

Disillusion among Liberal Supporters: Obama's Foreign / Military Policy

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A year has gone by since Sen. Barack Obama assumed the presidency, replacing George W. Bush, who was among the worst chief executives in American history.

The election of an African American to the White House is an historically positive development. And his first year in office has shown his superiority to Bush and his defeated opponent, rightist Sen. John McCain, in several areas.

At the same time, in terms of foreign/military policy, President Obama has essentially continued many of the Bush Administration's initiatives first and foremost his predecessor's "global war on terrorism," but in other international endeavors as well.

Democrats of the political center and center right have remained uncritical of President Obama's some to the extent of keeping quiet about, or supporting, his administration's expanding wars, although they may have opposed the wars during Bush's reign.

But a number of liberal Obama supporters who identify with the party's center left are expressing serious disappointment. Center right governance, continual compromise with the right wing Republicans, and more wars are not the changes they expected from a candidate some believed to harbor progressive intentions.

In this article we will explore the first year of President Obama's foreign/military policies < a principal source of progressive dissatisfaction.

On one level, the Bush-Obama global war on terrorism, with its military moves in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, the Philippines and elsewhere, are aimed at defeating al-Qaeda, which claims responsibility for the attack of Sept. 11, 2001, and other organizations it deems to be "terrorist," even if their activities are confined to their own countries or in fact are not actually terrorists at all.

But on another far more important level the real objective of this endless series of wars is the attainment of geostrategic advantage against any country or bloc that potentially might undermine Washington's dominion over world affairs.

Within this strategic context the Obama government is particularly interested in five objectives: (1) Winning the Afghan war, or at least conveying the impression that the U.S. has not lost; (2) Making sure Washington's old Cold War rivals < now reconstituted as the economic powerhouse of China and resource-rich Russia < are "contained," or at least are not subverting American power; (3) keeping the European Union in tow as a junior partner; (4) insuring that Latin America and the Caribbean remain firmly within the Yankee sphere of

influence; and (5) certifying that the lion's share of the world's petroleum and natural gas resources continue to accrue to the world's only military superpower.

Obama's foreign/military strategy is a continuation of policies that began in the aftermath of World War II in 1945. For the first 45 years, to 1990, the main goal was to dominate and lead the capitalist countries in a Cold War to overpower socialist and communist alternatives to capitalism. For the remaining 20 years the main goal was for the U.S. to dominate and lead all of countries of the world as the "indispensable" unipolar hegemon.

The eight years of the Bush Administration deviated from America's postwar international line, but not in its devotion to fulfilling the political system's hegemonic and militarist goals. Where Bush ruptured the continuity of traditional U.S. foreign/military policy was in the counterproductive methodology and dysfunctional risk evaluation emanating from the hubris and gross misperceptions of the neoconservative ideologists who crafted presidential decisions.

Starting unjust wars against much smaller countries hardly contradicts traditional U.S. international behavior. Indeed, it is the hallmark of such behavior. But responding to 9/11 with an amorphous, endless, and unwinnable "war on terrorism" was absurd. The subsequent attack on desperate, underdeveloped Afghanistan, and then invading already half-crippled Iraq, were disastrous errors that have cost Washington mightily in terms of treasure and reputation.

Bush announced early in his administration: (1) that the Pentagon would exercise its full spectrum military dominance, preemptively when desired, against any challenge from anywhere < and demanded worldwide allegiance to Washington's adventurism; (2) that the mission of the White House was to transform the governments of "rogue countries," "failed states," and societies that "harbored terrorists" into "democratic" subsidiaries of the U.S. government by violence if persuasion failed; (3) that other countries < especially America's NATO allies < must dance to Washington's martial music or risk being shunned or even tossed aside like a used tissue or an Old Europe.

The result of Bush' overt imperialist grab to extend Washington's global domination, coupled with rude treatment and bullying of hesitant allies, was the weakening of U.S. world power politically, militarily, and economically.

Politically, many allied nations grew more distant. Much of heretofore subordinate Latin America began to move left and to ignore Uncle Sam's orders. The Muslim world was aghast at Bush's unjust wars against two Islamic countries and 100% support for Israel. Militarily, the Pentagon's armies suffered the humiliation of being fought to a stalemate by small and poorly armed guerrilla forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. Economically during this period the U.S. became the world's greatest debtor nation, and of course it sank into a painful recession.

Regarding debt, which is often brushed aside, an article in the Dec. 29 Financial Times pointed out: "Over the next decade U.S. publicly held debt is forecast to more than double to 85% of gross domestic product < the highest rate since the second world war. And that is without including the intra-government debt in Social Security and Medicare, the government health scheme for the elderly, which would push U.S. indebtedness well above 100% of GDP during Mr. Obama's second term. Hegemons cannot for long survive such rising indebtedness."

As President Obama entered the White House a year ago, the U.S. was still the world's only superpower and despite its debts and the recession it remained a rich and dominant country. Its share of global income remains about where it has been for decades: 22%. But America's standing in the world was greatly diminished because of its past and especially more recent policies. Also, other nations were rising, such as the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India, China). And some previously subordinate countries were disinclined to continue playing follow the leader after Washington's neoliberal economic model caused them grave hardship and its extreme laissez faire form of capitalism sparked the present recession.

What principally props up the U.S. today is

- (1) its overall military power and hair-trigger willingness to use it;
- (2) the continuing political and organizational weakness of the European Union, a potentially powerful economic competitor and rival were it to leave Washington's orbit;
- (3) and China's expressed indifference to displacing the U.S. as the global hegemon. Beijing has been committed for decades to multipolarity, global leadership by several countries and blocs, not just the present unipolar superstate. Many other countries support such a reorganization.

Washington grudgingly recognizes that some form of multipolarity is unavoidable within the next decade or two at most, in which case it would certainly seize the opportunity to become "first among equals," retaining as much "leadership" as possible.

This is where Obama fits in, and we'll begin at the beginning. At 48, he is an exceptionally intelligent, self-confident and ambitious man who obviously feels comfortable wielding power. He had not even served a full first Senate term in Washington, after several years as an obscure Illinois state legislator, when he put himself forward and was selected by the power elite to seek the Democratic nomination for the presidency.

By power elite (the term coined by the great sociologist C. Wright Mills) we're speaking of that informal assemblage of corporate, financial, military, and political leaders and their intellectual minions in the U.S. who together possess hugely disproportionate influence and access to wealth. During the grueling primaries and the presidential campaign corporate and financial institutions were among Obama's biggest contributors, uniquely investing more in the Democrat this time than in his openly pro-business Republican opponent.

Obama of course was elected by the masses of American people, but it is extremely doubtful he would have been a serious candidate to begin with were it not for the backing of these powerful interests.

The elite wanted a chief executive who would (1) repair the damage Bush caused, and quickly restore U.S. dominance in world affairs; and (2) should the days of unipolarity prove short, as seems likely, manipulate the transition to multipolarity so that the United States comes out on top.

Obama made it clear in the two years before the election that his foreign/military strategy would rest upon a combination of the reliable hegemonic policies of the Democratic Clinton Administration and the "realist" international program of the Republican administration of George H. W. Bush (the First). These were the "successful" policies that existed during the dozen halcyon years before the neocon Vandals sacked Washington.

Obama won election for several reasons. The most important were that the Democratic candidate followed eight dreadful years of President Bush, and the country was in an economic recession. But equally important was the “hope for change” he cultivated in the minds of multitudes of Democrats and independents, while never specifying clearly what that “change” was supposed to be, though many voters assumed it would be progressive. That he opposed the Iraq war was a big plus, even though he voted to fund it during each of his few years in national politics. Not to be overlooked, of course, were his winning personality, and spellbinding ability as a public speaker.

Obama’s first payback to his elite backers was the selection of an economic team that would not impose overly harsh regulations on the financial system. Treasury Secretary Geithner, National Economic Council Director Summers, and Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke had also supported policies that facilitated the recession but they’ve supposedly learned from their colossal mistakes.

The second payback was keeping Bush’s Defense Secretary Robert Gates (who is also connected to Bush the First’s administration) in his old job, naming pro-Iraq war Democratic Sen. Hillary Clinton Secretary of State, and retaining Gen. David Petraeus as head of Central Command. This triumvirate seems mainly responsible for the vast expansion of the Afghan war, its overlapping into Pakistan and now the extension to Yemen. With their help, Obama believes he will “win” the Afghan war (and thus a second term).

Obama’s immediate task upon assuming office was to repair the Bush Administration’s mishandling of relations with the rest of the world. He quickly made peace with the major U.S. allies who had been offended by the Bush regime’s arrogance and unilateralism. He promised a new policy for Latin America based on equality and mutual respect. He assured the nearly 1.6 billion Muslims that America was their friend.

When these overtures were made, it seemed as though the conduct of the old foreign policy < which had served the U.S. handsomely since the mid-1940s until the neoconservative train wreck > was back on track. No more alienating our friends, and no more harebrained wars.

After a year, what does this foreign/military policy look like? It’s quite similar to Bush’s but without with the neocon management, so it looks better.

There has been a huge expansion of the Afghan war, increasing thrusts into Pakistan, and now Yemen’s the target of Washington’s bombings, pilotless drones, military aid and bribes. The war budget is more bloated than ever before. The costs of it all are astronomical, but it will be future generations of Americans < those of our children and grandchildren > who will pay big time for the imperial wars of the Bush-Obama years.

The overture to Latin America was a charade. Washington mildly criticized but facilitated the successful anti-democratic Honduran coup to prevent a reliable satellite from possibly turning toward the left in future years. Meanwhile, the Pentagon is taking over seven new military bases in Colombia, threatening adjacent Venezuela < the CIA’s number one target in South America. And of course the Cold War with Cuba is as cold as ever.

The Obama Administration is still pursuing the goal of exercising hegemony over the entire oil-rich Middle East. Washington’s total partiality to Israel at the expense of the Palestinian people remains unchanged. The attitude of the Democratic Congress and the Obama White

house toward the suffering people of Gaza is unforgivably cruel. The White House still supports dictatorial Egypt and backward Saudi Arabia against the aspirations of their own people.

Muslims around the world welcomed Obama's Cairo speech June 4, but the good will it generated has dissipated. Efforts to destabilize Iran are continuing apace, along with threats of "killer" sanctions, and the prospect of war remains "on the table."

NATO, which is remotely controlled from Washington like a drone over western Pakistan, is still inching toward Russia, to Moscow's continuing annoyance. And by penetrating Afghanistan, the armies of the North Atlantic are situated close to the Central Asian oil and gas reserves located in several former southern republics of the late Soviet Union. NATO bases are now virtually touching western China.

Billions are being spent to convert Guam into a major U.S. base in the Pacific, undoubtedly with China in mind. In northeast Asia Obama is continuing Washington's 57-year refusal to sign a peace treaty with North Korea to officially end the Korean War < a major irritant stimulating Pyongyang's antipathy toward Washington. All the over 700 U.S. major military outposts abroad < "America's Empire of Bases," as Chalmers Johnson puts it < are remaining in place, as are the nuclear-armed missiles targeting China's cities, a push-button away from oblivion.

Despite its rhetoric about taking environmental action < a foreign policy issue of enormous importance < the Obama Administration's performance at the UN's December climate conference in Copenhagen was big on posturing but small indeed on programmatic commitments.

The Obama White House couldn't do much about Iraq because Bush made the deal with the Baghdad government to withdraw at the end of 2011. We will believe the complete withdrawal when we see it. At this stage it is likely that there will be an eventual agreement between Baghdad and Washington to prolong the Iraq occupation with a substantial number of American troops remaining indefinitely.

Progressives have every reason to be dismayed by the Obama Administration's foreign/military policy. It's essentially a continuation of the postwar policy that brought the U.S. to global power, though in a bright new wrapping. It's better than the Bush years, but that's the faintest of praise.

Barack Obama was the candidate of change, but the reality in international endeavors is small change indeed. Social commentator Glenn Greenwald remarked on this general point during an interview on Democracy Now in early January:

"It's ironic, given that the campaign was all based on changing the nature of how Washington works < [but] the central attribute of the Obama Administration is to accommodate and keep in place the same power factions that have run Washington forever, and as a result, the same mindset, the same dynamic that governs Washington in virtually every area."

Unless we Americans take a public stance against war and hegemony, and associate ourselves with the antiwar and social movements struggling for substantial change, there will be no change at all. It'll just be war after war. Maybe if Albert Einstein said this it would

be more convincing. Well, he did:

"We must not conceal from ourselves that no improvement in the present depressing situation is possible without a severe struggle; for the handful of those who are really determined to do something is minute in comparison with the mass of the lukewarm and the misguided. And those who have an interest in keeping the machinery of war going are a very powerful body; they will stop at nothing to make public opinion subservient to their murderous ends."

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