

The Great Pretender

Obama's "non-negotiable" allegiance to Israel

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Region: [USA](#)

Global Research, January 21, 2009

21 January 2009

I know exactly the day when I decided I could not vote for Barack Obama. It was June 4, 2008. Obama had given a speech to AIPAC assuring the lobby that they had his "non-negotiable" allegiance to Israel.

I am not obsessively concerned with the power that Israel supposedly has over US foreign policy.

I am more concerned with the power that the US has over both Israel and the Middle East as a whole. As a virtual US military base in the eastern Mediterranean, Israel is worth at least ten US air-craft carriers—an absolutely loyal and reliable launching pad for the aggressions of the US "war on terror" in western Asia. Far from being a functional democracy, the Israeli theocratic apartheid state can hardly lay a serious claim to possessing national sovereignty, for one cannot be a total US military base and conduct an independent national policy. Thus, Israel, while being itself a colonizing power, is also a colonized entity at the periphery of US power.

I cannot think of a more desperate and losing proposition for a security-conscious state than to be a colony with colonizing aspirations. The only national policy open to such a pathetic bully, aping the ways of the master while being totally dependent on its military largesse, is to kiss up and kick down.

Thus Israel in Gaza today.

Be that as it may, I knew then, on June 4, that US policy in the Middle East was not scheduled for "change"—and, thus, nothing was going to change at all. The US government would continue its imperial wars in the region and elsewhere. It was, therefore, foolish to "hope" for improvement in social policies on the home front as well.

It was a beautiful summer day when I broke rank with my friends, enthusiasts for Obama. They had been justifiably sickened by the in your-face brutality of the Bush regime. They were desperate to "hope" for "change"—without considering that "change" was not synonymous with "reversal." On that bone-warming (we live in the wintry region of the Great Lakes), gentle, and tenderly green June day, I said to my closest friend, "I'm sorry, I simply cannot vote for Obama. He has just made it clear that the wars will continue." She looked at me in dismay—as though I had just told her I had an incurable illness. She felt sorry for me, and I felt sorry for her. We left it at that.

In the months between June and November, friends proudly showed up at the house sporting Obama buttons. It is true that they are addicted to mainstream media news and I

am not—not having turned the television on since January 2002. It is true that I'm addicted to internet news in three or four languages and that I have always been a skeptical observer of official pronouncements. And it is true that I have survived a major war and paid its consequences. But still. Where did they get their faith? After all, I insistently asked myself, who is this Obama who has come out of nowhere, done nothing of substance, and is applauded like the new Augustus, who will bring peace and justice to the empire?

Don't they know that empires cannot exist without wars and injustice?

No, they don't know because they don't acknowledge that they live in an empire. That's the Achilles heel of their liberal faith. Worse, they believe that an individual, a president, can actually write away with the proverbial stroke of a pen even the unacknowledged imperial policies that every US president since 1945 has been selected and vetted to pursue. They childishly believe that the magic of elections will deliver a redeemer.

Then, too, Obama is black, of course. I could see that—though, to be truthful, not too easily. I did not see behind the socially confident, bourgeois image of the generic Harvard law graduate and professional politician any inkling of belonging to the mass legacy of American apartheid, the bitter struggles, and the daily reminders of what it meant to be poor and black in America. Rather, he reminded me of how far one can get in America if one of its "minorities" du-jour puts the past behind, forgets roots and solidarity, history, knowledge, and experience. If, that is to say, he or she puts his/her nominal particularity at the service of the existing powers.

In a way, Obama's rise to power reminds me of Israel's: both are conditional upon the successful carrying out of the agenda of US imperialism. Both are historical upstarts—Israel in being the Johnny-come-lately creation of 19th-century European colonialism and Obama in coming from the inferiorized margins to lead the historically white-powered center. How "independent" are they?

True, for Obama, the timing had to be right. Today, a multicultural persona sells well, politically speaking. It is the democratic mask that the decrepit state of democracy in shrinking white America requires. Some multicultural captain in a progressive new hat, who will direct the same ship, along the same routes, to the usual piratical prize. Middle East oil, pre-eminently, but not exclusively. It is a calculated smokescreen to festoon old racist America with multicultural poster faces—behind which historically white-powered America hopes to extend its agonizing hegemonic power and privilege. Too, the masses of the American liberal electorate are not racist, and they have to be catered to in the race for the votes that the two shabby parties compete for during the every-four-year election fest. In truth, it's a racist calculus that manipulates and appeals to the better natures of the non-racist, liberal electorate.

My friends fell for it. I cannot tell you how many of them remarked to me that Obama, being black, was bound to be better than any white politician. That these essentialist remarks racially objectified the individual in Obama did not faze them when I pointed this out. That I objected that idealization was every bit a measure of unequal treatment as degradation had no effect. I had heard them say the same about women two decades ago, though the oppressive track record of women in established institutional power over the years has tempered their assurance. In the end I realized that what mattered to them was not whose side a person of color is on but simply what he or she "is." The difference, that is to say,

between real politics and identity politics. The difference between “doing for the world” and “being in the world.” The difference between substance and symbol.

Although only about 700, 000 people voted with me on our candidate, looking at the war crimes in Gaza, I take a mournful comfort in not having fallen for the glamorous scam of an African American president who takes up “the white man’s burden” where the former white brute left off. It was awfully lonely on election night 2008, as I felt once again the curse of the entrenched outsider in me—the one who can never belong. Now, looking at the faces of Gaza, bloodstained, bereft, terrorized but unbent, I know I was not alone on election night. The future was with me, and it was grim, but at least I had faced it honestly and was prepared for it. The president-elect has surrounded himself and filled his cabinet with “orientalists”—people who know that their “career is in the East,” as Disraeli put it in the late 1900s, when British imperialist culture was producing the kind of “knowledge” about the Middle East that facilitated and excused the advance of empire in those parts—the theft of lands that didn’t belong to it and the subjugation of people who had done it no harm. So Israel today colonizes historic Palestine, but the hand that arms it is that of the US.

And President Obama has been loudly and complicitly silent throughout.

Call me a self-hating liberal, but there you are.

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