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The New Obama Administration: A Lot of "More of the Same"

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"Obviously he [Rahm Emanuel] will influence the president to be pro-Israel, why wouldn't he be? What is he, an Arab? He's not going to clean the floors of the White House." Binyamin Emanuel (father of President Obama's Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel)

"I don't want to just end the [Iraq] war, ...I want to end the mindset that got us into war." Candidate Sen. Barack Obama (January 31, 2008)

"What Washington is really telling you is that you should keep doing the same old things over and over and over again and somehow expect a different outcome. And that's the definition of madness, doing the same thing over and over again and expecting something different**."** Candidate Sen. Barack Obama (December 27, 2007, to a crowd in Carroll, Iowa)

"Plus ça change, plus c'est pareil!" ["The more things change, the more they remain the same!"] Old French dictum

Democratic presidential candidate **Barack Obama** ran a successful campaign on an anti-Iraq war, anti-Washington establishment and pro-change platform. With the assistance of a rapidly deteriorating economic situation, he prevailed in obtaining a clear governing mandate. Most Americans have no other choice than to want him to succeed in delivering on his promises. But the issuance of vague political promises and the hard reality of governing while relying on an efficient decision-making process, are two different things.

President-elect Obama has so far concentrated on not repeating former president Jimmy Carter's mistakes in his difficult relations with Congress, and he has surrounded himself with people who are directly connected with the Democratic congressional majority. However, in so doing, he has given the impression that he has enthusiastically joined the Washington political establishment that he so vehemently decried only a short while ago. The real question is whether he has brought Washington insiders into his own political tent, or whether he has simply joined the same corrupt Washington establishment that he himself decried. Only the future will tell for sure.

It is indeed understandable that a young and relatively inexperienced President-elect Barack Obama would feel obliged to surround himself with people who know how to steer Congress, who have close ties to Wall Street and the media, or who have assisted him closely during his political ascension. After all, the efficiency of a new president depends very much on

having Congress, especially members of his own party, solidly on his side, if he wants to accomplish anything important.

That is probably why he chose an old run-of-the-mill senator in the person of Sen. Joe Biden as his vice-presidential running mate in the first place. It was undoubtedly also the main factor in his selection of Illinois Rep. Rahm Emanuel as his Chief of Staff. These two political workhorses will facilitate the necessary collaboration between the White House and Congress.

I would therefore not place too big an emphasis on the personae of these two well-connected individuals, i.e. their close association with the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee **AIPAC** considering their strategic role with Congress.

Also, the need to move quickly in forming a new administration, unless this has been planned otherwise long in advance, makes it a necessity to call on people who have experience and competence in government affairs. And, for a new democratic administration, the reservoir of experienced public servants can be found in the 1992-2000 **Clinton administration**. This may explain why President-elect Obama's transition team is so heavily staffed with individuals who served in the former Clinton administration. Similarly, such people can be expected to recommend former acquaintances as candidates for important government positions.

Similarly, after the closely fought election, there is a practical need to reward the important constituencies that were the backbone of the winning coalition with hard work and money. Some high-profile nominations can be expected to fall in that category. This is to be expected.

For instance, the symbolic gesture of naming the first black Attorney general, the former No. 2 Justice Department official in the Clinton administration, **Eric Holder,** is a case in point. The expected nomination of Washington insider Sen. **Hillary Clinton** as Secretary of State falls in the same category, i.e. the need to unite the Democratic Party behind the new administration. Ditto for the nomination of New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson as Commerce secretary, a former U.N. ambassador and Energy secretary under President Bill Clinton.

The enlarged Obama economic team is technically competent and is designed to inspire confidence and to create a feeling of active involvement, with a hands-on approach. This is important to understand the nomination of a high profile financier as Treasury Secretary, in the person of New York Federal Reserve Bank CEO **Timothy Geithner**. As a question of routine, the Treasury Secretary-to-be should be asked whether he was in favor of letting the investment bank Lehman Brothers fail in mid-September, and why Citigroup, the second largest Wall Street megabank, is still paying dividends to its shareholders after it has been saved from bankruptcy with hundreds of billions of dollars of public money? Indeed, let's keep in mind that Timothy Geithner, as president of the New York Fed, was directly involved in many recent generous bailouts to Wall Street banks and insurance companies, including Bear Stearns, Merrill Lynch, Citigroup and American International Group. — He is not new at the job and he surely does not represent a break with the past.

Geithner was under secretary for international affairs during the Clinton administration under former Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin (later a director of Citigroup in 1999 and its chairman in 2007) and under Lawrence Summers, who succeeded Rubin as Treasury chief.

(Summers is to lead the National Economic Council in the Obama administration.)

The arrival of legendary inflation-fighter Paul Volcker among Obama's economic advisers, however, is an indication that the new administration intends to be a problem-solving administration. This would seem to be required in order to repair the structural damage done to the U.S. economy over the last eight years. Nevertheless, a question lingers on: Will the ongoing mammoth bailout of Wall Street banks, with insufficient pro quo pro returns and protections for U.S. taxpayers, continue unabated under the Obama administration? If yes, these huge financial bailouts may turn out to be the largest transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich in the history of the world.

Economically, however, it can be said that the coming Obama administration finds itself in a somewhat enviable position. Indeed, if there were to be an **economic depression** in the coming years, such a depression would still be called the "George W. Bush depression", just as the last one was known as the **"Herbert Hoover depression".** The current economic and financial ordeals are justly part of the **Bush administration's dismal legacy**.

However, the same benefit of the doubt can hardly be extended when it comes to rewarding Sen. **Joe Lieberman** for siding against his own party, and for supporting the Republican Presidential Ticket (that he nearly joined) in 2008, and for filling other important cabinet posts. Let us remember that, in 2006, Sen. Lieberman was openly rejected by Democratic voters in a Connecticut primary, but ran as an independent candidate against the official Democratic anti-Iraq war candidate, **Ned Lamont**, in his own state of Connecticut. Could any other American politician, other than this fanatically pro-Iraq war and pro-AIPAC senator, have received the same generous accolade after being rejected by Democratic voters and after switching party lines twice, in both 2006 and 2008 elections?

Why then was Sen. Joe **Lieberman** allowed to keep his chairmanship of the all-important Senate Homeland Security Committee, with the implicit backing of **President-elect Barack Obama,** despite his high profile support for GOP presidential nominee John McCain during the 2008 presidential campaign? (N.B.: For the record, Sen. Barack Obama initially supported Lieberman over Lamont in 2006.) It is fair to say that if Sen. John McCain had won on November 4, Joe Lieberman would have gotten a high cabinet position in the new McCain Republican administration. Now that Lieberman is back in his powerful position in the Democratic-run Congress, it is also fair to say that this politician cannot lose, whatever he does. For him, at least, the Democrats and the Republicans are just two wings of a single large Establishment Party, in Washington D.C., between which some politicians are free to move at will.

What's going on over there? Does the desire to have a filibuster-proof threshold of sixty Democratic senators—and the good old-buddy system—explain and justify everything? Obviously, people are entitled at least to an explanation, lest rumors start to circulate that President Obama is *de facto* the stooge of powerful special money interests. The worst thing that could happen to a politician is to give the impression that he or she is in the pockets of rich special interests. This could be devastating to his credibility, not only domestically but also internationally.

Indeed, after the above revealing incident and after paying his political debts to supporting constituencies, things got even worse with some other nominations to the Obama cabinet, such as the choice of the crucial Defense secretary. Indeed, president-elect Obama—his promise of ending the Iraq war and changing the mindset in Washington that led to it, and

the echo of his slogan *"Change You Can Believe In"* still ringing in our ears—is said to have decided to leave the Pentagon in the hands of **Robert Gates**, a Bush appointee who does not believe in ending the Iraq war, who believes in the unlawful concept of preventive war and who says that America has the right to "act violently and alone" in the world! Many may see in this nomination a kind of betrayal of his campaign rhetoric and an overt attempt on Obama's part to please the **industrial-military complex**.

If the President-elect had wanted to bring Republicans into his administration, while marking a break with the recent past, he could have called on Sen. **Chuck Hagel** (R-NE), a decorated war veteran, to act as Secretary of Defense. —He did not. Alternatively, President-elect Obama could have asked Sen. Jim Webb (D-VA), a former Secretary of the Navy and a critic of Bush's Iraq war, to run the Pentagon. He did not, preferring a member of Bush's team, and this reveals more than anything else Obama's fundamental priority, i.e. to make himself acceptable to the Washington establishment.

This comes in tandem with the expected nomination of pro-war "stay the course" retired Marine Gen. **Jim Jones** as national security adviser, even though the general initially resisted Bush's rush to war with Iraq. The message here could be that, "as far as U.S. foreign policy is concerned, with Obama, it's business as usual." Is this so? When a politician aims at pleasing everybody, he usually ends up pleasing nobody.

So far, even though he ran on an anti-Iraq war platform, President-elect Obama has not filled any important government position with individuals who are known to have opposed the war. Therefore, the question must be asked: Was he really sincere when he pretended to be opposed to Bush's war, or was he simply playing politics?

In any case, too many decisions of the Lieberman-Gates-Jones variety, and people will start to think that a few faces may change in Washington D.C., but things really stay the same, no matter the grandiose promises of "change". Indeed, people are not far from having the impression that President-elect Obama has quickly "gone native", even before taking office, and that he has been embraced by the more or less corrupt Washington and Wall Street establishments. —He seems to want to fit in. If true, President Obama will make speeches, give press conferences and reign, but he won't govern.

Indeed, was the November 4 U.S. presidential election anything more than a narrow choice between a third term Bush administration and a third term Clinton administration, …or a mixture of the two?

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