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Barack Obama, Resort to Force, and U.S. Military Hegemony

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ABSTRACT: Just War Theorists have neglected that a lack of "just military preparedness" on the side of a country seriously undermines its capability to resort justly to military force. In this paper, I put forth five principles of "just military preparedness" and show that since the new Obama administration will seek to maintain the United States' dominant military position in the world, it will violate each of the principles. I conclude on this basis that we should anticipate that the Obama administration will add another page to the United States' history of unjust military interventions.[1]

I

Since the Second World War, the political and military leadership of the United States has sought to maintain a position of global military dominance (hegemony) and since the collapse of the former Soviet Union this position has no longer been significantly challenged. The project of American military hegemony has gone hand in hand with a series of unjust wars and interventions. The record of Just War Theory (JWT) in condemning these acts of aggression is at best mixed, reflecting that there are different versions of JWT, some of which are more pacifistic than others, and that its war-decision (*jus ad bellum*) principles are somewhat underdetermined so that there is room for ideological distortion. What is also at stake is that JW theorists have neglected the very project of U.S. military hegemony in their resort-to-force deliberations. There are two complementary ways of fixing this problem. The first one is to assess American interventions in the context of how they contribute to U.S. military hegemony and share the global security costs of this project. Thus, on basis of the *jus ad bellum* principle of proportionality, a strong prima facie case can be made against U.S. military interventions as such.[2] The second way is to assess U.S. military hegemony in terms of a new category of JWT, "just military preparedness," consisting of five principles of "just military preparedness," and show that the American failure to satisfy these principles undermines its capability of justly resorting to force.[3] My aim here is to briefly assess the new Obama administration in terms of the five principles of just military preparedness. I will conclude that since the Obama administration will bring us only to a limited degree closer to just military preparedness, we should anticipate a continued record of unjust American interventions. On a more hopeful note, this conclusion suggests an agenda for change: Progressives who helped Barack Obama to get elected as president are presented with an opportunity to push his administration toward just military preparedness.

II

The **first principle** of just military preparedness is that military preparedness must fit with its general purpose of protecting people from massive human rights violations.[4] This purpose allows a nation to use its military force to protect its own people (self-defense), to assist other nations in protecting their own people (international law enforcement), and to protect other people when their own government fails to do so (humanitarian intervention). The purpose requires only a fairly limited American military force, mostly located within its own borders, because there is no credible threat against the United States itself that requires much more than border protection and police work, while international law enforcement and humanitarian intervention are best pursued as collective tasks with multinational forces. Accordingly, just military preparedness requires a huge reduction in the size of the U.S. military (even if we assume that the United States will significantly contribute to collective military actions) as well as an elimination of its weaponry aimed at "global power projection."

The Obama administration will clearly violate the first principle. Notably, Barack Obama insists that the United States must continue to play "global cop." In *The Audacity of Hope*, he writes:

> So long as Russia and China retain their own large military forces and haven't fully rid themselves of the instinct to throw their weight around – and so long as a handful of rogue states are willing to attack other sovereign nations, as Saddam attacked Kuwait in 1991 –there will be times when we must again play the role of the world's reluctant sheriff. This will not change – nor should it.[5]

What goes wrong here is that Obama assumes that some countries are inherently aggressive and fails to see that their conduct might be influenced by America's military posture, such as its encircling of Russia with military bases and missile defense systems. Granted, America as "reluctant sheriff" is to be preferred to the America as eager cop with a "bring it on" attitude of the George W. Bush administration. But what Obama fails to question is the very notion that the world is to be divided into regions under U.S. military command (USSOUTHCOM, USCENTCOM, etc.). Or, to put it otherwise, he fails to consider that global security might be better served by the strengthening of true regional security arrangements and a corresponding gradual withdrawal of the United States from its "empire of bases," currently consisting of around forty major-to-medium sized military bases across the globe and hundreds of small military facilities in dozens of countries.[6] Instead, Obama echoes prior administrations by claiming that "we must maintain the strongest, best-equipped military in the world in order to defeat and deter conventional threats."[7]

Obama's "reluctant sheriff" may appear to be a multilateralist. Obama writes: "Once we get beyond matters of self-defense…, I am convinced that it will almost always be in our strategic interest to act multilaterally rather than unilaterally when we use force around the world."[8] Obama clarifies that what he means by multilateralism is not U.N. authorized action or token allied support, but rather "doing what George H. W. Bush and his team did in the first Gulf War." The example is telling and can be used to illustrate some of the global security costs of U.S. military hegemony. The United States was by far the largest military

force in the multilateral Gulf War; executed the war on its own terms; kept permanent forces in the region and so contributed to the emergence of al-Qaeda; and made clear to the world that only nuclear weapons can deter its superior forces, thus contributing to nuclear proliferation. It should be noted, moreover, that even though Obama may seem to follow JWT and international law in maintaining the right of unilateral action in self-defense, his notion of self-defense goes beyond the morally and legally permissible notion of reactive self-defense (as stated in article 51 of the U.N. Charter). In fact, Obama follows in the footsteps of prior administrations in defining self-defense so broadly that the door is left open toward unilateral wars in pretty much any corner of the globe. In *The Audacity of Hope,* Obama asserts:

> I would … argue that we have the right to take unilateral military action to eliminate an *imminent* threat to our security – so long as an imminent threat is to be understood to be a nation, group, or individual that is actively preparing to strike U.S. targets (or allies with which the United states has mutual defense agreements), and has or will have the means to do so in the immediate future.[9]

This understanding of preemption as included in legitimate self-defense appears quite broad –active preparation to strike is not the same as being ready to strike and displaying the intent to do so, as a narrow conception of justified preemption would require – and hardly constitutes a definite and clear break with the much criticized preventive war doctrine of the George W. Bush administration. The scope of legitimate resort to force is also viewed as very wide, including "U.S. targets" and allied countries. Here it should be observed that the further the global reach is of U.S. military hegemony the wider the scope is of what counts as "U.S. targets." In a 2007 speech entitled "The American Moment," Obama seems to broaden the scope of justified unilateralism even more by including the threats or attacks against U.S. "vital interests." Obama said: "No President should ever hesitate to use force – unilaterally if necessary – to protect ourselves and our vital interests when we are attacked or imminently threatened."[10]

In reality, then, Obama's "reluctant sheriff" will be prepared to go at it alone; this sheriff will prefer assistance by other forces but their role should be subservient. Adherence to the notion of "American exceptionalism" has made it easier for prior administrations to resort to unilateral military action and Obama enthusiastically endorses the notion. In "The American Moment" speech, he argues against the "cynics" who hold that "the American moment has passed" and that the 21st Century cannot be again a century in which "we lead the world in battling immediate evils and promoting the ultimate good." Obama confesses that he "still believe[s] that America is the last, best hope of Earth," and he goes on to articulate a variety of ways of how under his leadership the American moment can be seized anew, including a fresh beginning of America as reluctant global cop providing security for all.[11] Remarkably, Obama recognizes that the American global cop has made serious errors in the past – he mentions the covert action in Iran that brought the Shah into power, the Vietnam War, the funding of El Salvador's death squads, the invasion of Grenada, among others[12] – but he offers no real remedy for why such errors would not happen under his administration.

Worse, in the name of counterterrorism the Obama administration might even expand the reach of American military hegemony and so increase the risk of unjust interventions.

Obama uncritically embraces the "global war on terrorism" in that he looks at terrorism foremost through a military lens rather than through a law-enforcement or criminal lens and, correspondingly, inflates the size and scope of the threat. He holds that one of the ways in which the "American moment" can be seized again is by American leadership in this war. On his account, this requires that the U.S. military adds superiority in counterterrorism to its traditional conventional dominance, and this will necessitate an "expansion of our ground forces by adding 65,000 soldiers to the Army and 27,000 Marines" because "the ability to put boots on the ground will be critical in eliminating the shadowy terrorist networks we now face."[13] Obama's proposal to reduce American military presence in Iraq does not contradict his seeming willingness to expand the reach of U.S. military hegemony because his proposal is partly motivated by his concern that continued large-scale presence here would further weaken U.S. military hegemony and prevent the United States from shifting more troops to Afghanistan and the global war on terrorism.[14]

The Obama administration might fare a bit better in terms of the elimination of weapon systems aimed at global military power projection. Obama favors investment in weapons and their support systems that sustain America's "naval dominance" and its "global reach in the air," such as unmanned aerial vehicles and the KC-X air-refueling aircrafts, but at least the Bush administration endeavor to weaponize space is rejected and more serious efforts toward the elimination of nuclear weapons might be expected.[15] Obama explicitly endorses the proposal of George Schultz, Henry Kissinger, William Perry, and Sam Nunn to work toward a nuclear-free world, including such steps as reducing the American and Russian arsenals and creating safer launching protocols for nuclear weapons. However, Obama shares their failure to see that U.S. military hegemony is a cause of nuclear proliferation and that ending this hegemony might be a necessary condition for halting this proliferation in its tracks and moving toward a gradual global abolition of nuclear weapons. Skeptics may even see their plea for the abolition of nuclear weapons as an attempt to prevent that the spread of nuclear weapons among some countries in the South will restrain U.S. military hegemony.[16]

The **second principle** is that military personnel should receive training and education fitting to the purpose of just military preparedness and should participate fully in moral decisions concerning the initiation and execution of military force as well as in political life in general. Satisfaction of this principle by the United States would reduce its interventionism and the committing of atrocities by its forces, but, again, the United States is far away from this goal and it is doubtful that the Obama administration will improve matters much. In *Awakening Warrior*, Timothy L. Callans, who has broad experience teaching at U.S. military academies, writes: "The vast majority of military students I have personally taught in the classroom have many malformed moral beliefs. For example, most justify the exorbitant degree of collateral damage. They also justify harsh and coercive interrogation measures…. They are more than willing to err on the side of excessive force…."[17] This disposition, together with the fact that fighting in an environment where the enemy is hidden among a hostile population is as such atrocity producing, makes it not altogether surprising that Chris Hedges and Laila Al-Arian conclude in *Collateral Damage* on basis of interviews in 2006-07 with combat veterans from Iraq: "The war in Iraq is now primarily about murder. There is very little killing. American Marines and soldiers have

become socialized to atrocity."[18] In my view, they overstate their case, but such an overstatement might be a better impetus for change than Obama's frequent claims along the lines that "our men and women are performing heroically around the world" and that we have "the finest military in the world."[19] Of course, there are political considerations that motivate Obama to make such claims, but I see in his writings and political platform no explicit recognition that atrocity, torture, and the like are systemic manifestations of a "war machine" in need of fundamental change. At best, the Obama administration will make some ethical improvements in the sphere of military counterterrorism because Obama holds that U.S. leadership in the global war on terror demands of soldiers to acquire "a broader set of capabilities, as outlined in the Army and Marine Corps's new counter-insurgency manual."[20]

The **third principle** is that priority must be given to the nonmilitary means of realizing the purpose of military preparedness. One indication that the United States violates this principle is that the military spending per capita is around $2000 per year, while the per capita contribution to the United Nations is around $2 per year. It is widely acknowledged in official security circles that poverty reduction is crucial for prevention of civil wars, terrorism, and interstate conflict – even the National Security Statement of 2002 with its bellicose overtones and its preventive war doctrine makes this point forcefully. Yet, the American ratio of military spending to official development aid is around 25 to 1, compared to 2 to 1 in Holland, Denmark, and Belgium. Obama plans to double current "preventative" foreign aid, including economic development programs and nonviolent counterterrorism and nonproliferation measures, to 50 billion by 2012, but the Pentagon budget may rise under his administration as well and so we might end up with a ratio of around 15-10 to 1.[21] This is progress, but it provides no credence to Obama's claim that under his leadership another way in which "America will lead again is to invest in our common humanity – to ensure that those who live in fear and want today can live with dignity and opportunity tomorrow."[22] Moreover, it assumes that the Obama administration will bucket the trend of prior administrations in reneging on promises to increase greatly development aid.

The **fourth principle** is that governments must carefully balance the value of security promoted by military preparedness against other values they must advance, ranging from health to education and culture, and that resources should be allocated accordingly. In light of the global security costs of US military hegemony, it is clear that current military spending of at least 700 billion per year (which is about 50% of global military expenditures) violates this principle because less military spending on global power projection would actually increase the security of American citizens. That the United States indeed fails to strike a plausible balance between security and other values is illustrated by the fact that a mere 30% cut in its military spending would provide health care for all its uninsured (at least 40 million people); or we may point to the fact that in a world desperately in need of alternative energy resources around 30% of federally-supported research in engineering is paid for by the Department of Defense.[23] Here the Obama administration will make real improvement if we assume that even though it will at least sustain the current defense budget (and perhaps even increase the budget due to troop increases and the replacement of equipment lost in Iraq), it still will be able to fulfill its promises to reduce taxes for most individuals, raise the minimum wage, preserve social

security, cut the deficit, provide healthcare and a world class education for all, develop alternative energies and foreign oil independence, create an upgraded infrastructure, and the like – all this in times of recession or at best modest economic growth. The assumption is a pipe dream, and so the question is what Obama's real priorities are going to be: Will his administration continue to stimulate a war economy (as in prior administrations) or move toward an economy of human need? Time will tell, but we must face the fact that deeply entrenched political and economic interests in the United States are behind the first trajectory.

The **fifth principle** is that there should be a "right authority" for settling military preparedness policies, and this authority should be guided by "right intention." In a democracy, this means that the people and their representatives should subject the scope and purpose of military preparedness to collective control and public debate. The United States violates this principle because its defense budget is not transparent and the purchase of military hardware is heavily influenced by lobbyists from a weapons industry focused on profit maximization. In a word, the fifth principle of just military preparedness requires the elimination of the so-called military industrial complex. Curiously, Obama notes in *The Audacity of Hope* that in the period leading up the Vietnam War "'the iron triangle' of the Pentagon, defense contractors and congressmen with large defense expenditures in their districts amassed a greater power in shaping U.S. foreign policy." He adds: "U.S. policy makers increasingly viewed problems elsewhere through a military lens rather than a diplomatic one."[24] Obama seems to think that the impact of this "iron triangle" is no longer with us, or at least that its impact will disappear with his administration. The latter would indeed be a new beginning, but Obama's roadmap towards such a new beginning consists of little more than his assurance that with his election such a new beginning will evolve.

III

The "just military preparedness" principles are intended as principles for assessing and modifying the U.S. military. They are also principles aimed at showing that once the political and military institutions and their embedded cultural practices that must enable the execution of just wars are flawed in terms of "just military preparedness," there is bound to be reduced justice (or increased injustice) in the actual resort to force and even in the manner of the execution of military force.[25] To illustrate, hegemonic military preparedness makes the *jus ad bellum* principle of proportionality more difficult to satisfy due to the global security costs of hegemonic warfare. Furthermore, the lack of democratic control over military preparedness issues in the United States spills over into its resort-to-force decisions. Limited military force (e.g., in the form of missile strikes) is often used against other nations without any democratic oversight, and even in the case of full-scale military conflict Congress has often surrendered its responsibility as the institution that should declare war and placed it instead in the hands of the presidency and the Pentagon. The military industrial complex that pushes for the acquisition of hegemonic military hardware and so weakens legitimate authority in just military preparedness also weakens *jus ad bellum* legitimate authority. The reason is that the military industrial complex favors war as the instrument of solving political conflict because war, unlike non-military conflict

resolution, legitimizes the replacement of this hardware and its continuous development. This reason also shows how lack of just military preparedness might make it implausible to claim that a given resort to force decision by the United States has satisfied the last resort principle. Here the problem goes beyond the distorting impact of war profiteering on just war decision-making. Once a country fails to invest adequate resources in war prevention and nonviolent conflict resolution strategies and places instead all or most of its resources under the rubric of military conflict preparation, any claim that a war was a last resort has at the outset greatly diminished credibility. Finally, with regard to the link between just military preparedness and *jus in bello*, it may be noted that hegemonic weapons are bound to make the execution of war more often disproportionate (power projection works best through massive use of force that is also massive in its impact), while soldiers who are trained in a culture of hegemonic warfare are more likely to fight indiscriminately.

Now granted that the Obama administration will fail to meet the standards of just military preparedness, we must conclude that it will presumably continue the American record of unjust military interventions that are also morally tainted in their executions. History is open, at least to our limited minds, and so it is hard to tell when and how resort to force decisions will come into the picture. There are enough candidates for the next American misadventure, ranging from an expanded and continued war in Afghanistan, possibly spilling over into Pakistan, to acts of aggression against Iran and Venezuela. We do know that the American response to (real or perceived) threats or attacks has been traditionally bellicose and clouded in the mythology of the good global cop. Notwithstanding all the lofty language, Obama's foreign policy proposals are mostly centrist and do not offer a real break with this history. There is in fact not much of a new beginning at all in foreign policy if we look beyond the low point of the second Bush administration. To be sure, the Obama story is inspiring and the wave of hope that carried Obama to the White House signifies in itself domestic progress and will bring more social justice, perhaps even beyond Obama's own agenda.[26] It is less clear, however, that this movement of hope on the whole also seeks to abolish or even significantly curtail U.S. military hegemony. Still, we may derive some hope from the fact that Obama's election has created a window of opportunity for progressive groups in the United States (and elsewhere) to push his administration toward just military preparedness.[27] A similar window of opportunity has been created within the broader global community in that the very election of a black president has generated good will toward the United States, and the Obama administration will add to this good will by withdrawing from Iraq[28] and ending such gross human rights abuses of the past seven years as torture, indefinite detention, and extraordinary rendition. It is imperative that these windows of opportunity are used to push back U.S. military hegemony, but this struggle should be undertaken with determination and the grim understanding that historical opportunities are often short-lived and easily shattered by new conflicts.

Endnotes

[1] This paper was written for a session of Concerned Philosopher for Peace on Obama's foreign policy at the Eastern Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Philadelphia, December 27-30, 2008. A few additions, modifications, and clarifications were made in early February, 2009. I have made no attempt to incorporate any very recent information that confirms my analysis, such as the continuation of Robert Gates as Secretary of Defense or the appointment of Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State. I have not yet seen any action of the new Obama administration that refutes my view that it will continue a foreign policy centered on U.S. military hegemony, but if it has initiated such action by the time of the publication of this article I will rejoice and exclaim, "so much the better for the world!"

[2] I elaborate this argument in "Questioning the Resort to U.S. Hegemonic Force," forthcoming in *The Moral dimensions of Asymmetrical Warfare: Counter-terrorism, Democratic Values and Military Ethics*, ed. Th. A. van Baarda and D.E.M. Verweij (Leiden and Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2009).

[3] Indebted to Mark Woods, I first stipulated the need for this new JWT category in "Just war Theory and U.S. Military Hegemony," in *Rethinking the Just War Tradition*, ed. Michael W. Brough, John W. Lango, and Harry van der Linden (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007). For an elaboration of the "just military preparedness" principles, see my "Questioning the Resort to U.S. Hegemonic Force."

[4] Cf. David Luban, "Just War and Human Rights," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 9 (2): 160-81.

[5] Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006), p. 306. Obama continues to suggest that the defense budget of 2005 might be too high, but then adds that it may temporarily need to be increased to restore troop readiness and replace equipment due to setbacks in this regard caused by the war in Iraq. Add to this that Obama also maintains that the United States needs to expand (and retrain) its troops for the sake of the global war against terrorism (see note 13, below), and we can safely conclude that the military budget is unlikely to shrink under his administration.

[6] For an incomplete but detailed listing, see Department of Defense, Base Structure Report FY 2008, http:// www.**acq.osd.mil**/ie/download/bsr/BSR2008**Base**line.pdf. For a discussion of the "empire bases" and the inadequacy of DOD numbers, see Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004), Chapter 6, and *Nemesis* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006), chapter 4. For

[7] Barack Obama, "The American Moment: Remarks to the Chicago Council of Global Affairs," April 23, 2007, p. 3. Posted at http://www.barackobama.com. The bulk of the speech appeared in print as Barack Obama, "Renewing American Leadership," *Foreign Affairs,* July/August 2007. The speech is discussed in Paul Street, *Barack Obama and the Future of American Politics* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2009), p. 157. Generally, my understanding of Obama's foreign policy has profited from Streets' detailed and penetrating study.

[8] *The Audacity of Hope*, p. 309.

[9] Ibid., p. 308-09.

[10] "The American Moment," p. 4.

[11] Ibid., pp. 1, 2, and 9.

[12] See Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, pp. 286-89.

[13] Obama, "The American Moment," pp. 4 and 3, respectively.

[14] Obama follows in this regard the insights and recommendations of the bipartisan *Iraq Study Group Report* (2006). In his own words, "It is not too late to prevail in Afghanistan. But we cannot prevail until we reduce our commitment in Iraq…. In addition to freeing up resources to take the fight to al Qaeda, ending the war in Iraq will allow us to more effectively confront other threats in the world." See Barack Obama, "The World Beyond Iraq," speech delivered on March 18, 2008, in Fayetteville, North Carolina, pp. 5 and 6. Posted at http://www.barackobama.com.

[15] See Barack Obama, *Change We Can Believe In: Barack Obama's Plan to Renew America's Promise* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2008), pp. 119, 120, and 131-32, respectively.

[16] In "Soft Multilateralism" (*The Nation*, February 2, 2004), Immanuel Wallerstein argues that American display of its military dominance makes nuclear proliferation inevitable and "not necessarily bad." It is his hope that the more widespread possession of nuclear weapons among states (in combination with other failures of hegemony and unilateralism) may lead the United States to become a better global citizen. For a similar view, see William Greider, "Learning to Love the Bomb" (*The Nation*, March 20, 2006). In my view, this estimation might be correct; yet, we should oppose hegemony and proliferation at the same time.

[17] Timothy L. Challans, *Awakening Warrior: Revolution in the Ethics of Warfare* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), p. 24.

[18] Chris Hedges and Lila Al-Arian, *Collateral Damage* (New York: Nations Books, 2008), p. xiii.

[19] See respectively, The American Moment, p. 4, and Barack Obama, "The War We Need to Win," address delivered to Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, D.C, August 1, 2007, p. 6. Posted at http://www.barackobama.com.

[20] See "The War We Need to Win," p. 6.

[21] See Obama, *Change We Can Believe In,* p. 138.

[22] See Obama, "The American Moment," p. 6.

[23] See Kei Koizumi, "R&D in the FY 2009 Department of Defense Budget," chapter 5 of *AAAS Report XXXIII: Research & Development FY 2009*, http://www.aaas.org/spp/rd/09pch5.htm.

[24] Obama, *The Audacity of Hope,* p. 286.

[25] I think that this argument also applies to *jus post bellum* (justice after the war), but I will not try to show here that this is the case.

[26] In *Barack Obama and the Future of American Politics*, Street argues that what enabled Obama's political rise is that he presents a new face of America, but that his rise would never have been possible (and supported by powerful political and economic interests) were it not for the fact that he puts a new face on basically the same America. I think that this conclusion is too strong, at least with regard to domestic matters, but even so we may derive some hope (as Street himself does) from the fact that inspirational political leaders such as Obama may generate possibilities neither wanted nor foreseen by themselves or their backers.

[27] An example is that a dozen or so peace and justice groups from different countries are in the process of initiating a new global campaign to abolish American military bases abroad and create "security without empire." See http://www.projectonmilitarybases.org.

[28] In my view, what will restrict this good will is that Obama views the Iraq war as a blunder or mistake, not as a crime against the Iraqi people. A real break with U.S. military hegemony would require prosecution of some main figures of the second Bush administration, an apology to the Iraqi people, and above all very extensive reparations.