

Obama's War Cabinet

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December 1 brought more disappointment but no surprises. Obama's national security appointees (like all his earlier ones) aren't "change to believe in" or what people expected for their votes. They're recycled establishment figures. Their agenda is business as usual, and they'll continue the same failed Bush administration policies at home and abroad. Washington's criminal class is bipartisan. Obama was chosen to lead it and is assembling a rogue team that's little different from the one it's replacing.

For "security", it means:

- maintaining the "strongest military on the planet" and do it by outspending all other countries combined;

- continued foreign wars;

- possibly another against Iran;

- permanent occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan - directly and with proxy forces; Obama saying he'll withdraw all US forces from Iraq in 16 months (around mid-2010) is false and misleading;

- a reinvented Cold War against Russia;

- an "absolute" commitment "to eliminating the threat of terrorism (with) the full force of our power;"

- inciting instability anywhere it serves US imperial interests with special emphasis on resource-rich Eurasia, including the Asian sub-continent; Exhibit A: the Bombay (Mumbai) terror attacks that Michel Chossudovsky explains have "the fingerprints of a (carefully planned) paramilitary-intelligence operation (and) are described as India's 9/11," or at least a mini version of it; the usual suspects are blamed; the purpose is to incite fear and more violence; the consequences - an internal hard line crackdown, increased tensions between India and Pakistan, and a military opening for Washington to intervene further in the region; and

- additional North American militarization as evidenced by a disturbing December 1 Washington Post report - that (on the pretext of national security) the Pentagon will deploy 20,000 troops nationwide by 2011 "to help state and local officials respond to a nuclear attack or other domestic catastrophe;" three "rapid-reaction" combat units are planned; two or more additional ones may follow; they'll be supplemented by 80 smaller National Guard units and will be trained to respond to chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, high-yield explosive, and other domestic "terror" attacks or disturbances; in other words, homeland

militarization and occupation is planned using combat troops trained to kill.

Media Reaction to Obama's National Security Appointees

The New York Times suggested he's "put(ing) the rancor and even some of the rhetoric of the presidential campaign behind him on Monday as he welcomed his chief Democratic adversary into his cabinet and signaled flexibility in his plans to withdraw troops from Iraq." He stated: "I will listen to the recommendations of my commanders (and it's) likely to be necessary to maintain a residual force to provide potential training (and) logistical support to protect our civilians in Iraq."

According to the Cato Institute's foreign policy director, Christopher Preble, Obama chose Iraq war supporters, so it "suggests that we will only get more of the same."

The Washington Post highlighted Obama's "high-powered national security team....to face a complex security picture." It quoted him calling for "a new beginning, a new dawn of American leadership (and) the power of our moral example."

According to UN ambassador-designee Susan Rice, it's a team "to prevent conflict, to promote peace, combat terrorism, prevent the spread and use of nuclear weapons, tackle climate change, end genocide, fight poverty and disease." More on those aims below.

The Wall Street Journal suggested that Obama's national security team will make "a clean break from Bush administration policies on Iraq, Afghanistan and overseas diplomacy." It will differ from "an over-reliance on the military and a failure to devote enough resources to political reconciliation and economic development in those nations." More on that below as well.

Obama's National Security Designees

On December 1 in the UK Guardian, author Jeremy Scahill called them a "Kettle of Hawks" so it's no surprise that hard line neocon writer Max Boot was jubilant over the selections and said they "as easily (could) have come from a President McCain." He and like-minded ideologues believe this puts "an end to the 16-month timetable for withdrawal from Iraq, the unconditional summits with dictators (aka democrats like Chavez, president Ahmadinejad of Iran, and Fidel and Raul Castro), and other foolishness that once emanated from the Obama campaign." His selections "should be powerful voices for neoliberalism which is not so different from neoconservatism."

According to Boot, Obama will pick up right where Bush left off with a near-seamless transition. "Only churlish partisans of both the left and the right can be unhappy with the emerging tenor of our nation's new leadership."

According to former Chicago congressman, federal judge, and Clinton White House Counsel Abner Mikva in a Chicago Jewish News article, it's also true for the nation's Jews and the state of Israel. As some call Clinton 'the nation's first black president,' "I think when this is over, people are going to say that Barack Obama is the first Jewish president." Rabbi Arnold Wolf agrees in saying Obama is "embedded in the Jewish world." Given the team he's assembling, there's every reason to believe they're right.

Hillary Clinton

She's co-heading the team (with Robert Gates) as Secretary of State designee, so it's clear no change is planned given her hard line neocon ideology. As one analyst puts it: it's why many on the left "are grinding their teeth" about her and other former Clinton administration appointees.

Back in May, CounterPunch co-editor Jeff St. Clair referred to her "Gothic politics" that offer no hope for needed change. He called her "constitutionally wedded to a stern neoliberalism, a disposition (she's unable to) camouflage."

Darker still is her hawkishness, far enough to the right to be indistinguishable from Joe Lieberman or John McCain. It's why one analyst calls her a "war goddess" and with good reason. She supported the invasion and occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan and still does. She voted for the Patriot, Homeland Security, and other repressive acts.

She's extremely bellicose, endorses attacking Iran, supported Israel's destructive 2006 Lebanon war, praised Israel's apartheid wall, demeans the Palestinian people, equates them with terrorists, calls any Israeli criticism anti-Semitism, is close to AIPAC, and at its June convention said "The United States stands with Israel now and forever....We have shared interests....shared ideals....common values. I have a bedrock commitment to Israel's security. (Against Islamic extremists) our two nations are fighting a shared threat....I strongly support Israel's right to self-defense (and) believe America should aid in that defense....I am committed to making sure that Israel maintains a military edge to meet increasing threats."

"I am deeply concerned about the growing threat in Gaza (and) Hamas' campaign of terror....Its charter calls for the destruction of Israel....Iran (also) threatens to destroy Israel....I support calling the Iranian Revolutionary Guard what it is: a terrorist organization. It is imperative that we get both tough and smart about dealing with Iran before it is too late."

In other speeches, Clinton has been extremely belligerent and blatantly malicious in accusations mirror opposite of the truth. She called Iran a strategic long-term threat, a country that practices state terrorism, that uses "surrogates to supply explosives that kill US troops in Iraq," and that must be dealt with with "all options on the table."

She also said that if Iran attacks Israel (that's implausible on its face), America would respond by "obliterating" the country - in other words, incinerate its entire population through a nuclear holocaust. During the 2008 campaign, she told ABC's Good Morning America:

"I want the Iranians to know, if I am the president, we will attack Iran. And I want them to understand that (if) they might foolishly consider launching an attack on Israel, we would be able to totally obliterate them."

She's just as extremist on all foreign policy issues. She opposes an international treaty to ban land mines and was against banning cluster bomb exports to countries that use them on civilians. She backs arms transfers and police training to human rights abusing countries like Israel, Egypt, Pakistan, India, Saudi Arabia and similar US allies.

She's for a larger military budget, continuing the "war on terror," the nation's illegal wars and occupation, and Israel's repressive Palestinian occupation. In July 2004, she denounced

the UN, accused it of opposing aggressive US policies, its judicial arm for challenging Israel's Separation Barrier, and she sponsored a Senate resolution "urging no further action by the UN to delay" its construction.

She's done nothing to contain nuclear proliferation except to condemn Iran's legal commercial development. It's in full accord with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) unlike the world's greatest nuclear outlaw - America. Israel, India, and Pakistan as well, but they're US allies unlike Iran. Clinton also supports the Bush Doctrine and his administration's unilateral position on using first strike nuclear weapons, including against non-nuclear states.

Hillary Clinton at State sends a strong message to free people everywhere and especially to all Muslims and the Arab world - the "war on terror" will continue. Your people are its main target, and America will continue to invade and occupy your lands. It also tells the anti-war movement that it's work has just begun and will be no simpler under Obama than it's been up to now. Clinton is a powerful bulwark against it and to all freedom loving people everywhere. "Gothic" indeed - dark and foreboding in the same "war party" under new management.

Robert Gates

He'll remain as Defense Secretary and is a clear signal of Bush administration policy continuity. After being named to succeed Donald Rumsfeld in November 2006, this writer said about him: The appointment of Robert Gates "replac(es) one controversial (defense) secretary and accused war criminal with an unindicted liar and equally controversial former Reagan and senior Bush official." Earlier he was involved "in cooking the intelligence to fit the policy in the Iran-Contra scandal he was never held to account for." He also had a hand "in secretly arming Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s. When he takes over (at DOD), expect the Pentagon under (his) management to be no different" than the leadership it's replacing. In all respects, Gates lived up to expectations and will continue the same policies under Obama.

In an October 28 speech at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, he argued for expanding the Bush administration's pre-emptive war doctrine to include first strike nuclear weapons. He said that pacifist illusions shouldn't deter planning for a broader war.

He added that "As long as other states have or seek nuclear weapons - and can potentially threaten us, our allies and friends - then we must have a deterrent capacity that makes it clear that challenging the US in the nuclear arena - or with weapons of mass destruction - could result in an overwhelming, catastrophic response." In other words, if non-US allies seek nuclear weapons or if Washington (without evidence) claims it, they then become potential targets for a nuclear response even if their intentions are peaceful.

Gates' other credentials include 26 years with the CIA where he was its deputy director from 1986 - 1989 and director from 1991 - 1993. Former CIA official, turned political activist, Ray McGovern knew him there and wrote about his "dexterity in orchestrating his own advancement (and) never (being) one to let truth derail (his) ambition."

Former CIA analyst Mel Goodman described how he "tried hard to anticipate the views of policy makers in order to pander to their needs" and played a major role in politicizing the agency. One of his key distortions led to higher military spending under Ronald Reagan - by

exaggerating the Soviet menace (along with CIA director Bill Casey) as a “military behemoth with a robust economy rather than a decaying power with a shriveling GDP.”

Goodman added: “While serving as deputy director for intelligence from 1982 – 1986, Gates wrote the manual for manipulating and centralizing the intelligence process to get the desired intelligence product.” He promoted pliable CIA careerists to top positions while sidelining or retiring more independent ones. In 1991 under GHW Bush, his colleagues staged an unprecedented revolt for his role in destroying the agency’s commitment to objectivity.

At the time, Harold P. Ford, former National Intelligence Council vice-chairman, told the Senate Intelligence Committee: “Bob Gates has often depended too much on his own individual analytic judgments and has ignored or scorned the views of others whose assessments did not accord with his own. This would be okay if he were uniquely all-seeing. He has not been.”

Throughout his career, Gates was devious and opportunistic. He’ll bring those “qualities” to the new Obama administration.

He’s also a past president of Texas A & M University (a position gotten with considerable Bush family help), a member of several corporate boards, served on the Baker Iraq Study Group, and was George Bush’s first choice for Department of Homeland Security secretary but declined to remain at Texas A & M.

Retired Marine General James Jones

He’s the announced National Security Advisor designee to head the White House National Security Council (NSC). Since inception under Harry Truman, it’s to advise the president on national security and foreign policies as well as coordinate them among various government agencies (including the military branches, CIA, and other intelligence agencies).

Jones is a former NATO commander (from 2003 – 2006), Commandant of the Marine Corp (from 1999 – 2003), and 40 year veteran after retiring from the Corp in 2007. He’s now a US Chamber of Commerce executive and last November was named the administration’s special Middle East envoy with this endorsement: he’s the “person we need to take up this vital mission....an experienced leader who can address the regional security challenges comprehensively and at the highest levels....” His assignment was to draft a strategic security stabilization plan to complement (so-called) Israeli – Palestinian peace talks. He supports stationing US forces in Occupied Palestine under the pretext of NATO peacekeepers.

He also investigated the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, concluded that America “t(ook) its eye off the ball” in Afghanistan and is losing. That view supports Obama’s wanting 10,000 more combat troops there (30,000 according to some reports) and also plans “as our first priority” increased regional military operations – against Afghanistan and Pakistan with a more convenient than ever pretext in the wake of the Bombay (Mumbai) terror attacks in the part of the world he calls the greatest menace to US security.

Increasing numbers of US missile strikes are killing more Pakistani civilians. They’re inciting growing anger in the country, are escalating the Afghan war, and threaten to expand the war theater to a much larger area with potentially catastrophic consequences – a strategy

Obama and his incoming team apparently support.

In his latest article titled "Afghanistan, Another Untold Story," Michael Parenti has a different view. After reviewing the country's recent history, he says:

"US intervention in Afghanistan has proven not much different from US intervention in Cambodia, Angola, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Nicaragua, Grenada, Panama, and elsewhere. It had the same intent of preventing egalitarian social change, and the same effect of overthrowing an economically reformist government. In all these instances, the intervention brought retrograde elements into ascendance, left the economy in ruins, and pitilessly laid waste to many innocent lives."

"The war in Afghanistan, a battered impoverished country, continues to be portrayed in US official circles as a gallant crusade against terrorism. If it ever was that, it also has been a means to other things: destroying a leftist revolutionary social order, gaining profitable control of one of the last vast untapped reserves of the earth's dwindling fossil fuel supply, and planting US bases and US military power into still another region of the world....In the face of all this, Obama's call for 'change' rings hollow."

It also suggests a frightening prospect under his leadership – a continuation of Bush's (preventive war) Doctrine against countries we claim (true or false) practice "terrorism," harbor "terrorist" elements, or aid "terrorist" groups. In other words, an agenda that needs enemies, invents them strategically, and intends to wage permanent aggressive wars to expand US imperialism globally and especially over resource-rich parts of the world like Eurasia.

Eric Holder

As Attorney General designee, he's another very troublesome choice because of his hard line law-and-order reputation. He's Obama's senior legal advisor, a former District of Columbia Superior Court judge, and Deputy Attorney General under Bill Clinton.

As senior Democrat Party legal advisor during the Bush administration, he was actively involved in his party's complicity in enacting repressive police state laws.

In 1998, he issued a statement known as the "Holder memo" in which he supported government intervention into policing Internet free speech. It stated:

"Because of the nature of the Internet and availability of agents trained in conducting criminal investigations in cyberspace, investigation and prosecution of Internet obscenity is particularly suitable to federal resources."

In a 1998 letter to Morality In Media (an extremist religious right front group against pornography), he said: "I appreciated having the opportunity to meet with you recently to discuss the prosecution of obscenity cases." Holder supported multi-jurisdictional prosecutions of Internet web sites and businesses on such charges, even in cases of First Amendment-protected material.

Some claim his strategy wasn't to win, but to burden defendants with mounting legal costs, exhaust them through repeated litigation, and perhaps drive them into bankruptcy. It's a tactic very similar to so-called SLAPP (strategic lawsuit against public participation) lawsuits that are used to intimidate and silence critics.

Holder was also involved in Bill Clinton's indefensible last day in office Mark Rich pardon, the billionaire fugitive commodities trader. In 1983, Rich and his partner were indicted on 65 counts of defrauding the IRS, mail fraud, tax evasion, racketeering, defrauding the Treasury and trading with the enemy. Holder was deputy attorney general at the time.

As US attorney for the District of Columbia, he also pushed for stiffer marijuana penalties, and according to one report, advocated "minimum sentences of 18 months for first-time convicted drug dealers, 36 months for second offenses, and 72 months for each subsequent conviction." He also wanted to "make the penalty for distribution and possession with intent to distribute marijuana a felony, punishable with up to a five-year sentence." The DC Council enacted Holder's recommendation into law in 2000. His hard line stance against non-violent drug offenders runs counter to Obama's softer position, apparently about to harden.

Holder also played a lead role in the 2005 Patriot Act reauthorization, supported at the time by Obama. In addition, after his Clinton administration service, he was a partner in the Covington & Burling law and lobbying firm at which he defended Chiquita Brands International executives on charges of aiding terrorism by financing and arming Colombian (AUC) death squads. In spite of overwhelming evidence and the company's own admission, he got it off with a fine of around half of one percent of its annual revenue.

Holder also believes that accused "terrorists" have no Geneva Convention rights. In a January 2002 CNN interview he said:

"One of the things we clearly want to do with these prisoners is to have an ability to interrogate them and find out what their future plans might be, where other cells are located; under the Geneva Convention you are really limited in the amount of information that you can elicit from people."

"It seems to me that given the way in which they have conducted themselves, however, that they are not, in fact, people entitled to the protection of the Geneva Convention. They are not prisoners of war."

Holder left unaddressed the question of torture, guilt or innocence. The fact that they were captured and imprisoned is good enough for him.

As the nation's top law enforcement official, he'll assure more of the same criminal abuses under George Bush. He's no civil libertarian or what people should expect from the nation's top law enforcement officer. He represents business as usual, and a sign of continued dark times ahead.

Keeping FBI Director Robert Mueller as his chief law enforcement deputy (even though his term runs until 2011) is an even stronger signal. Mueller enforced the worst of "war on terrorism" policies, including witch-hunt prosecutions, illegal spying, and targeting political dissent.

The possible appointment of former George Tenet aide John Brennan as new CIA chief is also disturbing although reportedly he's out of the running. He heads Obama's intelligence transition team, supported warrantless wiretapping, extraordinary rendition, and was involved in politicizing intelligence alleging Saddam's WMDs in the run-up to the Iraq war.

Possible CIA Directors

On December 2, The New York Times reported that “Obama Faces a Delicate Task” in choosing his CIA chief – “one of the more treacherous patches of his transition to the White House” given the agency’s disturbing involvement in extraordinary renditions, torture, and other illegal practices under Bush.

Even so, “some senior Democratic lawmakers who are vehement critics of the Bush administration’s interrogation policies seemed reluctant in recent interviews to commit the new administration to following the Army Field Manual in all cases.”

Diane Feinstein will become Senate Intelligence Committee chairperson in January. She says extreme cases and potential terrorist threats call for flexibility, so her message is clear even though in a subsequent statement she softened it. Repressive interrogations, including torture, will likely continue under Obama even if Guantanamo is closed and even though they’re illegal under US and international law.

During the campaign, Obama aides said he’d let CIA keep holding prisoners in overseas jails but that International Committee of the Red Cross representatives should be given access to them. It matters little because, when allowed, their tours are carefully orchestrated to conceal repressive practices and no contact with prisoners most aggrieved by them.

The Army Field Manual (No. 27-10) is explicit on the rule of law. It incorporates the Nuremberg Principles prohibiting crimes against humanity, and in paragraph 498 states that any person, military or civilian, who commits a crime under international law bears responsibility and may be punished. In addition, paragraph 499 defines a “war crime.” Paragraph 500 refers to conspiracy, attempts to commit it and complicity with respect to international crimes. Paragraph 509 denies the defense of superior orders in the commission of a crime; and paragraph 510 denies the defense of an “act of state.”

Most members of Congress from both parties have been complicit with the administration in egregiously violating both US and international laws. All signs point to little, if any, change under the incoming Obama administration.

The Times reports that Obama will replace CIA director Michael Hayden. Possible candidates include:

- deputy director (since 2004) Stephen Kappes, a 27-year CIA veteran;
- former Indiana congressman and member of the 9/11 commission Tim Roemer; he’s now president of the Center for National Policy, a Washington-based national security think tank;
- Nebraska Senator Chuck Hagel who’s retiring from the Senate in January; he’s also a former conservative talk-show host and is (or was during his runs for the Senate) part owner, chairman, and CEO of the Election Systems & Software (ES&S) electronic voting machine company; it installed, programmed and operated the equipment used by most voters for the elections in which he ran; he won a second term in 1982 with 83% of the vote – the largest ever political victory in the state; some critics called it a dress rehearsal for Bush’s 2004 electoral theft and various state ones favoring Republican candidates; and
- Jack Devine, a 32-year CIA veteran, now retired, and former head of clandestine service; he describes himself as “a covert action person (who believes) we should be out there pushing US policy wherever we can, covertly and overtly.”

Admiral Dennis Blair

Reports are that retired Admiral Dennis Blair is top choice to be Director of National Intelligence (DNI). The office was established by the 2004 Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act and was formed in April 2005. It's the president's principal national security intelligence advisor; heads the nation's 16 intelligence agencies; and oversees and directs the National Intelligence Program.

Now retired, Blair is a 34 year Navy veteran and currently holds the (former Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman) John Shalikashvili Chair in National Security Studies at The National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR). Also the General of the Army Omar Bradley Chair of Strategic Leadership at Dickenson College and the US Army War College. He's the immediate past president of the Institute for Defense Analyses, a US government Washington, DC think tank that calls itself "a non-profit corporation that administers three federally funded (R & D) centers to assist the (government) in national security issues."

Blair was also an Oxford classmate of Bill Clinton and a Naval Academy classmate of Senator Jim Webb. If appointed, he'll bring more militarist credentials to Obama's war cabinet. In his various command assignments during the Bush administration, he was a point man in the "war on terrorism." He'll continue that role as the nation's intelligence chief.

An obstacle in his way was in a Pentagon inspector general finding regarding DOD conflict-of-interest standards. Earlier he was involved with a study of a major military contract for the F-22 fighter while a board member of the company that makes it, Lockheed Martin. It occurred while Blair was president of the Institute for Defense Analyses. Whether this will derail him is an open question, but it highlights the pervasive Washington revolving-door and overall corrupted culture.

Janet Napolitano

According to Michael Lacey of LA Weekly News, the current Arizona governor and designee for Homeland Security secretary is a troublesome choice. He cites her sorrowful Arizona service "consorting with anti-immigrant enforcers, indulging rank opportunism, and adhering to failed policies (that make for) an unlikely recipe for change we can believe in. And yet this very cocktail of mediocrity" made her Obama's choice for DHS chief or what this writer calls the nation's Gestapo.

As Arizona governor, Napolitano defended her states border with a "pitchfork. Her multi-pronged strategy: embrace the nation's most regressive legislation; empower a notorious sheriff using cynical political calculations; (and) employ boots on the ground" - shock troop enforcers against defenseless Latino immigrants forced north because of destructive NAFTA policies.

Lacey goes on to describe Napolitano's "bungled billions," hiring companies embedded with former state agency employees and cronies, ducking hard choices, using accounting gimmicks in state budgets, and various other practices amounting to "corruption, greed, and the cupidity of boondoggle bookkeeping in hard times." She also signed legislation criminalizing the need to work and support one's family and created a state atmosphere reminiscent of Prohibition - today against Latino immigrants driven north to find work. Now she'll do for America what she's doing to Arizona.

Susan Rice

She'll be Obama's nominee for UN ambassador. Earlier under Bill Clinton, she was on the National Security Council and served as Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs. Some call her progressive but recommending the unilateral use of military force against any country violates the Charter of the organization where she'll work. In 2006, she recommended it against Sudan in stating:

"History demonstrates that there is one language Khartoum understands: the credible threat or use of force....After swift diplomatic consultations, the United States should press for a UN resolution that issues Sudan an ultimatum: accept unconditional deployment of the UN force within one week or face military consequences."

Chapter VII of the UN Charter authorizes only the Security Council to "determine the existence of any threat to the peace, or act of aggression (and, if necessary, take military or other actions to) restore international peace and stability." It permits a nation to use force only under two conditions: when authorized by the Security Council or under Article 51 allowing the "right of individual or collective self-defense if an armed attack occurs against a Member....until the Security Council has taken measures to maintain international peace and security."

Calling for unilateral force against another state for any reason is illegal and criminal. Susan Rice did it, yet will serve as America's UN ambassador as her reward.

Obama continues to round out his team, and each appointment mirrors the others. On his watch, it'll be business as usual, but what else would we expect.

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