



American politics

Democracy in America

Petraeus to the CIA

Surge superintendent to spearhead spooks

Apr 29th 2011, 21:45 by W.W. | Iowa City

0

Like 31

BIG personnel changes are afoot

(http://www.economist.com/blogs/clausewitz/2011/04/obamas_national-security_team) for President Obama's national-security lineup. Leon Panetta, currently director of the CIA, will move into the cabinet seat about to be vacated by Robert Gates, the secretary of defence. Meanwhile Mr Panetta's plum CIA gig will go to General David Petraeus, currently America's head honcho in Afghanistan. Mr Obama's decision to make George Bush's favourite general the CIA's new helmsman brings home the remarkable, and to many of us the deeply disappointing, continuity between the Bush and Obama's administrations' approaches to national security and war. Installing the architect of the Iraq surge in Langley raises several worries. As Glenn Greenwald observes (http://www.salon.com/news/opinion/glenn_greenwald/2011/04/28/petraeus/index.html) :

“ One reason why it's so valuable to keep the CIA under civilian control is because its independent intelligence analyst teams often serve as one of the very few capable bureaucratic checks against the Pentagon and its natural drive for war. ”

Generals have run the CIA before, but handing the keys to the agency to the soldier more responsible than any other for America's military strategy in the Middle East seems quite likely to subordinate the CIA's operations to the Pentagon's, sapping the agency of it's capacity to offer a valuable alternative perspective. In particular, it's hard to think of anyone less likely than Mr Petraeus to advise that America abandon the costs sunk during his tenure as commander of coalition forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet an alternative perspective is badly needed.

Justin Logan, a foreign policy analyst at the Cato Institute, [makes the case](http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0411/53836.html) (<http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0411/53836.html>) that Mr Petraeus' nomination poses a problem:

“ [Mr Petraeus] has spent the past decade focused on what we used to call—at the behest of his commanders in chief—the “global war on terrorism.” But is U.S. nation-building in the Muslim world the most important national security and intelligence problem we face today?

Wouldn't we be better served by having someone at the CIA with a background in East Asia? Or thinking about potential future problems—issues such as cyberwar? Doesn't sending the world's leading GWOT veteran to run the CIA signal that Obama is reneging on his pledge to refocus American policy? ”

At this point, I think it is practically impossible to avoid the conclusion that Mr Obama has failed utterly to deliver on his campaign promises to extricate America from Mr Bush's defence and anti-terrorism policies. Mr Greenwald makes this point powerfully, if slightly overdramatically:

“ The nomination of Petraeus doesn't change much; it merely reflects how Washington is run. That George Bush's favorite war-commanding General—who advocated for and oversaw the Surge in Iraq—is also Barack Obama's favorite war-commanding General, and that Obama is now appointing him to run a nominally civilian agency that has been converted into an “increasingly militarized” arm of the American war-fighting state, says all one needs to know about the fully bipartisan militarization of American policy. There's little functional difference between running America's multiple wars as a General and running them as CIA Director because American institutions in the National Security State are all devoted to the same overarching cause: Endless War. ”

If I were to criticise Mr Greenwald, I would argue that he overstates the inevitability of Mr Obama's wholesale adoption of Mr Bush's stance on the GWOT. The problem is that Mr Obama has come to the problem intellectually unprepared. As Mr Logan relates:

“ Obama, who seems to think that every choice is false, believes his foreign policy approach is “anti-ideological” and that it defies “traditional categories and ideologies.” Unnamed aides recently told *The New Yorker* (http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/05/02/110502fa_fact_lizza?currentPage=all?currentPage=all) that the president is “an anti-ideological politician interested only in what actually works.” ”

This looks to me like a half-assed attempt to make a virtue of incompetence. In practice Mr Obama's anti-ideological pragmatism amounts to little more than carrying on the policies of his more ideological and motivated predecessor. No doubt Bush administration vets are gratified to learn that Mr Obama has implicitly conceded that their foreign policy approach is in fact “what actually works”. But those who supported Mr Obama over John McCain precisely because he promised to get America out of Iraq and Afghanistan will be rather less pleased.

0

Like 31

Related items

TOPIC: Iraq »

Deterring terrorism: Are we spending too much on homeland security?

Lawrence of Arabia: Prince of his disorder

Constitutional reform: All change

TOPIC: Middle East »

Unrest in the Middle East: A cartographic chronicle

The revolt in Syria: Not so easy

The Canton Fair: The China price

TOPIC: United States »

Osama bin Laden: The leader of al-Qaeda is dead

Fuel prices: The gas price debate

In Memoriam: Much missed: RIP Ron Asmus

TOPIC: World politics »

Australia under the monarchy: We are not amused

This week in print: Canada's general election, security in Colombia, violence in Mexico and Cuba's cigar scam

The week ahead: April 28th 2011: A step toward sainthood

More related topics: [American politics](#) | [Military and defence policy](#) | [David Petraeus](#)