Beyond September 11
An Anthology of Dissent

Edited by Phil Scraton
## Contents

**Acknowledgements** ix  
**Preface** x  

**Introduction: Witnessing ‘Terror’, Anticipating ‘War’**  
*Phil Scraton*  
1  

**America’s Jihad: A History of Origins**  
*Christian Parenti*  
10  

**An Unconscionable Threat to Humanity**  
*John Pilger*  
19  

**The Threat of United States’ Ruthlessness**  
*Madeleine Bunting*  
30  

**‘Terrorism’, ‘War’ and Democracy Compromised**  
*Paul Foot*  
35  

**The Politics of Morality**  
*Phil Scraton*  
40  

**Representations of Terror in the Legitimation of War**  
*Eileen Berrington*  
47  

**‘Either You Are With Us or You Are With the Terrorists’: The War’s Home Front**  
*Iude McCulloch*  
54  

**Resistance and Terror: Lessons from Ireland**  
*Bill Rolston*  
59  

**September 11 Aftermath: Where is the World Heading?**  
*Noam Chomsky*  
66  

**A Question of State Crime?**  
*Penny Green*  
71  

**This War is Illegal and Immoral, and it Won’t Prevent Terrorism**  
*Michael Mandel*  
77
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expanding the Concept of Terrorism?</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas Mathiesen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legislative Responses to Terrorism</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philip A Thomas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All in the Name of Security</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liz Fekete</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Defence of Civil Liberties</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paddy Hillyard</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty is the New Black</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Sivanandan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Challenge of September 11: An Interview with A Sivanandan</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Policing of Immigration in the New World Disorder</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leanne Weber and Ben Bowling</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 11 and All That: An African Perspective</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunde Zack-Williams</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Khaki Election</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russell Hogg</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signs of the Times</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naomi Klein</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business as Usual? Corporate Moralism and the 'War Against Terrorism'</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dave Whyte</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Markets, Regulation and Risk: The US Airlines Industry and Some Fallout from September 11</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve Tombs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dangers of the Armed Response at Home</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mick North</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrorism, Neighbours and Nuremberg</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herman Schwendinger and Julia Schwendinger</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pledging Allegiance: The Revival of Prescriptive Patriotism</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cecilia O'Leary and Tony Platt</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Contents
vii

My Fellow Americans: Looking Black on Red Tuesday
Jonathan David Farley
177

Neither Pure Nor Vile
Mike Marqusee
182

The Lion, the Witch and the Warmonger: ‘Good’, ‘Evil’ and the Shattering of Imperial Myth
Howard Davis
188

Beyond September 11: Certainties and Doubts
Barbara Hudson
195

Could Osama Bin Laden Have Been a Woman?
Masculinity and September 11
Martti Grönfors
200

An Attack on Truth?
Elizabeth Stanley
206

My Beating by Refugees is a Symbol of the Hatred and Fury of this Filthy War
Robert Fisk
211

In the Name of a ‘Just War’
Phil Scraton
216

Notes on Contributors
234

Index
238
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Phil Scraton
Merseyside
February 2002
Preface

So pervasive is the mass media that when dramatic, catastrophic events occur in Western societies, particularly the US, visual images are projected instantaneously on to a world stage. They are presented, indeed re-presented, to a global audience. This contrasts with the delayed or absent coverage of disasters and tragedies in the so-called Third World. By any standard, however, the magnitude and significance of September 11 was exceptional. Yet, like any transmitted event, meaning was constructed in the experiences of the beholder. While there could not be anything but incredulity, given the bold ferocity and appalling ‘success’ of the suicide mission, condemnation was not universal. For many throughout the world there was deep sadness and open outrage at the loss of civilians through wilful acts of mass murder; for others they were a cause for celebration. As those who hijacked and deployed domestic flights as bombs were condemned as terrorist killers, to others they were heroes who had sacrificed their lives in ultimate acts of heroism. This profound contrast in the responses of ordinary people across the globe could not, and cannot, be ignored.

The graphic, horrifying images of the ‘bombing’ and eventual collapse of the World Trade Center’s twin towers left a lasting imprint on all who watched their repeated transmission. With powerful lenses, from close focus to wide angle, and with clear blue skies of late summer as the backdrop, not one moment of the disaster went unrecorded. This left an often voiced sense of unease that those who indulged in the coverage, as producers and as viewers, later felt they had been voyeurs. Yet the sheer scale of the disasters, in Manhattan, Washington and Pennsylvania demanded and received world attention. That, of course, had been a primary objective of the terrible mission. These were not casual targets. Inevitably, then, September 11 was portrayed as the day that ‘changed history’. After these events ‘life would never be the same’. Clearly that was, and remains, true for the bereaved, the survivors and the rescuers. Their lives and futures were altered suddenly and permanently; their hopes and plans devastated.
To represent more broadly those fateful moments or hours as ‘world changing’ masked the realities of international relations and the powerful interests that underpin them. However vicious, uncompromising and criminal, the attacks on the US were not without context. They were the end-product of historical, material circumstances. If they are to be understood it is necessary to put aside simplistic mono-causal explanations. The political imperative is to move beyond indignation, condemnation and retribution and face the complex political, economic and socio-cultural relations between and within nation-states to understand and confront regimes which spawn such acts. Yet, to seek explanation is not to deny culpability. To understand through contextualisation is not to appease or justify despicable acts of extreme violence. To pursue justice through international laws and conventions is not to betray the dead and their bereaved families. The events of September 11 shaped rather than changed contemporary history. If we fail to grasp material and social contexts, if we dismiss as irrelevant profound differences in their interpretation, we deny their meaning, neglect their significance and rationalise their truth.

In the rush to judgement of the immediate aftermath, the ease with which a label – terrorism – emerged and was applied as a self-evident classification was disturbing, although hardly surprising. In the clamour for vengeance, the speed with which previously little-known individuals, groups and organisations were ascribed ‘monster’ status was remarkable. And, in the misappropriation of ‘justice’ as a non-negotiable process, the legitimacy claimed, if not coerced, for the deployment of the most powerful weaponry on earth was breathtaking. As the bereaved and survivors were still reeling from the full, personal impact of the attacks, the US demanded of its people, its allies and all nation-states, unqualified approval for its self-serving ‘war on terror’. The US alone decided on appropriate targets and its ‘with us or against us’ agenda condemned ‘ neutrals’ to reclassification as ‘enemies of the States’. Yet, consistent with a kind of Orwellian double-speak, it was a war that was not a war, suggesting, and eventually demonstrating, that the US would be bound neither by the rules of engagement associated with military action nor by the Geneva Conventions.

It was during the politics of the immediate aftermath, as the Bush agenda in the US transformed into the Blair agenda in the UK, that this anthology was conceived. As the destiny of Afghanistan’s torturing Taliban regime was sealed, with unrestrained US support
given to the torturing Northern Alliance to fight the ground war, the full implications of the potential of sustained and unlimited military intervention began to dawn. Still there was no workable or agreed definition of ‘terrorism’. Neither was there any informed political debate on extending the ‘war’ in Afghanistan to other states. What qualified states for inclusion on the prescribed list of potential US targets? There was no political mandate for the ‘war on terror’ and no political accountability for prioritised targets or ‘collateral damage’. At the same time, new anti-terrorist legislation was rushed through and enacted in the US, the UK and Europe. Apart from draconian law reform, existing legislation was used with harsh authoritarianism. In schools, colleges and universities, critical and rights-oriented debate was silenced with dissenters intimidated physically and professionally. The myth of academic freedom, usually disguised by liberal rhetoric and a pretence that the academy stands apart from vested military-industrial interests, was exposed.

What was deeply worrying about these developments was the ease with which opposition to the ‘war on terror’, in both political hubris and military action, was recast as betrayal. First a betrayal of those who died in Manhattan, Washington and Pennsylvania and second a betrayal of nationhood and ‘civilised values’. The worst excesses of this media-hyped response were seen in headlines branding opponents of the military strategy as ‘traitors’. Simultaneously, the ‘evil’ ascribed to Osama bin Laden, al-Qaida and the Taliban was transferred to Muslims living throughout the West, fuelling racism already endured by black and Asian communities.

In this context of vengeance and despair, of propaganda and reaction, I contacted academics, journalists, lawyers, activists and campaigners inviting short, informed articles reflecting critical responses to the Bush-Blair agenda. The brief was to write personally and/or professionally. This anthology, containing eight already published articles and twenty-six commissioned contributions, is not intended as a comprehensive coverage of all issues. Rather, it sets out to provide an accessible and detailed account of the implications of the responses to September 11 and its aftermath. It blends well-researched and closely observed political accounts with personal experiences.

What the collection achieves is a forum in which opposition to the ‘war on terror’, as constituted by President Bush in his September 2001 address to Congress and reaffirmed in his State of the Union speech in February 2002, has been voiced powerfully, authoritatively
and without compromise. This anthology of dissent reflects deep concerns from within the US and allied states. The contributors, individually and collectively, present a profound, shared concern with what has been, continues to be and will be carried out in our names.

Phil Scraton
Merseyside
February 2002
INTRODUCTION: WITNESSING ‘TERROR’,  
ANTICIPATING ‘WAR’

Phil Scraton

First thoughts

Trying to make sense – emotional, physical, political – of September 11, I return to my initial reactions and responses. Like so many others across the world, via satellite I witnessed truly horrifying scenes of scarcely believable atrocity. Filmed from every conceivable angle the second passenger aircraft imploded the twin tower. Its nose-cone, having passed through the building, was instantly engulfed in flames. At that ‘live by satellite’ moment, the collapse of the entire World Trade Center inevitable, the realisation dawned that the dual crashes were no coincidence. Both aircraft had been piloted, purposefully and accurately, into their targets. As news broke, telling of two other planes crashing, one into the Pentagon, the second out of control in Pennsylvania, the immensity and significance of these disasters became apparent. They had to be the dreadful end-product of effective and efficient collaboration involving groups working together, carefully planning and acquiring skills. These were not random targets. The World Trade Center, bomb damaged just eight years earlier, and the Pentagon represented hugely symbolic as well as material targets.

In a Verona hotel room we watched the dramatic live transmissions from downtown Manhattan. Firefighters and rescuers raced into the disaster zone passing dust-covered, ghost-like workers coming from the opposite direction – running or staggering for their lives. Cameras homed in on others trapped in offices high above the flames, some throwing themselves from windows to avoid choking or burning to death. As the towers collapsed, clouds of grey toxic dust covered all and everything in their path. Then came the first reports of agonised telephone calls made from one of the planes and by those facing death trapped in their offices. These were final goodbyes to loved ones. They reminded me of rescue workers recounting disaster scenes where the only sounds they could hear, as they listened for potential survivors, were those of mobile phones ringing from the debris as desperate relatives tried to make contact.

The carnage of September 11 could not have been anticipated. The total destruction of one of the world’s largest building complexes, the deaths of between three and four thousand civilian workers
Terrifying acts are not conceived in a political vacuum. They become broadly and popularly defined within the management and manipulation of ‘identity’. Their status is ascribed through a familiar vocabulary that slips easily and casually from the tongue, grabs headlines and captures – then imprisons – imagination. It is a vocabulary which demonises, vilifies and distances: deliver ‘us’ from ‘evil’; the ‘massacre’ of the ‘innocent’; ‘wicked’ beyond ‘humanity’; ‘savages’, not ‘humans’; ‘barbarism’ versus ‘civilisation’. In such accounts, so depraved are the perpetrators, so far removed are they from ‘our’ world, that they are aberrant and beyond redemption. They are ‘other’, not only outsiders and outlaws, but a sub-species. Their threat is not restricted to a collective rejection of ‘our’ Christian, social democratic values but extends to a commitment of our eradication. It is a dangerous construction invariably leading to an abandonment of the rule of law and established rules of engagement. If the ‘enemy’ is beneath contempt, the war against it can be unconditional.

The events of September 11 leave no doubts about the lengths to which some individuals, groups and organisations are prepared to go in the use of violence. Unique in terms of the operation, the claiming of so many civilian lives through co-ordinated acts of terror is hardly unusual. Terror is a strategy which ostentatiously denies the conventions of ‘acceptable’ conflict. Its purpose is to demonstrate as widely as possible a disregard for the boundaries or limits to formal combat. To strike terror into the heart of an identifiable community is to frighten people so deeply that they lose trust and
confidence in all aspects of routine daily life. Yet, to demonise perpetrators, to represent their humaneness as monstrousness, creates and sustains a climate within which a deeper understanding of historical, political and cultural contexts is inhibited and is replaced by an all-consuming will to vengeance.

Following the devastation at the World Trade Center two highly visible and emotional expressions of grief and sympathy replaced the initial shock of the attacks. First was the presence in lower Manhattan of those in search of the missing. In scenes reminiscent of old, grainy and faded photographs of relatives at pitheads quietly awaiting news of loved ones lost underground, families and friends clustered together, as close as permitted to the area designated for all time as Ground Zero. They carried treasured photographs and written descriptions, many photocopied and pasted on walls, hoardings and makeshift notice boards. These became dignified shrines to lost lives.

Second, and displaying a kind of civic commitment to supporting the gruesome yet hapless search for survivors, was the ever-changing mass of people out on the streets applauding firefighters and rescuers as they changed shifts. Unable to assist directly, it was as if those who stood with banners and flags, many travelling long distances to be there, felt impelled to ‘do something’. Undoubtedly, whatever the motives of individuals, this public recognition of the pain and loss endured by the rescue and recovery teams was much appreciated. Many firefighting precincts had lost officers, even entire crews.

How easy it is to hijack the spirit of grief, the heartfelt expressions of sympathy and the public displays of empathy. When, eventually, the US President – at first conspicuous by his absence – made his appearance in New York, the mood shifted to that of vengeance masquerading as the pursuit of justice in defence of global freedom. Returning to my emotions of those late September days, as firefighters posed Iwo Jima-style to plant the Stars and Stripes on the mountain of rubble that had claimed so many lives, I was not surprised by the attacks. Bush and his hawks, presumably with whom he had been planning a war schedule behind closed doors, reminded me of US insularity and the simplicity of a mindset that reduces complex political-economic and socio-cultural dynamics to the ranch barbeque discourse of ‘good folks’ and ‘bad folks’, to the civilised (meaning Western values) and the barbarians at ‘our’ gates, to allies and enemies. Suddenly the president with a dubious mandate to hold office, a man who when questioned did not know
the name of the president of Pakistan, had been catapulted centre stage into a world political crisis.

Shocked, but not surprised; that was my initial reaction. Shocked by the ‘success’ of those terrible and terrifying missions, by the repeated failures of international surveillance and security systems and by the consolidation of deep religious convictions that could recast suicide and murder as a holy war. But not surprised. The insularity of a richly diverse and intricate union of states, which continually reveals itself as an aggressive political-economic and cultural coloniser, stifles critical and informed debate. The US projects its military-industrial complex, its command of material resources and cultural transmission with an absolute certainty that its WASP-ish dominant ideologies and lifestyles are both right and righteous. Through this combination of material and cultural absolutism all who supply resources, open their borders, agree to unfair terms of investment and buy into the American Dream are friends. The rest are foes.

And so … to war

No country lightly commits forces to military action and the inevitable risks involved. The military action we are taking will be targeted against places we know to be involved in the al-Qaida network of terror, or against the military apparatus of the Taliban. The military plan has been put together mindful of our determination to do all we humanly can to avoid civilian casualties.

Tony Blair, UK Prime Minister, 7 October 2001

On 20 September George W Bush, heavily criticised for his invisibility throughout the immediate aftermath of the attacks on the US, addressed Congress. His nation had been ‘awakened to danger and called to defend freedom’. Shared grief had been ‘turned to anger and anger to resolution’. ‘Justice’ would be delivered – whether ‘we bring our enemies to justice or bring justice to our enemies’. In his sights were: al-Qaida – ‘to terror what the Mafia is to crime’; Afghanistan’s Taliban regime; and Osama bin Laden. Al-Qaida, with Osama bin Laden’s direction, had recruited and trained ‘thousands of … terrorists in more than 60 countries’. To the Taliban Bush issued three non-negotiable demands: present the al-Qaida leadership to the US authorities; release all foreign nationals; provide access to all
terrorist training camps. His message was unequivocal: ‘hand over the terrorists’ or ‘share their fate’. The ‘logic’ was simple: in harbouring and supporting murderers, ‘the Taliban regime is committing murder’. While not committing the US to the overthrow of the Taliban regime, this would be an inevitable consequence of its failure to meet US demands. Aiding and abetting ‘terrorism’ would provide legitimacy for military action.

Ominously, Bush expanded the dimensions of the US declaration of the ‘war on terror’: it ‘begins with al-Qaida, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped the defeated.’ All nations that ‘provide aid or safe haven to terrorists’ would be pursued relentlessly on the basis of an ultimatum that either ‘you are with us or you are with the terrorists’. There could be no third way, no neutral territories. In the long-term defence of US interests, in protecting its citizens, regimes tolerating or encouraging ‘terrorism’ would be designated ‘hostile’.

Flexing the military muscle of global policing, Bush emphasised that it was not ‘just America’s fight’. What was ‘at stake’ was not only ‘America’s freedom’. It would be a long-term fight for the ‘world’, for ‘civilisation’ and for ‘pluralism, tolerance and freedom’. With reference to the Nato Charter he proclaimed that an ‘attack on one is an attack on all’, that the ‘civilised world’ was quickly ‘rallying to America’s side’. No room here for the ‘clash of civilisations’ thesis – it was the civilised against the rest. In ‘grief and anger’ had been forged ‘our mission and our moment’. Defending the ‘advance of human freedom, the great achievement of our time’ now depended on US resolve and intervention.

And so the ‘war on terror’ was declared. Regardless of international mandate, formal political debate or democratic political process and in contravention of international law and conventions, Bush prepared the ground for the inevitable. The ‘war’ was not against Islam but against ubiquitous terrorism. With over 60 nation-states already proscribed as hostile, the long haul announced and the ‘defence of civilisation’ as the high moral purpose, the US was going to war. If states were not party to the Bush administration’s solution, they would be regarded part of its problem. As far as the US government was concerned the attacks provided it with the authority and legitimacy to define, name and eliminate ‘terrorist’ organisations, their members and their associates.

Sitting in Congress was the UK Prime Minister, Tony Blair. He endorsed the Bush speech without qualification and the president