

Elections 2008 & Obama's "Vision"

What we can expect in 2009, given both parties are well to the right of the population

Thursday 17 February 2011, by [CHOMSKY Noam](#) (Date first published: February 2009).

The word that immediately rolled off of every tongue after the presidential election was "historic." And rightly so. A Black family in the White House is truly a momentous event. There were some surprises. One was that the election was not over after the Democratic convention. One might expect that the opposition party would have a landslide victory during a severe economic crisis, after eight years of disastrous policies on all fronts including the worst record on job growth of any post-war president and a rare decline in median wealth, with an incumbent so unpopular that his own party had to disavow him, and a dramatic collapse in U.S. standing in world opinion. The Democrats did win, barely. If the financial crisis had been slightly delayed, they might not have.

A good question is why the margin of victory for the opposition party was so small, given the circumstances. One possibility is that neither party reflects public opinion at a time when 80 percent think the country is going in the wrong direction and that the government is run by "a few big interests looking out for themselves," not for the people; a stunning 94 percent object that government does not attend to public opinion. As many studies show, both parties are well to the right of the population on many major issues, domestic and international.

It could be argued that no party speaking for the public would be viable in a society that is business-run to an unusual extent. Evidence for that description is substantial. At a very general level, evidence is provided by the predictive success of political economist Thomas Ferguson's "investment theory" of politics, which holds that policies tend to reflect the wishes of the powerful blocs that invest every four years to control the state. More specific illustrations are numerous. To select one virtually at random, for 60 years the U.S. has failed to ratify the core principle of international labor law, which guarantees freedom of association. Legal analysts call it "the untouchable treaty in American politics," and observe that there has never even been any debate about the matter. Many have noted Washington's dismissal of conventions of the International Labor Organization as contrasted with the intense dedication to enforcement of monopoly pricing rights for corporations ("intellectual property rights"). There is much to explore here, but this is not the place.

The two candidates in the Democratic primary were a woman and an African American. That too was historic. It would have been unimaginable 40 years ago. The fact that the country has become civilized enough to accept this outcome is a considerable tribute to the activism of the 1960s and its aftermath, an observation with lessons for the future.

In some ways the election followed familiar patterns. The McCain campaign was honest enough to announce clearly that the election wouldn't be about issues. Sarah Palin's hairdresser received twice the salary of McCain's foreign policy adviser, the London *Financial Times* (FT) reported, probably an accurate reflection of significance for the campaign. Obama's message of "hope" and "change" offered a virtual blank slate on which supporters could write their wishes. One could search websites for position papers, but correlation of these to policies is hardly spectacular and, in any event, what enters into voters' choices is what the campaign places front and center, as party managers know well.

The Obama campaign greatly impressed the public relations industry, which named Obama "Advertising Age's marketer of the year for 2008," easily beating out Apple. The industry's regular task is to create uninformed consumers who will make irrational choices, thus undermining market theories. And it recognizes the benefits of undermining democracy in much the same way.

The *FT*, the world's premier business daily, reports the enthusiasm of the PR industry over the marketing of "brand Obama." Particularly impressed are those who "helped pioneer the packaging of candidates as consumer brands 30 years ago," when they designed the Reagan campaign. Obama is likely to "have more influence on boardrooms than any president since Ronald Reagan, [who] redefined what it was to be a CEO" by teaching the lesson that "You had to give them a vision." Reagan's visionary performance led to "the 1980s and 1990s reign of the imperial CEO," an office that registered such towering successes as destroying the financial system and exporting much of the real economy while amassing huge personal fortunes, based largely on ability to choose the boards that determine salary and bonuses, thanks to regulations established by the nanny state for the rich.

Obama had expressed his admiration for Reagan as a "transformative figure." He was not referring to the rivers of blood that that Reagan spilled from Central America to southern Africa and beyond. Nor was he referring to Reagan's great effectiveness in helping transform Pakistan into a nuclear-armed state with powerful radical Islamic forces, with consequences that Obama regards as the major foreign challenge to his Administration. So, yes, Reagan was a transformative figure abroad.

At home as well, though Obama was not referring to Reagan's crucial role in transforming the U.S. from the world's leading creditor to the world's leading debtor, or converting it from an industrial society rather resembling Europe to one in which real wages for the majority stagnate and social indicators decline while a few who are favored by government policy gain fabulous wealth, among other forms of social malaise.

Rather, Obama was referring to the imaginary figure constructed by a remarkable PR campaign, which anointed Reagan as the High Priest of free-markets and small government, culminating in a reverential commemoration of the Great Man that was reminiscent of the veneration of Kim il-Sung, one of the more embarrassing moments of the modern history of Western political culture.

The imagery is untainted by Reagan's breaking modern records in government intervention in the economy, while also somewhat increasing the size of government. Just to mention a few highlights, he was the most protectionist president in post-war American history, virtually doubling protectionist barriers in order to try to save the U.S. economy from takeover by more efficient Japanese producers; he called on the Pentagon to devise programs to instruct backward American management in modern production techniques; he bailed out Continental Illinois Bank and others while setting the stage for the huge Savings & Loan bailout; his "star wars" fantasies were sold to the business world, plausibly, as a huge taxpayer-funded bonanza to high tech industry; and on and on.

The term "Reagan" here refers not to the pathetic creature in the White House who, among other notable performances, put on his cowboy boots and declared a national emergency because the Nicaraguan army was two days from Texas—rather, to those who formulated and executed the policies of his Administration. Reagan's "vision," like most heralded "visions," is entirely independent of his deeds. The vision that was constructed by the doctrinal institutions is indeed one of dedication to unfettered free markets and "democracy promotion." The creation of the "vision" was indeed a marketing triumph of which those who "helped pioneer the packaging of candidates as consumer brands 30 years ago" should be proud, as they celebrate their greatest triumph yet in 2008.

The Center for Responsive Politics reports that once again elections were bought: "The best-funded candidates won nine out of 10 contests, and all but a few members of Congress will be returning to Washington." Before the conventions, the viable candidates with most funding from financial institutions were Obama and McCain, with 36 percent each. Preliminary results indicate that by the end, Obama's campaign contributions, by industry, were concentrated among law firms (including lobbyists) and financial institutions, with Obama favored by a considerable margin. The investment theory of politics suggests some conclusions about guiding policies of the new Administration.

The power of financial institutions reflects the increasing shift of the economy from production to finance since the liberalization of finance in the 1970s, a root cause of the current economic crisis: the financial collapse of 2008, ongoing recession in the real economy, and the miserable performance of the economy for the large majority, whose real wages stagnated for 30 years, while benefits and social indicators declined. The steward of this impressive record, Alan Greenspan, attributed his success to "growing worker insecurity," which led to "atypical restraint on compensation increases"—and corresponding increases into the pockets of those who matter. Greenspan's failure even to perceive the dramatic housing bubble, following the collapse of the earlier tech bubble that he oversaw, was the immediate cause of the current financial crisis, as he has ruefully conceded.

Reactions to the election from across the spectrum commonly adopted the "soaring rhetoric" of the Obama campaign. Veteran correspondent John Hughes wrote that "America has just shown the world an extraordinary example of democracy at work," while to British historian-journalist Tristram Hunt, the election showed that America is a land "where miracles happen," such as "the glorious epic of Barack Obama" (leftist French journalist Jean Daniel). "In no other country in the world is such an election possible," said Catherine Durandin of the Institute for International and Strategic Relations in Paris. Many others were no less rapturous.

The rhetoric has some justification if we keep to the West, but elsewhere matters are different. Consider the world's largest democracy, India. The chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, which is larger than all but a few countries of the world and is notorious for horrifying treatment of women, is not only a woman, but a Dalit ("untouchable"), at the lowest rung of India's disgraceful caste system.

Turning to the Western hemisphere, consider its two poorest countries: Haiti and Bolivia. In Haiti's first democratic election in 1990, grass-roots movements were organized in the slums and hills and, though without resources, elected their own candidate, the populist priest Jean-Bertrand Aristide. The results astonished observers who expected an easy victory for the candidate of the elite and the U.S., a former World Bank official.

True, this victory for democracy was soon overturned by a military coup, followed by years of terror and suffering to the present, with crucial participation of the two traditional torturers of Haiti, France and the U.S. (contrary to self-serving illusions). But the victory itself was a far more "extraordinary example of democracy at work" than the U.S. miracle of 2008.

The same is true of the 2005 election in Bolivia. The indigenous majority, the most oppressed population in the hemisphere (those who survived), elected a candidate from their own ranks, a poor peasant, Evo Morales. The electoral victory was not based on soaring rhetoric about hope and change or body language and fluttering of eyelashes, but on crucial issues, very well known to the voters: control over resources, cultural rights, and so on. Furthermore, the election went far beyond pushing a lever or even efforts to get out the vote. It was a stage in long and intense popular struggles in the face of severe repression, which had won major victories, such as defeating the efforts to deprive poor people of water through privatization.

These popular movements did not simply take instructions from party leaders. Rather, they formulated the policies that their candidates were chosen to implement. That is quite different from the Western model of democracy, as we see in the reactions to Obama's victory.

In the liberal *Boston Globe*, the headline of the lead story observed that Obama's "grass-roots strategy leaves few debts to interest groups": labor unions, women, minorities, or other "traditional Democratic constituencies." That is only partially right, because massive funding by concentrated sectors of capital is ignored. But leaving that detail aside, the report is correct in saying that Obama's hands are not tied, because his only debt is to "a grass-roots army of millions"—who took instructions, but contributed essentially nothing to formulating his program.

At the other end of the doctrinal spectrum, a headline in the *Wall Street Journal* reads "Grass-Roots Army Is Still at the Ready"—namely, ready to follow instructions to "push his agenda," whatever it may be.

Obama's organizers regard the network they constructed "as a mass movement with unprecedented potential to influence voters," the *Los Angeles Times* reported. The movement, organized around the "Obama brand" can pressure Congress to "hew to the Obama agenda." But they are not to develop ideas and programs and call on their representatives to implement them. These would be among the "old ways of doing politics" from which the new "idealists" are "breaking free."

It is instructive to compare this picture to the workings of a functioning democracy such as Bolivia. The popular movements of the third world do not conform to the favored Western doctrine that the "function" of the "ignorant and meddlesome outsiders"—the population—is to be "spectators of action" but not "participants" (Walter Lippmann, articulating a standard progressive view).

Perhaps there might even be some substance to fashionable slogans about "clash of civilizations."

In earlier periods of U.S. history, the public refused to keep to its assigned "function." Popular activism has repeatedly brought about substantial gains in freedom and justice. The authentic hope of the Obama campaign is that the "grass-roots army" organized to take instructions from the leader might "break free" and return to "old ways of doing politics," by direct participation in action.

In Bolivia, as in Haiti, efforts to promote democracy, social justice, and cultural rights, and to bring about desperately needed structural and institutional changes are, naturally, bitterly opposed by the traditional rulers, the Europeanized, mostly white elite in the Eastern provinces, the site of most of the natural resources currently desired by the West. Also, naturally, their quasi-secessionist movement is supported by Washington, which once again scarcely conceals its reflexive distaste for democracy when outcomes do not conform to strategic and economic interests. The generalization is familiar to serious scholarship, but does not make its way to commentary about the revered "freedom agenda."

To punish Bolivians for showing "the world an extraordinary example of democracy at work," the Bush administration cancelled trade preferences, threatening tens of thousands of jobs, on the pretext that Bolivia was not cooperating with U.S. counter-narcotic efforts. In the real world, the UN estimates that Bolivia's coca crop increased 5 percent in 2007, as compared with a 26 percent increase in Colombia, the terror state that is Washington's closest regional ally and the recipient of enormous military aid. AP reports that, "Cocaine seizures by Bolivian police working with DEA agents had also increased dramatically during the Morales administration."

"Drug wars" have regularly been used as a pretext for repression, violence, and state crimes, at home as well.

After Morales's victory in a recall referendum in August 2008, with a sharp increase in support over his 2005 success, rightist opposition turned violent, leading to assassination of many peasants supporting the government. After the massacre, a summit meeting of UNASUR, the newly-formed Union of South American Republics, was convened in Santiago, Chile. The summit issued a strong statement of support for the elected Morales government, read by Chilean President Michelle Bachelet. The statement declared "their full and firm support for the constitutional government of President Evo Morales, whose mandate was ratified by a big majority"—referring to his overwhelming victory in the referendum a month earlier. Morales thanked UNASUR for its support, observing that, "For the first time in South America's history, the countries of our region are deciding how to resolve our problems, without the presence of the United States."

A matter of no slight significance, not reported in the U.S.

Turning to the future, what can we realistically expect of an Obama administration? We have two sources of information: actions and rhetoric.

The most important actions prior to taking office are selection of staff and advisers. The first selection was for vice president: Joe Biden, one of the strongest supporters of the Iraq invasion among Senate Democrats, a long-time Washington insider, who consistently votes with his fellow Democrats—though not always, as when he brought cheer to financial institutions by supporting a measure to make it harder for individuals to erase debt by declaring bankruptcy.

The first post-election appointment was for the crucial position of chief of staff: Rahm Emanuel, one of the strongest supporters of the Iraq invasion among House Democrats and, like Biden, a long-term Washington insider. Emanuel is also one of the biggest recipients of Wall Street campaign contributions, the Center for Responsive Politics reports. He "was the top House recipient in the 2008 election cycle of contributions from hedge funds, private equity firms and the larger securities/investment industry." Since being elected to Congress in 2002, he "has received more money from individuals and PACs in the securities and investment business than any other industry"; these are also among Obama's top donors. Emanuel's task is to oversee Obama's approach to the worst financial crisis since the 1930s, for which his and Obama's funders share ample responsibility.

In an interview with an editor of the *Wall Street Journal*, Emanuel was asked what the Obama administration would do about "the Democratic congressional leadership, which is brimming with left-wing barons who have their own agenda," such as slashing defense spending (in accord with the will of the majority of the population) and "angling for steep energy taxes to combat global warming," not to speak of the outright lunatics in Congress who toy with slavery reparations and even sympathize with Europeans who want to indict Bush administration war criminals for war crimes. "Barack Obama can stand up to them," Emanuel assured the editor. The Administration will be "pragmatic," fending off left extremists.

Labor journalist and lawyer Steve Early writes that "While running for office, Obama said he strongly backed the Employee Free Choice Act, a long-overdue labor law reform measure that should be part of his promised economic stimulus plan. However, when Obama recently introduced his top economic advisers and talked about steps to "jolt" the economy in January, the Act was not part of the package. More disturbing, his new chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel, has declined to say whether the White House will support the Employee Free Choice Act.... [Workers] will be watching closely to see whether their plight merits the same helping hand so quickly extended to Wall Street."

Obama's transition team is headed by John Podesta, Clinton's chief of staff. The leading figures in his economic team are Robert Rubin and Lawrence Summers, both enthusiasts for the deregulation that was a major factor in the current financial crisis. As Treasury Secretary, Rubin worked hard to

abolish the Glass-Steagall act, which had separated commercial banks from financial institutions that incur high risks. Economist Tim Canova comments that Rubin had “a personal interest in the demise of Glass-Steagall.” Soon after leaving his position as Treasury Secretary, he became “chair of Citigroup, a financial-services conglomerate that was facing the possibility of having to sell off its insurance underwriting subsidiary...the Clinton administration never brought charges against him for his obvious violations of the Ethics in Government Act.”

Not surprisingly, Citigroup was a leading beneficiary of the Paulson bailout. That breaks little new ground. Walter Wriston, the CEO of its predecessor Citicorp, followed World Bank/IMF advice and lent so heavily to Latin America that when the debt crisis broke out in 1982, only a bailout (via the IMF) “saved Citicorp from a preemptive run on its interbank deposits, which could have been fatal,” international economist David Felix wrote—adding that Wriston, like the Treasury Secretaries, were firm believers in pure laissez-faire: “for others, not themselves.” These are the normal workings of state capitalism, for other industries as well. In a detailed analysis of corporate reliance on state intervention, Winfried Ruigrok and Rob van Tulder (*The Logic of International Restructuring*) conclude that, “At least twenty companies in the 1993 Fortune 100 would not have survived at all as independent companies, if they had not been saved by their respective governments,” and that many of the rest gained substantially by demanding that governments “socialise their losses.” Such government intervention, they observe, “has been the rule rather than the exception over the past two centuries.” That is apart from the crucial state role, particularly in the post-World War II period, in socializing the costs and risks of research and development while privatizing profit.

A curious feature of commentary on the 2008 financial industry bailout is that it was perceived as a radical departure from the norm, raising the threat of “socialism.” That is far from true.

The bailout of Rubin’s Citigroup was necessary, Paul Krugman wrote, but it was done in a manner that was “an outrage: a lousy deal for the taxpayers.” That holds for the bailout generally. His fellow Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz observed, “As we pour money in, they can pour money right out” if we “don’t have a veto.” If the government—in a functioning democracy, the public—does not have a degree of control, the banks can pour the public funds into their own pockets for recapitalization or acquisitions or loans to government-guaranteed borrowers, thus undermining the alleged purpose of the bailout. That is what happened, though details are obscure because the recipients refuse to say what they are doing with the gift from taxpayers. Indeed they regard the question as outrageous, so the Associated Press discovered when it sought answers: “no bank provided even the most basic accounting for the federal money,” most ignoring the request or saying, “We’re choosing not to disclose that.”

Again, normal workings of state capitalism. The “ignorant and meddlesome outsiders” are to be satisfied with “necessary illusion” and “emotionally potent oversimplifications,” as the distinguished moralist Reinhold Niebuhr explained.

After leaving the government for Citigroup, Rubin was replaced as Treasury Secretary by Summers, who presided over legislation barring federal regulation of derivatives, the “weapons of mass destruction” (Warren Buffett) that helped plunge financial markets to disaster. He ranks as “one of the main villains in the current economic crisis,” according to Dean Baker, one of the few economists to have warned accurately of the impending crisis. Placing financial policy in the hands of Rubin and Summers is “a bit like turning to Osama Bin Laden for aid in the war on terrorism,” Baker adds. Another achievement of Rubin and Summers (together with Alan Greenspan) was to prevent Brooksley Born, head of the Commodity Futures Trading Commission, from regulating credit default swaps in 1998—more WMD. “The best example of politics thwarting effective regulation,” Baker writes.

Obama's appointment for Treasury Secretary, Timothy Geithner, a close associate of Summers, elicited a favorable reaction from Wall Street, which may be "hoping that little will change with Geithner at Treasury," Tim Canova observes: "Supporters of President-elect Obama will be tempted to embrace the experience argument, and it is true that Geithner and Summers have lots of experience at crisis management and doling out bailout funds to their Wall Street clientele."

As the crisis began to hit, Geithner hinted that he would use the enormous leverage he had as president of the New York Fed to impose some controls on exotic financial instruments, but "there is no evidence," Canova writes, "that there has been much action, even though Geithner has used this time to negotiate multibillion-dollar bailouts and deals associated with the collapse of Bear Stearns, Lehman Brothers, AIG, and now Citigroup." He adds that "the selection of Geithner and Summers to top administrative posts rewards past failure and protects special interests [and] also sends the wrong message to those who thought they were voting for change."

Not much help in "changing" the world of finance can be expected from the Democratic Congress either. Charles Schumer, who led the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, broke records in obtaining contributions from Wall Street, helping the Democrats win Congress and increasing "the industry's clout in the capital," the New York Times reported. He also "helped save financial institutions billions of dollars in higher taxes or fees. He succeeded in limiting efforts to regulate credit-rating agencies, for example, sponsored legislation that cut fees paid by Wall Street firms to finance government oversight, pushed to allow banks to have lower capital reserves and called for the revision of regulations to make corporations' balance sheets more transparent." He also weakened efforts to regulate bank debt and supervise the credit-rating agencies, also agents of disaster. His personal reward was to collect more campaign contributions from the financial industry than anyone in Congress except for John Kerry. "He built his career in large part based on his ties to Wall Street [and] has given the Street what it wanted," said the director of a leading firm that advises investors on the regulatory system.

The business press reviewed the records of Obama's Transition Economic Advisory Board, which met on November 7 to determine how to deal with the financial crisis. In *Bloomberg News*, Jonathan Weil concluded that, "Many of them should be getting subpoenas as material witnesses right about now, not places in Obama's inner circle." About half "have held fiduciary positions at companies that, to one degree or another, either fudged their financial statements, helped send the world into an economic tailspin, or both." Is it really plausible that "they won't mistake the nation's needs for their own corporate interests?" He also pointed out that chief of staff Emanuel "was a director at Freddie Mac in 2000 and 2001 while it was committing accounting fraud."

Dean Baker observes that, "Obama faced the same sort of problem as those hoping to de-Baathify Iraq following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. It would have been almost impossible to establish a government without including members of the Baath party, since membership was a virtual requirement for holding a position of responsibility under Saddam Hussein. Similarly, it would have been almost impossible to get to the top echelons of power, or even the middle ranks, during the Clinton-Bush years without giving lip-service to the policies of one-sided financial deregulation and bubble-driven growth that were so fashionable at the time." And those leading Obama's economic team gave more than lip service. They were instrumental in designing the policies that have led to the present crisis.

A headline in the *Financial Times* reads, "Applause as Obama picks all-star team." No one is relevantly mentioned who is not on the right. Bush speechwriter David Frum said, "I cannot recall the last time Republicans felt so positive towards a Democratic presidential figure." Fellow speechwriter Michael Gerson wrote that, "Obama's appointments reveal not just moderation but maturity.... Whatever the caveats, Obama is doing something marvellously right"—where the term

“right” should be understood in its dual meaning.

Critical choices in foreign affairs followed much the same script, eliciting applause from Henry Kissinger, among others. Even super-hawk Richard Perle felt “relieved.... Contrary to expectations, I don’t think we would see a lot of change.” Retiring senior Republican Senator John Warner, former chair of the Armed Services Committee, said, “the triumvirate of Gates, Clinton and Jones to lead Obama’s national security team instills great confidence at home and abroad and further strengthens the growing respect for the president-elect’s courage and ability to exercise sound judgment in selecting the best and the brightest to implement our nation’s security policies.”

Clinton and Gates need no comment. Security analyst Robert Dreyfuss describes former Marine commandant James Jones, Obama’s new National Security Adviser, as “Obama’s hawk,” who “seems least compatible with Obama” among his hawkish team—though there is little reason beyond “hope” to justify the judgment about compatibility. Jones, Dreyfuss observes, “is a fierce advocate of NATO expansion,” Clinton’s policy that instantly reneged on firm promises to Gorbachev, guaranteeing confrontation with an encircled Russia. Jones urges that NATO should move to the South as well as the East, to expand U.S. control over Middle East energy supplies (in favored terminology, “safeguarding energy security”). He also advocates a “NATO response force,” which will give the U.S.-run military alliance “much more flexible capability to do things rapidly at very long distances.” Europe is reluctant, but will probably succumb as usual to pressure from a militaristic and expansionist Administration in Washington.

The new Director of National Intelligence is Dennis Blair, former head of the U.S. Pacific Command. In that post he was a strong supporter of U.S. military ties with the murderous Suharto regime in Indonesia, sometimes skirting State Department and congressional objections. In early 1999, Indonesian violence began to increase again in East Timor, far surpassing anything in Kosovo prior to the NATO bombing—and of course the background of U.S.-backed atrocities was far worse than anything in the Balkans. Blair was sent by the National Security Council to urge Indonesian general Wiranto to curb the violence. Instead, “Blair took a cordial approach,” Alan Nairn reported. He told Wiranto that he “looks forward to the time Indonesia will resume its proper role as a leader in the region,” according to U.S. officials who reviewed a cable written about the trip—which coincided with a particularly brutal slaughter in a church in Liquica, leaving dozens killed. Blair proposed new U.S. training programs for Indonesia, which were implemented, right through the last paroxysms of violence in September that practically destroyed what was left of the tortured country.

As his special assistant on the Middle East, Obama selected Dan Kertzer, Clinton-Bush Ambassador to Egypt and Israel. According to the well-informed Israeli diplomatic correspondent Akiva Eldar, Kertzer took part in writing Obama’s speech to the Israeli lobbying organization AIPAC in June 2008. This remarkable text went well beyond Bush in its obsequiousness, even declaring that, “Jerusalem will remain the capital of Israel, and it must remain undivided,” a position so extreme that his campaign had to explain that his words didn’t mean what they said. Kertzer is close to Obama adviser Dennis Ross, whose position as a negotiator for the failed Camp David negotiation was that Israel has “needs”—including parts of the occupied territories—while Palestinians only have “wants,” which therefore are less significant. His disgraceful book on the negotiations evades the major issue—the illegal Israeli settlements that expanded steadily under Clinton—and terminates conveniently just before its major thesis about Arafat’s culpability completely collapsed at the Taba negotiations, in Clinton’s last month in office.

Like other Obama Middle East advisors, Ross has been closely associated with the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), an offshoot of AIPAC and a barely disguised component of the Israeli lobby. Clinton’s record of support for Israeli extremism is well-known.

Asked in a press conference about the recycling of familiar faces, Obama responded that “Americans would be rightly ‘troubled’ if he overlooked experience simply to create the perception of change.” Explaining further, he said: “What we are going to do is combine experience with fresh thinking. But understand where the vision for change comes from first and foremost: It comes from me.”

That should satisfy doubters, impressed by the “soaring and persuasive rhetoric” about “change” and “hope.”

It is hoped, and indeed is highly likely, that Obama will reverse some of the more flagrant abuses of the Bush administration in dismantling the legal system. But it is not easy to be too confident. Obama’s choice for Attorney General, Eric Holder, has a decent reputation in the legal profession. However, he explained on CNN that we cannot adhere to the Geneva Conventions in interrogation of those accused of terrorism—which seems to mean that torture of suspects is legitimate, in gross violation of the foundations of international humanitarian law, by which the U.S. is theoretically bound.

The primary concern for the Administration will be to arrest the financial crisis and the simultaneous recession in the real economy. But there is also a monster in the closet: the notoriously inefficient privatized health-care system, which threatens to overwhelm the federal budget if current tendencies persist. A majority of the public has long favored a national health-care system, which should be far less expensive and more effective, comparative evidence indicates (along with many studies). As recently as 2004, any government intervention in the health-care system was described in the press as “politically impossible” and “lacking political support”—meaning: opposed by the insurance industry, pharmaceutical corporations, and others who count. In 2008, however, first Edwards, then Obama and Clinton, advanced proposals that approached what the public have long preferred. These ideas now have “political support.” What has changed? Not public opinion, which remains much as before. But by 2008, major sectors of power, primarily the manufacturing industry, had come to recognize that they were being severely damaged by the privatized health care system. Hence the public will is coming to have “political support.” The shift tells us something about dysfunctional democracy, and the struggles that lie ahead.

The rich countries are devoting enormous resources to resolving the financial crisis that is harming their economies, adopting measures that they barred when similar crises struck the less fortunate—the financial crisis of 1997-98, for one; and today as well. But there is more to say. And it is said, even if it is scarcely heard. The financial crisis, severe as it is, pales alongside the global food crisis, which has added 120 million people to the rolls of malnourished, according to Oxfam, bringing the total to almost one billion, nearly one in seven people: “This is hunger on so vast a scale that it is difficult to understand how the world arrived at this point.”

The journal *New Nation*, in Bangladesh, observes aptly that, “It’s very telling that trillions have already been spent to patch up leading world financial institutions, while out of the comparatively small sum of \$12.3 billion pledged in Rome earlier this year, to offset the food crisis, only \$1 billion has been delivered. The hope that at least extreme poverty can be eradicated by the end of 2015, as stipulated in the UN’s Millennium Development Goals, seems as unrealistic as ever, not due to lack of resources but a lack of true concern for the world’s poor. Whether the American, European or any other government infused bailout packages rectify the financial crisis or not, chances are that 16 October 2009 will bring similarly devastating news about the plight of the world’s poor and which is likely to remain that: mere ‘news’ that requires little action, if any at all.”

Returning to the Obama programs, internationally, there is not much of substance on the largely blank slate. What there is gives little reason to expect much to change from Bush’s second term, which stepped back from the radical ultranationalism and aggressive posture of the first term, also

discarding some of the extreme hawks and opponents of democracy (in action, that is, not soothing words), like Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz.

The immediate issues have to do mostly with the Middle East. On Israel-Palestine, rumors are circulating that Obama might depart from the U.S. rejectionism that has blocked a political settlement for over 30 years, with rare exceptions, notably for a few days in January 2001 before promising negotiations in Taba were called off prematurely by Israel. The record, however, provides no basis for taking the rumors seriously.

I have reviewed Obama's formal positions as of early 2008 elsewhere (*Perilous Power*), and will put the matter aside here, except to note that they have become more ominous since. Particularly disturbing is his reaction to the vicious Israeli assault on Gaza, opening with Israel's violation of a ceasefire on November 4, as voters were going to the polls to elect Obama, then breaking out in full fury on December 27. To these crimes Obama's response has been silence—unlike, say, the terrorist attack in Mumbai, which he was quick to denounce, along with the “hateful ideology” that lies behind it. In the case of Gaza, his spokespersons hid behind the mantra that “there is one president at a time,” and repeated his support for Israeli actions when he visited the Israeli town of Sderot in July: “If missiles were falling where my two daughters sleep, I would do everything in order to stop that.” But he will do nothing, not even make a statement, when U.S. jets and helicopters with Israeli pilots are causing incomparably worse suffering to Palestinian children.

After the November election, Israeli president Shimon Peres informed the press that on his July trip to Israel, Obama had told him that he was “very impressed” with the Arab League peace proposal that calls for full normalization of relations with Israel along with Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories—basically, the long-standing international consensus that the U.S. and Israel have unilaterally blocked (and that Peres has never accepted—in fact, in his last days as prime minister in 1996 he held that a Palestinian state can never come into existence). That might suggest a significant change of heart, except that the right-wing Israeli leader Binyamin Netanyahu said that on the same trip, Obama had told him that he was “very impressed” with Netanyahu's plan, which calls for indefinite Israeli control of the occupied territories.

The paradox is plausibly resolved by Israeli political analyst Aluf Ben, who points out that Obama's “main goal was not to screw up or ire anyone. Presumably he was polite, and told his hosts their proposals were ‘very interesting’—they leave satisfied and he hasn't promised a thing.” Understandable, but it leaves us with nothing except his fervent professions of love for Israel and disregard for Palestinian concerns.

On Iraq, Obama has frequently been praised for his “principled opposition” to the war. In reality, as he has made clear, his opposition has been entirely unprincipled throughout. The war, he said, was a “strategic blunder.” When Kremlin critics of their invasion of Afghanistan called it a strategic blunder, we did not say that they were taking a principled stand.

After intensive debate, the government of Iraq agreed on a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) on the U.S. military presence in Iraq. The talks dragged on, the Washington Post reported, because Iraq insisted on “some major concessions, including the establishment of the 2011 withdrawal date instead of vaguer language favored by the Bush administration [and] also rejected long-term U.S. military bases on its soil.” Iraqi leaders “consider the firm deadline for withdrawal to be a negotiating victory,” Reuters reports: Washington “long opposed setting any timetable for its troops to withdraw, but relented in recent months,” unable to overcome Iraqi resistance.

Throughout the negotiations, the press regularly dismissed the obstinate stance of the Maliki government as regrettable pandering to public opinion. U.S.-run polls continue to report that a large

majority of Iraqis oppose any U.S. military presence, and believe that U.S. forces make the situation worse, including the "surge." That judgment is supported, among others, by Middle East specialist and security analyst Steven Simon, who writes in *Foreign Affairs* that the Petraeus counterinsurgency strategy is "stoking the three forces that have traditionally threatened the stability of Middle Eastern states: tribalism, warlordism, and sectarianism. States that have failed to control these forces have ultimately become ungovernable, and this is the fate for which the surge is preparing Iraq. A strategy intended to reduce casualties in the short term will ineluctably weaken the prospects for Iraq's cohesion over the long run." It may lead to "a strong, centralized state ruled by a military junta that would resemble the Baathist regime Washington overthrew in 2003," or "something very much like the imperial protectorates in the Middle East of the first half of the twentieth century" in which the "'club of patrons' in the capital would dole out goods to tribes through favored conduits." In the Petraeus system, "the U.S. military is performing the role of the patrons—creating an unhealthy dependency and driving a dangerous wedge between the tribes and the state," undermining prospects for a "stable, unitary Iraq."

Iraqi opposition to the U.S. presence was underscored by reporting from across Iraq after parliamentary approval of the SOFA. The *International Herald Tribune*, drawing from interviews by Iraqi journalists from around the country, reported opposition to the pact on grounds that the Iraqi government had been "bullied into a deal by an occupying force," that the U.S. would not live up to its terms, and that the central government gained too much power. Apart from one voice disturbed by the parliamentary brawl, there was no report of opposition on grounds that U.S. forces were needed to defend Iraqi interests.

The latest Iraqi success culminates a long process of resistance to demands of the U.S. invaders. Washington fought tooth and nail to prevent elections, but was finally forced to back down in the face of popular demands for democracy, symbolized by the Ayatollah Sistani. The Bush administration then managed to install their own choice as Prime Minister, and sought to control the government in various ways, meanwhile also building huge military bases around the country and an "embassy" that is a virtual city within Baghdad—all funded by congressional Democrats. If the invaders do live up to the SOFA that they have been compelled to accept, it would constitute a significant triumph of nonviolent resistance. Insurgents can be killed, but mass nonviolent resistance is much harder to quell.

Many comparisons are being drawn between Vietnam and Iraq, most of them untenable. One, which is not being discussed, is of some interest. In both cases, Washington was faced with strong pressure from the invaded countries to withdraw. JFK discovered a few months before his assassination that the U.S. client regime was seeking a peaceful diplomatic settlement that would lead to U.S. withdrawal. To avert this threat, his Administration backed a military coup to install a more compliant regime in South Vietnam. As the internal and public record very clearly demonstrates, JFK did contemplate withdrawal (as was accurately reported at the time), but, crucially, only after U.S. victory was assured. The record also shows that he remained dedicated to this goal to the end. Efforts to evade the very clear and unambiguous facts are compelled to resort to alleged Machiavellian plots by the leader that have left no trace in the record, or to tidbits of evidence that reveal that the commentators accept Washington's right to impose the settlement of its choice. In the case of Iraq, in contrast, Washington has been unable to resort to such means to get rid of a government that is calling upon it to leave. There are many reasons for the differences. One is that the domestic population today is much less willing to tolerate U.S. aggression than it was in the early 1960s. A few years later strong opposition did develop, but only when the U.S. invasion far exceeded the scale of its aggression and crimes in Iraq.

Within the political class and the media it is reflexively assumed that Washington has the right to demand terms for the SOFA in Iraq. No such right was accorded to Russian invaders of Afghanistan

or indeed to anyone except the U.S. and its clients. For others, we rightly adopt the principle that invaders have no rights, only responsibilities, including the responsibility to attend to the will of the victims and to pay massive reparations for their crimes. In this case, the crimes include strong support for Saddam Hussein through his worst atrocities on Reagan's watch, then on to Saddam's massacre of Shiites under the eyes of the U.S. military after the first Gulf War; the Clinton sanctions that were termed "genocidal" by the distinguished international diplomats who administered them and resigned in protest, and that also helped Saddam escape the fate of other gangsters whom the U.S. and Britain supported to the very end of their bloody rule; and the war and its hideous aftermath. No such thoughts can be voiced in polite society.

The Iraqi government spokesperson said that the tentative SOFA "matches the vision of U.S. President-elect Barack Obama." Obama's vision was in fact left somewhat vague, but presumably he would go along in some fashion with the demands of the Iraqi government. If so, that would require modification of U.S. plans to ensure control over Iraq's enormous oil resources while reinforcing its dominance over the world's major energy producing region.

Obama's announced "vision" was to shift forces from Iraq to Afghanistan. That stand evoked a lesson from the editors of the *Washington Post*: "While the United States has an interest in preventing the resurgence of the Afghan Taliban, the country's strategic importance pales beside that of Iraq, which lies at the geopolitical center of the Middle East and contains some of the world's largest oil reserves." Increasingly, as Washington has been compelled to accede to Iraqi demands, tales about "democracy promotion" and other self-congratulatory fables have been shelved in favor of recognition of what had been obvious throughout to all but the most doctrinaire ideologists: that the U.S. would not have invaded if Iraq's exports were asparagus and tomatoes and the world's major energy resources were in the South Pacific.

The NATO command is also coming to recognize reality in public. In June 2007, NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer informed a meeting of NATO members that "NATO troops have to guard pipelines that transport oil and gas that is directed for the West," and more generally to protect sea routes used by tankers and other "crucial infrastructure" of the energy system. That is the true meaning of the fabled "responsibility to protect." Presumably the task includes the projected \$7.6-billion TAPI pipeline that would deliver natural gas from Turkmenistan to Pakistan and India, running through Afghan's Kandahar province, where Canadian troops are deployed. The goal is "to block a competing pipeline that would bring gas to Pakistan and India from Iran" and to "diminish Russia's dominance of Central Asian energy exports," the *Toronto Globe & Mail* reported, plausibly outlining some of the contours of the new "Great Game."

Obama strongly endorsed the then-secret Bush administration policy of attacking suspected al-Qaeda leaders in countries that Washington has not (yet) invaded, disclosed by the New York Times shortly after the election. The doctrine was illustrated again on October 26, when U.S. forces based in Iraq raided Syria, killing eight civilians, allegedly to capture an al-Qaeda leader. Washington did not notify Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki or President Talabani, both of whom have relatively amicable relations with Syria, which has accepted 1.5 million Iraqi refugees and is bitterly opposed to al-Qaeda. Syria protested, claiming, credibly, that if notified they would have eagerly apprehended this enemy. According to *Asia Times*, Iraqi leaders were furious, and hardened their stance in the SOFA negotiations, insisting on provisions to bar the use of Iraqi territory to attack neighbors.

The Syria raid was harshly condemned in the Arab world. In pro-government newspapers, the Bush administration was denounced for lengthening its "loathsome legacy" (Lebanon), while Syria was urged to "march forward in your reconciliatory path" and America to "keep going backwards with your language of hatred, arrogance and the murder of innocents" (Kuwait). For the region generally, it was another illustration of what the government-controlled Saudi press condemned as "not

diplomacy in search of peace, but madness in search of war.”

Obama was silent. So were other Democrats. Political scientist Stephen Zunes contacted the offices of every Democrat on the House and Senate Foreign Relations Committees, but was unable to find any critical word on the U.S. raid on Syria from occupied Iraq.

Presumably, Obama also accepts the more expansive Bush doctrine that the U.S. not only has the right to invade countries as it chooses (unless it is a “blunder,” too costly to us), but also to attack others that Washington claims are supporting resistance to its aggression. In particular, Obama has, it seems, not criticized the raids by Predator drones that have killed many civilians in Pakistan.

These raids, of course, have consequences: people have the odd characteristic of objecting to slaughter of family members and friends. There has been a vicious mini-war waged in the tribal area of Bajaur in Pakistan, adjacent to Afghanistan. The BBC describes widespread destruction from intense combat, reporting further that, “Many in Bajaur trace the roots of the uprising to a suspected U.S. missile strike on an Islamic seminary, or madrassa, in November 2006, which killed around 80 people.” The attack on the school, killing 80-85 people, was reported in the mainstream Pakistani press by physicist and dissident activist Pervez Hoodbhoy, but ignored in the U.S. as insignificant. Events often look different at the other end of the club.

Hoodbhoy observed that the usual outcome of such attacks “has been flattened houses, dead and maimed children, and a growing local population that seeks revenge against Pakistan and the U.S.” Bajaur today may be an illustration of the familiar pattern.

On November 3, General Petraeus, the newly appointed head of the U.S. Central Command that covers the Middle East region, had his first meeting with Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari, Army Chief General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, and other high officials. Their primary concern was U.S. missile attacks on Pakistani territory, which had increased sharply in previous weeks. “Continuing drone attacks on our territory, which result in loss of precious lives and property, are counterproductive and difficult to explain by a democratically elected government,” Zardari informed Petraeus. His government, he said, is “under pressure to react more aggressively” to the strikes. These could lead to “a backlash against the U.S.,” which is already deeply unpopular in Pakistan. Petraeus said that he had heard the message, and “we would have to take [Pakistani opinions] on board” when attacking the country. A practical necessity, no doubt, when over 80 percent of the supplies for the U.S.-NATO war in Afghanistan pass through Pakistan.

Pakistan developed nuclear weapons, outside the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), thanks in no small measure to Ronald Reagan, who pretended not to see what his ally was doing. This was one element of Reagan’s “unstinting support” for the “ruthless and vindictive” dictator Zia ul-Haq, whose rule had “the most long-lasting and damaging effect on Pakistani society, one still prevalent today,” the respected analyst Ahmed Rashid observes. With Reagan’s firm backing, Zia moved to impose “an ideological Islamic state upon the population.” These are the immediate roots of many of “today’s problems—the militancy of the religious parties, the mushrooming of madrassas and extremist groups, the spread of drug and Kalashnikov culture, and the increase in sectarian violence.” Hoodbhoy comments accurately that, “Radical extremism is the illegitimate offspring of a union between the United States under Ronald Reagan, and Pakistan under General Zia-ul-Haq.” CIA analyst Bruce Riedel, a specialist on the region, adds that, “All of the nightmares of the 21st century come together in Pakistan,” including Lashkar-e-Taiba, which is blamed for the terrorist atrocities in Mumbai in November 2008.

The Reaganites also “built up the [Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate, ISI] into a formidable intelligence agency that ran the political process inside Pakistan while promoting Islamic

insurgencies in Kashmir and Central Asia,” Rashid continues. “This global jihad launched by Zia and Reagan was to sow the seeds of al Qaeda and turn Pakistan into the world center of jihadism for the next two decades.” Meanwhile Reagan’s immediate successors left Afghanistan in the hands of the most vicious jihadis, later abandoning it to warlord rule under Rumsfeld’s direction. The fearsome ISI continues to play both sides of the street, supporting the resurgent Taliban and simultaneously acceding to some U.S. demands.

The U.S. and Pakistan are reported to have reached “tacit agreement in September [2008] on a don’t-ask-don’t-tell policy that allows unmanned Predator aircraft to attack suspected terrorist targets” in Pakistan, according to unidentified senior officials in both countries. “The officials described the deal as one in which the U.S. government refuses to publicly acknowledge the attacks while Pakistan’s government continues to complain noisily about the politically sensitive strikes.”

Once again problems are caused by the “ignorant and meddlesome outsiders” who dislike being bombed by an increasingly hated enemy from the other side of the world.

The day before this report on the “tacit agreement” appeared, a suicide bombing in the conflicted tribal areas killed eight Pakistani soldiers, retaliation for an attack by a U.S. Predator drone that killed 20 people, including two Taliban leaders. The Pakistani parliament called for dialogue with the Taliban. Echoing the resolution, Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi said, “There is an increasing realization that the use of force alone cannot yield the desired results.”

Afghan President Hamid Karzai’s first message to president-elect Obama was much like that delivered to General Petraeus by Pakistani leaders: “end U.S. airstrikes that risk civilian casualties.” His message was sent shortly after coalition troops bombed a wedding party in Kandahar province, reportedly killing 40 people. There is no indication that his opinion was “taken on board.” Karzai has informed the Afghan public that, “He is powerless to halt U.S. airstrikes in his country and he would stop American warplanes if he could,” the Voice of America reported. He informed a UN Security Council delegation visiting Kabul that he has demanded a timeline for withdrawal of foreign forces from his country. But this plea has also not been “taken on board” within the U.S. political and doctrinal systems.

The British command has warned that there is no military solution to the conflict in Afghanistan and that there will have to be negotiations with the Taliban, risking a rift with the U.S., the *FT* reports. Correspondent Jason Burke, who has long experience in the region, reports that “the Taliban have been engaged in secret talks about ending the conflict in Afghanistan in a wide-ranging ‘peace process’ sponsored by Saudi Arabia and supported by Britain.”

Some Afghan peace activists have reservations about this approach, preferring a solution without foreign interference. A growing network of activists is calling for negotiations and reconciliation with the Taliban in a National Peace Jirga, a grand assembly of Afghans, formed in May 2008. At a meeting in support of the Jirga, 3,000 Afghan political figures and intellectuals, mainly Pashtuns, the largest ethnic group, criticized “the international military campaign against Islamic militants in Afghanistan and called for dialogue to end the fighting,” AFP reported.

The interim chair of the National Peace Jirga, Bakhtar Aminzai, “told the opening gathering that the current conflict could not be resolved by military means and that only talks could bring a solution. He called on the government to step up its negotiations with the Taliban and Hizb-i-Islami groups.” The latter is the party of the extremist radical Islamist warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a Reagan favorite responsible for many terrible atrocities, now reported to provide core parliamentary support for the Karzai government and to be pressing it towards a form of re-Talibanization.

Aminzai said further that “We need to pressure the Afghan government and the international community to find a solution without using guns.” A spokesperson added, “We are against Western policy in Afghanistan. They should bury their guns in a grave and focus on diplomacy and economic development.” A leader of Awakened Youth of Afghanistan, a prominent antiwar group, says that we must end “Afghanicide—the killing of Afghanistan.” In a joint declaration with German peace organizations, the National Peace Jirga claimed to represent “a wide majority of Afghan people who are tired of war,” calling for an end to escalation and initiation of a peace process.

The deputy director of the umbrella organization of NGOs in the country says that of roughly 1,400 registered NGOs, nearly 1,100 are purely Afghan operations: women’s groups, youth groups, and others, many of them advocates of the Peace Jirga.

Though polling in war-torn Afghanistan is a difficult process, there are some suggestive results. A Canadian-run poll found that Afghans favor the presence of Canadian and other foreign troops, the result that made the headlines in Canada. Other poll findings suggest some qualifications. Only 20 percent “think the Taliban will prevail once foreign troops leave.” Three-fourths support negotiations between the Karzai government and the Taliban, and more than half favor a coalition government. The great majority, therefore, strongly disagree with the U.S.-NATO focus on further militarization of the conflict, and appear to believe that peace is possible with a turn towards peaceful means. Though the question was not asked, it is reasonable to surmise that the foreign presence is favored for aid and reconstruction.

A study of Taliban foot soldiers carried out by the *Toronto Globe & Mail*, though not a scientific survey as they point out, nevertheless yields considerable insight. All were Afghan Pashtuns, from the Kandahar area. They described themselves as Mujahadeen, following the ancient tradition of driving out foreign invaders. Almost a third reported that at least one family member had died in aerial bombings in recent years. Many said that they were fighting to defend Afghan villagers from air strikes by foreign troops. Few claimed to be fighting a global Jihad, or had allegiance to Taliban leader Mullah Omar. Most saw themselves as fighting for principles—an Islamic government—not a leader. Again, the results suggest possibilities for a negotiated peaceful settlement, without foreign interference.

A valuable perspective on such prospects is provided by Sir Rodric Braithwaite, a specialist on Afghanistan who was UK ambassador to Moscow during the crucial 1988-92 period when the Russians withdrew (and the USSR collapsed), then becoming chair of the British Joint Intelligence Committee. On a recent visit, Braithwaite spoke to Afghan journalists, former Mujahideen, professionals, people working for the U.S.-based “coalition”—in general, to “natural supporters for its claims to bring peace and reconstruction.” In the *FT*, he reports that they were “contemptuous of President Hamid Karzai,” regarding him as another one of the puppets installed by foreign force. Their favorite was “Mohammad Najibullah, the last communist president, who attempted to reconcile the nation within an Islamic state, and was butchered by the Taliban in 1996: DVDs of his speeches are being sold on the streets. Things were, they said, better under the Soviets. Kabul was secure, women were employed, the Soviets built factories, roads, schools and hospitals, Russian children played safely in the streets. The Russian soldiers fought bravely on the ground like real warriors, instead of killing women and children from the air. Even the Taliban were not so bad: they were good Muslims, kept order, and respected women in their own way. These myths may not reflect historical reality, but they do measure a deep disillusionment with the ‘coalition’ and its policies.”

Specialists on the region urge that U.S. strategy should shift from more troops and attacks in Pakistan to a “diplomatic grand bargain—forging compromise with insurgents while addressing an array of regional rivalries and insecurities” (Barnett Rubin and Ahmed Rashid in *Foreign Affairs*, Nov.-Dec. 2008). They warn that the current military focus “and the attendant terrorism” might lead

to the collapse of nuclear-armed Pakistan, with grim consequences. They urge the incoming U.S. administration “to put an end to the increasingly destructive dynamics of the Great Game in the region” through negotiations that recognize the interests of the concerned parties within Afghanistan as well as Pakistan and Iran, but also India, China, and Russia, who “have reservations about a NATO base within their spheres of influence” and concerns about the threats “posed by the United States and NATO” as well as by al-Qaeda and the Taliban. The immediate goal should be “Lowering the level of violence in the region and moving the global community toward genuine agreement on the long-term goals,” thus allowing Afghans to confront their internal problems peacefully. The incoming U.S. president must put an end to “Washington’s keenness for ‘victory’ as the solution to all problems, and the United States’ reluctance to involve competitors, opponents, or enemies in diplomacy.”

It appears that there are feasible alternatives to escalation of the cycle of violence, but there has been little hint of it in the electoral campaign or political commentary. Afghanistan and Pakistan do not even appear among foreign policy issues on the Obama campaign’s website.

Iran, in contrast, figures prominently—though not of course as compared with effusive support for Israel; Palestinians remain unmentioned, apart from a vague reference to a two-state settlement of some unspecified kind. For Iran, Obama supports tough direct diplomacy “without preconditions” in order “to pressure Iran directly to change their troubling behavior,” namely pursuing a nuclear program and supporting terrorism (presumably referring to support for Hamas and Hezbollah). “If Iran continues its troubling behavior, we will step up our economic pressure and political isolation.” And as Obama informed the AIPAC, “I will do everything in my power to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon”—up to nuclear war, if he meant what he said.

Furthermore, Obama will strengthen the NPT “so that countries like North Korea and Iran that break the rules will automatically face strong international sanctions.” There is no mention of the conclusion of U.S. intelligence with “high confidence” that Iran has not had a weapons program for five years, unlike U.S. allies Israel, Pakistan, and India, which maintain extensive nuclear weapons programs in violation of the NPT with direct U.S. support, all unmentioned here as well.

The final mention of Iran is in the context of Obama’s strong support for Israel’s “right to self defense” and its “right to protect its citizens.” This commitment is demonstrated by Obama’s co-sponsorship of “a Senate resolution against Iran and Syria’s involvement in the war, and insisting that Israel should not be pressured into a ceasefire that did not deal with the threat of Hezbollah missiles.” The reference is to Israel’s U.S.-backed invasion of Lebanon in 2006, with pretexts that are hardly credible in light of Israel’s regular practices. This invasion, Israel’s fifth, killed over 1,000 Lebanese and once again destroyed much of southern Lebanon as well as parts of Beirut.

This is the sole mention of Lebanon among foreign policy issues on Obama’s website. Evidently, Lebanon has no right of self defense. In fact who could possibly have a right of self defense against the U.S. or its clients?

Nor does Iran have such rights. Among specialists, even rational hawks, it is well understood that if Iran is pursuing a weapons program, it is for deterrence. In the conservative *National Interest*, former CIA weapons inspector David Kay speculates that Iran might be moving towards “nuclear weapons capability,” with the “strategic goal” of countering a U.S. threat that “is real in Teheran’s eyes,” for good reasons that he reviews. He notes further that, “Perhaps the biggest agitator of all in this is the United States, with its abbreviated historical memory and diplomatic ADD.” Wayne White, formerly deputy director for the Near East and South Asia in State Department intelligence, dismisses the possibility that Supreme Leader Khamenei and the clerical elite, who hold power in Iran, would throw away the “vast amounts of money” and “huge economic empires” they have

created for themselves “in some quixotic attack against Israel with a nuclear weapon,” if they had one. The probability of that is virtually undetectable, he points out.

White agrees that Iran might seek weapons capability (which is not the same as weapons) for deterrence. He goes on to suggest Iran might also recall that Saddam Hussein had no nuclear weapons program when Israel bombed its Osiraq reactor in 1981, but that the attack led him to initiate a program using nuclear materials it had on hand as a result of the bombing. At the time, White was Iraq analyst for State Department intelligence, with access to a rich body of evidence. His testimony adds internal U.S. intelligence confirmation to the very credible evidence available at once, later strengthened by reports of Iraqi defectors, that the Israeli bombing did not terminate, but rather initiated, Saddam’s pursuit of nuclear weapons. U.S. or Israeli bombing of Iranian facilities, White and other specialists observe, might have the same effect. Violence consistently elicits more violence in response.

These matters are well understood by informed hardliners. The leading neoconservative expert on Iran, Reuel Marc Gerecht, formerly in the CIA Middle East division, wrote in 2000 that: “Tehran certainly wants nuclear weapons; and its reasoning is not illogical. Iran was gassed into surrender in the first Persian Gulf War; Pakistan, Iran’s ever more radicalized Sunni neighbor to the southeast, has nuclear weapons; Saddam Hussein, with his Scuds and his weapons-of-mass-destruction ambitions, is next door; Saudi Arabia, Iran’s most ardent and reviled religious rival, has long-range missiles; Russia, historically one of Iran’s most feared neighbors, is once again trying to reassert its dominion in the neighboring Caucasus; and Israel could, of course, blow the Islamic Republic to bits. Having been vanquished by a technologically superior Iraq at a cost of at least a half-million men, Iran knows very well the consequences of having insufficient deterrence. And the Iranians possess the essential factor to make deterrence work: sanity. Tehran or Isfahan in ashes would destroy the Persian soul, about which even the most hard-line cleric cares deeply. As long as the Iranians believe that either the U.S. or Israel or somebody else in the region might retaliate with nuclear weapons, they won’t do something stupid.”

Gerecht also understands very well the real “security problem” posed by Iranian nuclear weapons, should it acquire them: “A nuclear-armed Islamic Republic would of course check, if not checkmate, the United States’ maneuvering room in the Persian Gulf. We would no doubt think several times about responding to Iranian terrorism or military action if Tehran had the bomb and a missile to deliver it. During the lead-up to the second Gulf War, ruling clerical circles in Tehran and Qom were abuzz with the debate about nuclear weapons. The mullahs...agreed: if Saddam Hussein had had nuclear weapons, the Americans would not have challenged him. For the ‘left’ and the ‘right,’ this weaponry is the ultimate guarantee of Iran’s defense, its revolution, and its independence as a regional great power.”

With appropriate translations for the doctrinal term “Iranian terrorism,” Gerecht’s concerns capture realistically the threat posed by an Iran with a deterrent capacity (Iranian military action is quite a remote contingency).

While as usual ignored as irrelevant to policy formation, U.S. public opinion is close to that of serious analysts and also to world opinion. Large majorities oppose threats against Iran, thus rejecting the Bush-Obama position that the U.S. must be an outlaw state, violating the UN Charter, which bars the threat of force. The public also joins the majority of the world’s states in endorsing Iran’s right, as a signer of the NPT, to enrich uranium for nuclear energy (the position endorsed also by Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, Kissinger and others when Iran was ruled by the tyrant imposed by U.S.-UK subversion). Most important, the public favors establishment of a nuclear-weapons-free zone in the Middle East, which would mitigate and perhaps eliminate this highly threatening issue.

Such observations as these suggest an interesting thought experiment. What would be the content of the “Obama brand” if the public were to become “participants” rather than mere “spectators in action”? It is an experiment well worth undertaking, and there is good reason to suppose that the results might point the way to a saner and more decent world.

Noam Chomsky

P.S.

* From MRZine archives, February 2009:

<http://www.zcommunications.org/elections-2008-and-obamas-vision-by-noam-chomsky>

* Noam Chomsky is a linguist, social critic, and author of numerous articles and books including the recent Failed States.