

Biden's Promise: America Is Back(wards)

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With President Donald Trump all but conceding to the transition team that will take over after January next year, interest now shifts to President-elect Joe Biden's choices for cabinet. On the national security front, the imperial-military lobby will have reasons to be satisfied. If Trump promised to rein in, if not put the brakes on the US imperium, Biden promises a cocktail of energising stimulants.

While campaigning for the Democratic nomination, Biden tried to give a different impression. Biden the militarist was gone. "It time to end the Forever Wars, which have cost us untold blood and treasure," [he stated](#) in July 2019. Pinching a leaf or two out of Trump's own playbook, he insisted on bringing "the vast majority of our troops home - from the wars on Afghanistan and the Middle East". Missions would be more narrowly focused on Al-Qaeda and ISIS. Support would also be withdrawn from the unpardonable Saudi-led war in Yemen. "So I will make it my mission - to restore American leadership - and elevate diplomacy as our principal tool of foreign policy."

This was an unconvincing display of the leopard desperately trying to change its striking spots. During the Obama administration, the Vice-President found war sweet, despite subsequent attempts to distance himself from collective cabinet responsibility. These included the current war in Yemen, the assault on Libya that crippled the country and turned it into a terrorist wonderland, and that "forever war" in Afghanistan. In 2016, Biden claimed to be the sage in the administration, warning President Barack Obama against the Libyan intervention. An impression of combative wisdom was offered. He had "argued strongly" in the White House "against going ... to Libya," a position at odds with the hawkish Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, who insisted on something a bit more than going to Libya. After the demise of Muammar Gaddafi, what then? "Doesn't the country disintegrate? What happens then? Doesn't it become a place where it becomes a - petri dish for the growth of extremism?" So many questions, so few answers.

The Iraq War is another stubborn stain on Biden's garments. His approval of the invasion of Iraq has been feebly justified as benign ignorance. As he [explained](#) to NPR in September last year, he had received "a commitment from President [George W.] Bush he was not going to go to war in Iraq." Bush looked him "in the eye at the Oval Office; he said he needed the vote to be able to get inspectors into Iraq to determine whether or not Saddam Hussein was engaged in dealing with a nuclear program." Then came the invasion: "we had a shock and awe". For Iraqis, it was a bit more than shock and awe.

With the warring efforts of the US in Iraq turning sour, Biden [entertained a proposal](#) reminiscent of Europe's old imperial planners: the establishment of "three largely autonomous regions" for each of Iraq's ethnic and confessional groups, governed by Baghdad in the execrable policy of "unity through autonomy". Not exactly an enlightened suggestion but consistent with previous conventions of dismemberment that have marked

Middle Eastern politics.

In considering Biden's record on Iraq, Spencer Ackerman of *The Daily Beast* [was clear](#) in describing an erratic, bumbling and egregious performance. "Reviewing Biden's record on Iraq is like rewinding footage of a car crash to identify the fateful decisions that arrayed people at the bloody intersection."

Now, we forward ourselves to November 2020. The Trump administration has given a good cover to the incoming Democratic administration. Considered putatively wicked, all that follows the orange ogre will be good. In introducing some of his key appointments, Biden's crusted choices stood to attention like storm troopers-elect, an effect helped by face masks, solemn lighting and their sense of wonder. "America is back," [declared](#) Biden. A collective global shudder could be felt. The Beltway establishment, mocked by Obama's Deputy National Security Adviser Ben Rhodes as "the Blob," had returned.

In the cast are such figures from the past as former Deputy Secretary of State and former Deputy National Security Adviser, Tony Blinken. He will serve as Secretary of State. National Security adviser: former Hillary Clinton aide and senior adviser Jake Sullivan. Director of National Intelligence: Avril Haines ("a reliable expert leading our intelligence community," [remarked](#) CNN's unflinching militarist Samantha Vinograd of CNN, herself another former Obama stable hand from the National Security Council). Secretary of Defence: most probably Michèle Flournoy, former Under Secretary of Defence for Policy.

Blinken, it should be remembered, was the one who encouraged Biden to embrace the antediluvian, near criminal project of partitioning Iraq. This does not worry *The Guardian*, [which praises](#) his "urbane bilingual charm" which will be indispensable in "soothing the frayed nerves of western allies, reassuring them that the US is back as a conventional team player." He is a "born internationalist" who likes soccer and played a weekly game with US officials, diplomats and journalists before joining the Obama administration.

Johannes Lang, [writing](#) in the *Harvard Political Review*, is a touch sharper, noting that Blinken "is a committed internationalist with a penchant for interventionism." The two often go together. As Blinken [recently told](#) *The New York Times* (members of the UN General Assembly, take note), "Whether we like it or not, the world simply does not organize itself."

Flournoy and Blinken have been spending time during the Trump years drawing sustenance through their co-founded outfit WestExec Advisors, a consulting firm promising to bring "the Situation Room to the Board Room." Revolving door rhetoric is used unabashedly: We knew power; we can show you how to exploit it. Having served in a presidential administration, these individuals [are keen](#) to use "scenario development and table-top exercises to test ideas or enhance preparedness for a future contingency". The consultants are willing to give their clients "higher confidence in their business decisions," as Flournoy puts it, in times of "historic levels of turmoil and uncertainty around the world".

The Flournoy set have also been the beneficiaries of the US defence funding complex, fronting think tanks that have received generous largesse. In a [report](#) for the Center for International Policy, Ben Freeman notes that, "Think tanks very considerably in terms of their objectives and organization, but many think tanks in Washington D.C. share a common trait: they receive substantial financial support from the US government and private businesses that work for the US government, most notably defense contractors." Flournoy's

own Center for a New American Security [now ranks second](#) to the RAND Corporation in the cash it gets from defence contractors and US government sources.

Biden's Department of Defense agency review team, tasked with informing what is hoped will be a "smooth transfer of power," has its fair complement of those from entities either part of the weapons industry or beneficiaries of it. According to [In These Times](#), they make up at least eight of the 23 people in that team. Think tanks with Biden advisory personnel include the militarily minded Center for Strategic and International Studies, which boasts funding from Raytheon, Northrop Grumman Corporation, Lockheed Martin Corporation and General Dynamics Corporation.

America – at least a version of it – is back, well and truly. The stench of wars continuous, and interventions compulsive, is upon us.

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