

Obama and War(s)

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PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA'S Cairo speech electrified the international media and public opinion, particularly in the Muslim world. Whether it will initiate a profound shift in America's stance toward Iran, Israel/Palestine and the broader Middle East, whether it will prove to be mostly style rather than substance — or whether, perhaps, it's more of a return to traditional policies than a truly new direction — will be topics for speculation and subjects for struggle for the rest of Obama's first term and perhaps longer. To understand the issues at stake, it's important to begin with some recent history.

The mad-dog war adventures of George W. Bush were, by near-unanimous consent, ruinous to the international "leadership stature" of the United States. In the neoconservatives' drive to impose imperial dictates on the world by shock-and-awe firepower, they shattered the empire's image of invincibility, destroyed Washington's veneer of respect for human rights, and produced revulsion in the U.S. population over torture and government lies. As principled opponents of the entire imperial agenda, we frankly regard these as the only good things to be said about the GWB years.

President Obama, who inherited policy debacles not of his making, didn't come to the presidency to dismantle the empire. Quite the contrary, he campaigned pledging to restore "American leadership." It cannot be honestly said that Obama tried to deceive the peace movement. His oath of loyalty to the cause of empire is longstanding. He made no promise to curb the military budget or permanent war economy. He said he'd wind down the "bad" war in Iraq and escalate the "good" one in Afghanistan, and he's certainly doing the latter. He promised to "overcome old divisions," and he's produced a bipartisan war cabinet and barred prosecution of the torturers and their legal protectors.

None of these are reasonable grounds to be "disillusioned" with Obama, except for those who chose to be illusioned in the first place. Is some of it sickening? Certainly so: the fact that Omar Khadr, the Canadian captured as a child soldier in Afghanistan in a firefight with U.S. troops, remains in Guantanamo charged with murder; that the new administration tried to maintain the Bush regime's secrecy on torture memos until it became politically and legally untenable; the attempt to continue denying basic legal rights of habeas corpus to detainees in extraterritorial prisons like Bagram, and to suppress photographic documentation of torture; the intention to restore the "military tribunal" process at Guantanamo; president Obama's recycled Bush-era rhetoric of "withdrawal with success" in Iraq, hiding the reality of the massive disaster there for U.S. policy and for the Iraqi people.

Sickening, but not surprising. For Barack Obama's administration to tell the truth about its predecessor, and to act on it — to state that George W. Bush and Dick Cheney were the Chief Executive Officer and Chief Operating Officer of an ongoing criminal conspiracy, whose top cabinet officers are world-class war criminals, and to open full forensic investigations into the conduct of the military, intelligence and propaganda apparatus associated with it — would tear huge holes in the fabric of the institutions that sustain the imperial state. That would be the surprise.

Needless to say, Barack Obama has never stated he would do anything of the sort, and no Democratic administration would do so — and not only from opportunistic fear of revealing how much Nancy Pelosi knew about Bush's torture program. We have seen this script more than once before. After the 1970s Vietnam/Watergate scandals that brought down Richard Nixon, and again after the Reagan regime's 1980s secret funding of Nicaraguan contras and genocide in Central America, Democrats enabled the CIA and the Pentagon to be rehabilitated and business as usual to be resumed. Ultimately this "don't look back" mantra would enable the George W. Bush gang to take the criminal conduct of Nixon and Reagan to whole new levels.

Much the same looks set to happen now. The crimes of lying to manipulate the country to war — in which Obama's current Vice-president Joe Biden and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, then Senators, actively participated — and of secret rendition and torture and massacres of Iraqi civilians by contract mercenaries and many other horrors, will mostly be forgiven in the name of "moving forward beyond the mistakes of the past."

Imperial immunity for these war crimes ensures that they will be repeated in future. If you wonder why we on the revolutionary left call the Republicans and Democrats "twin parties of imperialism" — fraternal, not identical twins but twins nonetheless — you don't have to look any further.

War from Option to Necessity

Having said this, let's survey some of the policy choices and quandaries that the new, fresh, highly intelligent and energetic imperial president has inherited from the wreckage his predecessor left behind. In some sense, president Obama is trapped by the fact that opportunistic "wars of choice" launched by the Bush-Cheney neocon regime have morphed into wars of imperial "necessity." Iraq and Afghanistan, and the lethal extension of those adventures to Pakistan, are the leading examples.

In the wake of 9/11, the Bush regime saw the opportunity for a master "solution" in the Middle East, including the capture of Iraq. (In fact, terrorist suspect detainees were tortured in order to obtain false information implicating Iraq in the 9/11 crimes.) As we've said before, Afghanistan was intended to be the appetizer, Iraq the soup, Iran the main course and Syria for dessert — after which the entire region including Palestine would surrender to U.S. desires. As we know, of course, the soup went down the empire's windpipe, the appetizer got caught in the throat, and the Iranian regime ate Bush's lunch.

The troop "surge" in Iraq, which is now hailed in proper bipartisan fashion as the turning point toward a U.S. victory in Iraq, was really part of a high-cost salvage operation to prevent complete disintegration of that country, along with paying the so-called "Sunni insurgency" to switch its tactical loyalties. This salvage effort has worked well enough for the U.S. military, which for its own reasons desperately wants out of Iraq — not to be around if the place ultimately descends back into chaos — to contemplate withdrawal on roughly the Obama 16-month timetable, give or take a few months and more carnage.

But tens of thousands of U.S. soldiers, we're now told, will stay in Iraq for no one knows how long. The fact that this occupation force must remain, far from reflecting the victory the Bush gang promised, is actually the indicator of the enormous strategic defeat that Iraq has become. The neoconservatives dreamed of permanent American bases in a pliant, pacified Iraq from which to project massive U.S. power. Now, the fear is that U.S. withdrawal might result in Iraq becoming another Somalia. This is part of the contradiction that Obama inherits from the way Bush turned imperial power to weakness.

It's certainly essential that the antiwar movement, which must not tie itself to the empire's interests,

rebuild around the central demand for immediate U.S. withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan. But make no mistake, the necessity for U.S. imperialism to keep troops in Iraq has become a political and military drain on its capacity to salvage its supposed “good war against the Taliban and al-Qaeda” in Afghanistan, and now even more crucially Pakistan. Twenty-one thousand more U.S. troops will not defeat the Taliban insurgency, secure the border with Pakistan (an impossible task), or suppress the opium trade.

This is not the place to analyze the local, regional and nuclear politics of Pakistan, nor to detail the deadly 30-year history of U.S. intervention in Afghanistan and support for military rule in Pakistan during much of this period. The bottom-line reality is that this deadly meddling, in the name of fighting Communism or defeating terrorism or controlling nuclear proliferation or whatever else, has produced a legacy of terrifying contradictions that imperialism has no means to solve.

The United States, along with Saudi Arabia and Pakistani intelligence, sponsored the “anti-Soviet Afghan patriots” (whose funding and many of the fighters were foreign) who became al-Qaeda. The Pakistani military and Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) today are simultaneously in deadly combat and covert collaboration with the fanatical “Pakistan Taliban” in the Swat Valley and tribal regions.

Such problems cannot be “solved” by more American troops in Afghanistan, whether 20,000 or 200,000. Drone attacks and Special Forces raids, while they can “take out” insurgent and alleged al-Qaeda leaders by the dozens, also recruit new insurgent fighters by the hundreds or thousands as civilian families and wedding parties are blown to pieces.

The fundamental choice facing the Obama administration is to admit the reality of imperial defeat in central Asia, or to pursue the delusional aim of “victory” that cannot even be precisely defined. The first entails rapid U.S. military withdrawal and normalized political and commercial relations with the main regional power whose own interests include ensuring a stable Iraq and defeating the Afghan Taliban — Iran. But that’s precisely why this choice is blocked, leaving the second, dangerously open-ended one of leaving U.S. military forces in Iraq, escalating troop levels in Afghanistan and hoping that Pakistan doesn’t come unglued. That’s how ill-conceived, opportunistic wars of choice became wars of “necessity” — necessary not for the good of humanity, but for the preservation of important imperial strategic assets.

For the moment, Obama can pursue this course without being challenged by powerful mass opposition at home. The antiwar movement, no longer driven forward by heavy American military casualties and hatred of George W. Bush, has been largely swallowed up by Barack Obama, at least temporarily. But in the end the war(s) could swallow and spit out his presidency.

Confronting Netanyahu?

President Obama has inherited a broader set of global policy debacles — Latin America, North Korea, NATO expansion to Georgia and Ukraine — which we aren’t able to discuss here. The most immediate problem is his dealings with an ally rather than an adversary — the Israeli state and its present regime, which in some sense represents the last bunker of the “neoconservatives” after their defeat in U.S. politics.

When it comes to Israel and Palestine, the Obama administration’s stated commitment to “the two-state solution,” if it’s meant seriously — an untested hypothesis at this moment — is on collision course with the new Israeli government of Binyamin Netanyahu. It’s in explosive contradiction with Israel’s accelerated program of Palestinian house demolition in East Jerusalem, the continued expansion of West Bank settlements, the strangulation of Gaza and the daily atrocities of a 42-year Occupation.

There are conflicting interpretations of what was said in the Obama-Netanyahu meeting about those settlements, but the test is in practice not rhetoric. If this or any other U.S. administration is going to be halfway serious about Palestine-Israel “peace not apartheid” in Jimmy Carter’s phrase, then it has to put the hammer down. Frankly, we doubt it: The entire history of empty U.S. declarations against Israel’s settler-annexation of the Occupied Palestinian Territories gives neither the Israeli regime nor the Palestinian people any reason to take seriously any such verbal exercises.

How can we test whether a serious change in U.S. policy is occurring? First, it would entail a clear statement that military action against Iran is off the table — a declaration that the lunatic “destroy Iran first” program of the current Israeli government is not part of the “policy option” discussion. That would be a sharp break not only with the “neoconservative hawks,” but also with the political record of Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden.

Second, it would mean a declaration that all the Israeli settlements are flatly illegal, backed up by action to suspend military aid to Israel — especially the planes and cluster bombs and white phosphorus which are used in Israeli assaults against concentrated civilian populations, in violation of United States law let alone international conventions.

It needs to be clearly understood that salvaging any meaningful, non-Bantustan Palestinian statehood at this very late date cannot be accomplished by some incremental, gradual “peace process.” It requires three factors that would constitute a political revolution: (a) a profound change in the United States policy toward the Israeli Occupation; (b) a major strategic defeat for the Israeli state, which will not be military in nature but rather political and economic isolation; (c) the emergence of a Palestinian leadership that is democratically rooted and capable of effective resistance and negotiation at the same time — the biggest obstacle to which, of course, is that the best Palestinian mass leaders, secular or Islamist, are routinely assassinated or imprisoned. Is the Obama administration serious about “two states”? The reality is that any significant change in the United States’ Middle East policy, even falling well short of what’s needed to end the Israeli Occupation and bring real peace, means a head-on confrontation with the Israel Lobby, including AIPAC and Christian Zionist organizations.

Frankly, there is little reason to expect any such developments until and unless basic U.S. imperialist interests are threatened by an escalating crisis, or — and here is the movement’s best hope — the international wave of revulsion against Israeli atrocities produces the absolutely necessary political defeat and isolation for Israel equivalent to that of apartheid South Africa.

The struggle for targeted boycotts, divestment and sanctions (BDS) against the Israeli state and its corporate allies — Caterpillar and Motorola, to name two of the worst — is essential for turning around U.S. as well as European policy enabling the Occupation to grind Palestine out of existence. That’s what the activist movement can do. As for extricating U.S. imperialism from the messes its predecessor left behind, that’s a job for its new CEO, not for the antiwar movement. Lotsa luck, Mr. President.

The Editors (*Against the Current*)

P.S.

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