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## Don't Let Barack Obama Break Your Heart

[TomDispatch](#)

**O**n the day that Americans turned out in near record numbers to vote, a record was set halfway around the world. In Afghanistan, a US Air Force strike wiped out [about 40 people](#) in a wedding party. This represented at least the [sixth wedding party](#) eradicated by American air power in Afghanistan and Iraq since December 2001.

American planes have, in fact, taken out two brides in the last seven months. And don't try to bury your dead or [mark](#) their deaths ceremonially either, because funerals have been hit as well. Mind you, those planes, which have conducted [31%](#) more air strikes in Afghanistan in support of US troops this year, and the missile-armed [unmanned aerial vehicles \(UAVs\)](#) now making almost daily strikes across the border in Pakistan, remain part of George W. Bush's Air Force, but only until January 21, 2009. Then, they – and all the brides and grooms of Afghanistan and in the Pakistani borderlands who care to have something more than the smallest of private weddings – officially become the property of President Barack Obama.

That's a sobering thought. He is, in fact, inheriting from the Bush administration a widening war in the region, as well as an exceedingly tenuous situation in devastated, still thoroughly factionalized, sectarian, and increasingly Iranian-influenced Iraq. There, the US is, in actuality, [increasingly friendless](#) and ever less powerful. The last allies from the infamous "coalition of the willing" are now rushing for the door. The South Koreans, Hungarians, and Bulgarians – I'll bet you didn't even know the latter two had a few troops left in Iraq – are [going home](#) this year; the rump British force in the south will probably be out by next summer.

The Iraqis are beginning to truly go their own way (or, more accurately, ways); and yet, in January, when Barack Obama enters office, there will still be more American troops in Iraq than there were in April 2003 when Baghdad fell. Winning an election with an antiwar label, Obama has promised – kinda – to end the American war there and bring the troops – sorta, mostly – home. But even after his planned 16-month withdrawal of US "combat brigades," which [may not be welcomed](#) by his commanders in the field,

including former Iraq commander, now Centcom Commander David Petraeus, there are still plenty of combative non-combat forces, which will be labeled "[residual](#)" and left behind to fight "al-Qaeda." Then, there are all those "advisors" still there to train Iraqi forces, the guards for the giant bases the Bush administration built in the country, the many thousands of [armed private security contractors](#) from companies like Blackwater, and of course, the 1,000 "diplomats" who are to staff the [newly opened](#) US embassy in Baghdad's Green Zone, possibly the largest embassy on the planet. Hmmmm.

And while the new president turns to domestic matters, it's quite possible that significant parts of his foreign policy could be left to the oversight of Vice President Joe Biden who, in case anyone has forgotten, proposed a plan for Iraq back in 2007 so filled with imperial hubris that it still startles. In a Caesarian moment, he recommended that the US – not Iraqis – functionally [divide the country](#) into three parts. Although he preferred to call it [a "federal system,"](#) it was, for all intents and purposes, a *de facto* partition plan.

If Iraq remains a sorry tale of American destruction and dysfunction without, as yet, a discernible end in sight, Afghanistan may prove Iraq squared. And there, candidate Obama expressed no desire to wind the war down and withdraw American troops. Quite the opposite, during the election campaign he plunked hard for escalation, something our NATO allies are sure not to be [too enthusiastic](#) about. According to the Obama plan, many more American troops (if available, itself an open question) are to be poured into the country in what would essentially be a massive "surge strategy" by yet another occupant of the Oval Office. Assumedly, the new Afghan policy would be aided and abetted by those CIA-run UAVs directed toward Pakistan to hunt down Osama bin Laden and pals, while undoubtedly further destabilizing a shaky ally.

When it comes to rising civilian casualties from US air strikes in their countries, both [Afghan President](#) Hamid Karzai and [Pakistani President](#) Asif Ali Zardari have already used their congratulatory phone calls to President-elect Obama to plead for an end to the attacks, which produce both a profusion of dead bodies and a profusion of live, vengeful enemies. Both have done the same with the Bush administration, Karzai to the [point of tears](#).

The US military argues that the use of air power is necessary in the face of a spreading, ever more dangerous, Taliban insurgency largely because there are too few boots on the ground. ("If we got more boots on the ground, we would not have to rely as much on airstrikes" was the way Army Brig. Gen. Michael Tucker, deputy commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan, [put it](#).) But rest assured, as the boots multiply on increasingly hostile ground, the military will discover it needs more, not less, air power to back more troops in more trouble.

So, after January 20th, expect Obama to take possession of George Bush's disastrous Afghan War; and unless he is far more skilled than Alexander the Great, British empire builders, and the Russians, his war, too, will continue to rage without ever becoming a raging success.

Finally, President-elect Obama accepted the overall framework of a "Global War on Terror" during his presidential campaign. This "war" lies at the heart of the Bush administration's fantasy world of war that has set all-too-real expanses of the planet aflame. Its dangers were further [highlighted](#) this week by the *New York Times*, which revealed that secret orders in the spring of 2004 gave the US military "new authority to attack the Qaeda terrorist network anywhere in the world, and a more sweeping mandate to conduct operations in countries not at war with the United States."

At least twelve such attacks have been carried out since then by Special Operations forces on Pakistan, Somalia, most recently Syria, and other unnamed countries. Signed by Donald Rumsfeld, signed off on by President Bush, built-upon recently by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, these secret orders enshrine the Pentagon's right to ignore international boundaries, or the sovereignty of nations, in an endless global "war" of choice against small, scattered bands of terrorists.

As reporter Jim Lobe [pointed out](#) recently, a "series of interlocking grand bargains" in what the neoconservatives used to call "the Greater Middle East" or the "arc of instability" might be available to an Obama administration capable of genuinely new thinking. These, he wrote, would be "backed by the relevant regional players as well as major global powers – aimed at pacifying Afghanistan; integrating Iran into a new regional security structure; promoting reconciliation in Iraq; and launching a credible process to negotiate a comprehensive peace between Israel and the Arab world."

If, however, Obama accepts a War on Terror framework, as he already seems to have, as well as those "residual" forces in Iraq, while pumping up the war in Afghanistan, he may quickly find himself playing by Rumsfeld rules, whether or not he revokes those specific orders. In fact, left alone in Washington, backed by the normal national security types, he may soon find himself locked into all sorts of unpalatable situations, as [once happened](#) to another Democratic president, Lyndon Baines Johnson, who opted to escalate an inherited war when what he most wanted to do was focus on domestic policy.

## Previews for a Political Zombie Movie

**D**omestically, it's clear enough that we are about to leave the age of Bush – in tone and policy – but what that leave-taking will consist of is still an open question. This is especially so given a cratering economy and the pot-holed road ahead. It is a moment when Obama has, not surprisingly, begun to emphasize continuity and reassurance alongside his campaign theme of "change we can believe in."

All you had to do was look at that array of Clinton-era economic types and CEOs behind Obama at his first news conference to think: been there, done that. The full photo of his economic team that day offered a striking profile of pre-Bush era Washington and the Washington Consensus, and so a hint of the Democratic world the new president will

walk into on January 20, 2009.

How about former Treasury Secretaries Robert Rubin and Larry Summers, those kings of 1990s globalization, or even the towering former Fed chief from the first Bush era, Paul Volcker? Didn't that have the look of previews for a political zombie movie, a lineup of the undead? As head of the New America Foundation Steve Clemons has been [writing recently](#), the economic team looks suspiciously as if it were preparing for a "Clinton 3.0" moment.

You could scan that gathering and not see a genuine rogue thinker in sight; no off-the-reservation figures who might represent a breath of fresh air and fresh thinking (other than, being hopeful, the president-elect himself). Clemons [offers](#) an interesting list of just some obvious names left off stage: "Paul Krugman, Joseph Stiglitz, Jeffrey Sachs, James Galbraith, Leo Hindery, Clyde Prestowitz, Charlene Barshefsky, C. Fred Bergsten, Adam Posen, Robert Kuttner, Robert Samuelson, Alan Murray, William Bonvillian, Doug & Heidi Rediker, Bernard Schwartz, Tom Gallagher, Sheila Bair, Sherle Schwenninger, and Kevin Phillips."

Mobilizing a largely Clintonista brain trust may look reassuring to some – an ingathering of all the Washington wisdom available before Hurricane Bush/Cheney hit town, but unfortunately, we don't happen to be entering a Clinton 3.0 moment. What's globalizing now is American disaster, which threatens to level a vulnerable world.

In a sense, though, domestic policy may, relatively speaking, represent the *good news* of the coming Obama era. We know, for instance, that those preparing the way for the new president's arrival are thinking hard about how to roll back the worst of Bush cronyism, enrich-yourself-at-the-public-troughism, general lawlessness, and unconstitutionality. As a start, [according to](#) Ceci Connolly and R. Jeffrey Smith of the *Washington Post*, Obama advisers have already been compiling "a list of about 200 Bush administration actions and executive orders that could be swiftly undone to reverse White House policies on climate change, stem cell research, reproductive rights and other issues," including oil drilling in pristine wild lands. In addition, Obama's people are evidently at work [on ways to close Guantanamo](#) and try some of its prisoners in US courts.

However, if continuity domestically means rollback to the Clinton era, continuity in the foreign policy sphere – Guantanamo aside – may be a somewhat different matter. We won't know the [full cast of characters](#) to come until the president-elect makes the necessary announcements or has a national security press conference with a similar lineup behind him. But it's certainly rumored that Robert Gates, a symbol of [continuity](#) from [both Bush eras](#), might be kept on as secretary of defense, or a Republican senator like [Richard Lugar](#) of Indiana or, more interestingly, retiring Nebraska Senator Chuck Hagel might be appointed to the post. Of course, many Clintonistas are sure to be in this lineup, too.

In addition, among the essential cast of characters will be Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, [Michael Mullen](#), and Centcom Commander David Petraeus, both late Bush appointees, both seemingly flexible military men, both interested in a military-plus approach to the

Afghan and Iraq wars. Petraeus, for instance, reportedly recently asked for, and was denied, permission to meet with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

All these figures will represent a turn away from the particular madness of the early Bush years abroad, one that [actually began](#) in the final years of his second term. But such a national security lineup is unlikely to include fresh thinkers, who might truly reimagine an imperial world, or anyone who might genuinely buck the power of the Pentagon. What Obama looks to have are custodians and bureaucrats of empire, far more cautious, far more sane, and certainly far more grown-up than the first-term Bush appointees, but not a [cast of characters](#) fit for reshaping American policy in a new world of disorder and unraveling economies, [not a crew](#) ready to break new ground and cede much old ground on this still American-garrisoned planet of ours.

## Breathless in Washington

**L**et's assume the best: that Barack Obama truly means to bring some form of the people's will, as he imagines it, to Washington after eight years of unconstitutional "commander-in-chief" governance. That – take my word for it – he can't do without the people themselves expressing that will.

Of course, even in the Bush era, Americans didn't simply cede the public commons. They turned out, for instance, in staggering numbers to protest the President's invasion of Iraq before it ever happened, and again more recently to work tirelessly to elect Obama president. But – so it seems to me – when immediate goals are either disappointingly not achieved, or achieved relatively quickly, most Americans tend to pack their bags and head for home, as so many [did in despair](#) after the invasion was launched in 2003, as so many [reportedly](#) are doing again, in a far more celebratory mood, now that Obama is elected.

But hard as his election may have been, that was surely the easy part. He is now about to enter the hornet's nest. Entrenched interests. Entrenched ideas. Entrenched ideology. Entrenched profits. Entrenched lobbyists. Entrenched bureaucrats. Entrenched think tanks. An entrenched Pentagon and allied military-industrial complex, both bloated beyond imagining and virtually untouchable, along with a labyrinthine intelligence system of more than [18](#) agencies, departments, and offices.

Washington remains an imperial capital. How in the world will Barack Obama truly begin to change that without you?

In the Bush years, the special interests, lobbyists, pillagers, and crony corporations not only pitched their tents on the public commons, but with the help of the President's men and women, simply took possession of large hunks of it. That was called "privatization." Now, as Bush & Co. prepare to leave town in a cloud of catastrophe, the feeding frenzy at

the [public trough](#) only seems to grow.

It's a natural reaction – and certainly a commonplace media reaction at the moment – to want to give Barack Obama a "chance." Back off those critical comments, people now say. Fair's fair. Give the President-elect a little "breathing space." After all, the election is barely over, he's not even in office, he hasn't had his [first 100 days](#), and already the criticism has begun.

But those who say this don't understand Washington – or, in the case of various media figures and pundits, perhaps understand it all too well.

Political Washington is a conspiracy – in the original sense of the word: "to breathe the same air." In that sense, there is no air in Washington that isn't stale enough to choke a president. Send Obama there alone, give him that "breathing space," don't start demanding the quick ending of wars or anything else, and you're not doing him, or the American people, any favors. Quite the opposite, you're consigning him to suffocation.

Leave Obama to them and he'll break your heart. If you do, then blame yourself, not him; but better than blaming anyone, pitch your own tent on the public commons and make some noise. Let him know that Washington's isn't the only consensus around, that Americans really do want our troops to come home, that we actually are looking for "change we can believe in," which would include a less weaponized, less imperial American world, based on a reinvigorated idea of defense, not aggression, and on the Constitution, not leftover Rumsfeld rules or a bogus Global War on Terror.

**[Note for TomDispatch readers:** For those who want to follow issues of war and peace, especially in the "arc of instability," I want to recommend four sites that are sure to prove as invaluable in the Obama era as they have been (to me at least) during the Bush years: Juan Cole's never miss-able [Informed Comment](#) blog, [Antiwar.com](#) (which has recently added Jason Ditz's useful daily summaries of the latest news developments like [this Iraqi one](#)), Paul Woodward's sharp-eyed site [The War in Context](#), and the always fascinating and provocative online newspaper, [Asia Times](#). I check in with all of them daily.]