

Richard Nixon as Obama's role model

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29 June 2011

The *New York Times* published an opinion piece on Sunday drafted by the editor of *Foreign Affairs* magazine, Gideon Rose, entitled “What would Nixon do?”

Undoubtedly meant to be provocative, the question posed in the headline was directed to the quandaries confronting the Obama White House as it pursues the goals stated by the US president in his speech on the Afghanistan war last week. In his June 22 address, Obama promised a withdrawal of 33,000 “surge” troops by next September and a turnover of security operations to Afghan puppet forces by sometime in 2014.

In our response to the Obama speech, the *World Socialist Web Site* stated: “The plan announced by Obama will spell an escalation rather than a reduction in the bloodshed in Afghanistan. The aim is to carry out a military offensive over this summer and the next in an attempt to militarily crush the popular opposition to US occupation. To the extent that the withdrawal affects firepower available to US commanders, it will inevitably lead to the use of more air strikes and drone missile attacks and, as a result, an even greater number of civilian casualties.”

The opinion piece drafted by Rose provides added confirmation to this assessment.

Both the author of this piece and the publication that he edits are worth examining. *Foreign Affairs*, the organ of the Council on Foreign Relations, has long served as a public forum for debating foreign policy issues within the US political establishment. It is the same magazine where Henry Kissinger, then a private citizen, first advanced views on Vietnam that would subsequently be embraced by Nixon after his 1969 inauguration.

As for Rose, he is described by the magazine as an expert on international conflict, terrorism and economic sanctions. He was a Middle East advisor on the National Security Council during the Clinton administration, helping craft the sanctions regime against Iraq estimated to have claimed the lives of over half a million Iraqi children.

Thus, Rose advises Obama as a member of the Democratic foreign policy establishment with real experience in the organization of war crimes.

His critique of the plan put forward in Obama's speech is that it represents not a strategy, but an attempt to chart a safe course between the military's demands for an indefinite continuation

of the surge, which has brought US troop deployments to over 100,000 in Afghanistan, and the growing popular sentiment for an end to the war—with its loss of life and waste of over \$2 billion every week that it goes on.

What Obama needs, writes Rose, “is a strategy for getting out without turning a retreat into a rout—and he would be wise to borrow one from the last administration to extricate itself from a thankless, seemingly endless counterinsurgency in a remote and strategically marginal region. Mr. Obama should ask himself in short: What would Nixon do?”

The invocation of Richard Nixon—the only US president forced to resign under threat of impeachment, a war criminal, and a figure whose very name has become a synonym for corruption, abuse of power and “dirty tricks”—as a role model for the former candidate of “hope” and “change you can believe in” doubtless aims to be jarring.

Yet, there is no arguing that there are parallels between the two politicians, as well as between the two neocolonial wars that they inherited from their immediate predecessors in the White House.

Nixon, it bears remembering, ran for office in 1968 not on his record as a hard-line militarist and anticommunist, but as the candidate with a “secret plan” to achieve “peace with honor” and bring an end to the Vietnam War. Forty years later, Obama was elected in large measure thanks to a cynical appeal to growing antiwar sentiment and revulsion towards the policies of aggressive war, torture and attacks on democratic rights pursued by George W. Bush.

After taking office, both presidents turned towards military escalation—Nixon in Vietnam and Obama in Afghanistan—on the grounds that the stepped-up killing would provide a means of ending the wars and achieving US objectives.

So what does Obama have to learn from Nixon? According to Rose, it is to emulate the strategy pursued by the former president and his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, of “masking their withdrawal with deliberate deception and aggressive covering fire.”

He argues that Nixon and Kissinger “almost succeeded,” and that in “today's more favorable environment” such tactics would likely work.

Rose acknowledges that this will lead to “charges of lying, escalation and betrayal,” but insists that Obama can pull it off with the appropriate mix of “deftness” and “tough-

mindedness.”

While admitting that the Vietnam War is widely regarded as the greatest debacle in the history of US imperialism, Rose writes, “But Mr. Nixon actually did a lot right in Vietnam, and his approach there was not the primary cause of the war’s ignominious end.”

Rose does not bother to go into any detail about Nixon’s strategy of “deception” and “aggressive covering fire” that he urges Obama to emulate. Given the historical record, his reticence on this score is understandable.

After taking office in January 1969 promising “peace with honor,” Nixon continued the war in Vietnam for another four years. During that period, another 21,000 US military personnel lost their lives and tens of thousands more were wounded. During the same period, almost half a million North Vietnamese soldiers were killed, as were roughly 109,000 members of the US-backed South Vietnamese forces. According to one estimate, there were 165,000 civilian casualties in South Vietnam during each year of the Nixon presidency, and an even greater toll in the North.

In short, the “aggressive covering fire” that Rose counts among the things that Nixon did “right” in Vietnam, cost the lives of millions of people. It involved immense war crimes, from the deliberate carpet-bombing of civilian population centers in North Vietnam and the mining of its harbors, to the Operation Phoenix assassination campaign in the South.

As for the “deliberate deception” that counts among Nixon’s other supposed strengths, this included secret and illegal bombing campaigns against Laos and Cambodia, gross abuses of power and the introduction of police state methods at home.

That these methods failed to bring about the desired results, Rose maintains, was merely the result of an unfavorable political conjuncture. “...[H]ad events in Washington played out differently—with Watergate not crippling the administration and with Congress less hell-bent on slamming the door behind the departing ground troops—they might have succeeded.”

What sophistry! Watergate was not something external to Nixon’s policy in Vietnam. Rather it arose directly out of it. The so-called “plumbers” unit, the dirty tricks and the use of the FBI and CIA against “enemies” at home began as part of an attempt to suppress mass opposition that built up to the Vietnam War under Nixon’s presidency. A criminal war abroad inevitably gave rise to criminal political methods at home.

Moreover, it was not a contentious Congress that undid Nixon’s policy, but rather the opposition of the majority of the US population to the war that found its expression not merely in antiwar protests, but in the growing resistance of the working class to paying for the war through rising inflation and reduced living standards.

Rose suggests that Obama can avoid the pitfalls that plagued Nixon because he is not ensnared in a Watergate crisis, does not face an antiwar Congress, and the resistance in Afghanistan

lacks the strength of the North Vietnamese and the National Liberation Front in South Vietnam.

Acknowledging that Nixon’s methods were “ham-fisted,” Rose goes on to write that, “Thanks to technological advances, the Obama administration can do the same thing while incurring far fewer human, financial, legal and political costs.” The drone missile attacks that have killed and maimed thousands of civilians in Pakistan, he contends, “are a precision replay of actions in Cambodia and Laos, but more effective and less controversial.”

This observation echoes a point that Obama himself made in his speech, declaring that while the US was called upon to employ force, “when that force can be targeted, we need not deploy large armies overseas.” He favorably cited Libya, where—without “a single soldier on the ground”—pilotless US drones can rain death from the skies with no risk of American casualties.

The most important trick of executing “withdrawal,” Rose counsels toward the conclusion of his article, is: “Withdrawal should be defined as the removal of ground forces from direct combat, not the abandonment of the country in question.”

This is indeed the objective being pursued by the Obama administration, which, even as it speaks publicly about withdrawing US forces and an “Afghanization” of the war to suppress popular resistance, is negotiating with the regime of President Hamid Karzai for the right to keep permanent US bases in Afghanistan for decades to come.

Rose’s glib and cynical article provides a revealing glimpse into the prevailing mindset within the Washington establishment and the Obama administration itself. Determined to maintain Washington’s dominant global position despite the decline of American capitalism, the ruling elite, together with both its Democratic and Republican representatives, turns ever more recklessly towards militarism.

That Richard Nixon can be proposed as a role model for Barack Obama is testimony to the bankruptcy of the Democratic Party and liberalism, as well as to the profound historical ignorance that prevails within ruling circles. Under conditions of deepening economic crisis and growing social anger in the working class, employing the criminal methods identified with Nixon can only unleash a crisis of bourgeois rule far deeper and more revolutionary than the one that ended in his downfall nearly 37 years ago.



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