

The Change We REALLY Want?

June 12, 2009



WITH THE ELECTION OF BARACK OBAMA, millions in the United States and around the world are hoping for relief from the dangerous arrogance and destructiveness of George Bush's foreign policy. President Obama is expected to take important positive initiatives — like closing Guantanamo and lifting the rule denying international organizations receiving U.S. aid the right to let women know about abortion. When the inevitable right-wing reaction to these initiatives comes, it will be crucial for us in the peace movement to defend them. On some broader questions, there is a chance that with strong continuing popular pressure — from both within and outside the United States — the pre-election hopes of many Obama supporters can be realized on issues such as an end to the war in Iraq or stepping back from Bush's attempt to install "missile defense" in Poland and the Czech Republic. The Obama administration will face a host of critical issues in foreign policy, such as how to relate to Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan, Israel and Palestine, Cuba, Russia, China, Latin America, AFRICOM (the new Pentagon structure for Africa), North Korea, NATO expansion, weapons in space, nuclear and conventional weapons — and perhaps most important, the international economy and global warming. Popular movements can succeed in moving Obama to some degree on these questions, and that makes immediate mobilization imperative. But achieving a thoroughgoing and consistent progressive foreign policy will require a substantive, not just rhetorical, transformational politics in the United States that goes far beyond what we have reason to expect from Barack Obama's presidency. Obama's foreign policy advisors and appointments, campaign speeches and website remind us that he has already shown his support for many of the central tenets of U.S. imperial policy. More fundamentally, given the corporate interests with which Obama and the Democratic Party are intertwined, there are limits to how far his administration can or will go in transforming U.S. relations with the rest of the world. But people have been energized by the sweeping repudiation of Bush's policies and the election of a candidate who has spoken broadly, albeit often vaguely, of the need for change. If movements in this country and abroad can build on popular hopes and show that what is needed is genuinely progressive change, they can push U.S. foreign policy to those limits, and place on the public agenda more profound challenges to the way the United States relates to its own people and the rest of the world. In so doing we can begin the process of forging the radical-democratic transformational politics this country requires.

A New U.S. Foreign Policy

THE PEACE MOVEMENT HAS LONG BEEN doing extremely valuable work opposing the many wars, interventions, and weapons systems of the U.S. government. But it is also necessary to step back from these day-to-day defensive battles and think in a broad, positive way about what a progressive U.S. foreign policy would look like. The New York-based Campaign for Peace and Democracy (of which I am a co-director) has contributed to the discussion of a new foreign policy, advocating a "détente from below" approach to resolving international conflict by forging an alternative to great power politics, an alternative based on movements for peace, social justice and democratic liberties across national boundaries.¹The Campaign calls for a new U.S. foreign policy that will:

- Renounce the use of military intervention to extend and consolidate U.S. imperial power. This would mean withdrawing all U.S. troops from around the world and closing down the more than 900 U.S. global military bases.
- End support for corrupt and authoritarian regimes.
- Oppose, and end U.S. complicity in, all forms of terrorism worldwide.
- Reject the notion that great powers have the right to “spheres of influence” that deny smaller nations their rights and autonomy. This means that Russia has no legitimate claim to hegemony over Georgia, Ukraine, or the rest of what it considers its “near abroad,” but likewise that the U.S. has no right to intimidate Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia, or other countries in the Caribbean, Central America or Latin America.
- Support the right of national self-determination for all peoples; in the Middle East, this would include the Kurds, Palestinians and Israeli Jews.
- End one-sided support for Israel in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.
- Take major unilateral steps toward renouncing weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons, and vigorously promote international disarmament treaties.
- End double standards whereby some countries are unjustly allowed to have nuclear weapons and others are not.
- Abandon and replace a global economic system that brings mass misery and insecurity to people around the world.

These initiatives, taken together, would constitute a truly democratic foreign policy. Such a policy could begin to reverse the mistrust and outright hatred felt by so much of the world’s population toward the United States. At the same time, it would weaken the rationale for imperial interventions by other great powers, and undercut the appeal of terrorism and reactionary religious fundamentalism. Though nothing the United States can do would decisively undermine these elements right away — they were, after all, a long time in the making — over time a new U.S. foreign policy would drastically undercut their power and influence.

Obama’s Foreign Policy

PEOPLE AROUND THE WORLD ARE enormously relieved by the defeat of John McCain, and hope that it signals a rejection of eight years of the destructive policies of the Bush Administration. And indeed, we can expect that President Barack Obama will put an end to the macho cowboy style of George W. Bush, with his bellicose rhetoric of “If you’re not with us, you’re against us,” “Bring ‘em on,” “Axis of Evil,” “Dead or Alive,” and “Global War on Terror.” But the end to such provocations, while extremely welcome, is not enough. And a review of some highlights of Obama’s foreign policy positions gives cause for concern, even alarm.² **(1) Afghanistan and Pakistan** PERHAPS THE MOST DISTURBING ELEMENT of Obama’s program, repeatedly stated during his campaign and afterwards, is his plan to increase the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan — above the 30,000 troops already there, and quite possibly above the 20,000 additional troops recently requested by the Pentagon. Obama is also expected to try to pressure NATO countries to increase their military forces in Afghanistan, though he is likely to encounter considerable resistance from governments facing voters unhappy with the prospect of sending their soldiers into what appears increasingly to be a dangerous and unwinnable war. Obama has threatened to target Osama bin Laden and other “high value” al Qaeda figures in Pakistan, with or without the agreement of the Pakistani government. It is not yet clear whether Obama intends to continue Bush’s policy of using American military power to attack Taliban forces in Pakistan’s northern areas. In any case, U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan and Pakistan is doomed to fail, but beyond that, the U.S. ground and air wars routinely kill and wound large numbers of civilians, in the process recruiting waves of new supporters of terrorism and fundamentalism. Pakistani General Kayani declared after an American ground raid in September 2008 that Pakistan would defend its borders at “all costs” if there were

further incursions by U.S. troops, and President Bush was forced, at least temporarily, to cease these ground attacks. At first Pakistani authorities indicated that they would look the other way if U.S. military forces acted only from the air. However, public opinion in Pakistan was so inflamed by the violation of Pakistani sovereignty and the loss of life caused by U.S. air attacks that Pakistani politicians have been compelled to condemn U.S. aggression from the air as well as on the ground. After meeting with the new head of the U.S. Central Command, David Petraeus, on November 3, 2008, Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari revealed the pressure he was feeling when he said, "Continuing drone attacks on our territory, which result in loss of precious lives and property, are counterproductive and difficult to explain by a democratically elected government. It is creating a credibility gap."³ Yet the Bush bombing goes on. Afghan President Hamid Karzai has likewise protested against aerial attacks that kill civilians, though it is unclear whether he called outright for ending the use of air power. But if it were so easy to avoid slaughtering civilians when fighting an insurgency from the air, the United States probably would have done so already. However, the alternative Obama has advocated so far, sending in more ground troops so as not to rely so heavily on aerial attacks,⁴ is no more likely to succeed than previous occupations by the British or the Russians. And as U.S. ground troops face near-inevitable defeats in fighting against the Taliban, the pressure to bring in air power will be hard to resist. Only a political, rather than a military, solution can offer any hope of undermining al Qaeda and rescuing Afghanistan from a restoration of Taliban rule. But this is impossible as long as the fight against al Qaeda and the Taliban is seen as part of a U.S. imperial agenda. We need to recall that al Qaeda was founded in the first place in opposition to the post-Gulf War U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia— and it wasn't just Osama bin Laden's personal objection; he was able to exploit a deep resentment against U.S. forces throughout the Middle East. What is needed is precisely *not* to inject U.S. or NATO power into the politics of the region. Many analysts have argued that a stable resolution to the conflict in Afghanistan will require some kind of regional settlement involving Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Iran. This may well be the case, but as an outside imperial force, deeply and rightly mistrusted, the United States should not be a player in any regional settlement (beyond providing aid and guarantees of non-interference). The United States will inevitably distort and poison the process as it attempts to configure the outcome to serve its military, corporate and realpolitik goals. Without the American presence, new, more democratic political groupings — alternatives to both the corrupt Karzai government and the Taliban — could have the chance to emerge over time. **(2) Iran** OBAMA'S ELECTION HAS BEEN MET WITH enthusiasm in the United States, Iran and throughout the Middle East (with the notable exception of Israel, where reaction is noticeably cooler). People hope that Obama's willingness to negotiate without preconditions and to tone down warlike threats can create a relaxation in tensions between the United States and Iran. But there are disturbing signs that the new Obama administration could nonetheless move toward war. The Washington-based Bipartisan Policy Center issued a report in September 2008 "Meeting the Challenge: U.S. Policy Toward Iranian Nuclear Development" that not only explored the idea of blockading Iran's gasoline imports, but also said that "a military strike is a feasible option and must remain a last resort." Among the report's authors is Dennis Ross, one of Obama's top Middle East advisers. *New York Times* editorial board member Carol Giacomo wrote a widely circulated editorial comment on November 3, 2008, expressing concern that this report and other Washington discussions about Iran were all too reminiscent of the climate that preceded the Iraq War. On the other hand, another report, the Joint Experts' Statement on Iran (www.justforeignpolicy.org/experts.pdf), points in a less bellicose direction, though one that still sees a role for the exercise of U.S. power in the region. It remains to be seen whether Obama will follow the guidelines of either of these two reports. Obama has often said categorically that the United States cannot allow Iran to have a nuclear weapon. But what if, as is more than likely, the Iranians insist in negotiations on having "everything but" a nuclear weapon — in other words, developing all of the components needed for a nuclear bomb without actually having one? In the October 29, 2008 *London Review of Books*, the respected scholar Ervand Abrahamian wrote that even the Iranian "minimalists," often defined in the West as "reformists,"

who see Ahmadinejad as being dangerously provocative, would nonetheless “like to develop the [nuclear] programme slowly, thus gaining the knowledge and equipment needed to produce weapons in the long term. In nuclear parlance, this is known as the Japanese option. Some thirty countries have this option, and it has probably been Iran’s unstated goal for the last twenty years.”⁵ The Iranian government will probably insist on pursuing at least this “minimalist” option, which is understandable if not supportable given the fact that the United States (along with the other nuclear powers), through decades of both Democratic and Republican administrations, has made clear its commitment to keeping and upgrading its own nuclear arsenal. As the Campaign for Peace and Democracy pointed out in its 2006 sign-on statement “Iran: Neither U.S. Aggression Nor Theocratic Repression”:

An end to Washington’s belligerence is a crucial step in preventing Tehran from joining the nuclear “club.” Beyond that, the only way to stop proliferation is for those countries that have nuclear weapons to begin disarming — something the Bush administration and previous administrations of both parties have refused to do, despite the fact that the U.S. is a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty which commits it to “pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament.” At the same time the nuclear powers must work toward nuclear-free zones around the world, but especially in the Middle East, a particularly volatile and dangerous region.

The only effective way to prevent the further spread of nuclear weapons to Iran and other countries is for the nuclear powers to take disarmament initiatives that foster a political climate in which it’s more difficult for them to go down this road. President Obama needs to feel public pressure to move toward disarmament, and any peace movement call for negotiations with Iran needs to avoid legitimating the idea that military threats should be made against Iran to convince them to abandon their pursuit of nuclear weaponry.⁶ Leading Iranian dissidents like Akbar Ganji and Shirin Ebadi have stressed that such threats, by offering a rationale for cracking down on human rights campaigners, feminists and other independent activists and intellectuals, only serve to strengthen the hand of Ahmadinejad.⁷ **(3) Israel-Palestine** RESOLUTION OF THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN conflict is the cornerstone of any lasting peace in the Middle East. But for too long, U.S. foreign policy and world peace itself have been held hostage to the aggressive policies of Israeli hawks. For decades both Democratic and Republican administrations have given lip service to the rights of Palestinians while giving billions of dollars in economic and military aid to Israel even as it flagrantly denies those rights. Will the Obama administration finally break from this destructive history and open the way for a real two-state solution? Throughout his campaign, Obama took positions on Israel-Palestine that were basically indistinguishable from the pandering to Israeli government policy of the Bush Administration, and his appointment of Rahm Emanuel as chief of staff is not encouraging. But it is conceivable — though unlikely — that Obama will move in a new direction on this critical issue. Anyone who hopes for peace in the Middle East should help put the greatest possible pressure on the new administration to make this happen. **(4) Challenging the Empire Itself** A CRUCIAL FEATURE OF A NEW PROGRESSIVE U.S. foreign policy would be renunciation of the idea that the United States must be an uncontestable imperial force that dares not lose “credibility” and therefore has to be the “Number One” global military power. A look at the Obama-Biden campaign website shows a very different approach. Below are excerpts from the campaign positions on foreign policy and defense from the Obama-Biden campaign website. For the fuller positions readers can go to the site.

- **Expand to Meet Military Needs on the Ground:** Barack Obama and Joe Biden support plans to increase the size of the army by 65,000 soldiers and the Marines by 27,000 troops. Increasing our end strength will help units retrain and re-equip properly between deployments and decrease the strain on military families.
- **Fully Equip Our Troops for the Missions They Face:** Barack Obama and Joe Biden believe we must get vitally needed equipment to our soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines before lives are lost. We cannot repeat such failures as the delays in deployment of armored vehicles, body armor and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles that save lives on the frontlines.
- **Review Weapons Programs:** We must rebalance our capabilities to ensure that our forces have the agility and lethality to succeed in both conventional wars and in stabilization and counter-insurgency operations. Obama and Biden have committed to a review of each major defense program in light of current needs, gaps in the field, and likely future threat scenarios in the post-9/11 world.
- **Preserve Global Reach in the Air:** We must preserve our unparalleled airpower capabilities to deter and defeat any conventional competitors, swiftly respond to crises across the globe, and support our ground forces. We need greater investment in advanced technology ranging from the revolutionary, like Unmanned Aerial Vehicles and electronic warfare capabilities, to essential systems like the C-17 cargo and KC-X air refueling aircraft, which provide the backbone of our ability to extend global power.
- **Maintain Power Projection at Sea:** We must recapitalize our naval forces, replacing aging ships and modernizing existing platforms, while adapting them to the 21st century. Obama and Biden will add to the Maritime Pre-Positioning Force Squadrons to support operations ashore and invest in smaller, more capable ships, providing the agility to operate close to shore and the reach to rapidly deploy Marines to global crises.
- **National Missile Defense:** An Obama-Biden administration will support missile defense, but ensure that it is developed in a way that is pragmatic and cost-effective; and, most importantly, does not divert resources from other national security priorities until we are positive the technology will protect the American public.
- **Ensure Freedom of Space:** An Obama-Biden administration will restore American leadership on space issues, seeking a worldwide ban on weapons that interfere with military and commercial satellites. He will thoroughly assess possible threats to U.S. space assets and the best options, military and diplomatic, for countering them, establishing contingency plans to ensure that U.S. forces can maintain or duplicate access to information from space assets and accelerating programs to harden U.S. satellites against attack.

THUS, DESPITE SOME WELCOME hesitations on missile defense, Obama has committed himself to building a military suitable for sustaining a foreign policy of threats and interventions abroad. It was argued during the presidential campaign that Obama needed to say these things “in order to get elected,” but he didn’t really mean them. The time is now to put this hypothesis to the test. If we move quickly, we may be able to get Obama to reverse some of his retrograde campaign pledges, whether he meant them or not. A good case in point is the proposed U.S. military radar in the Czech Republic and companion Interceptor missiles for Poland. President Bush has already signed agreements with both countries to install these bases. Obama has indicated a positive attitude toward expanding U.S. “missile defense,” but has allowed for a loophole — that he wants to be assured that such systems work before moving ahead. Meanwhile, the movement against the Czech radar has been astoundingly successful. Over 70 percent of the population opposes the radar, and the government has not yet been able to achieve a parliamentary vote in favor of accepting it. The vote has been postponed, and will probably not take place until after Obama is in office. The Campaign for Peace and Democracy has worked with several other U.S. peace organizations to support its Czech friends and dissuade the Bush Administration from moving forward with this project.⁸ President Obama needs to hear from the opposition to this dangerous escalation into a new

Cold War, not because “it won’t work,” but because it sharply raises the level of nuclear tension in the world. U.S. GLOBAL POWER AND INFLUENCE ARE on the decline — Latin America’s leftward shift, the growing economic power of China, and European moves toward independence from the United States are all indications of the decline. But President Bush refused to acknowledge this reality and instead tried to compensate for the waning economic hegemony of the United States with wild and erratic military moves such as the war in Iraq, NATO expansion, war threats against Iran, attacks on Pakistan, support for the unstable Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili, and the escalation of “Star Wars.” How will Barack Obama respond to this horrific legacy? Obama’s promises and rhetoric suggest a stepping back from the most reckless adventures of the Bush administration. But the imperial policies he embraces mean that the risk of dangerous confrontation remains substantial. All too often many Obama supporters, and at times Obama himself, go further and suggest that in rejecting the failures of the last eight years, what we need to do is return to the Golden Age of the Clinton Administration, and/or to the more multilateral and restrained *modus vivendi* of the first President Bush. It is worth going back, then, to take a look at the foreign policy of the Clinton Administration and think about whether this is really where we want to go. Andrew Bacevich, who is far from a leftist, has captured Clinton’s foreign policy legacy well in his important recent book, *The Limits of Power*:

During the first year of his administration, Clinton developed a prodigious appetite for bombing . . . Nowhere did Clinton’s infatuation with air power find greater application than in Iraq, which he periodically pummeled with precision-guided bombs and cruise missiles.⁹ . . . [In 1993, Clinton] proceeded to foster a Pax Americana-lite, generously seasoned with American military might . . . Bill Clinton dispatched U.S. troops to Somalia, Haiti and the Balkans, as U.S. missiles and bombs blasted Serbs, Sudanese, Afghans, and Iraqis.¹⁰

Democratic Party critics of George W. Bush’s foreign policy like Madeleine Albright often make Bush’s unilateralism the focus of their critique. But “multilateralism” in and of itself does not necessarily a progressive foreign policy make. While it may restrain the United States from some of its more outlandish projects, multilateralism has typically offered a merely more cohesive and rational basis for imperial politics — for example, the decades of cooperation between Europe and the United States during the Cold War — or the 1991 Gulf War, when George H.W. Bush garnered support for using force from the United Nations Security Council. Today’s dramatic international economic meltdown underscores the need for a radically different kind of multilateralism — a multilateralism of peoples and governments that genuinely represent them, capable of creating an equitable and democratic global economic and political system. In a word, socialism. Today millions are victims of the gyrations of corporations, their markets, and the governments that are subservient to them. While greater corporate regulation should be demanded, the core problem is that the dynamics of capitalism tend to move beyond regulative constraints as the very logic of the system propels investment in the lowest-paid labor for the greatest profit, without regard for the social cost. Today we are suffering the human and environmental consequences of these dynamics. The reputation of socialism has been tragically scarred by the horrors of bureaucratic Communism, and it will be very difficult to revive the socialist ideal. But revive it we must, making absolutely clear our commitment to democracy as essential to any socialism worthy of support. While socialist victory is not on the agenda today, fewer and fewer people believe in the sanctity of markets and the legitimacy of corporations, which makes it once again possible to begin to challenge the sanctity and legitimacy of capitalism itself. In saying this, by no means do I mean to suggest that we should forget about immediate domestic and international struggles. This is not a time to say “Revolution is the only solution, reform is chloroform,” but our work for immediate reform needs to be infused with a broader vision. It is still hard to believe that this country, with its deeply racist heritage, actually

elected an African-American to the presidency. Barack Obama's victory showed that the American people are truly capable of change, and this can inspire us in the work that lies ahead. Although in response to the intensifying crisis and popular pressure, he may take more radical steps than he originally intended, Obama himself is likely to disappoint — he has already begun to do so. But the heightened expectations that Obama has engendered can end up sparking immense new movements for social change. Let us hope that the movements will not only be militant in the streets, but will move toward creating a new political party free of the corporations, with labor and its allies setting the agenda. Such a party can actually begin to reshape our country's political landscape.

—November 19, 2008

Footnotes

1. To learn more about the Campaign for Peace and Democracy, visit the CPD website.
2. This article will only take up a few of the key foreign policy issues the new administration will face. A fuller account would address American foreign policy toward Asia, Africa and Latin America in detail.
3. "Petraeus, in Pakistan, Hears Complaints About Missile Strikes," by Jane Perlez, *New York Times*, Nov. 3, 2008.
4. Obama famously said about Afghanistan during his campaign, "We've got to get the job done there and that requires us to have enough troops so that we're not just air-raiding villages and killing civilians, which is causing enormous problems there."
5. "Who's in Charge?" by Ervand Abrahamian, review of *Ahmadinejad: The Secret History of Iran's Radical Leader* by Kasra Najafi and *The Road to Democracy in Iran* by Akbar Ganji, *London Review of Books*, Oct. 29, 2008.
6. We in the peace movement need to have a serious discussion about what we mean when we call for negotiations by the United States, not only with Iran but also with other countries. The Prussian military historian and theorist Carl von Clausewitz once said that war is the continuation of politics by other means. The reverse also applies, i.e. politics — and negotiations — can be war or intimidation by other means. We need to ask, then, what are the goals of our government (or any other government for that matter) as it enters into specific negotiations. Are they legitimate? Are they worthy of our support?
7. See, for example "Shirin Ebadi: Don't Attack Iran," by Robert Dreyfuss in *The Nation*, April 29, 2008.
8. For an account of the Campaign for Peace and Democracy's work against the Czech radar, go to the CPD website.
9. *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* by Andrew J. Bacevich, (New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, 2008) p.55.
10. Bacevich, p. 116.