

# King of Chaos. “If Clinton was Queen of Chaos, Obama is surely King”

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*Diana Johnstone recently published a very good book on Hillary Clinton entitled “Queen of Chaos” (Counterpunch Books, 2015). Johnstone justifies the title through her convincing critical examination of Clinton’s performance as Secretary of State as well as her broader record of opinions and actions. But Clinton served under President Barack Obama, and the policies which she pushed while in office were of necessity approved by her superior, who worked with her in “a credible partnership”.<sup>1</sup>*

And after Mrs. Clinton’s exit from office Mr. Obama carried on with replacement John Kerry in a largely similar and not very peaceable mode. Most important was their 2014 escalation of hostilities toward Russia with the coup d’etat in Kiev, anger at the responsive Russian absorption of Crimea, warfare in Eastern Ukraine, and U.S.-sponsored sanctions against Russia for its alleged “aggression.” There was also simmering tension over Syria, with U.S. and client state support of rebels and jihadists attempting to overthrow the Assad government, and with Russia (and Iran and Hezbollah) backing Assad. There was also Obama’s widening use of drone warfare and declared right and intention to bomb any perceived threat to U.S. “national security” anyplace on earth.

In any case, if Hillary Clinton was Queen of Chaos, Obama is surely King. If Iraq, Libya and Syria have been reduced to a chaotic state, Obama has a heavy responsibility for these developments, although Iraq’s downward spiral is in large measure allocable to the Bush-Cheney regime. The Syrian crisis has intensified, with Russia providing substantial air support that has turned the tide in favor of Assad and threatened collapse of the U.S.-Saudi-Turkish campaign of regime change. This remains a dangerous situation with Turkey threatening more aggressive action and the Obama-Kerry team still unwilling to accept defeat.<sup>2</sup> Yemen has also descended into chaos in the Obama years, and although Saudi Arabia is the main direct villain in this case, the Obama administration provides much of the weaponry and diplomatic protection for this aggression and for several years has done some drone bombing of Yemen on its own. A fair amount of chaos also characterizes Israel-Palestine, Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco, along with many sub-Saharan regimes (Mali, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Burundi, etc.). The leadership of the superpower with long-standing predominant influence over this region must be given substantial (dis)credit for this widening chaotic state, which has produced the main body of refugees flooding into Europe and elsewhere and the surge of retail terrorism.

It is often alleged that this chaos reflects a terrible failure of U.S. policy. This is debatable. Three states that were independent and considered enemy states by Israel and many U.S.

policy-makers and influentials—Iraq, Libya and Syria—have been made into failed states and may be in the process of dismemberment. Libya had been ruled by a man, Moammar Gaddafi, who was the most important leader seeking an Africa free of Western domination; he was chairman of the African Union in 2009, two years before his overthrow and murder. His exit led quickly to the advance of the United States African Command (Africom) and U.S.-African state “partnerships” to combat “terrorism”—that is, to a major setback to African independence and progress.<sup>3</sup> The chaos in Ukraine and Syria has been a great windfall for the U.S. beneficiaries of the permanent war system, for whom contracts are flowing and job advancement and security are on the upswing. For them the King of Chaos has done well and his policies have been successful.

There has been little publicity and debate addressing President Obama’s new and major contribution to the nuclear arms race and the threat of nuclear war. In April 2009 Mr. Obama claimed a “commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons”.<sup>4</sup> And on the release of a Nuclear Posture Review on April 6, 2010 he stated that the United States would “not develop new nuclear warheads or pursue new military missions or new capabilities for nuclear weapons.” But he wasted no time in violating these promises, embarking soon on a nuclear “modernization” program that involved the development of an array of nuclear weapons that made their use more thinkable (smaller, more accurate, less lethal).

The New York Times reported that “The B61 Model 12, the bomb flight-tested in Nevada last year, is the first of five new warhead types planned as part of an atomic revitalization estimated to cost up to \$1 trillion over three decades. As a family, the weapons and their delivery systems move toward the small, the stealthy and the precise. Already there are hints of a new arms race. Russia called the B61 tests ‘irresponsible’ and ‘openly provocative.’ China is said to be especially worried about plans for a nuclear-tipped cruise missile.”<sup>5</sup> The Times does cite a number of U.S. analysts who consider this enterprise dangerous as well as “unaffordable and unneeded”.<sup>6</sup> But the modernization plan has not aroused much comment or widespread concern. And it would very likely be considered too modest by all the leading Republican presidential candidates.<sup>7</sup>

What is driving Obama to move in such an anti-social direction, perversely generating threats to national security and wasting vast resources that are urgently needed by the civil society?<sup>8</sup> Obama is a weak president, operating in a political economy and political environment that even a strong president could not easily manage. The military-industrial complex is much stronger now than it was in January 1961 when Eisenhower, in his Farewell Speech, warned of its “acquisition of unwarranted influence” and consequent threat to the national well-being. The steady stream of wars has entrenched it further, and the pro-Israel lobby and subservience of the mass media have further consolidated a permanent war system. It also fits the needs of the corporate oligarchy.<sup>9</sup>

It is interesting to see that even Bernie Sanders doesn’t challenge the permanent war system, whose spiritual effects and ravenous demands would seem to make internal reform much more difficult. We may recall Thorstein Veblen’s more than a century-old description of war-making as having an “unequivocal” regressive cultural value: “it makes for a conservative animus on the part of the population” and during wartime “civil rights are in abeyance; and the more warfare and armament the more abeyance.”

“At the same time war-making directs the popular interest to other, nobler, institutionally less hazardous matters than the unequal distribution of wealth or of creature comforts.”<sup>10</sup>

With a permanent war system in place, the vetting of political candidates and the budgetary and policy demands of the important institutions dominating the political economy, war-making and nourishing the Pentagon and other security state institutions become the highest priorities of top officials of the state. They all prepare for war on a steady basis and go to war readily, often in violation of international law and even domestic law. Subversion has long been global in scope.<sup>11</sup> Reagan's war on Nicaragua, Clinton's attacks on Yugoslavia and Iraq, Bush-1's wars on Panama and Iraq, Bush-2's wars on Afghanistan, Iraq and a propagandistic "War on Terror," and Obama's wars on Libya, Afghanistan, Iraq, and many other places, show an impressive continuum and growth..

Mr. Obama's Cuba and Iran policies deviate to some extent from his record of power projection by rule of force. In the case of Cuba, the opposition to recognition of the Cuban reality had diminished and a growing body of businessmen, officials and pundits, and the international community, considered the non-recognition and sanctions an obsolete and somewhat discreditable holdover from the past. It is likely that the new policy recognized the possibility of "democracy promotion" as a superior route to inducing changes in Cuba. It should also be noted that the policy change thus far has not included a lifting of economic sanctions, even though for many years UN Assembly votes against those sanctions have been in the order of 191-2 (in 2015). A more immediate factor in the changed policy course may have been the fact that several Latin American countries threatened to boycott the 2015 OAS Summit if Cuba was not admitted. As Jane Franklin notes, "Obama had to make a choice. He could refuse to attend and therefore be totally isolated or he could join in welcoming Cuba and be a statesman."<sup>12</sup> Obama chose to be a statesman.

In the case of Iran, the new agreement (The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action signed in Vienna on July 14, 2015) was hammered out in an environment in which Iran had long been made the villain that needed to be constrained. This followed years of demonizing and pressure on Iran to scale back its nuclear program, regularly claimed, without evidence, to be aiming at developing nuclear weapons. U.S. hegemony is nowhere better displayed than in the fact that Iran was encouraged to develop a nuclear program when ruled by the Shah of Iran, a U.S.-sponsored dictator, but has been under steady attack for any nuclear effort whatsoever since his replacement by a regime opposed by the United States, with the steady cooperation of the UN and "international community."

Israel is a major regional rival of Iran, and having succeeded in getting the United States to turn lesser rivals, Iraq and Libya, into failed states, it has been extremely anxious to get the United States to do the same to Iran. And Israel's leaders have pulled out all the stops in getting its vast array of U.S. politicians, pundits, intellectuals and lobbying groups to press for a U.S. military assault on Iran.<sup>13</sup> The tensions between the United States and Iran have been high for years, with a sanctions war already in place. But with many military engagements in progress, tensions with Russia over Ukraine and Syria at a dangerous level, and perhaps resentment at the attempted political bullying by Israeli leaders, the Obama administration chose to negotiate with Iran rather than fight. The agreement finally arrived at with Iran calls for more intrusive inspections and some scaling down of Iran's nuclear program, while it frees Iran from some onerous sanctions and threats. This was a rare moment of peace-making, and probably the finest moment in the years of the King's rule. Iran is still treated as a menace and in need of close surveillance. But there was a slowing-down in the drift toward a new and larger war, allowing the Obama administration to focus more on warring in Iraq and Syria and taking on any other threat to U.S. national security.

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## Notes

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2. Patrick Cockburn, "Syrian Civil War: Could Turkey be Gambling on an Invasion?," Independent, January 30, 2016.
3. Maximilian Forte, *Slouching Toward Sirte*, Baraka Books, 2012.
4. "Remarks in Prague," April 5, 2009
5. William Broad and David Sanger, "As U.S. Modernizes Nuclear Weapons, 'Smaller' Leaves Some Uneasy," New York Times, January 11, 2016.
6. Andrew C. Weber, former director of the Nuclear Weapons Council
7. For a broader discussion of this new nuclear threat, see Lawrence Wittner, "The Frightening Prospect of a Nuclear War Is About to Become a Lot More Likely," History News Network, January 2016; Jonathan Marshall, "Learning to Love—and Use—the Bomb," Consortiumnews, January 23, 2016.
8. Jonathan Marshall notes ironically that "America's public sector is apparently too strapped financially even to provide safe drinking water to some of its residents."
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