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Worse Than a Third Bush Term?

By Anthony Gregory

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If in 2008 someone had said that Obama's war policy would be more belligerent and costlier than another round of Bush's, nearly no one would have believed it. Bush started a preventive war in Iraq, killing hundreds of thousands without any credible correlation to U.S. security, except perhaps a very negative one. He turned a hunt for bin Laden into an excuse to stumble around in Afghanistan at great cost without any clear idea of how the war and occupation were going to improve the situation there. He spent a trillion dollars, just in direct costs, and lost 4,000 American troops in these aggressive and endless wars.

Obama came along and promised to make it all better. Before he was a U.S. senator, he opposed the U.S. war in Iraq. As a presidential candidate, he vowed to exercise more restraint and wind down the U.S. presence in Iraq.

At the same time, Obama pledged to "refocus America on the greatest threat to our security—the resurgence of al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan" and to "deploy at least two additional combat brigades" to that theater of war. Some pro-peace Obama voters rationalized this one way or another, saying the Afghanistan war was less unreasonable than Iraq, or that Obama was just trying to get elected and would prove a more peaceful president overall than Bush (or McCain).

In my new Independent Institute policy report, ["What Price War? Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Costs of Conflict,"](#) I assess the numbers and come to a disturbing conclusion: The heightened conflict in Afghanistan has in a sense offset the decline of hostilities in Iraq, a decline we could

have expected anyway, and in all other areas of foreign policy and national security, Obama has essentially continued and expanded Bush-era policies.

First, on Iraq, it is true that Obama, unlike Bush and the Republicans, thought the U.S. shouldn't have begun that war. But once it started, like all too many Democrats, Obama thought it best to stay the course. "There's not much of a difference between my position on Iraq and George Bush's position at this stage," Obama famously said way back in October 2004. As a senator, he voted for Iraq war funding, unlike the truly antiwar folks in Congress, and in 2008 he told Bill O'Reilly that the horrible surge had "succeeded beyond our wildest dreams."

And here's the dirty little secret: Although the Iraq war has indeed calmed down since Obama took power, this was going to happen anyway. Bush signed the Status of Forces Agreement in 2008 setting forth the withdrawal schedule that Obama is mostly following—if anything, Obama has slowed it down a bit. A third Bush term would have almost surely overseen the same Iraq policy we have now. On the other hand, it would have also probably continued "neglecting" Afghanistan, in contrast with Obama's energetic escalation of that war.

In Afghanistan, 499 U.S. troops died last year and 317 the year before. Bush's last full year—2008—saw "only" 155 U.S. troop deaths in Afghanistan, and this was the deadliest year for Americans in Afghanistan during the whole of the Bush administration. The troop presence has about tripled from the height of the Bush years. Overall, thanks to the Afghanistan escalation, there were more U.S. military fatalities in Iraq and Afghanistan last year and the year before than in the last year under Bush. This doesn't even touch on the vast rise in contractors in Afghanistan, which obscures the full cost of the war. In the first half of 2010, more civilian contractors died than U.S. troops.

Meanwhile, 2010 was the deadliest year for Afghan civilians since the first year of the war. And in Pakistan, Obama has significantly increased the use of drone attacks, which were minimal until Bush's last year in 2008, during which 33 such horrible bombings were launched. That number more than tripled for 2010.

Of course, there is also the financial cost. Obama promised to "go through the federal budget, line by line, eliminating programs that don't work" with "one of the biggest savings" to come from a "change [to] our policy in Iraq." But these savings in Iraq—again, savings that a third Bush term likely would have seen as well—have almost been absorbed by the rise in costs in Afghanistan. Adjusted for inflation, the U.S. spent about \$171 billion on the two wars in FY 2010. Only Bush's last two years of war cost more. Yet in 2003, 2004, and 2005, few American critics of Bush thought he was squandering too little on militarism.

Up until March, one thing that could be said of Obama is that, unlike Bush, he didn't actually start a whole new war without anything resembling a justification and with questionable constitutional legitimacy. But now he has adopted a version of the Bush doctrine of preventive war in Libya, a presidential war that was started without even a nod from Congress and has raged on for more than two months in violation of the War Powers Resolution. This war, like Iraq, rests on the concept of world peace through democratization by force, but unlike his

predecessor, Obama didn't even try to convince his country that it was necessary to counter an impending danger to national security.

Bush's first term was still perhaps more of a warmongering disaster than Obama's has been so far. But we must look at the trajectory of U.S. foreign policy at the end of the Bush years and conclude that Obama has not just stayed the course, he has stepped on the gas. He has vastly expanded the war in Afghanistan, upped the violence in Pakistan, continued the Bush path on Iraq, bombed Yemen and Somalia, and started a new war with Libya. On the civil liberties and human rights fronts, he has invoked the Espionage Act more than all earlier presidents combined, persecuted whistleblowers, covered up torturers, and abused habeas corpus and the Fourth Amendment as much as Bush. And surely bin Laden could have been found without these monstrous policies.

It would have been bad enough if, as some cynics warned, nothing changed in national-security policy with Obama in charge. But even that would be better than what we've seen. At least a lot fewer people would be dying in Afghanistan and we wouldn't be at war with Libya.