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PRESIDENT OF CANT

A YEAR SINCE THE White House changed hands, how has the American empire altered? Under the Bush Administration it was widely believed, in both mainstream opinion and much of the amnesiac section of the left, that the United States had fallen under an aberrant regime, the product of a virtual coup d'état by a coterie of right-wing fanatics—alternatively, ultra-reactionary corporations—who had hijacked American democracy for policies of unprecedented aggression in the Middle East. In reaction, the election to the Presidency of a mixed-race Democrat, vowing to heal America's wounds at home and restore its reputation abroad, was greeted with a wave of ideological euphoria not seen since the days of Kennedy. Once again, America could show its true face—purposeful but peaceful, firm but generous; humane, respectful, multi-cultural—to the world. Naturally, with the makings of a Lincoln or a Roosevelt for our time in him, the country's new young ruler would have to make compromises, as any statesman must. But at least the shameful interlude of Republican swagger and criminality was over. Bush and Cheney had broken the continuity of a multilateral American leadership that had served the country well throughout the Cold War and after. Obama would now restore it.

Rarely has self-interested mythology—or well-meaning gullibility—been more quickly exposed. There was no fundamental break in foreign policy, as opposed to diplomatic mood music, between the Bush 1, Clinton and Bush 2 Administrations; there has been none between the Bush and Obama regimes. The strategic goals and imperatives of the US imperium remain the same, as do its principal theatres and means of operation. Since the collapse of the USSR, the Carter Doctrine—the construction of another democratic pillar of human rights—has defined the greater Middle East as the central battlefield for the imposition of American power around the world. It is enough to look at each of its sectors to see

that Obama is the offspring of Bush, as Bush was of Clinton and Clinton of Bush the father, as so many appropriately biblical begettings.

Ignoring Gaza

Obama's line towards Israel would be manifest even before he took office. On December 27, 2008, the IDF launched an all-out air and ground assault on the population of Gaza. Bombing, burning, killing continued without interruption for twenty-two days, during which time the President-Elect uttered not a syllable of reproof. By pre-arrangement, Tel Aviv called off its blitz a few hours before his inauguration on January 20, 2009, not to spoil the party. By then Obama had picked the ultra-Zionist Doberman from Chicago, Rahm Emanuel, a former volunteer for the IDF, as his Chief of Staff. Once installed, Obama called, like every US President, for peace between the two suffering peoples of the Holy Land, and again, like every predecessor, for Palestinians to recognize Israel and for Israel to stop its settlements in the territories it seized in 1967. Within a week of the President's speech in Cairo pledging opposition to further settlements, the Netanyahu coalition was extending Jewish properties in East Jerusalem with impunity. By the autumn, Secretary of State Clinton was congratulating Netanyahu on the 'unprecedented concessions' his government had made. Asked by Mark Landler of the *New York Times*, at a press conference in Jerusalem, 'Madame Secretary, when you were here in March on the first visit, you issued a strong statement condemning the demolition of housing units in East Jerusalem. Yet, that demolition has continued unabated, and indeed, a few days ago, the mayor of the city of Jerusalem issued a new order for demolition. How would you characterize this policy today?', she did not deign to reply.¹

A month earlier, the UN Fact Finding Mission set up to look at the invasion of Gaza reported that the IDF had not always acted by the book, though naturally rocket-attacks by Hamas had provoked it. Chaired by one of the most notorious time-servers of 'international justice', the South African judge Richard Goldstone, a prosecutor at the pre-orchestrated Hague Tribunal on Yugoslavia and self-professed Zionist, the Mission's complaints against Israel could hardly have been feebler, in startling contrast to the testimony they heard in Gaza and which was made available

¹ 'Remarks with Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu', Jerusalem, 31 October 2009, available on State Department website.

on their website.² But unaccustomed to Establishment criticism of any kind, Tel Aviv reacted with dudgeon, and so Washington instructed its client at the head of the PLO, Mahmoud Abbas, that he must oppose any consideration of it at the UN.³ This was too much even for Abbas's followers and amid the ensuing uproar he had to retract, discrediting himself even further. The episode confirmed that AIPAC's grip on Washington remains as strong as ever—contrary to delusions on the US left that the Israel lobby of old, never really much of a force, was now being superseded by a more enlightened brand of American Zionism.

In the Palestinian theatre of the American system, the lack of any significant novelty does not imply lack of movement. Viewed in a longer perspective, US policy has for some time been to coax Israel towards the creation of one or more bantustans, in its own best interests.⁴ The condition of that has, of course, been the elimination of any prospect of a genuine Palestinian leadership or real Palestinian state. The Oslo Accords were a first step in this process, destroying the credibility of the PLO by setting up a 'Palestinian Authority' that was little more than a Potemkin façade for the real authority in the occupied territories, the IDF. Incapable of achieving even token independence, the PLO leadership in the West Bank settled down to make money, leaving the bulk of the Palestinian people helpless: mired in poverty and regularly subjected to settler violence. In contrast, by creating a primitive but effective welfare system, capable of distributing food and medical care in poor neighbourhoods and looking after the weak, Hamas was able to win enough popular support to triumph in the Palestinian elections of 2006. Euro-America reacted with an immediate politico-economic boycott, hoisting Fatah back into power on the West Bank. In Gaza, where Hamas was strongest,

² In an interview with Israeli Army Radio conducted in Hebrew, Nicole Goldstone, the judge's daughter, said: 'My father took on this job because he thought he is doing the best thing for peace, for everyone, and also for Israel . . . It wasn't easy. My father did not expect to see and hear what he saw and heard.' She told the radio station that had it not been for her father the report would have been harsher. One could add that had it not been for the presence on the Mission of a feisty Pakistani woman lawyer, Hina Jilani, the report would have been even softer.

³ The Israelis applied the ultimate sanction: if Abbas endorsed the Goldstone Report, the mobile phone deal between an Israeli company and senior PLO personnel was off.

⁴ Though it should be pointed out that both Bishop Tutu and Ronnie Kasrils, former Deputy Defence Minister in the Mandela government, vehemently dispute the analogy. They insist that the condition of Palestinians in the occupied territories is far worse than was that of blacks in the bantustans.

Israel had for some time been inciting a coup by Mohammed Dahlan, Washington's favourite thug in the PLO security apparatus. Defence Minister Ben-Eliezer has openly testified before the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee that in 2002, when the IDF pulled out of Gaza, he had offered the Strip to Dahlan, who was quite willing to launch a Palestinian civil war, long a twinkle in the eye of many an Israeli colonizer. Four years later Dahlan was primed by Washington to implement a military putsch in Gaza,⁵ but was beaten to the punch by Hamas, which took over the Strip in mid 2007. After Euro-American political and economic punishment of its voters for defiance of the West came Israeli military retribution, with the assault of late 2008, winked at by Obama.

But the result is not the impasse so regularly deplored by well-wishers of a 'peaceful settlement'. Under repeated blows, and amid increasing isolation, the Palestinian resistance is being gradually weakened to a point where Hamas itself—unable to develop any coherent strategy, or break with the Oslo Accords of which it, too, has become a prisoner—is edging towards acceptance of the pittance on offer from Israel, garnished with a solatium from the West. No meaningful Palestinian Authority exists. Elected representatives from the West Bank or Gaza are treated like mendicant NGOs: rewarded if they remain on their knees and follow Western bidding, sanctioned if they step out of line. Rationally, Palestinians would do far better to dissolve the Authority and insist on equal citizenship rights within a single state, backed by an international campaign for boycott, divestment and sanction till the apartheid structures of Israel are dismantled. Practically, there is little or no chance of this in the immediate future. In all probability what lies ahead is the convergence—already being hailed in *Haaretz* as even more enlightened than Rabin⁶—of Obama and Netanyahu on a final solution of 'Palestinian' entities Israel can live with, and Palestine can die in.

Harvesting Baghdad

For the moment, however, there are more pressing preoccupations: war-zones farther east have the first call on imperial attention. Iraq may have dropped from the headlines, but not from the daily security briefings in the Oval Office. In 2002, on his way up the political ladder

⁵ See David Rose, 'The Gaza Bombshell', *Vanity Fair*, April 2008.

⁶ For example, Ari Shavit, 'Netanyahu is Positioning Himself to the Left of Rabin', *Haaretz*, 6 December 2009.

as a low-profile state senator in Illinois, Obama opposed the attack on Iraq; it was politically inexpensive to do so. By the time he was elected President, American forces had occupied the country for six years, and his first act was to maintain Bush's Defense Secretary, Robert Gates, long-time CIA functionary and veteran of the Iran–Contra affair, in the Pentagon. A cruder and more demonstrative signal of political continuity could hardly have been conceived. In the last two years of the Republican Administration, US troop-levels were increased by a fifth, to 150,000, in a 'surge' that was hailed across the party spectrum as having crushed the Iraqi resistance, readying the country for a stable pro-Western, hopefully even democratic, future. The new Democratic Administration has not deviated at all from this script. The 3-year Status of Forces Agreement signed by Bush and his collaborators in Baghdad had stipulated that all US troops would leave Iraq by December 2011, although a subsequent agreement could obviously extend their stay, and the US 'combat' forces would quit Iraqi cities, villages and localities by June 2009. Before his election, Obama promised a withdrawal of all US 'combat' troops from Iraq within sixteen months of his taking office, i.e. by May 2010—adorned with a safety clause that this pledge could be 'refined' in the light of events. It promptly was, with the February 2009 announcement that combat troops would now leave Iraq by September 2010, while the 'residual' 50,000 forces could also engage in combat operations to 'protect our ongoing civilian and military efforts'.⁷

The slaughter and devastation wreaked on Iraq by the United States and its allies, chiefly Britain, are now well known: the destruction of the country's cultural patrimony, the brutal dismembering of its social infrastructure, the theft of its natural resources, the sundering of its mixed neighbourhoods, and above all the death or displacement of countless of its citizens—over a million dead; three million refugees; five million orphans, according to government figures.⁸ Wasting no words on any of this, the Commander-in-Chief and his generals have other concerns. Can Iraq now be regarded as a tolerably secure outpost of

⁷ Obama speech at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, 27 February 2009.

⁸ *Cultural Cleansing in Iraq: Why Museums were Looted, Libraries Burned and Academics Murdered*, edited by Raymond Baker, Shereen Ismael and Tareq Ismael, London 2009, contains detailed figures and sources, amongst which the fact that from 2003–07, Washington only allowed 463 refugees, mainly professional Iraqis of Christian origin, into the United States. For an illuminating survey of the history of Iraqi oil and the privatized looting now under way, see Kamil Mahdi, 'Iraq's Oil Law: Parsing the Fine Print', *World Policy Journal*, Summer 2007.

the American system in the Middle East? They have reason to exult, and reason to doubt. Compared with the situation at the height of the insurgency in 2006, most of the country today is under the thumb of Baghdad, and American casualties are few and far between. A predominantly Shia army—some 250,000 strong—has been trained and armed to the teeth to deal with any resurgence of the resistance. Sectarian cleansing of the capital, on a scale of which the Haganah could be proud, has wiped out most Sunni neighbourhoods, for the first time giving the Maliki regime set up by Bush a firm grip on the hub of the country. To the north, the Kurdish protectorates remain staunch bastions of US power. To the south, Moqtada al-Sadr's militias have been sent packing. Best of all, the oil-wells are returning to those who know how to make good use of them, as auctions distribute 25-year leases to foreign corporations. Some excesses may mar the scene in Baghdad,⁹ but the new Iraq has the blessing of the saintly Sistani's smile.

Yet there persists the uneasy thought that the Iraqi resistance, capable of inflicting such damage on the US military machine only yesterday, might just be biding its time after its heavy losses and the defection of an important segment, and could still visit havoc on the collaborators tomorrow, should the US pull out altogether.¹⁰ To ensure against any such danger, Washington has put down markers in the modern equivalents—vastly larger and more hideous—of the Crusader fortresses of old. The Balad military base, within easy bomber reach of Baghdad, is a small-town American city-state. Containing an airport that is reportedly the busiest in the world after Heathrow, it can house over 30,000 US soldiers and auxiliaries—an immigrant labour force composed largely of South Asian

⁹ Here is the *Economist*: 'Old habits from Saddam Hussein's era are becoming familiar again. Torture is routine in government detention centres . . . Iraqi police and security people are again pulling out fingernails and beating detainees, even those who have already made confessions. A limping former prison inmate tells how he realized, after a bout of torture in a government ministry that lasted for five days, that he had been relatively lucky. When he was reunited with fellow prisoners, he saw that many had lost limbs and organs. The domestic-security apparatus is at its busiest since Saddam was overthrown six years ago, especially in the capital. In July the Baghdad police reimposed a nightly curfew, making it easier for the police, taking orders from politicians, to arrest people disliked by the Shia-led government.' See 'Could a Police State Return?', 3 September 2009.

¹⁰ General Petraeus recently announced that attacks on US forces in Iraq were down to 'only' 15 a day: *Financial Times*, 2 January 2010. Not Maliki but Muntadhar al-Zaidi, the Baghdad shoe-thrower, represents the sentiments of most Iraqis, regardless of ethnic or confessional origin.

workers who clean homes, cook food and staff Subway sandwich bars; drug-dealers are never in short supply, while mobile Eastern European prostitutes serve Balad's other needs. Fifteen bus routes complement the airport, but commuting remains a problem for some of the service staff.¹¹ Another thirteen military and air-force bases are scattered throughout the country, among them Camp Renegade near Kirkuk, to guard the oil-wells, Badraj on the Iranian border, for espionage in the Islamic Republic, and a British base dating back to the 1930s at Nasiriyah, upgraded to serve American appetites. In Baghdad itself, meanwhile, the US proconsul can now enjoy the largest and most expensive embassy in the world—it is the size of the Vatican City—in the fortified enclave of the Green Zone.

After seizing Iraq as colonial prey in 1920 and installing the Hashemite dynasty as its local instrument, Britain was faced with full-scale rebellion which it suppressed only with difficulty and all-out savagery. For the next twelve years, London ruled the country as an imperial dependency, before finally relinquishing its 'mandate'—granted by the League of Nations—in 1932. But the client regime it left behind lasted another quarter of a century, until eventually it was overthrown in the revolution of 1958. The American seizure of Iraq provoked a full-scale insurgency even more swiftly, and one that has lasted longer, against an occupation enjoying this time a mandate of the United Nations. The US empire too will leave behind a puppet regime to hold down the country into the foreseeable future. In that venture there could be few more fitting successors to Ramsay MacDonald—that earlier handsome, willowy figure who was never at a loss for uplifting words—than Barack Obama. But history has accelerated since those days, and there is at least a chance that Maliki and his torturers will meet the fate of Nuri al-Said more rapidly, in another national uprising to root out alien military bases, outsize embassies, oil companies and their local collaborators alike.

Menacing Tehran

For American elites, Iran has long posed a conundrum: an 'Islamic Republic' publicly breathing fire against the Great Satan while quietly

¹¹ 'It takes the masseuse, Mila from Kyrgyzstan, an hour to commute to work by bus on this sprawling American base. Her massage parlour is one of three on the base's 6,300 acres and sits next to a Subway sandwich shop in a trailer, surrounded by blast walls, sand and rock', writes Marc Santora: 'Big US Bases Are Part of Iraq, but a World Apart', *New York Times*, 8 September 2009.

extending assistance to it wherever most needed, be it collusion with counter-revolution in Nicaragua, invasion of Afghanistan or occupation of Iraq. The rulers of Israel are not the recipients of any of these benefits, and have taken a dimmer view of the rhetoric of the mullahs, directed with greater ferocity at them and at the Little Satan in London, than at their patrons in Washington. Above all, once the prospect of an Iranian nuclear programme undermining the Israeli monopoly of weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East started to loom on the horizon, Tel Aviv galvanized its assets in the United States into a campaign to ensure that Washington became committed to striking it down at all costs. Not that there was much resistance to overcome, given the degree to which Israeli objectives have long been internalized as little less than second nature by US policy-makers. Scorning overtures from the Khatami regime for an across-the-board regional deal in 2003, the Republican Administration sought instead to force Iran into compliance with the Israeli monopoly by matching Tehran's oratorical tirades and tightening economic sanctions on it.

Without saying so too explicitly, Obama came into office allowing it to be understood that this was not the way to go about things. Much better would be to initiate a forgive-and-forget dialogue with Tehran, banking on the traditional pragmatism of the regime, and the manifest pro-Americanism of middle-class and youth layers in the population at large, to achieve a friendly diplomatic settlement in the interest of all parties, denuding Iran of a nuclear capability in exchange for an economic and political embrace. But the timing was unlucky and the calculation was upset by political polarization in Iran itself. Factional struggles in the clerical establishment escalated over the presidential election in June 2009, when a bid by its most openly pro-Western wing to take power on a wave of (mostly) middle-class protest was suppressed by an incumbent counter-strike that combined electoral fraud and militia violence. For Obama, the opportunity for ideological posturing was too great to resist. In a peerless display of sanctimony, he lamented with moist-eyed grief the death of a demonstrator killed in Tehran on the same day his drones wiped out sixty villagers, most of them women and children, in Pakistan. With the Western media in full cry behind the President, the thwarted candidate in the Iranian contest—historically one of the worst butchers of the regime, responsible for mass executions in the 80s—was converted into another icon of the Free World. Schemes for a grand reconciliation between the two states had to be set aside.

After this misadventure, the Democratic Administration has reverted to the line of its predecessor, attempting to corral Russia and China—European acquiescence can be taken for granted—into an economic blockade of Iran, in the hope of so strangling the country that the Supreme Leader will either be overthrown or obliged to come to terms. Should such pressure fail, an air-strike by Israeli or American fighter-bombers on Iranian nuclear facilities remains the back-up threat. While still unlikely, such a blitz cannot be altogether ruled out, if only because once the West at large—in this case not only Obama, but Sarkozy, Brown and Merkel—has pronounced any Iranian nuclear capability intolerable, little rhetorical room for retreat is left if this should materialize.¹² In the past, fear of Iranian retaliation against shaky American positions in Iraq would probably have been enough to deter such an assault. But Tehran's influence in Baghdad is not what it was. Once confident that Iraq would shortly become a sister Islamic Republic, it can no longer be sure that relations between the two will be any better than between the various Sunni states in the region. For the moment, the Maliki regime knows which side butters its bread—Iran could never match the dollars and arms it gets from the US, while Sistani's pretensions to pre-eminence over assorted divines across the border are of long standing. Whether Moqtada al-Sadr's militias are now equally biddable remains unclear.

Still, to date the Pentagon remains opposed to any adventure that could risk stringing its forces out across a war-zone which would stretch from the Litani to the Oxus, if the Revolutionary Guards were to foment operations in Lebanon or western Afghanistan. Nor should Tehran's threat to retaliate with conventional missiles against Israeli cities be discounted. There are also Washington's other allies to be considered. Israel and its lobbyists may be the prime movers in ongoing agitation against Iran, but they are not alone. The Saudi monarchy, a *sui generis* confessional dictatorship, remains fearful that a Tehran–Baghdad combination might destabilize the Peninsula: Shia constitute a large majority in Bahrain and the oil-producing region of the Saudi state itself. But the Saudis are also aware that any direct attack on Tehran could pose an even bigger threat to their rule, provoking Shia uprisings that might engulf them. For Riyadh, an alternative route under review in Washington is preferable—inserting

¹² In Illinois in 2004, I watched Obama interviewed on network television in the run-up to the Senate election he subsequently won. Asked whether he would back Bush if he decided to bomb Iran, the future President did not hesitate for a moment. He put on a warlike look and said that he would.

Turkey into the regional equation as a Sunni–NATO detachment of the empire, buttressing the Saudi petrodollars offered to Syria to break with Iran. This would serve as a counter-thrust against any future Tehran–Baghdad axis and cut off Hezbollah from Damascus, softening it up for another assault by the IDF.

Fabricating Kabul

From Palestine through Iraq to Iran, Obama has acted as just another steward of the American empire, pursuing the same aims as his predecessors, with the same means but with a more emollient rhetoric. In Afghanistan, he has gone further, widening the front of imperial aggression with a major escalation of violence, both technological and territorial. When he took office, Afghanistan had already been occupied by US and satellite forces for over seven years. During his election campaign Obama—determined to outdo Bush in prosecuting a ‘just war’—pledged more troops and fire-power to crush the Afghan resistance, and more ground intrusions and drone attacks in Pakistan to burn out support for it across the border. This is one promise he has kept. A further 30,000 troops are currently being rushed to the Hindu Kush. This will bring the US army of occupation close to 100,000, under a general picked by Obama for the success of his brutalities in Iraq, where his units formed a specialist elite in assassination and torture. Simultaneously, a massive intensification of aerial terror over Pakistan is under way. In what the *New York Times* delicately described as a ‘statistic that the White House has not advertised’, it has informed its readers that ‘since Mr Obama came to office, the Central Intelligence Agency has mounted more Predator drone strikes into Pakistan than during Mr Bush’s eight years in office’.¹³

There is no mystery about the reason for this escalation. After invading Afghanistan in 2001, the US and its European auxiliaries imposed a puppet government of their own making, confected at a conference in Bonn, headed by a CIA asset and seconded by an assortment of Tajik warlords, with NGOs in attendance like page boys in a medieval court. This bogus construct never had the slightest legitimacy in the country, lacking even a modicum of the narrow but dedicated base the Taliban had enjoyed.

¹³ David Sanger, ‘Obama Outlines a Vision of Might and Right’, *New York Times*, 11 December 2009.

Once installed in Kabul, it concentrated its energies on self-enrichment. Aid was diverted, corruption generalized, narcotics—repressed by the Taliban—set free. Karzai and company amassed a huge amount of wealth: over 75 per cent of the funds from donor countries were handed directly to Karzai's cronies, the Northern Alliance or private contractors used by both. The construction of a new 5-star hotel and a shopping mall became priorities in one of the world's poorest countries, while torture and murder proceeded routinely a short distance away; Bagram has become a chamber of horrors to make Guantánamo look civilized. Opium production reached an all-time high, soaring to over 90 per cent above its levels in 2001, when it was still confined to areas controlled by the Northern Alliance, spreading southwards and westwards under the aegis of the Karzai clan. The mass of the Afghan poor have received little or nothing from the new foreign-imposed order except increased risk to life and limb, as the re-organized neo-Taliban hit back at the occupation and NATO bombs rain so indiscriminately on villages that even Karzai has repeatedly been forced to protest.¹⁴

By June 2009 the Afghan guerrillas controlled large swathes of the country and had infiltrated official police and military units. Adopting Iraqi tactics of IEDs on the roads and suicide bombs in the cities, it was inflicting ever heavier blows on the Western occupation and its collaborators. Within the imperial camp itself, disarray was mounting.¹⁵ American diplomatic and military functionaries publicly contradicted each other, quarrelling over how far the pretence of democratic elections staged by Karzai should be upheld or rejected. In the event, after vehement denunciations of fraud by the highest functionary in Washington, and a pro forma second round

¹⁴ Most recently on 27 December when a US black-ops unit killed 10 civilians on the same day as Ahmadinejad's militias killed 5 demonstrators in Tehran.

¹⁵ See the letter from Matthew Hoh, a former Marine captain who served as a political officer in Iraq and subsequently Afghanistan, and resigned in September 2009. 'The Pashtun insurgency, which is composed of multiple, seemingly infinite, local groups, is fed by what is perceived by the Pashtun people as a continued and sustained assault, going back centuries, on Pashtun land, culture, traditions and religion by internal and external enemies . . . In both RC East and South, I have observed that the bulk of the insurgency fights not for the white banner of the Taliban, but rather against the presence of foreign soldiers and taxes imposed by an unrepresentative government in Kabul . . . If honest, our stated strategy of securing Afghanistan to prevent al-Qaeda resurgence or regrouping would require us to additionally invade and occupy western Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan, Yemen, etc.' See Ralph Nader, 'Hoh's Afghanistan Warning', *CounterPunch*, 4 November 2009.

of voting, Obama consummated the farce by congratulating Karzai on a victory more blatantly rigged even than Ahmadinejad's two months earlier, on which—in top Uriah Heep form—the US President had spared no stern words. Unlike the regime in Tehran, which retains an indigenuous base in society, however diminished, what passes for government in Kabul is a Western implant that would disintegrate overnight without the NATO praetorians dispatched to protect it.

Leaning on Islamabad

Desperate to claim victory in a self-chosen 'just war', Obama has plunged into the classic *fuite en avant* of dispatching a still larger expeditionary force, and expanding the war to a neighbouring country where the enemy is suspected of finding succour. From the start of his administration, it was announced that Pakistan and Afghanistan would henceforward be treated as an integrated war-zone: 'Afpak'. A stream of emissaries poured into Islamabad to man up the Pakistani state to the repressive tasks it was being called upon to perform.¹⁶ The 2,460 km border between Afghanistan and what is now Pakistan has been porous ever since the Durand Line was laid down by the British Empire in 1893. Sixteen million Pashtuns live in southern Afghanistan, 28 million in the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan. The frontier is impossible to police, and movement across it difficult to detect since tribes that speak the same dialect and are often inter-married live on either side. That Afghan insurgents seek and receive sanctuary in the area is hardly a secret. For NATO or the Pakistani Army to stop this flow would require at least a quarter of a million troops, and campaigns of annihilation like those of Chiang Kai-shek in the 1930s. Under Musharraf—and threats from Pentagon blowhards to bomb the country back into the Stone Age if it did not comply—the Pakistani Army was turned from patron to foe of the Taliban in Afghanistan, but never a whole-hearted one, since it was only too well aware that it was being forced to yield influence in Kabul to India, which wasted no time in taking Karzai under its wing. Musharraf did his best to please America by allowing US Special Forces

¹⁶ Inter-Risk, the Pakistani subsidiary of US defence contractor DynCorp, was recently raided by local police, who seized 'illegal and sophisticated weaponry'. The company's boss, a retired Captain Ali Jaffar Zaidi, informed reporters that US officials in Islamabad had ordered the import of prohibited weapons 'in Inter-Risk's name', promising that payment would be made by the US embassy. Anwar Abbasi, 'Why the US security company was raided', *The News*, 20 September 2009.

and drones into the country, and handing over al-Qaeda operatives where he could. But he never really satisfied Washington that he was being vigilant enough, while managing to earn the contempt of the majority of Pakistanis for truckling to the US.

By the time Obama came to power, two developments had altered this scene. Incessantly goaded by the Pentagon, between 2004 and 2006 Musharraf sent the Pakistani Army nine times into the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), the seven mountainous sectors outside the jurisdiction of the North-West Frontier Province, where central governmental authority had always been vestigial, to crack down on Taliban infiltration. The result was simply to provoke solidarity with the Afghan resistance and an increasing will to emulate it. This led in December 2007 to the formation of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, a brutal home-grown guerrilla dedicated to carrying the war back against Islamabad itself. (Contrary to Western assumptions, this outfit is not a subsidiary of the Afghan neo-Taliban, as evidenced in Mullah Omar's outburst against it. Revealingly, Omar insisted that it was wrong to target the Pakistan Army when the real enemy was the US and NATO.)

In 2008, Musharraf himself was ousted, fleeing impeachment to Mecca. His replacement as President became the infamous widower of Benazir Bhutto, Asif Zardari, a discredited crook who offered himself as an ideal straw-man for the US. Washington's Ambassador Anne Patterson—fresh from duty in arming Uribe in Colombia—was soon gushing over his cooperative good will. Its fruits were not long in coming. In April 2009, Zardari ordered the Army to occupy the Swat district in the North-West Frontier Province, taken over by the TTP two months earlier. An all-out military assault drove the TTP back into the hills, and 2 million refugees out of their homes. Emboldened by this humanitarian success, Obama pressed Zardari into sending the Army into FATA proper in October, to flush out Taliban fighters—it no longer mattered much whether Afghan or Pakistani—from South Waziristan and Bajaur. Hundreds of thousands more tribespeople were displaced, US bombers roaring overhead as they scattered to the winds.¹⁷ In November the Pakistan Army announced that 'the offensive was over'. The guerrilla had disappeared.

¹⁷ For the estimated number of refugees in Swat and FATA, see Mark Schneider, 'FATA 101: When the Shooting Stops', *Foreign Policy*, 4 November 2009. Schneider is Senior Vice President of the impeccably Establishment International Crisis Group.

How far domestic ethnic cleansing of this sort can be taken, and what kind of results it is likely to produce, have yet to be seen. What is clear is that in forcing the Pakistani Army to turn its guns on its own tribes, with whom it used to be on fairly good terms, Obama is de-stabilizing yet another society in the interests of the American empire. Suicide bombs are now exploding on a weekly basis in Pakistan's big cities, in vain acts of revenge for repression on the frontier. Zardari and his entourage are tottering, as the immunity against corruption charges granted them by Musharraf has been struck down by the Supreme Court. There is even a chance that the worm-eaten PPP—a curse to the country since Benazir Bhutto's second term in office—might break up and disappear after him.¹⁸ Washington will be reluctant to let such a helpful stooge go, but can no doubt rely on the Army's top brass to provide a functional substitute, as it always has in the past. The Pakistani Army has never produced patriotic junior officers capable of eliminating the high command, expelling foreign agencies and instituting reforms, of the kind that Latin America or the Arab world has sometimes seen. Its subservience to the United States is structural, without ever being total. Dependent on massive infusions of American cash and equipment, it cannot afford to defy Washington openly, even when obliged to act against its own interests; covertly, it always seeks to retain a margin of autonomy, so long as confrontation with India persists. It will harry its own citizens at US behest, but not to the point of setting the tribal areas irretrievably on fire, or helping to extirpate all resistance across the border.

Duplicating Saigon?

With this expansion, what are the prospects for Obama's 'just war'? Comparing the American with the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, two major differences stand out. The regime created by the US is far weaker than that protected by the USSR. The latter had a genuine local basis, however much it abused it: never just an alien graft, the PDPA

¹⁸ The US-brokered deal that allowed Zardari and his late wife to return to the country during the Musharraf period was pushed through via a hurriedly concocted 'National Reconciliation Ordinance' pardoning politicians charged with various crimes. Last November, the National Assembly in Pakistan refused to vote in favour of renewing the Ordinance. The re-instated Chief Justice did the rest. On 16 December 2009, a cold, crisp winter afternoon in Islamabad, the full bench of the Supreme Court of Pakistan—sixteen senior judges and the Chief Justice—declared the Ordinance null and void. Few doubt that the Zardari interregnum is almost over. This particular US drone can now be returned safely to base in Dubai or Manhattan.

generated an army and administration capable of surviving the departure of Soviet troops. The Najibullah government was eventually overthrown only thanks to massive outside assistance from the US, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. But in that assistance lies the second decisive contrast. Unlike the fighters who entered Kabul in 1992, bankrolled and armed to the teeth by foreign powers, the Afghan resistance of today is all but completely isolated: anathema not only to Washington, but to Moscow, Beijing, Dushanbe, Tashkent, Tehran, able at most to count on a sporadic, furtive tolerance from Islamabad.

That is why comparisons with Vietnam, though they are telling in so many other respects—moral, political, ideological—in military terms are less so. At one level Obama's arrogant escalation of the war in Afghanistan could be said to combine the hubris of Kennedy in 1961 with that of Johnson in 1965, even of Nixon in 1972, whose bombing of Cambodia bears more than one resemblance to current operations in Pakistan. But there is no draft to disaffect American youth; no Soviet or Chinese aid to sustain the guerrilla; no anti-imperialist solidarity to weaken the system in its homelands. On the contrary, as Obama likes to explain, no less than 42 countries are lending a hand to help his embarrassing marionette in Kabul dance a good show.¹⁹ No world-historical spectacle could be more welcome than the American proconsul fleeing once again by helicopter from the roof of the embassy, and the motley expeditionary forces and their assorted civilian lackeys kicked unceremoniously out of the country along with him. But a second Saigon is not in prospect. Monotonous talk of the end of American hegemony, the universal cliché of the period, is mostly a way of avoiding serious opposition to it.

If a textbook illustration were needed of the continuity of American foreign policy across administrations, and the futility of so many soft-headed attempts to treat the Bush–Cheney years as exceptional rather than essentially conventional, Obama's conduct has provided it. From one end of the Middle East to the other, the only significant material

¹⁹ In Oslo Obama could duly congratulate the Nobel Peace Prize committee on the Norwegian troop contingent in Afghanistan, along with those from Albania, Armenia, Australia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Jordan, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Macedonia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Singapore, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, Ukraine, the United Arab Emirates and the UK.

change he has brought is a further escalation of the War on Terror—or ‘Evil’, as he prefers to call it—with Yemen now being sighted as the next target.²⁰ Beyond, the story is much the same. Renditions—torture by proxy—are upheld as a practice, while their perpetrators continue to lounge at their ease in Florida or elsewhere, ignoring extradition warrants under Obama’s protection. Domestic wire-taps continue. A coup in Central America is underwritten. New military bases are set up in Colombia.

Emulating Wilson

Still, it would be a mistake to think that nothing has changed. No Administration is exactly like any other, and each President leaves a stamp on his own. Substantively, vanishingly little of American imperial dominion has altered under Obama.²¹ But propagandistically, there has been a significant upgrade. It is no accident that a leading columnist—and one of the more intelligent—could, only half ironically, list the five most important events of 2009 as so many speeches by Obama.²² In Cairo, at West Point, at Oslo, the world has been treated to one uplifting homily after another, each address larded with every egregious euphemism that White House speech-writers can muster to describe America’s glowing mission in the world, and modest avowal of awe and sense of responsibility in carrying it forward.

²⁰ On 27 December 2009 Obama announced the doubling of US military expenditure on Yemen. The *Economist* noted that ‘On his [Obama’s] watch American drones and special forces have been busier than ever, not only in Afghanistan and Pakistan but also, it is reported, in Somalia and Yemen’: 30 December 2009.

²¹ Hence in part the disenchantment of many erstwhile Obama partisans, which has surfaced with striking rapidity compared to the relatively long liberal love affair with Bill Clinton. Nonetheless, their explanations have tended to blame structural constraints rather than the incumbent himself: Garry Wills sees the well-meaning president as caught in the cogs of the US imperial state apparatus (‘The Entangled Giant’, *New York Review of Books*, 8 October 2009), while Frank Rich has angrily attacked lobbyists for undermining Obama’s ‘promise to make Americans trust the government again’ (‘The Rabbit Ragu Democrats’, *New York Times*, 3 October 2009). For Tom Hayden, the ‘expedient’ decision to boost force levels in Afghanistan is ‘the last in a string of disappointments’, despite the fact that Obama had pledged to do so in his campaign; but though Hayden is removing his bumper sticker, he will still be ‘supporting Obama down the road’ (‘Obama’s Afghanistan Escalation’, *Nation*, 1 December 2009).

²² Gideon Rachman, ‘The Grim Theme Linking the Year’s Main Events’, *Financial Times*, 23 December 2009.

'We must say openly to each other the things we hold in our hearts' is the characteristic tone. 'Our country has borne a special burden in global affairs. We have spilled American blood in many countries on multiple continents. We have spent our revenue to help others rebuild from rubble and develop their own economies. We have joined with others to develop an architecture of institutions—from the United Nations to NATO to the World Bank—that provide for the common security and prosperity of human beings'. 'The struggle against violent extremism will not be finished quickly, and it extends well beyond Afghanistan and Pakistan . . . Our effort will involve disorderly regions, failed states, diffuse enemies'. 'Our cause is just, our resolve unwavering. We will go forward with the confidence that right makes might'. In the Middle East, there are 'tensions' (the term recurs nine times in his address to Mubarak's clique at al-Azhar), and a 'humanitarian crisis' in Gaza. But 'the Palestinians must renounce violence', and 'the Iraqi people are ultimately better off' for American actions. In Oslo: 'Make no mistake: evil does exist in the world'. 'To say that force may sometimes be necessary is not a call to cynicism—it is a recognition of history; the imperfections of man and the limits of reason.' In Cairo: 'Resistance through violence and killing is wrong'. In short: if the US or Israel wage war, it is a regrettable moral duty. If Palestinians, Iraqis or Afghans resist them, it is an immoral dead-end. As Obama likes to say, 'We are all God's children', and 'This is God's vision'.²³

If sonorous banality and armour-plated hypocrisy are the hallmarks of this Presidential style, that does not make it less functional for the task of servicing and repairing the imperial institutions over which Obama

²³ 'Remarks by the President on a New Beginning', Cairo, 4 June 2009; 'Remarks by the President to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan', West Point, 1 December 2009; Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, Oslo, 11 December 2009; 'Remarks by the President to the Ghanaian Parliament', Accra, 11 June 2009. The tropes of 'imperfect man' and 'limited reason' are borrowed from the vapourings of Reinhold Niebuhr, pastor of Cold War consciences, for whom see Gopal Balakrishnan, 'Sermons on the Present Age', below. Niebuhr could, however, on occasion be less of a humbug than his pupil. Rather than pious guff about the 'two suffering peoples', he had the honesty to call a Zionist spade a spade: in 1942, observing that 'the Anglo-Saxon hegemony that is bound to exist in the event of an Axis defeat will be in a position to see to it that Palestine is set aside for the Jews', he argued that 'Zionist leaders are unrealistic in insisting that their demands entail no "injustice" to the Arab population'. The latter would have to be 'otherwise compensated'. ('Jews after the War—II', *Nation*, 28 February 1942.)

and Clinton now preside. Nothing grated more on international opinion than the lack of requisite unctiousness with which Bush and Cheney all too often went about their business, exposing allies and audiences otherwise well-disposed towards American leadership to inconvenient truths they would have preferred not to hear. Historically, the model for the current variant of imperial Presidency has been Woodrow Wilson, no less pious a Christian, whose every second word was peace, democracy or self-determination, while his armies invaded Mexico, occupied Haiti and attacked Russia, and his treaties handed one colony after another to his partners in war. Obama is a hand-me-down version of the same, without even Fourteen Points to betray. But cant still goes a long way to satisfy those who yearn for it, as the award to Obama of what García Márquez once called the Nobel Prize for War has graphically shown. After lying enough to voters—promising peace and delivering war—Wilson was re-elected to a second term, though it did not end well for him. In more combative times, Johnson was forced to step down in ignominy for his warmongering, without being able to gull the electors again. Twelve years later, a debacle in Tehran helped sink Carter. If the recent setbacks for Democrats in West Virginia and New Jersey—where Democratic voters stayed at home—become a pattern, Obama could be a third one-term President, abandoned by his supporters and mocked by those he tries so hard to conciliate.