

Biden's Foreign Policy Picks Are from the Hawkish National Security Blob. That Is a Bad Sign.

Biden's incoming team helped shape some of the most militaristic policies of the Obama administration.

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Global Research, November 27, 2020

[In These Times](#) 23 November 2020

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#)

There was no reason to think that a Biden administration would be to the left of the Obama administration when it comes to foreign policy. Biden comes with a long political career of supporting the wars of the United States and its allies, from the 2003 invasion of Iraq to Israel's aggression against Palestinians to the protracted occupation of Afghanistan. And whatever limited overtures he made to the Left during his campaign for the general election in 2020 (while he simultaneously ran on distancing himself from the Left), foreign policy was almost entirely omitted, as evidenced by the issue's exclusion from the [unity task force](#) with Bernie Sanders.

Perhaps the most distinguishing foreign policy position Biden took on the campaign trail was his saber rattling toward China, which was not quite as racist as Trump's, but nonetheless got so bad a Biden ad was [rebuked](#) by progressive Asian-American groups for its racist content (Biden eventually walked back some of the ad's rhetoric). Biden did say during his campaign that he wants to end "forever wars" (many of which he helped start) and that he's against the war in Yemen (a position he only took after he served in the Obama administration that supported the war), but he neither centered these platforms nor accompanied them with concrete policy proposals that would actually bring an end to endless war.

In keeping with this trajectory, Biden is already drawing from a host of pro-war individuals from the Obama era to fill his cabinet. Because many of these people have been around for a while and have relationships across Washington, there is no shortage of well-known political figures who are testifying to their [decency and smarts](#)—that's how the relatively insular world of Washington "national security professionals" works, after all. But for those on the outside of the Washington Blob looking in, the operative questions are, "What are these appointees' records, and what does this say about what exactly we are up against in a Biden administration?"

Antony Blinken — who will be nominated for Secretary of State, as the Biden-Harris transition team [announced](#) Monday — has rightfully attracted considerable criticism for a record of supporting wars and so-called humanitarian interventions. Blinken was a top aide to Biden when the then-Senator voted to authorize the U.S. invasion of Iraq, and Blinken helped Biden develop a proposal to [partition](#) Iraq into three separate regions based on ethnic and sectarian identity. As deputy national security adviser, Blinken [supported](#) the disastrous military intervention in Libya in 2011, and in 2018 he helped launch WestExec Advisors, a "strategic advisory firm" that is secretive about its clients, along with other Obama administration alumni like Michèle Flournoy. Jonathan Guyer [writes](#) in *The American Prospect*, "I learned

that Blinken and Flournoy used their networks to build a large client base at the intersection of tech and defense. An Israeli surveillance startup turned to them. So did a major U.S. defense company. Google billionaire Eric Schmidt and Fortune 100 companies went to them, too.”

But other, lesser-known Obama administration alumni deserve greater scrutiny. Among them is Avril Haines, who has been tapped as Biden’s Director of National Intelligence. Haines was one of the co-authors of Obama’s “presidential policy guidance,” the infamous drone playbook that normalized targeted assassinations around the world. Here’s how Newsweek [described](#) Haines in 2013:

Since becoming the National Security Council’s legal adviser in 2011, she had been working on a wide array of highly complicated and legally sensitive issues — generally until 1 or 2 in the morning, sometimes later — that go to the core of U.S. security interests. Among them were the legal requirements governing U.S. intervention in Syria and the range of highly classified options for thwarting Iran’s nuclear program. All the while, Haines was sometimes summoned in the middle of the night to weigh in on whether a suspected terrorist could be lawfully incinerated by a drone strike.

During the Biden presidential campaign, there was a concerted effort by former Obama aides to cast Haines retroactively as a voice of restraint and protecting civilians, as captured in an [article](#) by Spencer Ackerman. This revisionism should not be believed: Whatever civilian protections Haines may have written into drone law, they clearly did not work, as evidenced by the [devastating toll](#) of U.S. drone wars on civilians. While the Trump administration escalated the drone war and [loosened restrictions](#) on killing civilians, it was the Obama administration — aided by Haines — that normalized the widespread use of targeted assassinations that turned the whole world into a potential U.S. battlefield.

There are other aspects of Haines’ record that are worrying. She has “in the past described herself as a former consultant for the controversial data-mining firm Palantir,” as Murtaza Hussain [reported](#) for *The Intercept*. Palantir was co-founded by a Trump-backing billionaire, and is implicated in some of the worst wrongdoings of the Trump administration, including mass surveillance and immigrant detention. As Hussain reports, little is known about Haines’ role at the firm, and she scrubbed any mention from her bio when she came on as a Biden advisor. (Haines also worked for WestExec, as Guyer [reports](#).)

In 2018, Haines angered progressives when she [spoke in support](#) of Gina Haspel’s nomination for CIA Director. Haspel was widely opposed for her role in running CIA prisons where torture took place.

And then there is Linda Thomas-Greenfield, tapped to serve as United Nations Ambassador. Thomas-Greenfield lists her most recent employment Albright Stonebridge Group, a secretive “global strategy firm” somewhat similar to McKinsey & Company, and chaired by Madeleine Albright (Thomas-Greenfield is currently [listed](#) as “on leave” from the firm). Albright Stonebridge Group is a black box: It’s near impossible to get any info about who its clients are. The firm claims that it does not lobby the U.S. government or do work that is covered by the Foreign Agents Registration Act, but many of its staffers [double in roles](#) that certainly do exert influence, or have in the past. The firm’s UAE office is headed by Jad Mneymneh, who previously was in the Crown Prince Court of Abu Dhabi’s Office of Strategic Affairs.

There is nothing remarkable about Biden appointing someone who hails from a shadowy global strategy firm for a powerful role, but that is precisely the problem. As Guyer [points out](#), Jake Sullivan, set to be Biden's National Security Advisor, went to work for Macro Advisory Partners in 2017. "Run by former British spy chiefs, Macro Advisory Partners has about 30 full-time staff and reported \$37 million in revenue last year," notes Guyer. "Macro Advisory Partners has used Sullivan's involvement as a selling point in offering 'trusted counsel in a turbulent world,' with his face atop the roster on their website's landing page. But when Sullivan publishes a magazine article about U.S. foreign policy or delivers university lectures, he almost always omits this job from his biography."

Then there is Michèle Flournoy, considered the favorite to lead the Pentagon (though this hasn't been officially announced yet). Not only is she on the [board](#) of military contractor Booz Allen Hamilton, but she co-founded the hawkish center-left think tank Center for a New American Security (CNAS) — which receives significant funding from the weapons industry, including General Dynamics Corporation, Raytheon, Northrop Grumman Corporation and Lockheed Martin Corporation. She served in the Obama administration as Under Secretary of Defense for Policy from 2009 to 2012 and then played a powerful role at CNAS. She was a [major backer](#) of the 2011 military intervention in Libya, [a supporter](#) of the occupation of Afghanistan, and firmly opposed the complete removal of U.S. troops from Iraq.

More Biden nominations will be trickling in over the coming days and weeks, and we have every reason to expect more of the same: His transition team is a clear tell. As I [reported](#) on November 11, one third of Biden's Pentagon transition team alone lists as their "most recent employment" think tanks, organizations or companies that are either funded by the weapons industry or are directly part of this industry. Many of these entities are well-known and even respected, including influential think tanks like CNAS and the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Staffers of these think tanks do not get the same bad flak that lobbyists receive, but they deserve it: Via policy papers, media outreach and relationships with politicians, these staffers effectively do the same thing lobbyists do, but dressed in a more academic veneer, and the think tanks Biden is drawing from have proven track records of pushing weapons systems on the U.S. government. Indeed, in 2016 even the *New York Times* [accused CSIS of lobbying](#) for General Atomics, a California-based manufacturer of Predator drones, based on a cache of emails showing it doing just that. And then there are the many that do not disclose their funders, including four transition team members (Linda Thomas-Greenfield among them) who hail from Albright Stonebridge Group.

There is a temptation to take a moment to breathe, to celebrate that the Trump administration has been voted out (although Trump appears determined to maintain power), and to hold on to hope that Biden will mark a turn away from some of Trump's worst impulses, including his war mongering. But we learned from the earliest days of the Obama administration that it is sober assessment — rather than projection — that is called for in moments like this. Obama, with Biden at his side, oversaw intervention in Libya, disastrous involvement in the Yemen war, ongoing occupation in Afghanistan, support for the coup in Honduras, and much more. And Biden is now pulling from the same team of advisors and influence peddlers and consultants who helped make it all happen.

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Featured image: Then-Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken testifies before a Senate appropriations subcommittee on April 12, 2016 in Washington, DC. PAUL MORIGI/WIREIMAGE

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