

Obama's Sins of Omission

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Global Research, April 27, 2009

[The Boston Globe](#) 25 April 2009

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

The history of American liberalism is one of promoting substantively modest if superficially radical reforms in order to refurbish and sustain the status quo. From Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal to Bill Clinton's New Covenant, liberals have specialized in jettisoning the redundant to preserve what they see as essential. In this sense, modern liberalism's great achievement has been to deflect or neutralize calls for more fundamental change – a judgment that applies to President Obama, especially on national security.

Granted, Obama has acted with dispatch to repudiate several of George W. Bush's most egregious blunders and for this he deserves credit. In abrogating torture, ordering the Guantanamo prison camp closed, and setting a deadline for withdrawing troops from Iraq, Obama is turning the page on a dark chapter in American statecraft. After the hectoring and posturing that figured so prominently in his predecessor's style, the president's preference for dialogue rather than preaching is refreshing.

But however much Obama may differ from Bush on particulars, he appears intent on sustaining the essentials on which the Bush policies were grounded. Put simply, Obama's pragmatism poses no threat to the reigning national security consensus. Consistent with the tradition of American liberalism, he appears intent on salvaging that consensus.

For decades now, that consensus has centered on what we might call the Sacred Trinity of global power projection, global military presence, and global activism – the concrete expression of what politicians commonly refer to as “American global leadership.” The United States configures its armed forces not for defense but for overseas “contingencies.” To facilitate the deployment of these forces it maintains a vast network of foreign bases, complemented by various access and overflight agreements. Capabilities and bases mesh with and foster a penchant for meddling in the affairs of others, sometimes revealed to the public, but often concealed.

Bush did not invent the Sacred Trinity. He merely inherited it and then abused it, thereby reviving the conviction entertained by critics of American globalism, progressives and conservatives alike, that the principles underlying this trinity are pernicious and should be scrapped. Most of these progressives and at least some conservatives voted for Obama with expectations that, if elected, he would do just that. Based on what he has said and done over the past three months, however, the president appears intent instead on shielding the Sacred Trinity from serious scrutiny.

What the president is doing and saying matters less than what he has not done. The sins of omission are telling: There is no indication that Obama will pose basic questions about the purpose of the US military; on the contrary, he has implicitly endorsed the proposition that

keeping America safe is best accomplished by maintaining in instant readiness forces geared up to punish distant adversaries or invade distant countries. Nor is there any indication that Obama intends to shrink the military's global footprint or curb the appetite for intervention that has become a signature of US policy.

Despite lip service to the wonders of soft power, Pentagon spending, which exploded during the Bush era, continues to increase.

There are differences, to be sure. Bush counted on high-tech manned aircraft above and mechanized ground forces below to make quick work of any foe, with Iraq the point of main effort. Ostensibly learning from Bush's failures, Obama is taking a modified approach, centering his attention on "Af-Pak."

His preference is for high-tech unmanned aircraft, the weapon of choice for an expanded Israeli-style program of targeted assassination in Pakistan. Meanwhile, when it comes to ground forces, Obama's inclination is to park the tanks and get troops out among the people, as his intensified effort to pacify Afghanistan suggests.

Obama's revised approach to the so-called Long War, formerly known as the Global War on Terror, should hearten neoconservative and neoliberal exponents of American globalism: Now in its eighth year, this war continues with no end in sight. Those who actually expected Obama to "change the way Washington works" just might feel disappointed. Far than abrogating the Sacred Trinity, the president appears intent on investing it with new life.

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