

# Introduction: Imperial Obama —A Kinder, Gentler Empire?

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**T**HE ELECTION OF BARACK OBAMA BROUGHT HOPE TO MANY ON THE LEFT THAT MUCH of the George W. Bush–Dick Cheney “national security” mischief would be undone by withdrawing from Iraq, terminating the war in Afghanistan, scaling back the private military industry, closing Guantanamo, and eliminating the worst of the Patriot Act’s assault on civil liberties. Some optimists even anticipated investigations and prosecution of officials involved in violations of U.S. and international laws against illegal warfare, torture, and illegal detention. After two and one-half years in office, we see that nearly all of this was wishful thinking. Congress thwarted some of Obama’s campaign promises, such as closing Guantanamo. On a number of other promises, Obama has been unwilling to buck public opinion. On February 27, 2010, Obama signed a one-year extension of the Patriot Act without reforms, including limits on domestic surveillance that Democrats in Congress had favored.

As a candidate, Obama criticized the Bush administration’s Guantanamo tribunals. On March 7, 2011, President Obama lifted the ban on new military commissions for Guantanamo prisoners. Then, on April 5, 2011, the Obama administration reversed policy with the decision to prosecute Khalid Shaikh Mohammed and four others accused of plotting the September 11 attacks before a military commission, not a civilian court. Even worse off are the 47 detainees being held without trial of any sort; in early January 2011, the administration considered an executive order maintaining these unlimited detentions (Malinowski, 2011). Although President Obama formally prohibited the use of torture on his inauguration day, torture nevertheless continues with the yearlong hideous mistreatment of Pfc. Bradley Manning, held naked in solitary confinement (Nakashima, 2011: 1A; Ackerman and Benkler et al., 2011: 62). And no-fly lists continue, by which the U.S. government “has temporarily exiled U.S. citizens or legal residents so they can be questioned about possible terrorist links without legal counsel” (Finn and Hosh, 2011: 1A), including Virginia teenager Gulet Mohamed, who was subject to harsh interrogation by Kuwait authorities with FBI cooperation.

“Black jails” at Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan continue to conduct torturous interrogations, guided by American psychologists with the blessing of the

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American Psychological Association's president (Soldz, 2010; Ambinder, 2010). In Afghanistan, business for contract interrogators such as Lockheed Martin is booming (Chatterjee, 2009; 2010), with interrogations removed farther from public accountability and transparency. The Obama administration has approved summary executions abroad, including targeting American cleric Anwar al-Awlaki for CIA assassination.

Next is the manner in which the administration has dealt with the WikiLeaks revelations, pressuring *Amazon.com* not to distribute Penguin-published disclosures and getting Visa, MasterCard, and PayPal to block financial support for WikiLeaks. As the University of Chicago's John J. Mearsheimer (2011) has pointed out, WikiLeaks reveals more lying by government leaders to their own publics than to other countries. Obama has continued the "state secrets" doctrine, which allows the government to shut down trials if they might reveal "sensitive" information. In September 2010, the FBI raided the offices and eight homes of various anti-war groups in Minneapolis and Chicago. The White House has been pushing Congress to make it easier for federal authorities to wiretap online communications, including e-mails, Facebook postings, and Internet phone calls. So much for the First Amendment and a free Internet!

The triumph of continuity over change in national security makes this special issue of *Social Justice* on Obama's wars sadly necessary. Our articles on torture, counterinsurgency tactics, and "just war" theory are as important today as at any time in American history. Neoliberalism and neoconservatism transcend the election cycles of Tweedledum and Tweedledee party politics. As Mearsheimer (2010) argues, the United States needs a new grand strategy to tame the national-security state. "Global dominance is a prescription for endless trouble—especially in its neoconservative variant. Unfortunately, the Obama administration is populated from top to bottom with liberal imperialists who remain committed to trying to govern the world..." Obama, with the approval of neoconservatives, escalated the Bush-Cheney War on Terror in the Middle East, doubling in 2010 military expenditures to Yemen in support of the unpopular ally, Ali Abdullah Saleh.

When the United States and some of its European allies moved against Libya's "evil" dictator, Moammar Qaddafi, in late March 2011, the United States displayed its customary hypocrisy regarding "friendly" dictators (seen as helping fight al Qaeda) in Yemen and Bahrain, where pro-democracy protestors were brutally attacked by military forces as the U.S. stood by (Miller, 2011: A09). The bloody April suppression of democratic protestors in Syria elicited no more from Washington than a few grumbles, to no small degree because a regime change there makes Israel very nervous. Obama continues the Bush-Cheney policy of managing "enemies" of Israel in U.S. Middle East. Israel's continued bombing of the Gaza strip and land grabs in the West Bank fail to elicit serious U.S. condemnation. The Obama administration evidenced only a mild diplomatic reaction to the Israeli military attack on a humanitarian flotilla attempting to bring medical supplies to Palestin-

ians. Then, in the middle of the night on February 19, the Palestinian engineer, Dirar Abu Sisi, vanished from a Ukrainian train in the eastern city of Kharkiv bound for the capital and, at the time of this writing, is being held in prison by the Israeli secret service. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in the Ukraine said Abu Sisi has been in custody in Israel since shortly after his disappearance. The U.N. agency believes he was abducted and illegally transported by Israeli security forces, in order, some speculate, to sabotage a key electric power plant in the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip, where he worked as a senior manager (Danilova, 2011).

The wars in Iraq (today a garrison state) and Afghanistan continue to drain the U.S. of money and lives. In his speech marking the 30th anniversary of the *London Review of Books*, Tariq Ali argues (in our “Obama’s Wars” section) that the United States will maintain a military force indefinitely in Iraq (and, indeed, Obama officials announced in April 2011 that a force of 10,000 U.S. troops would remain in Iraq). The current war in Afghanistan is also unwinnable. Meant to be a “good war” (in distinction to Bush-Cheney’s “bad war” in Iraq), Afghanistan and other Obama military actions in the region offer a textbook illustration of foreign policy continuity, according to Ali (2010: 68). Jeremy Keenan’s “The Sahara Emirate: Al Qaeda in the West, for the West?” argues in this volume that al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (an area stretching from the Chad-Niger border to the Atlantic coast and embracing Niger, Mali, southern Algeria, much of Mauritania, and affecting Burkina Faso, Morocco, and Libya, as well) was a fabrication of the United States and Algerian intelligence services. An effort to legitimize U.S. policy in the region has now become an Islamist and jihadist self-fulfilling prophecy.

In the quest for global dominance, President Obama rationalizes his continuing warfare by appealing to noble-sounding principles, as he did in his Nobel Peace Prize Speech given at Oslo. William Felice’s article for *Social Justice* scrutinizes the president’s moral framework, said to be inspired by the theologian and ethicist, Reinhold Niebuhr’s principles of “Christian realism.” Shunning the moral absolutes of George W. Bush’s “good versus evil” ethic, Obama admitted that the United States has been guilty of wrongful action. In critiquing Obama’s tenets of just war theory in his Oslo speech, Felice points out that the president gave only a partial definition of the “just war” concept, neglecting two crucial tenets. The consequent “traditional realist approach to statecraft” has shaped a flawed foreign policy in a number of areas that perpetuate or extend Bush-Cheney policies. In Daniel C. Maguire’s contribution to our issue, “just war” theory is used to critique the militarism of the United States and Israel, revealing how our militaristic assumptions frustrate diplomacy and imperil security and genuine security. Tyler Wall’s contribution, “Imperial Laughs: A Soldier’s Song and the Colonial Present,” provides a critical reading of a U.S. Marine song, “Hadji Girl,” that conveyed a dehumanized and racialized depiction of Iraqi people. The song exemplifies the cultural logic that rationalizes and supports our neocolonialism.

The “endless war” strategy of global hegemony embraced by the Obama administration has grievous domestic repercussions, creating a “blowback” that erodes our civil liberties. According to Alfred McCoy, author of *Policing America’s Empire* (2009: 8–9), counterinsurgency surveillance technologies used abroad have an insidious way of making their way back home in increasingly repressive surveillance and policing techniques. New surveillance technologies, from retina scanning and facial recognition to drones, have domestic applications by Homeland Security and other policing agencies engaged in domestic counterterrorism *and* the war on crime (of which there is a growing convergence, especially regarding the drug war).<sup>1</sup> For instance, state and local police, the FBI, and DHS analysts gather, coordinate, and analyze state surveillance data at a fast-growing number of “fusion centers” nationwide. In “The Future of Security?” in this issue, Torin Monahan’s provides a critical review of these Homeland Security centers. On other fronts, the Obama administration’s anti-terror policy has further eroded the rights of free speech and association. Justice Department expansion of “antiterrorism” laws, which targets activists whose speech “coordinates” with groups the Secretary of State designates as terrorist pursuant to *Holder v. the Humanitarian Law Project* (a Supreme Court ruling the Solicitor General supports), sharply limit First Amendment rights (Deutsch, 2010). Torturous interrogation and general penal mistreatment abroad lower domestic penal standards as well (Tapley, 2010). According to the Center for Constitutional Rights (Fisher, 2011), federal prisoners with “unpopular political beliefs” are being isolated and abused at two “experimental” federal prison units (called Communications Management Units, or CMUs).

Our section on “Professional Ethics and Interrogation” examines the role of the military, private contractors, and psychologists and anthropologists in counterinsurgency “enhanced interrogation.” As an occasion to conduct a broader inquiry into U.S. counterinsurgency interrogation policies under the Obama administration, Wm. C. Peters, in his “Addendum for the War on Terror,” recounts the 2002 torture and murder of an Afghan taxi driver, Dilawar, by U.S. Army and intelligence personnel at the Bagram Collection Point in Afghanistan. Although an Army sergeant was reprimanded for “unlawful and reprehensible conduct,” no one in a leadership position was held accountable for this atrocity or others committed at Bagram. Peters explores the deeper question about the rule of law and U.S. Army tactics during armed conflict, as well as the relevance today of the century-old Martens Clause. Michael Welch’s contribution, “Illusions in Truth Seeking: The Perils of Interrogation and Torture in the War on Terror,” critically examines “enhanced” interrogation methods as a “science” of truth seeking. He locates contemporary coercive interrogation in the modernization of the old American third degree (a practice dating back to Civil War military interrogations and early 20th-century municipal police). Contrary to those who today promote the “science” of torture—including influential individuals in the legal, medical, and mental health communities—the reliability of such coercion is illusory, illegal, and inimical to democracy.<sup>2</sup> J. Patrice

McSherry reviews the edited volume, *The Trauma of Psychological Torture*. This book addresses the dangers of “enhanced interrogation” from political, legal, psychiatric, and neurobiological perspectives; its contributors underscore the dangers of separating science from ethics and divorcing the healing professions from their mission to alleviate suffering. There is a long and unfortunate tradition among sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and the medical professions in and out of academia of facilitating military torture.<sup>3</sup>

As a forward to our last two articles, we have reprinted Jeremy Keenan’s *Times Higher Education* review of a pamphlet entitled *The Counter-Counterinsurgency Manual* (2009). Written by the founders of the Network of Concerned Anthropologists, it is a rejoinder to the U.S. Army and Marine Corps’ 2007 *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (CFM). Their critique focuses on the manual’s third chapter, “Intelligence in Counterinsurgency,” which seeks to mobilize anthropologists for war. It is largely the handiwork of anthropologist Montgomery McFate, who suggests counterinsurgency strategies to “weaponize” indigenous cultural information. Anthropology has long played a role in promoting U.S. colonialism and imperialism by providing expertise in warfare and covert operations. But this role has been extensively debated since the Vietnam War, when the American Anthropological Association adopted a code of ethics that stresses accountability regarding any possible harm resulting from the research of its members. Recent active recruitment of anthropologists for the U.S. Army’s Human Terrain System (HTS) of counterinsurgency warfare has rekindled debate within the profession. In “Obama’s War and Anthropology: Ethical Issues and Militarizing Anthropology,” anthropologists Amy Mountcastle and James Armstrong attempt to clarify the ethical dilemmas involved in military embedding. Their incisive analysis reveals many important issues and weighs opposing arguments concerning the role of anthropologists in and for the military.

In the behavioral and health professions, psychologists rank among the worst human rights offenders in their facilitation of abusive and torturous interrogation techniques. Psychologists and other mental health professionals have played instrumental roles in interrogation (including techniques such as sleep deprivation) at the secret detention center at Bagram Air Base (Ambinder, 2010). Run by the Defense Intelligence Agency’s Defense Counterintelligence and Human Intelligence Center, the American Psychological Association (APA) has regularly lobbied Congress for ongoing funding of this agency (Soldz, 2010). Mountcastle and Armstrong emphasize that within the anthropological establishment, many practitioners in the human and behavioral sciences experience considerable tension between professional opportunities and professional ethics.

For some, career gain easily trumps ethics. Witness the case of Dr. Larry James, a retired Army colonel who was the former chief psychologist at Abu Ghraib and for the intelligence command at Guantanamo Bay. Currently the Dean at Wright State University’s School of Professional Psychology in Dayton, Ohio, Dr. James

stands accused of overseeing detainee torture, including that of children, at Guantanamo. In April 2011, Harvard Law School's International Human Rights Clinic filed a court motion in the Franklin County (Ohio) Court of Common Pleas seeking to compel the Ohio State Psychology Board to investigate James' conduct at Guantanamo (IHRC, 2011). According to the complaint, filed on behalf of four Ohio residents (including a psychologist, veteran, a mental health advocate, and a minister), interrogators systematically employed abusive techniques such as forced nudity, sleep deprivation, stress positions, threats of rape, and physical assault during James' tenure as head of the prison's Behavioral Science Consultation Team (BSCT) assisting interrogation (Kaye, 2011).<sup>4</sup>

Shamefully, until recently the APA failed to declare as unethical the harmful interrogative activities inflicted by its members in the name of antiterrorism and counterinsurgency (Vedantam, 2007). Instead, throughout the Bush administration's war on terror, the APA's leadership promoted a strong role for psychologists in detainee interrogation. Its board of directors and the APA's ethics office resisted calls from its general membership for reform. Not until August 2007, after several days of heated protests at its 115th annual meeting, did the APA vote to bar member participation (under the threat of professional membership revocation) in several interrogation techniques, including mock executions, simulated drowning, sexual humiliation, and sleep deprivation (*Ibid.*). But the association failed to pass a blanket measure prohibiting interrogation work by psychologists, leaving wiggle room for abusive treatment in the nebulous areas of "enhanced interrogation" and providing a support role that legitimates the whole ugly process. The author of our final contribution, Bryant L. Welch, knows much about the politics of the APA from work inside its central office in various governance positions. His commentary examines why psychology was important to the Bush administration's interrogation program, the actual role psychologists played in detainee torture, and how the APA came to facilitate the process. Career advancement is enhanced by serving as a consulting expert on psychological methods of "enhanced interrogation" for the CIA and the military. But, according to Welch, entrepreneurial opportunities, including speaking fees and grant money, are a small part of the story.

Early in his administration President Obama released Bush-era torture memos that detailed their legal justifications for torture, but Attorney General Eric Holder's plan for war crimes investigations went nowhere. When pressed by the media, Obama replied that he was "looking forward, not back." Failure to prosecute illegalities committed by Bush administration functionaries is an implicit approval of those acts. Obama's policy does more than move on; it embraces and extends the Bush security state. In exercising "pragmatism, not ideology," Obama turned justice on its head, as in the case of Thomas A. Drake, a former senior National Security Agency (NSA) official. While granting immunity to Bush operatives, the Obama administration pursues whistle-blowers from the Bush era's sprawling and secretive Surveillance State. In April 2010, a federal grand jury indicted Drake on

10 counts, including obstruction of justice, for his revelations (leaking “classified information” to a newspaper reporter) about a 2006–2007 NSA program of eavesdropping without warrants. The indictment is “highly unusual,” according to the *New York Times* (Shane, 2010).

Bush interrogators stressed nudity, hoping to induce “learned helplessness” (similar to the American public in regard to its own domination by powerful political-economic classes and strata). The Obama administration continued this tactic with Pfc. Bradley Manning. Whistle-blowers are held naked in solitary confinement, while our political establishment, a complicit media, and a professional class of lawyers and behavioral scientists attempt to veil American atrocities. Current targeted assassinations of American citizens, landmines, torture, and military tribunals sadly converge with the Bush-Cheney era policy of war and counterterrorism.

## NOTES

1. To assuage those in criminal justice from feeling crowded out by an up-and-coming “national security industrial complex,” the Department of Justice website promotes “The Criminal Justice System as a Counterterrorism Tool” [<http://blogs.usdoj.gov/blog/archives/541>] with this statement: “The Obama administration is committed to using every instrument of national power to fight terrorism—including intelligence and military operations as well as the criminal justice system. As a counter-terrorism tool, the criminal justice system has proven incredibly effective in both incapacitating terrorists and gathering valuable intelligence from and about terrorists. In every instance, the administration will use the tool that is most effective for fighting terrorism, and will make those decisions based on pragmatism, not ideology.”

2. With the U.S. assassination of Osama bin Laden, debate over the effectiveness of torture has been rekindled. Dick Cheney and other Bush-era torture advocates were quick to claim that the identity of bin Laden’s courier was obtained through waterboarding at Guantanamo.

3. See “The American Culture of Torture: A Review Essay” (*Social Justice* 33,1, 2006), which reviews *A Question of Torture: CIA Interrogation, from the Cold War to the War on Terror*, by Alfred W. McCoy (New York: Henry Holt/Metropolitan, 2006) and *World as Laboratory: Experiments with Mice, Mazes, and Men*, by Rebecca Lemov (New York: Hill and Wang/Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005).

4. The Harvard Law School’s International Human Rights Clinic webpage (IHRC, 2010) declares: “The system of interrogation and detention employed at Guantánamo was specifically designed to exploit prisoners’ psychological vulnerabilities, maximize their feelings of disorientation and helplessness, and put them in a position of absolute dependency upon their interrogators.

During Dr. James’s tenure at the prison, boys and men were threatened with rape and death for themselves and their family members; sexually, culturally, and religiously humiliated; forced naked; deprived of sleep; subjected to sensory deprivation, over-stimulation, and extreme isolation; short-shackled into stress positions for hours; and physically assaulted.

The evidence indicates that abuse of this kind was systemic, that BSCT health professionals played an integral role in its planning and practice, and that Dr. James, in his position of authority, influenced the interrogations and detention conditions of all detainees held during the period of his tenure.

The complaint to the Ohio psychology board alleged 18 violations of Ohio statutes and board licensure rules.

... On January 28, 2011, over seven months after receiving the complaint, the Ohio State Psychology Board dismissed it without justification, stating only that it was 'unable to proceed to formal action' on the matter. Prior to its dismissal, the Board refused Complainants' multiple offers to answer questions of law or fact. It also refused Complainants' offers to assist in finding witnesses to further corroborate the allegations."

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