

White House And Pentagon: Change, Continuity And Escalation

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Few of his contemporaries and far fewer since knew of the nineteenth century French journalist and novelist Alphonse Karr, but most everyone is familiar with some variant of his quip plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose: The more it changes the more it's the same thing.

Anyone driving the streets of major American cities over the past year or more has seen a bumper sticker that simply read 01-20-2009.

The numbers indicated the date that George W. Bush would leave the White House.

Until last November no one knew who his replacement would be or even with which of the two major political parties he or she would be affiliated; it was enough to anticipate Bush's departure as an end in itself.

Judging by other bumper stickers that often accompanied this one on a given vehicle, it was assumed that those who so adorned the back of it looked forward to the end of eight years of an aggressive foreign policy, one marked by the war in Iraq and, for anyone who had paid attention to other matters, that in Afghanistan and assorted counterinsurgency and proxy wars such as those in Yemen, Somalia and the Philippines.

But for most of those sporting the 01-20-2009 sticker and desiring a change in US foreign policy the sentiment was reducible to withdrawing American troops from Iraq and less so concern for the people of the nation that had been invaded, devastated and occupied.

It seems to have been assumed if rarely opening acknowledged that the eight years of the Bush administration had been an egregious anomaly, an uncharacteristic and unprecedented straying from the path of his predecessor's and indeed all former presidencies.

That with Bush's leaving the Oval Office the traditional US practice of diplomacy as first and war as last resort would be resumed.

No matter that said diplomacy more often than not entailed heavy-handed diktat and demarches, embargoes, sanctions, trade restrictions, the freezing of a nation's and its leaders' financial assets, travel bans, financing of propaganda messages flooding a targeted country, assistance in running opposition election campaigns and attempts to falsify their results, and even covert operations like supporting armed uprisings and attacks on civilian targets – at which alleged diplomacy the Bush administration also proved adept. At least it was something short of war.

Short of war for the United States, that is.

In the preceding presidential election year, 2004, another popular bumper sticker was seen on American cars, trucks, vans, sports utility and recreational vehicles, Jeeps and hummers: When Clinton lied no one died.

The allusion was to the Monica Lewinsky affair, but when Clinton lied about issues other than extramarital dalliances hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians died in Iraq, Somalia, Sudan, Afghanistan, Yugoslavia and Colombia inter alia, so the real message was that when Clinton lied no Americans died.

More precisely, no American combat troops died.

When Bush lied thousands of American servicemen died. In Iraq.

The subtext of bumper stickers is best left to social psychologists and cultural semioticians, but what is bracketed out of their meaning is frequently as important as what appears on them.

Nevertheless a sentiment, resilient if not conscious, prevailed that with the replacement of one administration by another in the world's most expensive election – \$2 billion dollars was spent for the November 2008 polls, half of that on the presidential campaigns – that somehow there would emerge a dramatic if not instantaneous shift in US foreign policy and Americans could again hold their heads up high and be liked by others around the world.

Nations like individuals can be vain and even narcissistic.

And the real human cost of the Iraq war to US servicemen and their families cannot be lightly dismissed.

Not that anything said by any of the major presidential contenders provided specific plans for a reduction in the size of the US military budget or the abandonment of major weapons programs, much less a willingness to recognize that their nation, as important as it is in many respects, is in the end a nation among 191 others and not the lighthouse, beacon, guide, model, farseeing older brother or stern taskmaster for all the others.

The switch from one zoological totemic image to another – the Democratic donkey succeeding the Republican elephant – was not accompanied by any analogous change in fundamental worldview. If anything there may have been a revival and reinforcement of it.

There was discussion of a phased withdrawal of US troops from Iraq – the major military engagement of the time – but those who advocated it simultaneously urged an increase in troops to Afghanistan.

On all other issues concerning the use of US military might – for example the so-called war on terror, the expansion of NATO to and around Russia's borders, the arming and training of proxy armies for regional wars like those of Georgia in the South Caucasus and Ethiopia in the Horn of Africa, and the provision of Israel with military and diplomatic support for armed attacks like those against Lebanon and Gaza – the main candidates of both the Democratic and Republican parties maintained a staunch unanimity. In fact their positions were and are identical.

When tactical differences existed they were in the manner of a seesaw; where one side went down the other went up.

In the 2004 contest between then incumbent George Bush and challenger John Kerry the second regularly said of the war in Iraq – which he had voted to authorize in the US Senate in 2002 – that it was “the wrong war at the wrong time.”

During that year he had also called for a quintupling of US troops in Afghanistan from the 12,000 at the time to 60,000. The precise figure was used at the same time by former vice-president Al Gore (who was then also considering another presidential run) and future presidential candidate and now secretary of state Hillary Clinton.

A curious mind, one unblinded by partisan party spirit, would have asked how all three had arrived at exactly the same number.

Afghanistan was the right war at the right time. Kerry’s accusation that the Bush-Cheney administration had “taken its eye off Afghanistan” would be echoed four years later by both Barrack Obama and Hillary Clinton.

No one in either major party would mention that there would have been no war in Afghanistan, or presumably the events of September 11, 2001 that served as its justification, without the fully bi-partisan US orchestration of the 1978-1992 mujahedin war in and against that nation, one that included the active participation of an estimated 10,000 “Afghan Arabs,” among them Osama bin Laden.

Earlier this week Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the main recipient of billions of dollars of the CIA’s Operation Cyclone aid to the Afghan mujahedin and someone then president Ronald Reagan once compared to America’s founding fathers, boasted that his forces had killed four US soldiers in the Nangarhar province of Afghanistan.

A year ago last December one of the most successful American films during that Christmas season was Charley Wilson’s War which depicted – celebrated – the role of the US in arming Hekmatyar and his allies with Stinger missiles and other weaponry to prolong the Afghan war until America’s clients entered the capital of Kabul in 1992 and laid waste broad swathes of it in internecine fighting.

Tens of millions of Americans flocked to movie theaters to watch the film and applaud its “flawed but admirable” hero and many more approvingly viewed it on DVD at home. Perhaps as many as 100,000,000 Americans whooped, whistled and clapped their hands with delight as young Russian conscripts, their bodies on fire, were blown out of helicopters by US missiles.

Now the moral equivalents of the founding fathers of the United States are slaying the latter’s descendants in South Asia.

The world’s first uncontested superpower doesn’t have to account for its actions to anyone, even its own people.

In the words of the first President Bush after his government shot down an Iranian civilian airliner in 1988, killing all 290 persons on board, “I’ll never apologize for the United States of America. Ever, I don’t care what the facts are.”

During last year's presidential campaign and most notably during the debates of the general election, Barrack Obama repeatedly vowed that "If we have actionable intelligence about high-level al Qaeda targets in Pakistan's border region, we must act if Pakistan will not or cannot."

Rarely (never before to this writer's recollection) has a candidate for the post of US president with a serious chance of winning, and a standing Senator moreover, so brazenly proclaimed the intent of launching deadly military attacks inside a nation that the US was not at war with, that is in fact a major half-century-long American ally and military client. And rarely has a campaign pledge been delivered on so promptly and resolutely.

Again leaving aside the origins of al-Qaeda in US-assisted training camps in Pakistan in the 1980s, the best that one could say about the above-quoted statement is a desideratum written at the time by an American political journalist: One hopes it was only another false campaign promise.

It wasn't. Between the election of November 4 and the changing of the guard on January 20 of this year the incumbent Bush government acted on Obama's words and launched a series of missile attacks on and suspected commando raids in Pakistan's tribal regions with the outgoing president perhaps wishing to steal some of the incoming's thunder.

On only his fourth day in office Obama delivered on his promise and five missiles were launched into North and South Waziristan, killing 14 people, suspected armed militia and possibly others.

The attacks have continued uninterruptedly with over 30 killed in missile strikes in South Waziristan on February 14; 30 in the Kurram Agency on February 16; seven more on March 1 in South Waziristan; 24 on March 12 in the Kurram Agency; and most recently at least five killed on March 16 in the North-West Frontier Province.

The US's preceding post-Cold War wars – Operation Desert Storm in 1991, Operation Allied Force in 1999, Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001, Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003 – were waged against basically defenseless nations with populations under 30 million.

Pakistan has 173,000,000 citizens, nuclear weapons and the bombers and missiles to deliver them.

In the give and take of US foreign policy, the Democratic Party handed the Korean and Vietnam wars over to the Republicans and the Republicans have now returned the favor by bequeathing the Iraq and Afghanistan wars to the Democrats.

Republican President Dwight Eisenhower ended the US military campaign on the Korean peninsula (though bases and troops remain there fifty six years later).

His vice-president Richard Nixon while later president himself inherited the Vietnam war from Democrat Lyndon Johnson and escalated the bombing of North Vietnam and expanded the war into Cambodia.

The current Obama administration may commence partial military disengagement from Iraq but has already continued, as detailed above, to extend the war into neighboring Pakistan.

The New York Times of two days ago wrote of plans by Obama and his national security

advisers to further deepen military attacks inside Pakistan, reaching beyond the tribal belt to the environs of the capital of Baluchistan, Quetta.

Pakistani Baluchistan borders with Baluch-inhabited southeastern Iran and missile attacks and commando raids on the Pakistani side could spill over to and drag in Iran. Perhaps that's Washington's intention.

The White House has also announced that it is going to rush 17,000 more troops to Afghanistan in addition to the 38,000 already there. Altogether an addition of 30,000 new troops is planned.

This would bring total US troops in Afghanistan to 55,000 immediately and 68,000 later in the year. That is, on either side of the 60,000-troop number advocated by leading Democratic elected officials five years ago.

On March 9 the second-in-command of American forces in Iraq, Lt. Gen. Lloyd Austin, stated that only 12,000 American troops would be withdrawn from Iraq this year.

If his estimate proves to be correct and if as many as 30,000 more US troops are deployed to Afghanistan, the net change in war zone deployments for 2009 would be 18,000 more than in the preceding year.

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Indications that the current administration would be anything other than a seamless continuation of its predecessor in the foreign and military policy spheres should have been dispelled when Joseph Biden was selected (or appointed) Obama's vice-presidential running mate last August.

In his 35 years in the US Senate Biden has never opposed and has instead avidly supported every American war of aggression including the attacks on Grenada in 1983, Panama in 1989, Iraq in 1991, Yugoslavia in 1999 and Afghanistan in 2001.

He voted for the Iraq War Resolution (Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution) in the Senate in October of 2002.

Immediately before his selection as Obama's running mate Biden visited the Georgian capital of Tbilisi only days after the nation's American-trained, -armed and -advised invading army was driven out of South Ossetia by Russian forces.

How close the world was to a direct confrontation between its two major nuclear powers will be revealed by historians, but Biden further inflamed still fresh Russian fears and resentment (several hundred Russian soldiers had been killed and wounded in five days by a US proxy army) by giving fulsome assurances to the US client regime in Georgia of its unstinting support and pledging \$1 billion in post-war aid.

As a reward for this provocative mission, less than a week later he was chosen as Obama's vice-presidential pick and the future second-in-command and potential power behind the throne in the White House.

Two days after his election victory Barack Obama named Rahm Emanuel as his presidential chief of staff.

Emanuel is a hawk who supported the wars against Afghanistan and Iraq and during the first

Gulf War while half a million of his fellow citizens were sent to Saudi Arabia for the impending war with Iraq served with the Israeli Defense Forces.

After this display of patriotic zeal he was awarded the posts of Assistant to the President for Political Affairs and Senior Adviser to the President for Policy and Strategy in the Clinton administration from 1993 onward and, after making \$16 million in three years as an investment banker, essentially had a congressional seat (that of now discredited former Illinois governor Rod Blagojevich) conferred on him in the 2002 election.

Next Obama announced that he was retaining Bush's appointee as Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, former CIA director with a doctorate degree in Sovietology and Russian studies from Georgetown University, and was naming former United States Marine Corps four-star general and Bush administration appointed NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe and commander of United States European Command James Jones as his National Security Adviser.

It was under Jones' double tenure at the US European Command and NATO that the Pentagon's first new regional command in over half a century, African Command (AFRICOM), was devised and nurtured.

The Obama foreign policy triad was rounded out with the nomination and subsequent appointment of Hillary Clinton as secretary of state.

Clinton has never been timid in touting her foreign policy credentials or appropriating credit for achievements, real and imagined, both during her six-year stint in the US Senate from 2003-2008 and as the nation's first lady from 1993-2001.

In the second capacity she has repeatedly boasted of partnering with her husband in formulating and implementing his administration's foreign policy, one which was marked by the bombing of more unoffending nations than any other presidency before and since. Victims included Iraq, Somalia, the Bosnian Serb Republic, Afghanistan, Sudan and Yugoslavia as well as cruise missiles landing in Pakistan in 1998 and on the outskirts of the Bulgarian capital of Sofia in 2001. As embassies are the extension of a nation's sovereignty abroad, Clinton, who was reported to have personally reviewed all bombing targets during NATO's 1999 war against Yugoslavia, was also responsible for the devastating triangulated cruise missile attack on the Chinese embassy in Belgrade that killed three and wounded 20 of the nation's citizens.

Chicago Tribune columnist Steve Chapman wrote of Clinton's second-term secretary of state Madeleine Albright that for her foreign policy was a quiz where the answer was always bombs.

The Obama White House's choice for Director of National Intelligence was retired four-star Navy admiral Dennis Blair, who is a former associate CIA director for military support with a doctorate degree in Russian studies from Oxford University, which he attended at the same time as Bill Clinton and his roommate Strobe Talbott, another Russia hand who currently heads up the Brookings Institution.

After stepping down from his post in the Navy, Blair and James Jones served together on the Project for National Security Reform which is in the words of its website "carrying out one of the most comprehensive studies of the U.S. national security system in American history."

Only yesterday Obama named retired US Air Force major general J. Scott Gration as his envoy to Sudan. Under the Bush administration Gration served as Assistant Deputy Undersecretary of the Air Force for International Affairs and later as the Director of the Plans and Policy Directorate of United States European Command.

(His new role will complement that of the abrasive and insufferable Richard Holbrooke as special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan where he is overseeing the expansion of the US's South Asian, and NATO's first ground and first Asian, war.)

Gration's history as an Air Force pilot includes 1,000 hours of combat and combat support time in 274 combat missions over Iraq.

For years Hillary Clinton has been demanding the creation of an Iraq-type no-fly zone over the Darfur region of Western Sudan – under NATO command – and Gration seems just the person to put the plan into effect.

What such an initiative might result in is indicated by recalling that Clinton's spouse bombed Iraq regularly for all eight years of his tenure and once, according to the Iraqi government at the time, even damaged the tomb of St. Matthew the Apostle near Mosul.

Regarding James Jones, Dennis Blair and now J. Scott Gration and their new roles, the appointments of former EUCOM and NATO chief commander Alexander Haig as the Reagan administration's first secretary of state and former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell to the same position in the first George W. Bush White House rightly raised concerns about the militarization of US foreign policy.

Now three former top career military officers – a Marine general, an Air Force general and a Navy admiral – are playing crucial roles in the new administration's policies.

Just as the Obama administration insisted on retaining Bush appointee Robert Gates as Secretary of Defense, so Gates has announced that he will keep Navy Admiral Mike Mullen on as chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Two weeks ago Mullen offered to assist counterinsurgency war efforts in Mexico; in the words of a Reuters account of his statement "The US military is ready to help Mexico in its deadly war against drug cartels with some of the same counter-insurgency tactics used against militant networks in Iraq and Afghanistan."

In Mullen's own words "They [Mexican authorities] need intelligence support, capabilities and tactics that have evolved for us in our fight against networks in the terrorist world. There are an awful lot of similarities."

Mullen also drew a parallel between the nearly nine-year-old Plan Colombia program initiated by Bill Clinton and Madeleine Albright – supposedly a drug eradication initiative but in fact a ruthless death squad-linked counterinsurgency war – and his plans for Mexico. The Bush administration had previously deployed Colombian military and security personnel to Afghanistan in an earlier effort to replicate Plan Colombia's putative success in Asia.

As though Pakistan with a population of 172,000,000 and Mexico with 110,000,000 were not enough for the Pentagon to contend with, North Korea and the world's most populous nation, China, have also been added to its list.

The US is currently conducting 12-day joint war games, Key Resolve and Foal Eagle, in South Korea with the involvement of 26,000 American troops, destroyers, the John C. Stennis nuclear aircraft carrier and a nuclear-powered attack submarine.

The destroyers are Aegis-class with not only Tomahawk cruise but also interceptor missiles.

Late last month the new director of the Pentagon's Missile Defense Agency, Gen. Patrick O'Reilly, announced that the US was prepared to shoot down what North Korea described as a planned satellite launch.

Also, two days ago Air Force Gen. Victor Renuart, head of the North American Aerospace Defense Command, boasted during a Congressional hearing of the US's ability to shoot down North Korean missiles and other launches.

On March 8 the US surveillance vessel The Impeccable approached a new Chinese submarine base in Yulin off the southern end of Hainan in the South China Sea.

Chinese vessels surrounded The Impeccable in what China considers its 200-mile exclusive economic zone (based on the Convention on the Law of the Sea which China has signed and the US hasn't).

According to a Time Magazine report shortly after the incident occurred, "The U.S. wants to know how well it can track Chinese submarines moving in and out of their new and growing base" and "Any intelligence gathered would be useful in a future showdown. Because U.S. aircraft carriers would play a vital role in any clash with China over Taiwan, being able to bottle up Chinese subs at their base — and measuring the range from their base within which U.S. technology could be used to hunt them before they escape into the open sea, where they would be much more difficult to detect...."

It was in the same area in 2001 that a US spy plane collided with a Chinese jet fighter resulting in the death of a Chinese pilot.

In late February Democratic Congressman John Murtha announced that the Obama administration would request a record \$537 billion in military expenditures for the next fiscal year, one that Murtha described as a base budget.

As roughly the same time it was revealed that the White House would seek an additional \$205.5 billion for combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

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Many have urged that the new US administration be given time to settle in before being criticized. As the preceding accounts demonstrate, a lot can be known about a new government even before it formally takes charge and a lot can occur in two months.

There are important and indisputable social, historical and even moral dimensions to the election of Barrack Obama as the president of the United States.

In the political sphere, particularly in the areas of general foreign relations and military policy, there has been nothing to celebrate.

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