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CounterPunch Diary

War and Peace

By ALEXANDER COCKBURN

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I suppose we should not begrudge Barack Obama his Nobel Peace Prize, though it represents a radical break in tradition, since he's only had slightly less than nine months to discharge his imperial duties, most concretely through the agency of high explosives in the Hindu Kush whereas laureates like Henry Kissinger had been diligently slaughtering people across the world for years.

Woodrow Wilson, the liberal imperialist with whom Obama bears some marked affinities, won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1919, having brought America into the carnage of the First World War. The peace laureate president who preceded him was Teddy Roosevelt, who got the prize in 1906 as reward for sponsorship of the Spanish-American war and ardent bloodletting in the Philippines. Senator George Hoar's famous denunciation of Roosevelt on the floor of the US Senate in May of 1902 was probably what alerted the Nobel Committee to Roosevelt's eligibility for the Peace Prize:

“You have sacrificed nearly ten thousand American lives—the flower of our youth. You have devastated provinces. You have slain uncounted thousands of the people you desire to benefit. You have established reconcentration camps. Your generals are coming home from their harvest bringing sheaves with them, in the shape of other thousands of sick and wounded and insane to drag out miserable lives, wrecked in body and mind. You make the American flag in the eyes of a numerous people the emblem of sacrilege in Christian churches, and of the burning of human dwellings, and of the horror of the water torture. ”

TR was given the peace prize not long after he'd displayed his boundless compassion for humanity by sponsoring an exhibition of Filipino "monkey men" in the 1904 St Louis World Fair as "the missing link" in the evolution of Man from ape to Aryan, and thus in sore need of assimilation, forcible if necessary, to the American way. On receipt of the prize, Roosevelt promptly dispatched the Great White Fleet (sixteen U.S. Navy ships of the Atlantic Fleet including four battleships) on a worldwide tour to display Uncle Sam's imperial credentials, anticipating by scarce more than a century, Obama's award, as he prepares to impose Pax Americana on the Hindukush and portions of Pakistan.

People marvel at the idiocy of these Nobel awards, but there's method in the madness, since in the end they train people to accept without demur or protest absurdity as part and parcel of the human condition, which they should accept as representing the considered opinion of rational men, albeit Norwegian. It's a twist on the Alger myth, inspiring to youth: you too can get to murder Filipinos, or Palestinians, or Vietnamese or Afghans and still win a Peace Prize. That's the audacity of hope at full stretch.

It's dawning even on those predisposed to like the guy that when it comes to burning issues the first black president of the United States truly hates to come down on one side or the other. He dreads making powerful people mad. He won't stand up for his own people when they're being savaged by the nutball right, edges them out, then has his press secretary claim that they jumped of their own accord. This may impress the peaceniks of Oslo, but from the American perspective he's looking like a wimp.

Obama's Afghan policy evolved on the campaign trail last year as a one-liner designed to deflect charges that he was a peacenik on Iraq. Not so, he cried. The Global War on Terror was being fought in the wrong place. His pledge was to hunt down and "kill" Osama bin Laden.

Once ensconced in the Oval Office Obama, invoking "bipartiship", instantly nailed a white flag to the mast by keeping on Robert Gates, Bush's secretary of defense.

He formed a foreign policy team mostly composed of Clinton-era neo-liberal hawks, headed by Hilary Clinton and Richard Holbrook. His next step was to eject the US commander in Afghanistan, Gen. David McKiernan, and install Gen. Stanley McChrystal, best known for running the assassination wing of the military's joint special-operations command. (JSOC). Then he ordered 17,000 new US troops to be deployed to Afghanistan.

It was a fine exhibition of Obama's eerie skill - also demonstrated in the politicking over health reform - in foreclosing his own range of choices and allowing opponents to coalesce and seize the initiative. If, on his second day in office he'd announced a full and complete review of US aims in Afghanistan, with no option left off the table he'd have had some purchase on the situation. But the months drifted by and finally the worsening situation forced a review of Afghan policy, precisely when Obama's poll numbers were dropping, the war lobby heartened and the liberals already dejected by Obama's surrender to Goldman Sachs and Wall Street and disastrous efforts in the health fight.

At this point fate handed Obama a golden opportunity. With astounding insolence Gen. McChrystal began to conduct a public lobbying campaign for his appeal for 40,000 more troops. His rationale for new troops ended up in the hands of Bob Woodward of the Washington Post.

Harry Truman was an indifferent president who needlessly dropped A-bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, designed to intimidate Stalin. He launched the cold war arms race in 1948. Yet Americans venerate him for two things: the sign on his desk saying the buck stops here, and his dramatic firing of war hero Gen. Douglas MacArthur, for insubordination in challenging Truman's overall direction of the war in Korea (not to mention Truman's fears of likely MacArthur excess in administering plans being carefully evolved in Truman's high command to deploy and use nuclear weapons on the Korean peninsula.)

Truman didn't allow MacArthur time to stage a grandiose resignation. In April, 1951, he fired him on late night radio, announcing that "With deep regret I have concluded that General of the Army Douglas MacArthur is unable to give his wholehearted support to the policies of the U.S. Government and of the U.N. in matters pertaining to his official duties. In view of the specific responsibilities imposed upon me by the Constitution of the U.S. ...I have decided that I must make a change in command in the Far East. I have, therefore, relieved General MacArthur of his command."

It's clear that McChrystal stepped over the line conclusively in his speech in London at the Institute for Strategic Studies where he contemptuously dismissed the "small footprint" counter-terrorism strategy proposed by Vice President Joe Biden and Senator John Kerry, saying that it would lead to Afghanistan becoming Chaos-istan. Obama's National Security Advisor, Gen Jim Jones declared that it would have been better that McChrystal's criticisms had come up through the Army's chain of command. That was the moment Obama could have fired McChrystal for MacArthur's offense – insubordination and defiance of civilian control of military policy.

McChrystal is no war hero, like MacArthur. People crave some evidence that Obama has steel in his soul. High risk, maybe, but potentially a huge coup for Obama at a fraught political moment, also a brisk exit from the humiliation of the failed booster trip to Copenhagen to win the 2016 Olympics for Chicago. Obama did nothing, except further irk his liberal base by saying withdrawal isn't an option. Pundits solemnly explained that given Democrats' distaste for the war in Afghanistan – backed by strong popular hostility, Obama might have to go to Republicans to get the votes for the necessary appropriations of money.

It's all much too late for any sensible policy review. There have been two moments in the last 40 years when life might have improved for ordinary Afghans, particularly women. The first came with the the reforming left regime of the late 1970s, destroyed by the warlords with US backing. The second arrived with the US eviction of the Taliban in 2001-2, which was welcomed by many Afghans. But at this stage in the game, simply by definition, no American intervention overseas can be anything other than a ghastly disaster, usually bloodstained. Already the US had too many chits out to the warlords of the Northern Alliance. The US "nation building" apparatus is irreversibly corrupt – with a network of \$250,000 a year

consultancies, insider contracts, and beyond that a de facto stake in the drug industry now supply most of the West's heroin and opium.

There's no possible light at the end of any tunnel. The robot war via Predator missiles and other instruments in the arsenal infuriates all Afghans, as wedding parties are blown to bits every weekend. With more troops and mercenaries now in Afghanistan than during the Russian military presence at its peak, there's zero chance for America playing a long-term constructive role in Afghanistan. The US presence is just a recruiting poster for the Taliban.

But Obama has now surrounded himself with just the same breed of intellectuals who persuaded Lyndon Johnson to destroy his presidency by escalating the war. They're easily as mad as the bible thumper I heard last week on my truck radio as I drove over the Tehachapi pass on route 58, between Barstow and Bakersfield. Harold Camping, president of Family Stations Ministry, was patiently explaining that God's plan was to end the world by flooding on May 21, 2011, thus trumping the end of the Mayan calendar, December 21, 2012. In the Biblical perspective 5/21/2011 is the end of the world. The elect will be saved, the rest will perish, not even given brief probation like the inhabitants of Nineveh. Camping's voice was calm and seemingly rational, no doubt like those of the men and women briefing Obama. A doubter called in, emphasizing that he was a 100 per cent believer in the veracity of each line in the Bible, but how to explain verse 4 of the ninetieth psalm? "For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night"? Why had the divine author permitted himself the ambiguity of simile? Camping plunged confidently into biblical numerology: God revealed to Noah in the year 4990 BC that there would be yet 7 days until the flood of waters would be upon the earth. Substitute 1000 years for each one of those 7 days, and we get 7000 years. And when we project 7000 years into the future from 4990 BC, we find that it falls on the year 2011 AD. $4990 + 2011 = 7001$. He counseled us to remember, when counting from an Old Testament date to a New Testament date, always to subtract one year because there is no year zero, resulting in: $4990 + 2011 - 1 = 7000$ years exactly.

But May 21? On May 21, 1988, God finished using the churches and congregations of the world. The Spirit of God left all churches and Satan entered into the churches to rule at that point in time. The Bible decrees that this period of judgment upon the churches will last for 23 years. A full 23 years (8400 days exactly) would be from May 21, 1988 until May 21, 2011. Camping took pains to remind his vast world audience that this information was discovered in the Bible completely apart from the information regarding the 7000 years from the flood.

At this point the geological contours of the Tehachapi pass interrupted the radio signal and soon I was descending into the inferno of sunset over Bakersfield. Is Camping madder than the augurers who have been counseling Obama on his Afghan policy? Is his devoted audience more gullible than the President?

Last week Obama invited Republicans as well as Democrats to the White House for further review of the options. Obama has let events overtake him, exactly as he allowed the health policy debate to spin out of his control in the summer and early fall. He'll shoot for some sort

of lethal semi-compromise on reinforcements, thus feeding the right and angering his liberal supporters. A year from now he'll be paying the penalty in the mid-term elections, just as Clinton did.

Anthropology at War

Don't miss the marvelous new edition of our Subscriber-Only Newsletter. David Price, an anthropologist and season contributor to CounterPunch excavates a story of particular relevance right now: the way the Pentagon is recruiting PhDs to fight its counter-insurgency campaigns: today Afghanistan, tomorrow the world. Price writes:

“While political science was the academic discipline, which the wars of the twentieth century drew upon, the asymmetrical wars of the twenty-first century now look toward anthropology with hopes of finding models of culture, or data on specific cultures, to be conquered or to be used in counterinsurgency operations. ..

“The counterinsurgency program generating the greatest friction among anthropologists is the Human Terrain Systems (HTS) – a program with over 400 employees, originally operating through private contractors and now in the process of being taken over by the U.S. Army. Human Terrain embeds anthropologists with military units to ease the occupation and conquest of Iraqi and Afghanis – with plans to extend these operations in Africa through expanding units with AFRICOM. Some HTS social scientists are armed, others choose not to. In the last two years, three HTS social scientists have been killed in the course of their work, and HTS member Don Ayala recently pled guilty in U.S. District Court to killing the Afghan (whom Ayala shot in the head-execution style while the victim was detained with his hands cuffed behind him) who had attacked THS social scientist Paula Loyd...

“Supporters of HTS claim the program uses embedded social scientists to help reduce “kinetic engagements,” or unnecessary violent contacts with the populations they encounter. The idea is to use these social scientists to interact with members of the community, creating liaison relationships between occupiers and occupied, as well as using HTS's social scientists' cultural knowledge to reduce misunderstandings that can lead to unnecessarily violent interactions.”

HTS has been selling itself to the public through remarkably well-organized domestic propaganda campaigns that have seen dozens of uncritical articles on HTS , with personality profiles on HTS's personnel appearing in American newspapers, The New Yorker, Harpers, Elle, More, etc.) In his essay, exclusive to the newsletter, Price lays out the full, ugly story of these recipes for “better killing”.

Also in the newsletter: Mark Grueter reports from Sulaimani, Iraqi Kurdistan, on a multi-million dollar campus designed to sell the American way of life. Welcome to the American University of Iraq. “Move your ass and your brains will follow”: Joe Paff remembers an astounding mobilization in San Francisco, 1967-1973 and the lessons it holds for left organizers today.

