Obama and Empire

written by Thomas Harrison | June 12, 2009

AS NOAM CHOMSKY OBSERVED, “Obama’s message of ‘hope’ and ‘change’ offered a blank slate on which supporters could write their wishes” (*Znet*, Nov. 25, 2008). Millions voted for Barack Obama in order to reverse the brutal and catastrophic foreign policy of the Bush Administration, especially the war in Iraq. But as far as fundamental change is concerned, his first months in office (this is being written in mid-April) offer no real grounds for hope. Obama has announced the closing of the prison facilities at Guantanamo Bay, but he has also indicated that the policy of rendition — essentially outsourcing torture — will remain in place.The President’s tacit recognition of the “Islamic Republic of Iran,” and some other initiatives indicate a possible shift from threats to diplomacy, but he has also renewed sanctions on Teheran. He has reiterated the Bush administration’s plan to install a missile defense system in Eastern Europe, using the same excuse — Iran. While promising to withdraw the majority of U.S. troops from Iraq by Aug. 31, 2010, he has stated that the occupation will continue with 50,000 “non-combat” soldiers until the end of 2011, the date set by the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with the Iraqi government for the removal of all troops. Of course, there’s a good chance that by 2011, the Administration will pressure Baghdad to allow the United States to stay. In Afghanistan, Obama wants to add 21,000 troops to the 35,000 already there. Obama’s stated goal of defeating Al Qaeda and the Taliban in both Afghanistan and Pakistan cannot be accomplished by military means without further escalation and enormous civilian casualties, and probably not even then. The AfPak War, as it is now called, provides a perfect example of the toxic effect of U.S. intervention, its blind militarism and cynical political manipulation fueling the spread of Islamic fundamentalism. Though only a small minority of the Pakistani people would freely choose Taliban rule, they are overwhelmingly hostile to any U.S.-sponsored war. On April 14, *The New York Times* reported on Taliban and Al Qaeda inroads in Punjab, the country’s most populous province; after interviewing villagers, the reporter declared that “the single biggest obstacle to stopping the advance of militancy was the attitudes of Pakistanis themselves, whose fury at the United States has led to blind support for everyone who goes against it.” As long as U.S. drones continue to kill Pakistani civilians, with the de facto complicity of Islamabad, further accommodations to the viciously misogynistic rule of the Taliban, like those in the Swat Valley, are inevitable. If a negotiated solution is possible, it can only be carried out in a radically reconfigured context, one that probably must include a resolution of the Kashmir problem. In that Muslim-majority region, held against its will by India since 1947, a proxy war has been going on for decades. The Indian army maintains a brutal occupation, while Delhi refuses to discuss self-determination for the Kashmiri people (evidence indicates that they would vote to be independent from both Pakistan and India). Meanwhile, Pakistan continues a de facto war against India through its surrogates, the Islamist insurgent groups — one of which was evidently responsible for the Mumbai terror attacks. The undeclared war between India and Pakistan has an impact on the war in Afghanistan too, where President Karzai enjoys Delhi’s strong backing and Islamabad exerts influence over Taliban forces in the eastern part of the country. Peace between the two nuclear-armed regional powers might be achieved through political negotiations between Delhi and Islamabad, with the essential condition that the Kashmiris be allowed to govern themselves. But the Obama Administration is continuing the Bush strategy of “tilting” towards India, as a strategic counterweight to China, thus giving Delhi no incentive to make concessions. The uproar over the AIG bonuses cast a harsh light on the influence wielded by Geithner, Summers, and their ilk over the President and his cabinet. A great many people are noticing that the new Administration’s response to the collapse of banking and finance is all too similar to the neoliberal crony capitalism of its predecessors. What has received less attention so far in the major media is the striking continuity evident in Obama’s foreign policy. The President has supported an increase in the military budget, as promised during the campaign, proposing $21

billion more in military spending than under Bush — $534 billion, compared to Bush's $513 billion. Defense Secretary Robert Gates has called for cutting some obsolete and very expensive weapons systems, but he is also seeking more money for drones and troop support. In addition, Obama is asking for more war funding for Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan — an expected additional $75.5 billion for the remainder of 2009 (as with Bush's budgets, these war funds are above and beyond the regular defense budget).

An Empire Like No Other

SINCE WORLD WAR II, successive U.S. administrations, without exception, have pursued not just global military dominance, but overwhelming dominance. NATO's purpose has always been more about maintaining Washington's control over its allies than about defense against a common enemy (a Soviet invasion of Western Europe was never a serious possibility). And now that the United States is losing its economic predominance, American leaders feel they must compensate militarily. Its armed forces must possess a military advantage so immense that no state, or groups of states, will be willing or able to equal it. Thus, today this country accounts for more than half of worldwide military spending. There are around one thousand U.S. bases in 130 countries, if you include refueling stations, weapons depots, training camps, and so on. The militarization of space is well underway. The Bush Pentagon called it "full spectrum dominance," and there is no sign that Obama has any inclination to relinquish this kind of dominance. The world has never seen an empire like this. Unlike previous imperialisms, the power of the U.S. Empire is not used to colonize or permanently occupy territory, despite its vast network of bases, charmingly dubbed "lily-pads" by the Pentagon — nor does it confront its real military rivals with war or the explicit threat of war (Serbia and Iraq were hardly serious rivals). Instead, power is "projected" episodically over other nations, but with no limits of time or space. Bush took this doctrine to an extreme. In 2003 *The New York Times* magazine quoted a high level official informing reporters: "We're an empire now, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality . . . we'll act again, creating other realities." In this crazed arrogance, there was more than a whiff of a Nazi-like "triumph of the will." But even the apparently more "sober" approach of the new administration is still committed to a system of domination on a scale that no other imperial power ever considered possible. Bush's "Global War on Terror" (GWOT) was designed to put the nation on a permanent wartime footing, with consequences for dissent and civil liberties typical of wartime. Because military action cannot possibly eradicate non-state terrorism, and in fact foments it, there can be no end in sight for such a war, and indeed the Bush Administration envisioned none. Under Obama, only the terminology has changed. The policy has been re-branded as "Overseas Contingency Operations, or OCO. Some commentators have noted, hopefully, that abandoning GWOT may signal a reluctance to use wartime rhetoric to justify further aggrandizement of extraordinary executive powers by the Administration. But whatever it means, OCO still includes policing a global empire. Moreover, as Ellen Meiksins Wood explains in *Empire of Capital*, "Unilateral global supremacy can never be achieved once and for all. It means moving the boundaries of warfare ever further beyond the reach of would-be challengers; and this requires constant revolutionizing of the means of war — which cannot then be left untested and unused." Despite its colossal power, the U.S. Empire is threatened.Threats include "failed states" like Pakistan,"rogue states" like Iran, and strong states that may become future competitors, such as Russia, China, and the European Union. While the first two categories are subject to direct military intervention, the third is kept in check by military force applied indirectly. Russia and China are surrounded by bases and missiles. The EU is enveloped in the embrace of NATO, making its armed forces a "foreign legion of the Pentagon" (William Pfaff, quoted in Wood).

The World's Second Superpower

BUT THE GREATEST THREAT OF ALL, potentially, is popular resistance — which *The New York*

Times once labeled the world's "second superpower"— using the tools of democracy itself. One especially vibrant example of this still mostly latent superpower, the anti-radar movement in the Czech Republic, succeeded not only in aborting plans for a U.S. radar base, but in helping to topple the fanatically pro-American Czech government, which had arrogantly ignored pubic opinion, overwhelmingly opposed to the base. Democracy scored a major victory, although the battle may not yet be over. The Empire is inimical to democracy abroad, as the Czech example shows. Democracy, majority rule, in the Arab world would be a major blow to U.S. global dominance; majoritarian populism in Latin America has already threatened Washington's power over that continent. But Empire has also always been at odds with democracy at home. Its smooth functioning depends on excluding American voters from deciding or even seriously debating questions of foreign policy. Above all, the massive military budget cannot be questioned, except marginally and in a way that does not challenge the basic assumptions behind it.Thus Rep. Barney Frank has called for cutting military spending by 25 percent, starting in 2010, insisting that doing so need not diminish "the security we need" — which begs the question of what constitutes true security. Does it require continuing to shower military aid on Israel, escalating the war in Afghanistan, stepping up intervention in Pakistan, maintaining foreign bases throughout the world? Even if all this can be accomplished with 75 percent of current military spending, its immorality, futility, and still-disastrous cost need to be exposed. Frank, as well as most other "progressive" politicians, does not question the whole panoply of imperial might — although he has performed a service by pointing out how scandalous it is that while the annual military budget is not much less than the $700 billion financial bailout, calling for any reduction is basically taboo. At the moment, no one in Congress (with the exception of Dennis Kucinich and perhaps one or two others) or the mainstream media will dare to suggest that the United States should not continue to guard its global preeminence at all costs, that it is madness to maintain a bloated military establishment, bristling with ever-more horrifying weapons, sucking up vital resources that could be used to support decent lives for millions both here and abroad. It is up to the peace movement to violate this taboo. Popular opposition to the war in Afghanistan is growing and will certainly increase at a more rapid rate as the fighting drags on and expands into Pakistan. A significant anti-NATO movement has emerged in Europe on the occasion of the alliance's sixtieth anniversary, and it needs strong American support. And a revival of the movement for nuclear disarmament is long overdue. But the work of the peace movement will always be a labor of Sisyphus, forever responding to particular crises that are the inevitably recurring products of an imperial system, the goal of peace and security forever out of reach — unless, that is, it moves beyond reactive, single-issue projects and begins to challenge comprehensively the assumption that the United States ought to continue acting as a global superpower. But if a critique of Empire is to make sense to most Americans, it must propose an alternative. The only response to the violent jihadi networks operating, and probably proliferating, throughout the Muslim world that has any chance of effectiveness is to call off the inhumane and un-winnable "war on terror," by whatever name, and replace it with a radically different policy. Ending all support to Arab police states and giving real support to Palestinian statehood, advocating self-determination in Kashmir, withdrawing from Afghanistan (not merely non-escalation); these and other democratic foreign policy initiatives are not only right in themselves, but are also means of countering the bitterness and hostility in Muslim countries that breeds terrorist threats. The United States and its military police a world-system that is deeply cruel and irrational. Obama's election has not changed that. Even before the current economic crisis, billions toiled and died in the most abysmal squalor, thanks in large part to the tyranny of U.S.backed rulers, the policies of U.S.-dominated international financial institutions, and the needs of the global capitalist order. A vast portion of the world's population is unemployed. These billions could find work building, educating, producing the things that people so desperately need. A truly democratic U.S. foreign policy is desperately needed to address this misery and inequity, but we can begin to do so only by diverting this nation's vast wealth away from militarism and maintenance of Empire. April 16, 2009

Footnotes