of \$134 to the 9-11 victims’ fund. (While in Korea public donations as after the IMF crisis have precedents, there are few such expressions of public togetherness in the US.)

The most visible of all the flags adorn the trucks of working men—carpenters and plumbers, construction workers and contractors. Remembering the era of the Vietnam War, it was the same folks who were most vociferous in support of the war and most aggressive in attacking anti-war protestors. Then, anti-war activists had a large base in the universities. Today however, that base’s size and, in some cases, its very existence, are in question. *The International Herald Tribune* quoted a centrist Democrat as

saying it “astonishing how little anti-war agitation there has been on the left” in the US.¹ Although there have been dozens of small protests against war, within the normal circles of intellectuals who oppose aggressive foreign policy measures, support for the war in Afghanistan has been vociferously articulated.

During the Vietnam era, many Americans supported Ho Chi Minh and the National Liberation Front, but today nowhere in public discourse is there any sympathy for the enemy. Writing in *The Nation* on November 5, Katha Pollitt observed that unlike the Vietnam War, “This time, our own country has been attacked, and the enemies are deranged fanatics.” On October 14, *Nation* editor and *LA Weekly* columnist Marc Cooper called them “atavistic, religious fascists whose world view is diametrically opposed to all humanitarian and progressive morality.” Another respected commentator (whom I shall not name because her comments were circulated on a private listserve of “radical” professors) maintained that fundamentalism’s “doctrine of intolerance simply cannot stand in contemporary society if we are to evolve towards peace and cooperation.” Intolerance of intolerance?

Many progressives mirror the Bush administration’s comparison of bin Laden and Hitler, of the Taliban and the Nazis, an analysis that makes any offensive action seem proper. Professor Richard Falk of Princeton University, widely respected for his condemnation of the Vietnam War based on principles of international law, called the war in Afghanistan “the first truly just war since World War II.” Normally not a man to write in superlatives, Falk condemned the attacks of September 11 as the “greatest display of grotesque cunning in human history.” (One cannot help but wonder what he excludes from his list of “grotesque cunning” if the murder of 3000 people is at the top of his list.) According to Falk, “The narrative of apocalyptic terrorism could be laid before the world as the crimes of Nazism were bared at Nuremberg.” Falk even contemplates extending this war to “countries regarded as hostile to the United States, who are in possession of weapons of mass destruction but are not currently related to global terrorism in any significant fashion.” Here his list includes Iraq, Libya, Syria, Iran and Sudan. (As usual, Korea remains largely invisible to American progressives.)

¹ Dan Balz, “War Dissent? Don’t Look on the (Hawkish) Left,” *International Herald Tribune* (November 27, 2001) p. 3.

The most vituperative attack on critics of the war was launched by *Nation* longtime contributor Christopher Hitchens when he personalized his political disagreements with MIT professor Noam Chomsky. To answer a plethora of media inquiries regarding his viewpoint on the attacks at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Chomsky had issued a tersely worded statement that made reference to the US destruction of the Al-Shifa pharmaceutical plant in the Sudan in 1998. According to Chomsky, “tens of thousands of people--many of them children--have suffered and died from malaria, tuberculosis, and other treatable diseases” in the Sudan because no drugs were available after the attack. Rising to attack Chomsky as though he were Saint George seeking to slay the dragon, Hitchens first praised the men who fought the hijackers on the fourth flight and caused it to crash before it could reach its intended target: “One iota of such innate fortitude is worth all the writings of Noam Chomsky, who coldly compared the plan of September 11 to a stupid and cruel and cynical raid by Bill Clinton on Khartoum in August 1998.” Hitchens continued: “ I have no hesitation in describing this mentality, carefully and without heat, as soft on crime and soft on fascism. No political coalition is possible with such people and, I'm thankful to say, no political coalition with them is now necessary. It no longer matters what they think.”²

In his response, Chomsky refused to be drawn into a personalized exchange. He maintained that Hitchens “cannot mean what he says” and that “The fair and sensible reaction is to treat all of this as some aberration, and to await the return of the author to the important work that he has often done in the past.” Hitchens is, after all, the author of an important work that seeks an international war crimes tribunal for Henry Kissinger based upon his responsibility for US policy in Vietnam, Cambodia, Chile and elsewhere. Not to be misunderstood, however, Chomsky also elaborated on his original statement about September 11: “Proportional to population, this is as if the bin Laden network, in a single attack on the US, caused hundreds of thousands of people -- many of them children -- to suffer and die from easily treatable diseases...To regard the comparison to Sept. 11 as outrageous is to express extraordinary racist contempt for African victims of a shocking crime, which, to make it worse, is one for which we are responsible: as taxpayers, for failing to provide massive reparations, for granting refuge and immunity to the perpetrators, and for allowing the terrible facts to be sunk so deep in the memory hole that some, at least, seem unaware of them.”

² The Hitchens/Chomsky exchange can be found in the archive at <http://thenation.com>.

Hitchens was neither willing to relent nor to leave the exchange alone. Rejoining the attack, he wrote that Chomsky's "casuistry appears to be limitless"; "the pretense of [his] remorseless logic degenerates into flat-out irrationality"; and "Noam Chomsky has lost or is losing the qualities that made him a great moral and political tutor in the years of the Indochina war... the last time we corresponded, some months ago, I was appalled by the robotic element both of his prose and of his opinions."

Hitchens was not alone in his personalized condemnation of Chomsky. Todd Gitlin, former 1960s radical and today a New York University professor, joined in the chorus of "left-wing" abuse and wrote: "Sneering critics like Noam Chomsky, who condemn the executioners of thousands only in passing, would not hesitate to honor the vengeful feelings of Palestinians subjected to Israeli occupation. They have no standing." Rather than viewing these attacks simply in personal terms, however, it is important to understand them as part of a wider distancing of Americans—and not only radicals or former radicals—from any semblance of moral or material critique of America's global role. According to this perspective, whatever "mistakes" the US has made, there should be no parallel drawn with the "criminal" events of September 11.

The above examples make clear that traditional voices of anti-war sentiment are today divided. Simultaneously large constituencies who were opposed to the Vietnam War are today staunchly in favor of a war on terrorism. African-Americans led the opposition to the war in Vietnam in the early 1960s and have traditionally been a strong voice against US foreign military intervention. Immediately after September 11, however, many leading African-American commentators and respected organizations all issued statements condemning the attacks of September 11 as a "crime against humanity" —the very rhetoric that has become a signal for patriotic allegiance. Within this context, anyone who questions whether, for example, the bombing of al-Shifa or any number of other similar US actions were also "crimes against humanity" is immediately accused of sympathy—or even support for—terrorism.

Nowhere is such Manichean thinking more pronounced than among conservative intellectuals. For more than a decade they have inveighed against multiculturalism and campus "political correctness." In the past few months they renewed their offensive, singling out for public scrutiny the few

professors who have spoken out publicly for peace. Significantly, the organization sponsoring this initiative was founded by Lynne Cheney, the Vice-President's wife and herself a powerful conservative voice since being head of the National Endowment of the Humanities during the first Bush administration. Listing 115 instances of how college and university events equivocated in support for the war, Cheney's spokespersons also rebutted the notion that Americans should get to know more about Islam. That idea, Cheney said in a speech on October 5, "implies that the events of Sept. 11 were our fault." Rather, the group's report clarified that: "We believe that the West will fight for its own survival. But only if we know what we are fighting for...We call upon all colleges and universities to adopt strong core curricula that include rigorous, broad-based courses on the great works of Western civilization as well as courses on American history."³

While the needs to educate the American public about world civilizations and constrain the US military have seldom been so urgent, voices in power in the US are pushing in the opposite direction. At the same time, traditional peace constituencies are divided, and much of the world peace movement supports the US war against terrorism. The Germans Greens, whose founding principle is pacifism, have served a key role in legitimating the US war (to say nothing of the first foreign deployment of German combat troops since Hitler). In this context, activists in Korea can play a vital role. A non-Islamic country with a citizenry that is deeply concerned about war, Korea can have a voice that speaks to governments and activists all over the world. If people here were to mount significant protests against the real possibility of the US war against terror being expanded, governments would take note and activists in the US and Europe would be affected—maybe even inspired to act.

On this wintry evening, I decided to enjoy my home's fireplace, so I went to the supermarket to buy firewood. As I entered the store I couldn't help but pass the sale racks of items marked down 75% or more. Among them were a large pile of white cotton t-shirts with American flags and "United We Stand" printed upon them. I would love to think that the new patriotism in the US is a passing fad, that like the t-shirts, it will soon be gone. But no matter how hard I try to imagine that happening, I have the feeling that the worst is yet to come.

³ Cheney's report is available at <http://www.goacta.org/Reports/defciv.pdf>.

