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[www.afgazad.com](http://www.afgazad.com)

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## Commentaries

### Obama's Empire

by Sheldon Richman

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Why isn't the honeymoon over yet? That all peace advocates still haven't broken with Barack Obama is ominous, indeed. Do they really hate war, empire, and colonialism? Or did they just hate George W. Bush and Dick Cheney?

Obama has been in power more than 100 days, which is time enough to judge the man's intentions for the American empire. The signs are not good. Liquidation is clearly not on his agenda.

He says he'll close Guantánamo; however, he wants to restart military commissions (albeit, he promises, with more protections for the accused), but that is not a big improvement over the Bush policy. If the government has evidence that the men at Guantánamo plotted to commit violence against Americans, charge them and bring them to court. It worked with John Walker Lindh, Zacarias Moussaoui, Ali al-Marri, and Jose Padilla, not to mention the 1993 World Trade Center bombers. Treating terrorist acts as warfare has been a disaster for America.

Obama has done worse than follow Bush when it comes to secrecy. In arguing for a dismissal of a case against Bush's warrantless wiretapping, the Obama Justice Department not only invoked "state secrets," as the Bush DOJ did, but also sovereign immunity, the doctrine that no one may sue the government without its permission. There's change we can live with.

On Iraq, Obama has perhaps pulled a bait and switch. The bulk of the troops are to be out by the end of August 2010. That's much too long to prolong the hated occupation, but it's in the campaign-promise ballpark. The full picture, however, is not comforting. He plans to keep up to 50,000 troops there until 2012 for training, protection of Americans, and, ominously, anti-terrorism activities. Since the occupation provokes "terrorism," his plan resembles a perpetual-motion machine.

The sale of major military equipment to Iraq, some of which won't be delivered until after 2011, bespeaks of a stay longer than called for under the agreement with the Iraq government. And what of the air bases and Vatican-sized imperial U.S. embassy inside the Green Zone? The prime minister and most Iraqis want the United States out, but I'm not sure I'd put a substantial sum on money on that outcome.

Then there is Afghanistan and Pakistan, or what we'll eventually think of as Obama's Vietnam. Here the talk is not of withdrawal, but rather of escalation. There'll be more troops, while more drones and bombers rain death on innocents. When the Afghan president asked for an end to that, he was told to mind his own business. "We can't fight with one hand tied behind our back," said national security advisor Gen. James L. Jones. At home Obama gets a pass because, well, he's Obama and not Bush.

Afghanistan and Pakistan have the potential to make Iraq look like Grenada. Sinking further into Afghanistan while playing with fire in volatile Pakistan seems the height of stupidity. Once again, arrogant American planners think they can manage a complicated region of the world while apparently knowing little of the indigenous people's history, culture, or interests. The fact that U.S. imperial officials treat the border between the two countries like something more than an arbitrary colonial tribe-splitting line in the sand speaks volumes.

So gird yourself for daily accounts of increasing "terrorist" activity and intensifying "insurgencies" — all pinned on the Taliban, but mostly just resistance to the brutal American occupation by the people the United States championed when they were fighting the Soviets.

[The American ruling establishment — the party is irrelevant — remains fully committed to the U.S. role as world policeman, a solemn "responsibility" that also includes looking out for well-connected economic interests. The defense contractors apparently don't anticipate any great contraction under Obama.](#)

Where do the American people figure in all this? Except for being forced to pick up the insanely large tab, they are expected to just move along. Requested war spending hardly foreshadows change. Any talk by Obama of transparency won't be applicable here. Of course, the U.S. treasury is long past broke, and Obama has promised not to raise taxes on people making less than \$250,000. That means he'll do what his predecessors and their predecessors did: sink Americans further into debt and prepare the way for a ravaging inflation. Is the empire worth it?