

Journalist, scoundrel Christopher Hitchens dies at 62

By David Walsh
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British-born journalist Christopher Hitchens died December 15 at the M. D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, Texas, at the age of 62. His death has prompted an outpouring of praise and commentary in the US and global media. The *New York Times* chose to feature an account of his passing prominently on the front page of its printed edition and, for a time, even more prominently on its online version.

To say the least, the torrent of admiring words is out of proportion to Hitchens' accomplishments and significance. He began his public life as a "left" journalist in Britain and moved on, without undergoing any apparent internal struggle, to become a proponent of imperialist war and violence, residing in Washington, D.C.

In paying tribute to Hitchens, those writing his obituaries primarily seek to legitimize their own present and future obeisance to power and money. For the *Times* and its staff in particular his departure is a major event. He exemplified a social type they admire.

Taken from the widest angle, Hitchens' trajectory resembled that followed by many of his contemporaries in the "protest generation." His was an especially spectacular and filthy evolution, but the difference between a Hitchens and a great many left celebrities, including those who still maintain a pretense now and then of opposition to the existing order, is slight. What has characterized these middle class elements, above all, has been an immense unseriousness about the great life-and-death questions of our day.

Chatter about Hitchens as a "contrarian," an "iconoclast" and so on is simply self-deception, and comparisons to George Orwell, on the latter's worst day, are equally absurd. Hitchens, for the last decade of his life and more, aligned himself with the American state, its CIA and military, as Washington embarked on a murderous drive to conquer the globe.

The Christian right is not the only variant of contemporary reaction. That Hitchens did not share its bigotry and fanaticism is of no importance weighed against his support

for the invasion of Iraq, with the resulting destruction of a society and the deaths of perhaps one million people, and other imperialist crimes, and his cheerleading the build-up of a police state in the US, including the murder this year of unindicted US citizen Anwar al-Awlaki. Hitchens died an unrepentant and unapologetic proponent of the "global war on terror" and the crusade against "Islamofascism," the racist-chauvinist justification for the conquest of Middle Eastern energy supplies by the US and its allies.

Associated with the "state capitalist" International Socialists group in the UK in the 1970s and later the *Nation* magazine in the US, Hitchens was the sort of private school "leftist" that British society regularly turns out, essentially snobs and careerists, who ditch their former "comrades" as soon as the wind shifts or more tempting opportunities present themselves.

His autobiography is an exercise in shameless name-dropping and self-promotion. The journalist's account of meeting Margaret Thatcher, newly elected Conservative Party leader, whose neo-colonial Malvinas War Hitchens would later endorse, is especially distasteful: "Almost as soon as we shook hands on immediate introduction, I felt that she [Thatcher] knew my name and perhaps connected it to the socialist weekly that had recently called her rather sexy [Hitchens' own piece in the *New Statesman*]. While she struggled adorably with this moment of pretty confusion ..." What is one to make of this?

In the late 1990s, by which time Hitchens had largely given up his leftist pretensions, the *Washington Post* bluntly portrayed the circles he belonged to in the US capital as "an elite subset of Washington society—the crowd of journalists, intellectuals, authors and policymakers, mostly in their thirties and forties, who regularly dine together and dine out on each other." Another *Post* article at the time described "a rarefied world where the top pols and bureaucrats sup with the media and literary elite at exclusive dinner parties. It's a cozy little club of confidential sources and off-the-record confidences."

Truly, a "slashing polemicist" (*New York Times*) of a

unique sort.

In 2002, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, which became the occasion for Hitchens to cement his ties to the ultra-right, we noted on the WSWS that the journalist “was a former ‘left,’ who has moved openly and sharply to the right over the past several years. During the impeachment drive of 1998-99, engineered by the extreme right, Hitchens foamed at the mouth about the sins of Bill Clinton. Indeed at one point he actively intervened, playing a small but dirty role, and did his best to pin a perjury charge on a Clinton aide [Sidney Blumenthal]. During the 2000 election hijacking Hitchens made common cause with the extreme right again, denouncing Democrats for ‘squealing’ about the Bush camp’s fraud and thuggery. Following the September 11 terror attacks, the *Nation* columnist became a vocal proponent of a US military attack on Afghanistan.”

A defender of neo-colonial war, a snitch and an ally of the most reactionary elements in American politics—what an unusual “contrarian.”

We wrote a number of pieces about Hitchens in the late 1990s and early 2000s. We would refer readers to those pieces for a more extensive analysis of the journalist’s career and evolution:

- Journalist Christopher Hitchens fully embraces the Bush war camp
- The political depravity of journalist Christopher Hitchens
- Journalist Christopher Hitchens: from “left” charlatan to mouthpiece for the Republican right
- Scoundrel time redux: Christopher Hitchens as a social type

The WSWS has not written much on Hitchens since that time because one simply ceased caring what he said or did, as he navigated the corridors of the American political and media establishment, often a hero to the semi-fascist right.

However, to portray Hitchens as a “renegade” or an apostate also largely misses the point about the “left” circles in which he first traveled. As far as those circles were concerned, he never entirely fell out of favor. In the various tributes from “left” and liberal commentators, one encounters the same pattern again and again. Hitchens and X or Y would fall out, make up, have drinks together and pay each other personal tributes, despite supposedly sharp political conflicts.

D.D. Guttenplan in the *Nation*, for example, writes: “The last time I saw Christopher was in the summer of 2009, when he materialized at the edge of the audience after I’d done a reading at Politics and Prose in Washington. There had been a kind of *froidueur* [coldness] between us over various matters, some personal and some political, and I was deeply touched that he’d come. After we exchanged kisses,

he asked if I was free for dinner and I explained that I was going out with my cousin and her daughter ... Agreeing—or disagreeing—with all of Christopher’s positions over the years was impossible. But he was always very easy to love.”

In the *Atlantic*, Benjamin Schwartz recalls, “I met Christopher (never Chris) in 1997. Perry Anderson, a mutual friend, had invited us to debate the wisdom of American intervention in the Balkans. We were, unsurprisingly, on opposing sides—a position that all his friends have experienced, formally or informally. ... Over martinis and dinner afterward, we talked about [American writer Nathaniel] Hawthorne, mostly ... In the following three years, we came together over [Monica] Lewinsky, avoided Kosovo, and mostly talked about books and history.” The Perry Anderson in question is the left academic, a stalwart of the *New Left Review* and Western Marxism.

All one, if not happy, then reconcilable and amicable family. Why should disagreements about matters involving the deaths and oppression of tens of thousands, or more, come between pals?

None of this has anything remotely to do with the struggle for socialism, the building of a movement in the working class prepared to wage irreconcilable combat with the status quo.

If obituary writers refer to Hitchens as an erstwhile “Trotskyist,” a reference to his membership in the International Socialists group, that is merely a tragicomic misunderstanding. The organization was founded on the basis of repudiating Trotsky’s defense of the Russian Revolution and orientation to the revolutionary role of the working class. However, Hitchens’ political origins have a certain significance. It was well known that IS gathered around itself at the time a set of unprincipled, irresponsible middle class figures such as Hitchens, Paul Foot of *Private Eye* fame, and others. The seamless character of Hitchens’ transition to the right underscores the essentially anticommunist character of the “state capitalist” theories of IS and its contemporary equivalents in the US and Britain.

Indeed, the evolution of Hitchens and the friendliness with which his former “left” associates continued to regard him points to one of the important social realities of our time, which is still not widely enough grasped: that middle class leftism functions as an indispensable cog in the bourgeois political machinery.

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