

Obama, the military and the threat of dictatorship

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With his choice of Admiral Dennis Blair as director of national intelligence, President-elect Barack Obama has now named three recently retired four-star military officers to serve in his cabinet. This unprecedented representation of the senior officer corps within the incoming Democratic administration is indicative of a growth in the political power of the US military that poses a serious threat to basic democratic rights.

As head of the US military's Pacific command in 1999-2000, Blair was distinguished by his efforts to solidarize the Pentagon with the military of Indonesia as it carried out butchery in East Timor, effectively vetoing the half-hearted human rights concerns voiced by the Clinton administration.

Before tapping Blair, Obama named former Marine Gen. James Jones as his national security adviser and former Army chief of staff Gen. Erik Shinseki as secretary of veterans affairs. It is also reported that the incoming administration may ask retired Air Force Gen. Michael Hayden to stay on as director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

The *Washington Post* last Saturday described this concentration of former senior officers in the administration as “an unusual trend for a Democratic administration and one that has surprised both political camps.”

The appointments follow the announcement that Robert Gates, Bush's defense secretary, will stay on at the Pentagon, where multiple “transition teams” are at work to assure that continuity is maintained in America's ongoing wars of aggression and that the immense power of the military remains unchecked.

Earlier this month Obama spelled out his subservience to the Pentagon by declaring, “To ensure prosperity here at home and peace abroad, we all share the belief we have to maintain the strongest military on the planet.” To that end, he has pledged to increase the size of US ground forces by 100,000 soldiers and Marines and made it clear that there will be no significant cuts to a military budget that is gobbling up some \$850 billion annually under conditions of soaring deficits and an intensifying financial crisis.

There is no doubt a significant element of political calculation in Obama's decision to surround himself with military brass and assure that he is seen as “supporting our troops.” There is, after all, the bitter experience of the last Democratic

administration. Bill Clinton's first term was nearly shipwrecked by his confrontation with the uniformed command over his proposal to scrap the ban on gays in the military. For the remainder of his presidency, he was treated with open or barely concealed contempt by much of the officer corps.

The threat of an even uglier confrontation under Obama is very real given the disastrous effects of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan on the military and reports of a growing delusional sentiment within the officer corps that the failures of the US operations in these countries were the result of a “stab in the back” delivered by the civilian authorities, the media and the American people themselves.

But there is a more fundamental process underlying both Clinton's experience and Obama's bowing before the military today. It is the immense growth in the power of the “military industrial complex” against which President Dwight Eisenhower warned nearly half a century ago—a power which grew uninterrupted during the whole of the Cold War.

During the last seven years of the so-called “global war on terrorism,” this expansion of power—together with the rise in military funding—has only escalated, accompanied by increasingly sinister features bound up with US imperialism's growing reliance on militarism as a means of offsetting the decline in its global economic position.

The military chiefs of the Pentagon's regional commands—CENTCOM, PACOM, SOUTHCOM and the new AFRICOM—have largely supplanted ambassadors and civilian officials as the representatives of US interests and power around the globe.

Meanwhile, in prosecuting two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the military command has been tasked with running colonial-style administrations with virtually unfettered power over entire populations.

Finally, with the creation of military tribunals and military prisons, such as the one in Guantánamo, the military has usurped tasks that historically have been assigned to civilian courts operating under the rules of the US Constitution.

These momentous changes have taken place even as the military, and particularly its officer corps, has grown increasingly separate and estranged from the civilian world and become ever more dominated by Republican politics in general and evangelical Christian beliefs in particular. A “professional”

and “volunteer” force, it is more insulated from the popular pressures felt by armies made up of draftees and “citizen soldiers” of earlier generations.

The *Washington Post* Sunday published an extraordinarily blunt opinion piece by a former assistant secretary of state in the Bush administration, Thomas Schweich, on the increasing dominance of the American state by its military apparatus.

“Our Constitution is at risk,” wrote Schweich. He warned that the elevation of an unprecedented number of former senior officers into Obama’s cabinet could “complete the silent military coup d’etat that has been steadily gaining ground below the radar screen of most Americans and the media.”

Schweich, who served as an ambassador for counter-narcotics in Afghanistan and then oversaw international law enforcement affairs at the State Department, wrote that he “saw firsthand the quiet, de facto military takeover of much of the US government,” which in Iraq and Afghanistan, he said, “was, in theory, justified by the exigencies of war.”

He stressed that what began abroad is coming home. “Now the Pentagon has drawn up plans to deploy 20,000 US soldiers inside our borders by 2011, ostensibly to help state and local officials respond to terrorist attacks or other catastrophes.” This mission, he warned, “could easily spill over from emergency counter-terrorism work into border-patrol efforts, intelligence gathering and law enforcement operations.”

A report that appeared in a magazine published by the US Army War College last month, just weeks after the election, indicates that the Pentagon is preparing its own “transition,” a process that is being driven not by Obama’s vague promises of “change” but by what the military command sees as a historic crisis of the existing order that could require the use of armed force to quell social struggles at home.

Entitled “Known Unknowns: Unconventional ‘Strategic Shocks’ in Defense Strategy Development,” the monograph was produced by Nathan Freier, a recently retired Army lieutenant colonel who is a professor at the college, the Army’s main training institute for prospective senior officers. According to the magazine, he “continues to provide expert advice to key actors in the security and defense policymaking and analysis communities.”

One of the key contingencies for which Freier insists the US military must prepare is a “violent, strategic dislocation inside the United States,” which could be provoked by “unforeseen economic collapse” or “loss of functioning political and legal order.”

He writes: “To the extent events like this involve organized violence against local, state, and national authorities and exceed the capacity of the former two to restore public order and protect vulnerable populations, DoD [Department of Defense] would be required to fill the gap.”

Freier continues: “Widespread civil violence inside the United States would force the defense establishment to reorient priorities *in extremis* to defend basic domestic order ... An

American government and defense establishment lulled into complacency by a long-secure domestic order would be forced to rapidly divest some or most external security commitments in order to address rapidly expanding human insecurity at home.”

In other words, a sharp intensification of the unfolding capitalist crisis accompanied by an eruption of class struggle and the threat of social revolution in the US itself could force the Pentagon to call back its expeditionary armies from Iraq and Afghanistan for use against American workers.

Given such conditions, he adds: “DoD might be forced by circumstances to put its broad resources at the disposal of civil authorities to contain and reverse violent threats to domestic tranquility. Under the most extreme circumstances, this might include use of military force against hostile groups inside the United States. Further, DoD would be, by necessity, an essential enabling hub for the continuity of political authority in a multi-state or nationwide civil conflict or disturbance.”

This peculiar phrase—“an essential enabling hub for continuity of authority”—is a euphemism for military dictatorship.

He concludes this section of the article by noting, “DoD is already challenged by stabilization abroad. Imagine the challenges associated with doing so on a massive scale at home.”

The point is well taken. Having failed to quell resistance and restore order in Iraq and Afghanistan, what would be the prospect of the military succeeding in an occupation of the US itself?

That these questions are being asked by the Pentagon’s strategic planners should be taken with deadly seriousness. Those commanding the armed forces of the US capitalist state foresee the present crisis creating conditions for revolution and are preparing accordingly.

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