Obama’s transition: A who’s who of imperialist policy

19 November 2008

The contradiction between the aspirations and hopes of millions of Americans who voted to repudiate the Bush administration's policies of war and social reaction and the class character of the incoming Obama administration has become increasingly clear over the two weeks since Election Day.

The filling out of Obama's transition team with a cast of financiers, lobbyists and defense operatives gives tangible evidence of what is being prepared. The makeup of the team, which Obama has said is working to make "as seamless a transition on national security as possible," shows that his administration will consist of proven veterans of the Washington establishment who are deemed more competent, but no less ruthless, than the Bush administration in defending the interests of US imperialism.

Previous incoming administrations made concessions to public sentiment, appointing figures with popular appeal to second-tier posts. In 1977, President Jimmy Carter, whose administration marked a significant rightward shift by the Democratic Party, nevertheless named one-time civil rights activist Andrew Young as US ambassador to the United Nations—a post from which Young was fired after meeting with the Palestine Liberation Organization.

Relying on the overwhelming hatred of American people for the despised Bush administration and his status as the first African-American president, Obama does not feel the need to make such an appeal. Indeed, he has gone out of his way to solidarize himself with right-wing politicians. On Monday, Obama met in Chicago with John McCain, his Republican opponent in the election. In an interview the previous evening on the "60 Minutes" television program, he affirmed his decision to appoint Republicans to his cabinet, and his advisors have widely floated the possibility of his retaining Robert Gates as secretary of defense.

Obama's transition team is of a piece with these maneuvers. It is co-chaired by Valerie Jarrett, a Chicago real estate magnate and confidante of Obama, and John Podesta, former chief-of-staff for President Bill Clinton and head of the Podesta Group, a Washington lobbying firm. The transition team employs 450 people and has a budget of $12 million. It includes several "review teams" to prepare recommendations for the incoming administration's nominations and policy.

The co-chairs of the US Treasury review team are Josh Gotbaum, an investment banker at Lazare Frères who served in numerous positions during the Clinton administration, and Michael Warren, chief operating officer of Washington lobbying firm Stonebridge International LLC.

The co-chairs of the State Department review team are both former Clinton administration State Department officials. Tom Donilon is a former top lobbyist for US mortgage giant Fannie Mae, recently bailed out with US taxpayer funds, and now a partner at law firm O'Melveny and Myers. He is a member of several influential foreign policy think tanks. Wendy Sherman is a top employee at the Albright Group, an international lobbying firm founded by Clinton administration Secretary of State Madeleine Albright.

The co-chairs of the Department of Defense review team are John White, who served as deputy secretary of Defense in the Clinton administration and recently headed the Kennedy School's Middle East Initiative at Harvard University, and Michèle A. Flournoy, deputy assistant secretary of defense in the Clinton administration and president of the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) think tank.

Members of CNAS, a rather small Washington think tank with a staff of 30 employees founded in 2003 by

© World Socialist Web Site

Podesta and Flournoy, play an outsized role in the Obama transition team. Obama advisors told the *Wall Street Journal* that Flournoy might become the first female US defense secretary. Wendy Sherman, who serves on the CNAS board of advisors, is expected to receive a top State Department job. Two CNAS advisors, Susan Rice and James Steinberg, are reportedly on Obama's short list for national security advisor.

So many CNAS members are likely to join the Obama administration that CNAS officials told the *Journal* they were concerned the think tank might fold after Obama's inauguration. However, they added, they hope to recruit Bush administration officials leaving office to fill the CNAS vacancies.

CNAS publications, many of which are publicly available on its web site, make it clear that the Obama administration's foreign policy will have a thoroughly imperialist character. A June 2008 CNAS report authored by Flournoy and other CNAS staff calls for a "conditional engagement" of US troops in Iraq and opposes a fixed timeline for a US withdrawal—a position now adopted by Obama. It advocates the large-scale deployment of US ground forces to Afghanistan and Pakistan to pursue an Iraq "surge"-style policy of buying off local military leaders and massacring those who resist.

The CNAS also favors a policy of using Japan and India to contain China in East and South Asia. On November 11, it published a report on US naval power, warning of a potential great power war in the Pacific Ocean and calling for the US Navy to stay ahead of the Chinese Navy. The *New York Times*' November 16 editorial, "A Military for a Dangerous New World," echoed these recommendations, warning against China "expanding its deep-water navy," saying the US cannot "cede the seas," and adding that it cannot "allow any country to interfere with vital maritime lanes."

Obama's consideration of Hillary Clinton for the position of secretary of state further underscores the falsity of his pose of opposition to the Bush administration's militarism. During the Democratic primary campaign, he attacked Clinton for having voted to allow Bush to attack Iraq, calling it a strategic blunder. He also denounced her for voting in favor of a Senate resolution branding the Iranian Revolutionary Guard a terrorist organization. During the primary campaign, Clinton declared that the US would "obliterate" Iran if it attacked Israel. Now Obama is considering placing her at the head of US diplomacy.

These developments illuminate a fundamental political truth: Obama was the choice of a faction of the US political establishment that saw him as the ideal figurehead for the repackaging and recalibration of US imperialist policy.

Alex Lantier

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site