

Obama's New York Times interview: Military aggression and attacks on democratic rights to continue

Barry Grey
10 March 2009

In an extensive interview conducted last Friday with the *New York Times* and published on Sunday, President Barack Obama outlined policies on national security and foreign affairs that underscore the essential continuity between his administration and that of his predecessor, George W. Bush.

The interview made clear that the new administration has embraced the basic political and ideological framework of the Bush administration to justify military aggression and illegality internationally and attacks on democratic rights within the United States—the so-called "global war on terror."

In its report on the interview, the *Times* itself took note of the continuity between the policies of the two administrations, writing: "The president spoke at length about the struggle with terrorism in Afghanistan and elsewhere, staking out positions that at times seemed more comparable to those of his predecessor than many of Mr. Obama's more liberal supporters would like. He did not rule out the option of snatching terrorism suspects out of hostile countries."

Further on, the newspaper commented, "Mr. Obama signaled that those on the left seeking a wholesale reversal of Mr. Bush's detainee policy might be disappointed."

In the course of the interview, Obama took pains to rebut suggestions that his policies were in some way "socialistic," going so far as to call back the interviewer later in the day to reaffirm his commitment to "free market principles." (See "A specter haunts the ruling elite")

Asked whether the US was presently winning the war in Afghanistan, Obama said "No," and proceeded to

outline his policy of expanding the Afghan war and extending it into Pakistan. He said: "At the heart of a new Afghanistan policy is going to be a smarter Pakistan policy. As long as you've got safe havens in these border regions that the Pakistani government can't control or reach, in effective ways, we're going to continue to see vulnerability on the Afghan side of the border."

Last month Obama announced the deployment of an additional 17,000 US troops to Afghanistan, the first installment of a military escalation that is expected to double the US troop presence in the country to 60,000 in the coming months. At the same time, the Obama administration has stepped up missile attacks across the border in Pakistan, and has gone beyond such attacks by the Bush administration by targeting for the first time anti-government Pakistani Islamist forces that are not involved in cross-border raids on US and NATO troops in Afghanistan.

In response to a question from the *Times*, Obama suggested that US would be open to negotiating with certain anti-US Islamist and Taliban factions in Afghanistan in an attempt to break them away from more hard-line Taliban forces. He justified this option by referring to the "success" of a similar tactic employed in Iraq by then-US commander in Iraq and current chief of the US Central Command, Gen. David Petraeus.

Petraeus, as part of the Bush administration's military "surge" in Iraq, combined the bribing of some Sunni tribal leaders with intensified military violence against so-called "incorrigible" elements and devastating attacks on civilian populations in hostile regions. The aim was to isolate and destroy the most implacable

opponents of the American occupation and the US puppet regime in Baghdad.

In an effort to deflect a suggestion by the *Times* interviewer that he was "more liberal than you suggested on the campaign," Obama cited his own policy in Iraq. "I think it would be hard to argue, Jeff," he said. "We have delivered on every promise that we've made so far. We said that we would end the war in Iraq and we've put forward a responsible plan."

"Responsible" is a code word for delaying any significant draw-down of US troops until the end of the year, in line with the demands of the military, and abandoning his campaign pledge to withdraw one combat brigade a month and all "combat" forces within 16 months. In the plan for Iraq that Obama announced last month, a residual force of up to 50,000 so-called "non-combat" troops will remain in Iraq at least until the end of 2011.

At another point, to counter any suggestion that he was a "socialist," Obama touted his commitment to slash spending and impose fiscal austerity, making clear, however, that the military budget would not be targeted. "We've essentially said that, number one, we're going to reduce non-defense discretionary spending to the lowest levels in decades," he said.

On the illegal and anti-democratic methods employed by the US in pursuit of the "war on terror"—the kidnapping of alleged terrorists and their transfer for interrogation (torture) to third countries (rendition), the indefinite detention without charges or trial of so-called "enemy combatants," warrantless domestic spying—Obama indicated that the substance of the Bush administration's policies would be continued.

Asked about striking a "balance" between national security and civil liberties, Obama gave his stamp of approval to the role of top Bush intelligence officials who oversaw massive domestic spying, rendition, secret CIA torture centers and illegal detentions, including of legal residents and US citizens. He suggested that while in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 there may have been abuses, by the time he took office these excesses had been corrected.

He said: "I think the CIA, for example... took steps to correct certain policies and procedures after those first couple of years. I think that (former CIA director) Admiral Hayden and Mike McConnell at DNI (director of national intelligence) were capable public servants

who really had America's security interests in mind when they acted, and I think they were mindful of American values and ideals..."

The *Times* interviewer cited public statements by Obama's CIA director, Leon Panetta, that the Obama administration would continue the practice of rendition. Asked why the new administration would continue the policy, Obama suggested it was justified in relation to "dangerous" Al Qaeda operatives who surfaced in countries with which the US had no extradition treaty and which would be loathe to prosecute.

Declaring that his administration was conducting a review of rendition policy to somehow make it compatible with international law, and reiterating his verbal renunciation of torture, he said, "... we ultimately provide anybody that we're detaining an opportunity through habeas corpus to answer to charges."

The *Times* reported that Obama aides subsequently told the newspaper that "Mr. Obama did not mean to suggest that everybody held by American forces would be granted habeas corpus or the right to challenge their detention. In a court filing last month, the Obama administration agreed with the Bush administration position that 600 prisoners in a cavernous prison on the American air base at Bagram in Afghanistan have no right to seek their release in court.

"Instead, aides said Mr. Obama's comment referred only to a Supreme Court decision last year finding that prisoners held at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, have the right to go to federal court to challenge their continued detention."

Obama's interview with the *Times* is the latest demonstration of the fraudulent character of his campaign rhetoric of "change" and his anti-war posturing, and underscores the impossibility of effecting any real change in government policy under a political system dominated by two parties of American imperialism.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact