

Obama's Neocon in Residence

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Global Research, November 11, 2008

[Antiwar.com](#) 11 November 2008

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The grip that the Israeli lobby has over both political parties means that any real shift in U.S. Middle Eastern policy is unlikely, whoever is elected president today. It might also be argued that no change in policy outside the Middle East is likely either, except that Obama might talk before he bombs. Given Joe Biden's warning that Obama will respond decisively to a foreign policy test in his first six months, it might even be suggested that a new regime could prove more trigger-happy than the current one.

That said, there is a real substantive difference between the Obama's foreign policy team and John McCain's. The latter is neocon-dominated, with advisers such as Bill Kristol, John Bolton, Robert Kaplan, and the Kagan brothers, not to mention key spokesman Randy Scheunemann. Such an administration would be virtually guaranteed to see the world in Manichean terms and use the military as the preferred foreign policy option. When McCain ran against George Bush in 2000, he was the choice of the neocons, who saw him as the candidate mostly likely to engage in an assertive foreign policy that would, *inter alia*, be "good" for Israel. He is still their man, and, since it has also become clear that the choice of Sarah Palin originated with the neocons at *National Review* and *The Weekly Standard*, McCain-Palin is very much their ticket.

Barack Obama has inherited much of the old Bill Clinton foreign policy team, including Richard Holbrooke, Susan Rice, Anthony Lake, and Madeleine Albright. One might reasonably critique much of Clinton's foreign and security policy – most particularly the horrific sanctions against Iraq, war in the Balkans, invasion of Haiti, and chaotic counterterrorism efforts – but his advisers were mostly old-school realists who believed that there was such a thing as a national interest and that dealing with other nations required the give-and-take of diplomacy in addition to the threat of force.

If Obama wins, it is generally believed that the position of Secretary of State will go to Richard Holbrooke. Holbrooke is not shy when it comes to the use of force, having been the architect of U.S. military engagement in Bosnia in the mid-1990s, but his current views on Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan are not completely clear. Regarding Iraq, he initially supported removing Saddam Hussein but has lately called for a "new strategy" for redeployment of U.S. forces in the region. Holbrooke's aggressiveness combined with Joe Biden's prediction that there will be a major challenge together suggest that Obama will quite likely be supported by his advisers if he is keen to prove that he is not a wimp, so the first six months or so could be a wild ride.

But what is really scary about a possible Obama administration is Dennis Ross. Ross claims that he believes in diplomacy and has even written a book on the subject, though his one major foray in that area, Camp David in 2000, demonstrated that he was more interested in

advancing Israeli interests than he was in creating a viable peace with the Palestinians. He was the architect of so-called “no surprises” negotiations between the Palestinians and Israelis in which all positions supported by the U.S. had to be cleared by Israel before they were even placed on the table. If the Israelis said “no,” the U.S. would back down. Ross was also one of the most vocal critics of former Democratic President Jimmy Carter after Carter wrote [*Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*](#).

Ross has most recently been in the news for his participation on a task force organized by the Washington-based Bipartisan Policy Center, headed by ex-senators George Mitchell, Daniel Coats, and Charles Robb. In this case, bipartisan most definitely does not mean objective. The task force included Ross; Steve Rademaker, husband of Danielle Pletka of the American Enterprise Institute (AEI); Michael Rubin, also of AEI; Kenneth Weinstein of the Hudson Institute; Kenneth Katzmann of the Congressional Research Service; as well as two generals, an admiral, two former Defense Department officials who worked for Paul Wolfowitz and Doug Feith, and a Lehman Brothers economist. Rubin drafted the report assisted by the project director Michael Makovsky, who is the brother of David Makovsky, senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), a pro-Israeli think-tank that was founded by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). No one on the task force was an independent expert on Iran who might have been willing or able to express Iran’s concerns or point of view. Indeed, apart from Rubin, no one on the task force knew anything about Iran at all, except possibly that it was part of the axis of evil.

Not surprisingly, the task force’s report, “[Meeting the Challenge: U.S. Policy Toward Iranian Nuclear Development](#)” [.pdf], issued in September, concluded that Iran has no right to enrich nuclear fuel for any purpose. It advocated talking to Tehran to give it a chance to surrender on all key issues before attacking it, urging the next president to build up forces for the assault from day one of the new administration. The task force recommended that U.S. forces should remain in the area after Iran is bombed into submission, vigilant and ready to react to any possible resurgence by the mullahs. On Oct. 23 an op-ed appeared in the *Washington Post* by Coats and Robb that summarized the “bipartisan” conclusions without identifying the members of the task force itself, as many readers would certainly have realized from the names that the report was the latest neocon snow job. The *Washington Post* apparently did not care that it was being exploited to promote a bad policy wrapped in a deceptive fog of bipartisanship.

Ross is a commentator for Fox News and the Ziegler distinguished fellow at WINEP, which he helped found in the 1980s. He is also chairman of the Jerusalem-based [Jewish People Policy Planning Institute](#). He would only be a spear-carrier in the latest neocon absurdity if it weren’t for the fact that he is a major player in the Obama campaign as Obama’s top adviser on the Middle East and a key link to AIPAC. Ross reportedly has been helping the Obama campaign formulate positions that AIPAC would be comfortable with. It has been reported that Ross has aspirations to become secretary of state, but he lacks the seniority for that position and may instead focus on the Middle East, either at the State Department or the National Security Council. Ross-watchers believe that if he is put in charge of Middle Eastern policy, he will guarantee that only Israeli security concerns will matter to the new administration, because that is the position he has always taken in the past. If the bipartisan report is any indication, he will be particularly interested in defanging Iran, a position that he has made clear in speeches to Israeli audiences.

My focus on Dennis Ross and what he represents is not intended to single him out for demonization. Rather, it is a word of caution to the electorate not to expect too much from

Obama if he is elected, as he is surrounded by people who already have agendas. There are many Dennis Rosses out there, and they are scattered throughout the government bureaucracy, Congress, and the media. For some of them, Israel is a key issue, but there are many others intent on returning to a Cold War with Russia and thwarting China, starting new quarrels over issues unrelated to the national interest. Closer to home, Obama and McCain both made a point of disparaging Venezuela in their last debate. President Hugo Chavez is a despicable clown in many respects, but his country provides much of the oil Americans consume. Does Washington need to go after him too? Looking for new dragons to slay in an unstable world has brought the Bush administration to its knees. Americans do not need four more years of the same kind of policies from Obama or McCain.

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