

Editorial

Slump and War

The election of Barack Obama came as the culmination of a profound surge of optimism in the United States, and of hope against hope in large parts of the rest of the world. Widely detested, the Bush administration was the most unpopular in living memory.

Obama had fought an audacious campaign, calling in question not only the war in Iraq, but the train of events which had brought the United States into contempt all around the world. The American military, far from exercising full spectrum dominance, was arousing full spectrum detestation. Its symbols were Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, water boarding and extraordinary rendition.

As the American economy raced from recession to slump, Obama's campaign seemed to gather momentum. Earnest crowds of young people were seen on television singing the anthem of Woody Guthrie:

*'This land is your land, this land is my land,
from California to New York Island.'*

Would that it were so.

This land creaks with every conceivable injustice, with loss and despair, with cruelty, oppression and contempt, by no means all of which have been exported to the numerous theatres of war. If he were bent upon cleansing the Augean Stables, the labours of Obama would be Herculean indeed. And yet, the mobilisation of millions of formerly excluded voters, of the young, the blacks, the many minorities, must now be a moment of hope. They could indeed make light work of removing the accretion of filth from the Bush years and earlier. Will they be allowed to do so? Early signals from those with whom the President Elect is surrounding himself may promote doubt rather than hope. We continually hear the name Clinton. (Two for the price of one, only slightly shop-soiled.)

Certainly, for change to happen in the area of foreign policy, unambiguous leads would be needed from the administration. These may be difficult to secure, but in some areas the Obama team could secure advance quickly.

The abolition of Guantanamo, and the trial or release of its captives would be relatively simple to secure. For justice to be done, it would be necessary to give Guantanamo back to the Cubans, and put its jailors on

'Obama's choice of Chief of Staff, Rahm Emanuel, the House Democrat who received the most donations from the financial sector, sends an unmistakably reassuring message to Wall Street. When asked if Obama should be moving quickly to increase taxes on the wealthy, as promised, Emanuel pointedly didn't answer the question.'

Naomi Klein

trial for abuse and any other infractions they may have committed. But even short of that, serious progress would be easy to make.

It would be equally easy to outlaw torture in all its forms, although it might be more difficult to persuade people to believe that new decrees on this matter would be observed. We could see the end of extraordinary rendition. The British collaborators must surely be nervous.

Other areas are far more difficult. What will happen in relation to Palestine, for instance? President Carter called the siege of Gaza 'A crime, an atrocity, and an abomination'. But he was not invited to say anything at the Democrats' Convention, unlike another past President. His role was restricted to silently walking-on.

The old regime had pushed hard to secure sanctions against Iran, based on what now appear to be forged documents. The legacy of the Iraqi weapons of mass destruction is difficult to overcome in the United States. Now the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has gathered evidence that documents describing a secret Iranian nuclear weapons related research programme 'may have been fabricated'. The documents were gathered by US intelligence in 2004 from sources which have not yet been revealed. They mostly consist of electronic files allegedly stolen from a laptop computer, the property of an Iranian researcher. Much of the American push for United Nations sanctions against Iran is based on these documents. Now that the IAEA has evidence of possible fraud in this case, there has been a marked move towards distancing the Agency from these allegations.

The suspect laptop documents include what purport to be technical drawings to redesign the nose cone of the Iranian Shahab-3 ballistic missile, so that it can carry a nuclear warhead. It is also claimed that the documents show studies on the use of high explosive detonators for nuclear weapons, and blueprints of a shaft intended for nuclear testing. All these studies are now described by the IAEA as 'alleged studies'. The Americans claim that the information derives from Kimia Maadan, a company said by the Americans to have been engaged by the Iranian

Defence Ministry. But the Iranians say they worked for the civilian Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran. The IAEA have reported their satisfaction that the Kimia Maadan company had been created in May 2000 solely for the purpose of designing, procuring and installing ore processing equipment. This work could only be carried through when the nuclear agency furnished it with the technical drawings and reports which formed the basis of the contract.

'Information and explanations provided by Iran were supported by the documentation, the content of which is consistent with the information already available to the Agency', sources in the IAEA summed up. There have been other allegations about fraud in connection with this case, and the Central Intelligence Agency has declined to comment.

Forgeries have been rather popular with the American intelligence services. The forged documents from Niger which 'proved' that Niger was supplying uranium oxide to Iraq were a significant part of the White House's case for the Iraq war. Mohamed ElBaradei wrote to the White House and the National Security Council three months before the Americans launched their war on Iraq, warning them that the Niger documents were likely to be forgeries, and should not be used to stand up allegations about the Iraqi intention to obtain nuclear weapons. It was only when he received no response from the Bush administration that ElBaradei went public to expose the Niger forgeries.

Contentious though the previous allegations on Iraq had been, these allegations about Iran have not come at a propitious time for the outgoing American administration, because there are fairly strong reasons to suspect that the Russian and Chinese representatives on the Security Council may now prove more agnostic about such claims than they had been in previous years.

The chance of renewing the programme of UN sanctions, leave alone extending it, must have receded. Of course, we have no way of accurately predicting the likely responses of the new administration. Will it wish to reopen meaningful talks with the Iranians? Will it willingly pull back from confrontation and diplomatic pressures? Or will it try to defend the dubious practices of the previous administration, and the dubious intelligence upon which they were based? Various ambivalences have been reported concerning the views of the Bush Presidency on these matters. Will peace be made in Iran in order to deploy further afield? Are those forces to be committed to Afghanistan? Or, more likely, as we already warned¹, to Pakistan, an altogether more rational, if dangerous, target. Pakistan has Islamists a-plenty, nuclear weapons, a sufficiency of external

'Obama's first two crucial appointments represent a denial of the wishes of his supporters on the principal issues on which they voted. The vice-president-elect, Joe Biden, is a proud warmaker and Zionist. Rahm Emanuel, who is to be the all-important White House chief of staff, is ... an "Israel-first" Zionist who served in the Israeli army and opposes meaningful justice for the Palestinians.'

John Pilger

enemies, internal schisms and terrorist potential over and above that fostered by the Americans. Pakistan is the sixth most populous nation in the world, the second among Muslim states, and has a prime geostrategic position for would-be world dominators. Perhaps that is why so many of its people nurture suspicions about American goodwill.

The last time that we discussed the likelihood of an Obama presidency, we did warn about one advice stream that will certainly bring influence to bear on the President Elect. This was the eminent foreign policy adviser, Zbig Brzezinski, himself no slouch in the domination stakes. He has now published a debate with Brent Scowcroft,² who was also a national security advisor for Presidents George H. W. Bush and Gerald Ford. (Zbig Brzezinski had occupied that position for President Carter.) This debate, moderated by David Ignatius, shows both men in a relaxed mood, and emphasises their urbanity. But Scowcroft is markedly less hawkish than his Democrat interlocutor. Even so, Brzezinski tells us that if the Democrats win the elections, they will certainly slow down the process of installing missile interceptor systems in Poland and the Czech Republic. These systems are supposed to defend the Europeans, who have not asked for them, and they are supposed to render the Czechs, for example, safe from attack by Iranian missiles which don't yet exist, and may never do so.

As Brzezinski rightly tells us:

'I don't see the rush ... the system we want to deploy is non-existent, and the threat against which it is to be deployed is also non-existent.'

We should not forget that one of the reasons advanced by members of the outgoing American administration for hastily including Georgia in Nato was that this would give Nato the reach to enable bombers to strike Iran. What Iran has to do with a *North Atlantic Treaty* is yet to be explained. And what will be the attitude of the Obama presidency to the stand-off in the Caucasus is yet to be clarified. However, it is not very likely that other key Nato allies will hasten to conform to American pressures to enlarge

Nato to include either Georgia or Ukraine, even if the British do hasten to comply with every trans-Atlantic whim.

What will be the outcome of an Obama White House in respect of the present wars? There are high hopes of significant withdrawals of troops from Iraq. We must wait upon events, but, as we have seen, the talk is of redeploying some of the forces engaged in Iraq in Afghanistan, which is regarded as a 'good war' in contrast to the bad one in Iraq.

The BBC reported on the 14th November that:

'Up to 2,000 extra British troops are likely to be sent to Afghanistan next year. Ministers are considering sending reinforcements to Afghanistan to meet an expected request from Barack Obama.'

The Ministry of Defence in Britain has stated that no requests have been received from the United States for additional troops, and various British Generals and other officers have made public statements about the undesirability of committing further forces in that theatre. Afghan President Karzai visited Gordon Brown in mid-November however, and did appeal for an increase in the number of soldiers from Britain. Various British Ministers have, more or less tentatively, suggested that any surge in the forces on the ground in Afghanistan should be based upon the principle of 'burden sharing', which would imply that other Nato allies would send additional troops, where necessary changing their rules of engagement to allow them to undertake combat duties.

An Obama surge in Afghanistan does appear to be probable, although it is not known what might be its remit. Meantime, 8,000 British troops are deployed mainly in Helmand Province, where the action is very intense.

The British Secretary for Defence, John Hutton, has declared that these troops are defending very significant British interests, and are crucial to British national security. We are not sure which vital interests are at stake. Would it be vitally interesting to stay in Afghanistan in order to mitigate American belligerence in Pakistan? (Perhaps this might prevent unrest in

'All you had to do was look at that array of Clinton-era economic types and CEOs behind Obama at his first news conference to think: been there, done that. The full photo of his economic team that day offered a striking profile of pre-Bush era Washington and the Washington Consensus, and so a hint of the Democratic world the new president will walk into on January 20, 2009.'

Tom Engelhardt

Bradford?) Or, more likely, is it vitally interesting, in the immortal words of a former Ambassador to Washington, 'to get up the arse of the administration and stay there'?

In the absence of more persuasive arguments, the British people have been giving their answer to the claimed vitality of this mission. Sixty-eight per cent of those polled by the BBC, fifty-nine percent of these being men and seventy-five per cent being women, said that British troops should be withdrawn within twelve months. The Afghan Embassy's political affairs secretary said that this was unrealistic. We should not expect a force of 8,000 to 'just abandon the country'. The age group which was most strongly opposed to the war, unsurprisingly, consisted of eighteen to twenty-four year olds, three-quarters of whom said they wanted the troops pulled out. Opposition to the deployment was also very strong among older people.

The columnist Simon Jenkins was asked by the BBC to comment, and he recommended Government to take notice of the survey.

'It has never received a popular mandate for this work in any realistic sense. It was done at the bidding of the Americans – there is a new American President, we might be able to capture something from that. But he is equally in favour of it. I just think we should pull out.'

All around the world there remain problems, some of which have been maturing into crises. As Martin Wolf of the *Financial Times* reported

'The new President's agenda is daunting. His country's power is also reduced. Indeed, it was never as great as those who spoke of the "unipolar moment" believed. But the US remains the world's greatest power and only leader. It possesses unmatched assets. The presidency of George W. Bush was a lesson in how not to use them. The Obama presidency must now be the opposite.'³

With new reversible Clinton guidance?

At the top of Mr. Wolf's agenda, rightly, is economic policy. Many of Obama's election promises, as he so energetically toured the country, involved more or less protectionist policies. But the liberal advisors whose hopes have been raised to the heights in recent days have been concerned, like Mr. Wolf, to maximise the achievements of open global competition. Similar considerations will touch the evolution of policy on the environment.

Nowhere will it be possible to provide one-country solutions to these kinds of problems. Indeed, it is unlikely to be possible to find solutions in one bloc. The Americans have all the debts, the Chinese have all the money, and the Russians have all the energy. If East is East and West is

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West and never the twain shall meet, then the future of the capitalist world economy may, in the absence of effective international government, as the prophet Hobbes once told us, be 'nasty, brutish and short'. This judgement seems uncomfortably close in these dismal days. Who knows what other futures may lie in store?

Ken Coates

Footnotes

1. See *Spokesman 99* p12, pp 15-25.
2. Zbigniew Brzezinski and Brent Scowcroft, moderated by David Ignatius: *America and the World: Conversations on the Future of American Foreign Policy*, Basic Books, \$25.50.
3. *Financial Times*, 11 November 2008.

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