

July 23, 2009

Dear Friends,

Probably like most of you, I am engaged in a daily attempt to make up my mind about President Obama. I was an early supporter. And as a former Washington "player," I am aware how difficult is his position. I began to worry when he failed to grasp what I have seen to be the early window of opportunity for a new administration -- the first three months -- when the bureaucracy is relatively fluid. As the months have flown by, I have seen that there are many positive things, mainly in his eloquent addresses on world problems, notably his speech at the University of Cairo on world pluralism, but also quite a few negative things. With sadness and alarm I find that my list of the negatives keeps on growing. Among them are the following:

(1) the commitment to the war in "Af-Pak" which (I believe) will cost America upwards of \$6 trillion but perhaps *only* a few hundred casualties since we are relying increasingly on drone bombing. Just the money costs could derail almost everything Obama's supporters hoped and thought his administration would do. That amount of money is roughly half the total yearly income (the GNP) of America. It is costing America a great deal in terms of approval and friendship throughout the world. Of course, it will cost Afghanistan far more. Casualties and displaced persons figure high. Less dramatic perhaps but more crucial will be the further breakdown Afghan society, leaving behind when we ultimately get out an even more demoralized, fractured, war-lord-plagued society and will probably lead to a coup d'état in Pakistan, further enhancing the danger of war among the South Asian countries. The nominal leaders of Afghanistan (Hamid Karzai) and Pakistan (Asif Ali Zardari) whom we practically appointed and with whom we have chosen to work are hated by their people and are human monuments to the potential of government corruption. (Drugs, traffic in American arms even to insurgents, shakedowns of citizens, sale of public offices, outright stealing, kidnap for ransom...the list is long and as an old hand, it certainly reminds me of South Vietnam.) We now have a window of opportunity to get out of this looming disaster, but it seems that the President is determined to "stay the course." Fundamental to my worry is that I do not hear anyone around the President or he himself saying things that indicate that they know anything about Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kashmir or India, much less "Pashtunistan" or "Paktunistan," a.k.a. The Northwest Frontier Province. Ignorance is rarely a very trustworthy guide.

(Parenthetically, I have recently read the British "how to do it" manual on "Tribal fighting on the Northwest Frontier" -- the buzzword "counterinsurgency" was not in use then -- by General Sir Andrew Skeen. Skeen spent his life fighting the Pathans. He warned British soldiers back in the 1920s that the Pathans were "the finest individual fighters in the east, really formidable enemies, to despise whom means sure trouble." My copy is the only one I could find on the internet. It survived in a British officers' mess library. I doubt that Messrs Petraeus, McChrystal et al have ever heard of it. It makes more sense than Petraeus's *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*.)

(2) the choice of personnel is (to me) baffling:

In the military the President has chosen to keep on Bush's Secretary of Defense Robert Gates (who signed if not wrote the latest version of the neoconservative-inspired US National Defense Doctrine calling for, among other things, the "right" of first striking almost anyone we choose if we don't like them), General David Petraeus whom I regard as a con man for breathing life into the Vietnam counterinsurgency program (which has never worked anywhere in the world in the last two centuries when tried by the British, the Russians, the French, the Germans and us) and General Stanley McChrystal who makes statements that sound terrifyingly like the SS. McChrystal's main claim to fame appears to have come out of running the prison system in Afghanistan where, apparently, some of the worst cases of torture happened. Seymour Hersh of *The New Yorker* who just met with him came out of the meeting appalled. These men, allegedly, have told Obama that they could win the war in Afghanistan "on the cheap." So when his then principal military adviser gave a more sober assessment -- nearly half a million men -- Obama fired him and listened to Petraeus' siren song. Again, as an old hand, I cannot help remembering Vietnam where we went from 1,700 to half a million soldiers and still lost.

The Pentagon budget is not only enormous but contains a number of potential scandals. One of the worst is the F-22 fighter, designed to outclass a plane that does not exist and almost certainly will never be built. At almost unbelievable cost -- \$350 million a plane for a total of those on order now of \$64 billion -- it is like our counterinsurgency program: it does not fly the way we were told it would. (Despite advertised as a 'stealth' fighter, it is visible on radar and, being very fragile, requires about 8-10 times as much repair time as flying time.) If it is the worst, it is not unique. There does seem to be some movement on trimming it back. But not everything that cost a lot was designed to fly. Our overseas bases now cost us over \$100 billion yearly. Since the DOD sops up over half of the disposable resources of the government, Obama must get control of it. His task will be difficult because the DOD and what President Eisenhower called the "military industrial complex" have cleverly portioned out the work and procurement on programs to virtually every congressional district. Congress will opt for the F-22 program, or most of it I fear, even if it bankrupts America. Congress will be Obama's enemy if he tries any reforms. Even to try, he will need able advisers and staff. He should certainly know better than to appoint the foxes to guard the henhouse.

In the State Department activities, the most attractive person is Senator Mitchell but he does not seem to have any significant power. I hope I am wrong but he reminds me of my dear friend Governor Chester Bowles after JFK fired him and used him only for window dressing. The others have their own agendas. To be generous, one has to say that Hillary has not yet shown enough to judge, but some of her statements would be hard to worsen. I assume that she has begun to run for the presidency in 2012. She reminds me of the wise saying that when a president assembles his cabinet, he has all his enemies in one room. Dick Holbrooke has a bully's approach to diplomacy in one of the touchiest spots in the world. His browbeating, hectoring, shouting "Balkan" tactics are ill-suited to Central Asia.

In the White House, I think it would be hard to find a worse choice than the new Special Assistant to the President, Dennis Ross. Three examples of his skill: a) in the early negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians, when he was supposedly the honest broker, he took a more extreme position than even the Israelis, apparently shocking even them; b) in the build-up to the Iranian elections he sponsored and organized a program to "electronically invade" Iran with destabilizing messages trying, more subtly to be sure than the 1953 CIA-MI6 coup, to "regime change" it. Whatever else could be said about the "Iran-Syria Operations Group," it played right into the hands of Ahmadinejad and the rightwing of the *ulama* and the *Pasdaran-e Enqilab* (Revolutionary Guard), giving them a proof text for American interference in the elections and thus may have backfired since no issue in Iranian politics is as sensitive as the fear of foreign espionage; (c) just before his appointment to be the chief honcho on all the Middle East, Ross published a book whose message was essentially 'let's try a bit of diplomacy for a short time. Of course it won't work, but it will justify our attacking.' That is, his approach to peace-seeking is consistent and negative. Since he is now Obama's point man, we are in for deeper trouble.

The Vice President, as you know, just reversed the final position of the Bush administration, where Bush told the Israelis that America would not approve an attack on Iran: Joe Biden essentially authorized it, saying what the Israelis decided to do was their business, not ours. But those of you who have read my occasional essays could tick off the list of potential disasters for America and the Western world such an attack would bring on. It is patently absurd to suggest that an Israeli attack (made with our weapons and implicit approval) is not our business; indeed, regardless of our weapons and our approval, the long-term consequences for our economy, our position in the world, and our exposure to terrorism would be almost impossible to exaggerate.

On the CIA I confess I am not a big admirer. I fought its Middle Eastern policy in the early 1960s (drawing down upon myself a veritable "operation" by the then Middle Eastern chief James Critchfield) and my analysis of its activities earlier in Iran led me to believe it was often dangerously wrong. But to examine it objectively, consider that it is charged with three tasks: gathering information, evaluating it and performing dirty tricks.

On gathering information, it is usually agreed that over 80%, perhaps more like 95%, of its "take" comes from sources that you and I can access if we have the time, energy and interest. Most of the rest comes from technology (intercepts and code breaking which appear to be valuable for counter-terrorism but, at least in my experience, are of near zero value in 'strategy'; on satellite and overflight imagery much the same can be said.) I rarely heard of a useful product of "hum[an]int[elligence] -- that is what agents pick up. (Although the gossip they reported was sometimes fun to read.)

The second task, evaluation or "appreciation" is very difficult at best, but the record, at least during the Bush administration, is pretty poor. It was far better done during the Vietnam war, and even during the Bush administration, in the tiny Bureau of Intelligence and Research of the State Department. The failure to sustain the appointment of

Ambassador Chas Freeman to be head of the National Intelligence Council was one of the early bad omens of the Obama administration.

The third task, "dirty tricks," often leads to disasters and violates all that America should stand for. There are scores of examples to back up this statement, but one that has now come back to haunt us is the 1953 coup d'état that destroyed the elected and popular Iranian government of Prime Minister Muhammad Musaddiq (Mossadegh) that, had it survived, might have avoided the 1979 Iranian revolution and relieved us of our current worries there. We should get out of the business of espionage, kidnap, torture and murder. Period. The current leadership of the CIA does not seem to have addressed these issues and President Obama has gone out of his way to grant a sort of blanket pardon in advance lest anyone fear that what he did knowing that it was illegal he might be called to court.

Back to the President: From my experience with life at the "brink," during the Cuban Missile Crisis, I think that the President's initiatives on cutting back nuclear weapons is perhaps the best thing he has done so far. True, it is a very modest step, leaving thousands of "devices" in place on both the Russian and American sides, only gently urging Israel, which has hundreds of bombs, to join the Nonproliferation Treaty and actually encouraging India to forge ahead with its nuclear program. "Too little" is a just or even a generous judgment. What we have not done (in Israel) and done (in India) is moving probably inexorably toward at least doubling the number of nuclear-weapon-armed countries rather than (as I have strenuously advocated) moving from Russo-American cutbacks to nuclear free areas and ultimately toward worldwide abolition of nuclear weapons. But, President Obama has at least made a (short) step in the right direction.

That's for foreign affairs.

On domestic affairs, I am really not qualified, but the only senior man to whom I would give high marks is former Federal Reserve Bank chairman Paul Volker. I predict that sooner or later, however, several of the men he has appointed to handle the financial problems will prove to be major political embarrassments to his administration. The phrase "no banker left behind" may prove a potent slogan. What is happening at the top is still not completely evident, but what is not happening at the base already is: unemployment statistics are disturbing and they do not tell it all. The American middle class is in greater danger than at any time since the 1930s.

Healthcare is the really tough but literally vital issue. I doubt that many Americans realize that it takes up about \$1 in each \$6 in our economy but that still 50 million Americans are uninsured. A June 2009 poll showed that 85% of the American public said the system either must be fundamentally changed or totally rebuilt. I think Obama is right that this is probably the make or break issue of his presidency. But I do not find a strategy to match his rhetoric. For some reason, on this issue as on some others, he does not seem to grasp the potential advocacy -- and educational -- powers of presidency. He is certainly trying but he does not, at least so far, use the powers of the presidency to win

in the battle with Congress. Too bad he could not learn from Lyndon Johnson.

On the environment, I see no significant concrete steps. Perhaps on this issue is the real test of a presidency's fundamental role in a democracy: educating the public so that it can understand and cope with the present and the future. I certainly pretend to no particular wit on the environment, but it doesn't take much wit to see what is happening. Nevermind what the scientists say, one would have to be blind not to see what the photographs show us of climate change. And where does this lead? I think there can be no other answer than a cutback, either voluntarily or enforced, in our material culture. It is going to come as a great shock to Americans who have grown up with SUVs, cheap gasoline, uninsulated houses, and rampant consumerism. We had better begin to prepare ourselves for a significant decline in our standard of waste if not of living. And for this, the President must be our shepherd. Arguably, it is much too early in his presidency for him even to consider this role, but as we look back it was taking on a comparable role that marked the very early days of the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt.

There are, of course, for President Obama as for all previous presidents, myriads of other issues, but one that I believe will haunt him for his own term and beyond is moral and constitutional: What are we doing -- and what will we be seen to be doing -- to the vast but unknown number of prisoners -- terrorists, freedom fighters, accidents -- we are holding indefinitely, without charges, without recourse to the courts or that fundamental right in our heritage from the struggle against tyranny, habeas corpus. What we are doing at Guantanamo, Bagram and an unknown number of other "secret" prisons is, as the courts have rightly, if belatedly and guardedly, held, a violation of our legal system. We don't need the courts to tell us that it certainly a violation of our moral code. Obama began by urging transparency on this sordid issue, but he backed off . His Justice Department is now appealing a US District Court order that the Supreme Court decision on habeas corpus rights for Guantanamo also applied to a set of prisoners at Bagram who apparently arrived there by rendition or who, at least, are non Afghans. Of course, the most sordid issue is the evidence of sodomy, rape and torture captured in the photograph collection that Obama first wanted to release and then changed his mind. Those who profess to know say that what these pictures show is truly horrible. Some have compared them to the vivid record the Nazis kept of their sadism. Even pragmatically, since they are known -- indeed known worldwide -- it is questionable to say the least that hiding them will protect our reputation. For what little it is worth, my opinion is that making a clean breast of the evil and making an apology -- as we have repeatedly urged other countries to do in comparable cases -- would be or could be the beginning of the resurrection of America. As I write, Obama's Attorney General is wrestling with the question of how to approach this issue, cover it over, hit the thugs who actually tortured, or allow a really independent investigation of those who ordered them to commit the obscenities and inflict the pain.

So it is that I read with further dismay this morning's article in *The Washington Post*. Here it is:

U.S. Rebuffs U.N. Requests for Guantanamo Visits, Data on CIA Prisons

By Colum Lynch
Washington Post Staff Writer
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UNITED NATIONS -- The Obama administration has declined requests from U.N. human rights investigators for information on secret prisons and for private interviews with inmates at the U.S. military detention center at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, U.N. officials said, dampening their hopes of greater U.S. cooperation on human rights issues.

The rebuffs are the latest instances of the U.S. government resisting international human rights organizations' efforts to learn about Bush administration practices. In June, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton turned down a request from the top U.N. anti-torture official for a meeting in Washington to discuss practices at secret CIA detention centers and at Guantanamo Bay, despite the administration's avowed commitment to being open to greater scrutiny by the United Nations.

Two U.N. human rights researchers, Martin Scheinin and Manfred Nowak, separately requested visits to the Guantanamo Bay facility in recent months and were turned down. "They said, 'We are trying to close down the institution. For the time being, we don't see it as a priority,' " Scheinin said U.S. officials told him. "It was not a 'no, no.' It was a diplomatic 'no.' Let's say dialogue will continue."

Scheinin, Nowak and two other U.N. experts also requested details on the secret CIA prisons' history, locations and detainees. "The answer we received from the United States is meaningless. There is no meaningful information," Nowak said. "They're just repeating that the Obama administration stopped using secret places of detention."

U.S. officials said that they support the work of the U.N. human rights researchers but that they are constrained in releasing information on sensitive intelligence matters. They insist that they have not formally closed the door on visits to Guantanamo Bay.

U.S. efforts to engage the United Nations have been slowed because several key diplomatic positions in the Obama administration are still open or have just been filled.

"The Obama administration has taken aggressive action on this issue from day one, upholding our nation's fundamental values while making the American people safer," Mark Kornblau, a spokesman for the U.S. mission to the United Nations, said in a statement. "The President banned the use of so-called enhanced interrogation techniques, initiated a review of all pending cases at Guantanamo, and ordered that facility closed within one year."

Many U.N. human rights advocates acknowledge that President Obama has ended the worst practices of the Bush administration, including harsh interrogation techniques, such as waterboarding, that the United Nations considers torture. But they say the old practices damaged the international human rights system, making it easier for brutal regimes to

justify abuses.

Obama "has set an example of what a leader can do, in terms of policy and practice, to uphold the total prohibition on torture," Navanethem Pillay, the U.N. high commissioner for human rights, said last month. But "there is still much to do before the Guantanamo chapter is truly brought to a close."

The U.N. team probing secret prisons plans to publish a major report this year. The project will review the broader history of clandestine detention centers, starting with their use in Latin America from the 1970s onward, then delving into the Bush administration's secret detentions and scrutinizing other countries suspected of still using such prisons.

The investigators will pursue the fate of scores of suspects who were not sent to Guantanamo Bay, including Mustafa Setmariam Naser, a dual Syrian-Spanish citizen who is thought to have been transferred to Syria, said Joanne Mariner, director of the nonprofit group Human Rights Watch's terrorism and counterterrorism program. "They are interested in bringing to light some new cases," she said.

Still, U.N. rights investigators have differed over how to respond to the Obama administration's refusal to abandon a number of Bush-era policies, including open-ended detention of terrorism suspects and the use of military commissions. Some investigators insist that they have an obligation to prod the administration until it confronts the United States' human rights record. Others say it is time to move on and direct attention at governments that continue abuses.

"It is not enough to say we've stopped these practices and we'll look to the future," Nowak said. The Obama administration has a legal obligation, he said, under the 1984 Convention Against Torture, which the United States ratified, to investigate torture allegations. The Austrian lawyer said there is a need for urgent investigation because the statute of limitation for prosecution of alleged torturers expires as early as next year.

Nowak said he wants to conduct private interviews with 14 "high value" detainees who were transferred from secret CIA prisons in 2006. But he also expressed concern about prevailing conditions at Guantanamo Bay, where a Yemeni detainee, Muhammad Ahmad Abdallah Salih, apparently committed suicide last month. "I do think there is a genuine willingness by the Obama administration to tackle these issues. I just feel it is already taking a fairly long time to really change," Nowak said.

In March, Philip Alston, the U.N. official researching extrajudicial executions, criticized the Obama administration's refusal to rule out the use of military commissions or to investigate past practices.

But Alston, an Australian lawyer who teaches at New York University, said he has little power to compel the administration to change course. He said the United States' measured response to his report had diluted its impact; U.S. officials said they appreciated it but disagreed with portions. "By playing the good guy, not making a fuss,

not even taking on any of the issues, the U.S. shrewdly helped to play the whole thing down," he said. He has since moved on to work on other nations.

Meanwhile, Scheinin said the United States and Britain have enough strong domestic voices pushing for accountability. For instance, Attorney General Eric H. Holder Jr. is considering appointing a prosecutor to investigate torture allegations. Scheinin said he will turn his attention to scrutinizing other countries, including Russia and China, that continue to cite U.S. practices to justify abuses against domestic opponents.

He said his plan to travel to Guantanamo Bay was driven by a belief that it would strengthen his case for securing access in other countries. "I would like to move on," Scheinin said. "My priority is to stop copycatting by authoritarian governments who thought what the Bush administration was doing gave them a free hand to do whatever they like."

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I am waiting for the Obama we elected to show up. I hope this drama does not follow Samuel Beckett's script.