

Obama's Foreign Policy: The Case for Pessimism

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Global Research, November 25, 2008

[Antiwar.com](#) 24 November 2008

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

We know the sellout is a reality when we listen to Jamie Kirchick [praise](#) Barack Obama's national security appointments: "Barack Obama isn't even president yet, and he's already angering some of his most devoted followers on the party's left wing. This is the mark of what could be a very successful presidency," he snarks.

[Kirchick](#), in [his role](#) as [Marty Peretz's](#) alter ego, is pleased as punch with the incoming Obama-ites, who appear to have [abandoned](#) their "[netroots](#)" early on and [ceded](#) the foreign policy realm to the pro-war Clinton wing of the party. He is mostly concerned with gloating over the fact that Joe Lieberman [wasn't expelled](#) from the Democratic caucus, but the larger issue is the party's foreign policy stance in general, which looks to be shaping up as distinctly right-of-center. ("Right," in this sense, means [neocon](#), rather than [authentically](#) conservative, but then you knew that.)

As the last surviving representative of the [Scoop Jackson Democrats](#), who have long been on the politically endangered species list, Lieberman has a special place in the hearts of neocons everywhere, but especially in the editorial offices of The New Republic, which, in spite of unconvincing efforts to suck up to the "new politics" wing, exists to hold high the banner of that hoary tradition.

Obama's [personal intervention](#) on Lieberman's behalf hints at where the Democrats are going as a governing party, and his appointments are rapidly confirming this trend: not only [Hillary Clinton at State](#) and [Robert Gates at Defense](#), but also retired Marine Gen. [Jim Jones](#) as national security adviser. The former commander of U.S. forces in Europe and military head of NATO was [described](#) last year as a political "hot commodity" by the Wall Street Journal. In a piece that detailed the courting of the general by both political parties, Hillary is cited as saying she'd put him in her Cabinet, perhaps as defense secretary, although her campaign qualified this by saying that "it's way premature" to speculate about such matters, as indeed it was. Jones is best [buddies](#) with John McCain, and, although he assiduously avoided a formal endorsement, he made an appearance with his old friend during the campaign. When Jones served on a commission evaluating our military operations in Iraq, he concluded that we ought to stay the course: "Understand the fact that regardless how you got there, there is a strategic price of enormous consequence for failure in Iraq." His point of agreement with President-elect Obama is that he believes we've been grievously amiss in not [escalating](#) the fighting on the Afghan front sooner.

The argument for Gen. Jones as national security chieftain echoes the case for Hillary at State: "If Obama engages Iran," [avers](#) The New Republic, "it'll be harder to dismiss his overtures as soft-headed or naïve with Jones coordinating foreign policy." The same malarkey is being uttered with a straight face by defenders of the Clinton appointment, such as Obamacon-in-chief [Andrew Sullivan](#), who claims it will somehow give Obama the

credibility to pull off a settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. This assumes, however, that his "[team of rivals](#)," as the pundits have deemed it, won't mutiny. It assumes presidential omnipotence, when the reality is that without the cooperation of the vast and powerful [national security bureaucracy](#), the White House will find it difficult to carry out its program. It also assumes Clinton and her menagerie won't actively sabotage the policies she [attacked](#) during the primaries as "naïve" and "dangerous."

On the key question of withdrawal from Iraq, Jones is a mixed bag. The Jones [commission](#) set up to evaluate Iraq's move toward creating its own military and police forces praised the Iraqi army but dissed the police as sectarian bullies and recommended they be disbanded. Of course, the police are run by the ruling Shi'ite parties, each of which has its [own militia](#), and these will never be disbanded. The Jones plan is to reorient the U.S. mission in Iraq to protect the borders and leave internal security to the Iraqi military. At the congressional hearings held to present the commission's findings, Jones was [questioned](#) by Sen. Carl Levin:

"You say that significant reductions, consolidations and realignments would appear to be possible and prudent - is that your finding?"

"That's correct," was Jones' reply. However, when it came [John McCain](#)'s turn to question his old bud, Jones told the Arizona senator what he no doubt wanted to hear. Asked if it would be in our interest to set a definite timetable for U.S. withdrawal, Jones said:

"Senator, I'll speak for myself on this, but I think deadlines can work against us, and I think a deadline of this magnitude would be against our national interest."

Is it really possible that a [candidate](#) for president elevated to front-runner status by [antiwar voters](#) in the primaries - and elected over a rival who made support for the war the [leitmotif](#) of his losing campaign - is enabling the hijacking of American foreign policy by a new cabal of warmongers?

The idea that by [surrounding himself](#) with advisers who have a long history of opposing any change in our bipartisan foreign policy orthodoxy Obama can somehow immunize himself from criticism is logical only in a [Bizarro World](#) kind of way. In that alternate universe, where up is down and black is white, it makes perfect "sense" for a president to appoint people to key posts who oppose his policies. In our own world, however, such an approach would be crazy - yet it seems to be happening right before our eyes.

Another disturbing aspect of the Jones appointment is that it underscores the rebirth of NATO as an [engine](#) of American aggression. [No doubt](#) the Bushian-neocon campaign to enlarge the archaic alliance and extend the Euro-American military umbrella into the Caucasus will be taken up by the Obama administration with fresh enthusiasm. The "unilateralist" approach attacked by Bush's Democratic critics as a [strategic mistake](#) is now about to be corrected, with a renewed NATO as its symbol. While the ostensible enemy is, at present, [the Taliban](#) in Afghanistan and Pakistan, NATO is, first and foremost, a challenge to Russia. Founded as the Western shield against the Soviet empire, now it is a [sword](#) pointed straight at Putin's throat, as the Alliance moves inexorably eastward. If a new confrontation with the Russians is in the making, then it makes sense to put a former NATO military chieftain in as national security adviser.

The new president's appointments resound like slaps in the faces of his liberal supporters:

Rahm Emanuel (a [fierce opponent](#) of the antiwar wing of the party), Hillary, Robert Gates (they're [trying to persuade him](#) to stay on), and now Gen. Jones. It looks like antiwar voters voted for one thing, but are getting quite another – although it won't be the first time that's happened. From "[he kept us out of war](#)" in [Woodrow Wilson](#)'s day to George W. Bush's pledge of "[a more humble foreign policy](#)," presidents seem to have a penchant for inverting their campaign promises in the foreign policy realm, and Obama's appointments could presage a lot of surprises – and bitter disappointments – for his supporters.

Just how docile is the rank-and-file of the Obama "movement" – will they take this lying down? We're about to find out. So far, the outrage of the "netroots" and the [Rachel Maddow](#) crowd seems limited to the triumph of Lieberman over the attempt to purge the evil spirit of Scoop Jackson from party precincts once and for all. And even this has nothing to do with Lieberman's rabidly pro-war views, per se, only with the Connecticut senator's endorsement of McCain.

As it slowly dawns on the netroots that they've been had, however, don't expect "netroots" entrepreneur Arianna Huffington to start asking uncomfortable questions. After all, she has a lot to lose. As the Times of London [reports](#):

"Arianna Huffington looks set to cement her position as the Queen of Capitol Hill in the next few days.

"The Times has learnt that the Huffington Post, her influential political Web site, will confirm within the next week that it has completed a \$15 million (£10 million) fundraising from investors.

"The money will finance the expansion of HuffPo, as it is known, into the provision of local news across the United States and into more investigative journalism. And it will ensure that Ms. Huffington's influence continues to spread across the U.S. political scene.

"She is a close friend of Barack Obama, the president-elect – who, with Hillary Clinton, has posted on her site – and, at a dinner in London on Wednesday night, joked: 'I only text three people – my two teenage children and Barack Obama.'"

Arianna criticize the Dear Leader's appointments? That might get her blocked from the presidential cell, not to mention alienate those generous investors whose interest in her money-losing, aesthetically disastrous, and painstakingly trite [Web site](#) might lessen considerably. Which just goes to show that no matter how high the price, a whore is still a whore – and what better occupation for the Queen of Capitol Hill?

The circus aspect of all this may be amusing, if you take your humor black, but the joke is on the rest of us when the Obama-ites take office, because that's when our real problems will begin.

Obama's appointments on the foreign policy front prefigure a policy of paralyzing caution and indecision. Just look at the cast of characters who will be major players on the national security field: not only Hillary and Gen. Jones, but also [Joe Biden](#), who fancies himself a foreign policy maven and will [no doubt](#) want to play a major role in the decision-making process. This has all the makings of a three-way bureaucratic turf war, and the result is bound to be paralysis, rather than change of any desirable sort. Obama's first concern, as he takes office, will be facing America's [economic crisis](#), and his full attention will be

required for an extended period – plenty of time for the built-in rivalry in the foreign policy apparatus to take root and fester.

The outlook for the foreign policy of the new administration is not good. I foresee a protracted period of confusion and internal struggle, punctuated by periodic foreign crises in which Team Obama will be [all too eager](#) to prove their “toughness.” Diverted by trouble on the home front, President Obama is likely to let the tremendous opportunities opened up by his international popularity and stature go to waste. Putting Hillary Clinton to work on forging a Middle East peace agreement is another example of Bizarro World logic in action: Obama might as well assign the task to [Norman Podhoretz](#).

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