

Obama transition points to more war and repression

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President-elect Barack Obama owes his victory, both in the Democratic primaries and the general election, in large part to the overwhelming hostility of the American people to the years of military aggression, torture, extraordinary rendition, domestic spying and all of the other crimes that will constitute the indelible legacy of the Bush administration.

Thanks to his carefully calibrated criticisms of these policies, as well as his indictment of his principal Democratic opponent, Senator Hillary Clinton, for her October 2002 vote authorizing the US invasion of Iraq, Obama's "change you can believe in" was perceived by many, both in the US and abroad, as a promise that his election would signal an end to militarism and attacks on democratic rights.

As the transition to the new administration unfolds, however, belief in Obama's promise of change can be sustained only to the extent that one fails to examine the political record of those who are involved in this process.

For the most part, the Obama-Biden transition team is staffed by veterans of the Clinton administration, associated with the US wars in the Balkans and the policy of regime change in Iraq that set the stage for the war that followed under the Bush presidency.

Symbolic of this relationship is Obama's decision to send Clinton's former secretary of state, Madeleine Albright, to this weekend's Group of 20 meeting in Washington as his personal emissary. Confronted in a 1996 interview on the CBS News program "60 Minutes" with the fact that US sanctions against Iraq had led to the deaths of half a million Iraqi children, Albright replied, "It's a hard choice, but the price, we, think, is worth it." She subsequently became a key architect of the US-backed dismemberment of Yugoslavia and the subsequent war against Serbia, which was marked by the widespread bombing of civilian targets. Such is Obama's face to the world.

In terms of the military policy of an incoming Obama presidency, the most telling indication of the narrow character of the change that can be anticipated are the persistent reports that Bush's defense secretary, Robert Gates, may be kept at his post after the change in administrations.

Citing two of the president-elect's advisers, the Wall Street Journal reported Tuesday that "President-elect Barack Obama is leaning toward asking Defense Secretary Robert Gates to remain in his position for at least a year."

The retention of Gates, as the Journal points out, would send the clearest signal of essential continuity with the militarist foreign policy of the Bush administration. "Like the president-elect, Mr. Gates supports deploying more troops to Afghanistan," the paper noted. "But the

defense secretary strongly opposes a firm timetable for withdrawing American forces from Iraq, and his appointment could mean that Mr. Obama was effectively shelving his campaign promise to remove most troops from Iraq by mid-2010.”

The substantial support within the Democratic leadership for keeping Gates on was expressed last weekend by Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (Democrat of Nevada) in an interview with CNN. “Why wouldn’t we want to keep him?” said Reid. “He’s never been a registered Republican.”

The other figure most often cited as a potential pick as defense secretary is former Clinton-era Navy Secretary Richard Danzig. Last June, Danzig delivered his own endorsement for retaining Gates, telling the Times of London, “My personal position is Gates is a very good secretary of defense and would be an even better one in an Obama administration.”

Whether Gates stays or goes, Obama’s selection of key personnel on his Pentagon transition team signals that the incoming administration “will handle Iraq and Afghanistan differently from the Bush administration—but will stop well short of a complete restructuring of American military strategy in the two war zones,” the Journal’s Yochi Dreazen reported in a subsequent column.

The co-leader of this team, Michele Flournoy, who was in the Defense Department under Clinton, is the current president of the Center for New American Strategy, a bipartisan think tank on military policy. She has publicly opposed the idea of setting a fixed timetable for withdrawing US troops from Iraq. In March 2007, she co-wrote a position paper on Iraq for the center, declaring, “The US has enduring interests in that besieged country and the surrounding region, and these interests will require a significant military presence there for the foreseeable future.”

Another prominent member of the transition team is Sarah Sewall, a Harvard University “human rights” specialist who served as an adviser to Gen. David Petraeus in Iraq and participated in the drafting of the military’s counterinsurgency field manual.

Also serving as senior adviser to the Pentagon transition effort is Sam Nunn, who was chairman of the Senate Committee on Armed Services from 1987 to 1995. A right-wing Democrat and cold warrior, Nunn left the Senate after leading a campaign against President Bill Clinton over the proposal to lift the ban on gays serving openly in the military.

The character of this transition team is in keeping with the real intentions of the incoming Obama administration: the continued occupation of Iraq by tens of thousands of US troops and a sharp escalation of the ongoing colonial war in Afghanistan.

The same picture emerges with the transition team at the Central Intelligence Agency. According to published reports, the leading figure in that effort is John Brennan, who headed up what is now known as the National Counter-Terrorism Center and previously served as CIA deputy executive director and former CIA Director George Tenet’s chief of staff. He left the agency in 2005.

It must be assumed that Brennan, a senior operator in the so-called global war on terrorism, was intimately familiar with and involved in decisions to carry out torture, assassinations, extraordinary rendition and domestic spying that were implemented during his tenure at the CIA.

Also figuring prominently in Obama's intelligence transition team is Jamie Miscik, who headed the CIA's analytical operations under Tenet. She played a leading role in manufacturing the phony intelligence about Iraqi "weapons of mass destruction" and ties to Al Qaeda that was used to sell the war, and in suppressing reports from agency analysts that rejected both claims as unfounded. After leaving the agency at the end of 2004, she found a lucrative—though relatively short-lived—position as the head of global sovereign risk analysis at the now-bankrupt Wall Street firm Lehman Brothers.

While on the campaign trail, Obama on occasion denounced the Bush administration's intelligence abuses—warrantless wiretapping, waterboarding, indefinite detention without trial—but when it came to a vote in the Senate last summer, he supported vastly expanded domestic spying powers for the National Security Agency and retroactive immunity for the telecom companies that collaborated with the Bush administration in carrying out the illegal wiretapping.

As with Gates, it is not ruled out that those in charge of US intelligence under Bush will stay on under Obama. Director of National Intelligence Michael McConnell and CIA Director Michael Hayden have both indicated they are prepared to remain at their posts in the incoming Democratic administration. McConnell, who gave Obama a presidential-style intelligence briefing last week, described the president-elect's team as "very smart, very strategic."

While Obama's overall transition chief, John Podesta, stressed last weekend that the incoming president would swiftly repeal a number of executive orders issued by the Bush administration, the specific ones he cited—stem cell research, domestic oil drilling, etc.—did not include the multiple directives authorizing US military and intelligence forces to carry out acts of aggression around the world.

Given that Obama has vowed to escalate cross-border raids against Pakistan and prosecute the so-called war on terror—the pretext used to justify Washington's use of military force to dominate the oil-rich regions of the globe—he will in all likelihood adopt these orders as his own.

It is only 10 days since Obama was swept to victory in the presidential election by a wave of popular hostility to the Bush administration. Yet the actions of the president-elect and his advisers are already making it clear that the longing of millions of Americans for an end to the growth of US militarism and international criminality are not to be realized after the inauguration in January.

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