

Obama signs his last Pentagon budget: A legacy of war and reaction

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President Barack Obama signed into law last week his seventh and final Pentagon spending bill, providing \$619 billion to continue and expand the murderous violence of the US war machine. Spending more than the next seven countries combined, the US military is currently engaged in combat operations in at least seven different countries, while maintaining some 800 overseas bases around the world.

Obama's signing statement was released on the Friday afternoon of a long holiday weekend, the favored time in Washington for dumping news that officials hope will escape the attention of the public. Once again, behind the backs of the American people, US imperialism is preparing another escalation of militarism and war.

The National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), as the Pentagon budget legislation is known, runs over 3,000 pages. It can be safely said that few if any of the members of the House and Senate who overwhelmingly approved it (in the Senate it passed 92-7) read the bill before casting their votes.

Yet, contained within its pages, along with the dry language of military personnel policies and the lucrative authorization of multi-billion-dollar contracts for new weapons systems, there is to be found a key to the real political legacy of Barack Obama, whose presidency comes to an end in barely three weeks.

Eight years ago, Obama was swept into office on a wave of antiwar sentiment based on the misplaced hopes of large sections of the population that America's first black president, with his promise of "change you can believe in," would spell an end to the wars and crimes of the Bush administration.

After barely nine months in office, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his supposed "vision" of a world free of nuclear weapons and for having "captured

the world's attention and given its people hope for a better future."

Even as the peace prize was announced, Obama was meeting with his war council to plan a major escalation of the war in Afghanistan. He was putting in place the framework for his signature policy—the drone assassination program that has killed thousands from Afghanistan and Pakistan to Somalia and Yemen. And he was preparing what has since emerged as a \$1 trillion nuclear weapons modernization program.

The supposed candidate of peace and change will now leave office with the deplorable distinction of becoming the first American president to have kept the country at war for two entire four-year terms. He seamlessly continued the so-called "war on terror" launched by his predecessor, George W. Bush, at the cost of over a million lives in Iraq and Afghanistan, while adding to it the wars launched under the cynical pretense of "human rights" in Libya and Syria, killing hundreds of thousands more and turning millions of others into refugees.

The bill that he signed last Friday provides the necessary resources for the uninterrupted continuation of this eruption of American militarism in pursuit of global US hegemony.

The general outlines of the NDAA were previously reported. In addition to the base Pentagon budget, it includes a \$67 billion Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) appropriation, a massive slush fund used to finance US wars abroad as well as budget-busting increases to military spending. Further funds are provided for the Energy Department's nuclear weapons programs.

In the final version of the legislation, previously unpublicized provisions have emerged that amount to a mandate to the incoming Trump administration to

continue and escalate the provocative military confrontations initiated by the Obama White House.

Included in the bill is language facilitating the “provision of man-portable air defense systems to the vetted Syrian opposition during fiscal year 2017.” As is well known, weapons funneled by the CIA and the Pentagon to the so-called “moderate rebels” have invariably ended up in the hands of Al Qaeda-affiliated militias that constitute the core fighting force in the US-orchestrated war for regime-change in Syria. These anti-aircraft missiles can be used not only to shoot down Russian warplanes, but also civilian passenger jets.

Another part of the bill aimed directly against Moscow includes a major increase in military aid to the right-wing, anti-Russian government of Ukraine, including for “lethal” military equipment.

In a blatant provocation directed against China, the legislation provides for high-level exchanges between the US military and the military of the island of Taiwan, which Beijing claims as part of its territory. The measure represents a further attack on the “One China” policy embraced by Washington for nearly four decades. It is in line with the provocation staged by Donald Trump earlier this month, accepting a congratulatory phone call from Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen and thereby signaling plans for an even more confrontational policy toward China.

Both Russia and China issued statements denouncing the provisions in the NDAA directed specifically against them.

The legislation also includes a provision known as the “Countering Disinformation and Propaganda Act,” which represents a plan to build up the propaganda arm of the US government. In the name of creating a new government agency to “counter foreign state and non-state propaganda and disinformation efforts aimed at undermining United States national security interests,” it establishes the framework for directing propaganda against the American people and cracking down on anyone who challenges or exposes the crimes of the US government.

Perhaps most decisively for the legacy of the 44th president of the United States, the legislation enacted last Friday is the seventh NDAA in a row signed by Obama that explicitly prohibits the closure of the infamous US prison camp at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. In his signing statement, Obama cynically criticized

this provision, while accepting it, declaring that “unless the Congress changes course, it will be judged harshly by history.”

In reality, when it comes to Guantanamo, history will find Obama himself guilty. On his first day in office in 2009 he announced an executive order promising that within one year he would shut down the prison camp, which had become a hated symbol of US torture and criminality. Ever since, Obama has bowed to the Pentagon, the intelligence agencies and the political right, including within the Democratic Party, obeying the restrictions of Congress and refusing to take any action to close Guantanamo.

At the same time, he protected all those within the Bush administration who were responsible for ordering and overseeing the systematic use of torture not only at Guantanamo, but in Iraq, Afghanistan and at CIA black sites round the world.

On January 20, Obama will hand the keys of Guantanamo to Donald Trump, who has vowed to “load it up with some bad dudes.” He has also called for the imprisonment of US citizens there and indicated his support for a redoubled use of torture.

Obama’s legacy is the seamless continuity between the crimes of the Bush administration, which were compounded during his own eight years in the White House, and the coming crimes of the government headed by Trump.



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