

Obama's Bay of Pigs by Michael Carmichael

The volcano is erupting, and the lava pouring forth is a bold and deliberate challenge metaphorically slapping the face of President-Elect Barack Obama. The architect of Obama's challenge is, of course, Lame Duck President George W. Bush.

During the US presidential campaign, Vice-President-Elect Joseph Biden predicted that Obama would be tested. "Mark my words. It will not be six months before the world tests Barack Obama . . . Gird your loins," Biden said while addressing a fundraiser in Seattle. Today, Biden seems like the proverbial prophets of the Old Testament uttering their dire predictions of imminent catastrophe for the people of Israel precipitated by the troubling policies of their monarchs. Even Biden did not conceive that Obama's challenge would be the Parthian shot of a disgraced lame duck that could be morphing into Obama's Bay of Pigs.

History appears to be repeating itself. In 1960 during the presidential campaign, JFK received top secret briefings from the CIA and Secret Service that informed him about US plans to back a counter-attack against Fidel Castro's forces in Cuba manned by anti-Castro Cuban exiles marshaled into guerilla forces based in Florida and Guatemala. The plan for the attack was the product of the Director of Central Intelligence, Allen Dulles, and Eisenhower's designated White House liaison for the CIA, then Vice-President Richard Nixon. The Top Secret briefings presented the anti-Castro invasion to JFK as a fait accompli, and as a candidate for the presidency, he had no power to veto it.

After his inauguration, JFK scaled back US military involvement and the operation floundered on the Cuban beach engraved into the collective consciousness of that era as a massive military debacle known as The Bay of Pigs. JFK accepted the blame for the fiasco, and he ordered the retirement of Allen Dulles, Charles Cabell and Richard Bissell who bore responsibility for the failure. In the aftermath, JFK ordered the reorientation of the CIA that shifted from covert operations that produced searing blowback under Dulles to policing the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons under John McCone, the former head of the Atomic Energy Commission.

While it might seem uncanny, a similar scenario is now unfolding in Gaza. A counter-terrorist operation involving US military materiel and foreign troops is taking place before the inauguration of the next president, and there are some striking similarities between the Bay of Pigs and the Gaza War for the origins of both stem from the secret chambers of the previous administration.

Last Saturday, the Israeli Air Force launched its attack on Hamas via its aptly named Operation Cast Lead, a phrase from a popular children's song during Chanukah to, "cast lead dreidels." The dreidel is a four-sided spinning top, the favorite child's toy during Chanukah. Sixty Israeli military aircraft including both F-16s and Apache helicopters are not dropping lead dreidels on the inhabitants of Gaza -- they are dropping high-tech 250-pound bombs provided by the "foreign aid" program of the Bush government courtesy of the United States of America.

The giant US arms manufacturer, Lockheed-Martin, produces the F-16 "Fighting Falcon" at costs of \$70 million per fighter, while McDonnell-Douglas produces the Apache helicopters at an average unit cost of a paltry \$14 million per unit. Boeing produces the GBU-39 Small Diameter Bomb (SDB) at a cost of \$70-90,000 each. In the first

phase of Operation Cast Lead, fifty Israeli Air Force (IAF) F-16s dropped one hundred US-built bombs on 50 targets in Gaza. It should be noted that Hamas does not have an air force, nor supersonic bombers, nor attack helicopters, nor high-tech bombs so the current conflict has no pretensions of being a just war. It is naked aggression – nothing more, nothing less.

In contrast to the high-tech US-manufactured arsenal generously provided to Israel courtesy of American taxpayers, Hamas uses outdated and ineffective Katyusha and Qassam missiles. The Russians developed the Katyusha in 1941 as an un-guided artillery shell sometimes described as a multiple rocket launcher. The Qassam is a crude and inexpensive, home-made unguided rocket or ‘missile’ from 3-7 feet in length bearing a small explosive charge that works like a fourth of July rocket from a Chinese fireworks factory.

The official rationale for the 2008 Gaza War suggests that the massive military operation is a response to the end of the agreement for a six-month truce between Israel and Hamas that officially concluded on December 19th. Both sides claim violations of the truce. The government of Israel argues that a palpable escalation of rocket fire from Gaza killed one Israeli civilian and triggered the current crisis.

In contrast to the official Israeli rationale, Palestinians, Israeli journalists, Israeli writers and Israeli peace activists trace the breakdown of the truce to an Israeli Defense Force (IDF) military operation that raided a tunnel between Gaza and Egypt and led to the deaths of six Palestinians as the tipping point that precipitated the subsequent escalation of rocket fire from Gaza. On the fifth of November the morning news reported that Barack Obama had been elected to replace George Bush, and on that very day the IDF raided the tunnel killing six Palestinians in the process. In the aftermath of the tunnel raid, Hamas escalated rocket fire ultimately resulting in the death of one Israeli prior to the launch of Operation Cast Lead.

Last June, President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt brokered the six-month truce agreement that began on June 18th and expired on the 19th of December. Last week, Prime Minister Tzipi Livni informed Hosni Mubarak that Israel would strike Hamas in retaliation to the rocket fire. Reports in Israel confirm that military planning for the current operation began six months ago, at the beginning of the truce. Less than two months into the truce, the New York Times reported the US would speed up delivery of high-tech bombs to Israel. On the first day of the Israeli assault more than 200 Palestinians died making it the bloodiest day of the Arab-Israeli conflict since the Six Day War of 1967.

In televised statements from Bush’s official spokesman, Gordon Johndroe, it is clear that the US is supporting the Israeli attack on Gaza. In a tremulous voice, Mr. Johndroe addressed a hastily assembled press conference in Crawford, Texas. In brief comments punctuated by “Ummms” and “Ahhhs,” Johndroe justified the conflict by the refusal of Hamas to accept the right of Israel to exist.

From his podium in Crawford, Johndroe intoned, “Hamas has a choice to make. Right now they are choosing to be a terrorist organization that fires rockets into Israel. That is not going to lead to a ceasefire.”

From Johndroe’s statements, the position of the US is sharp and clear. The people of Gaza must not defend themselves against the IAF bombardment or any future IDF ground assault. Through Johndroe’s statements, Bush has issued an ultimatum to the Palestinian people to restrain them from their natural compulsion to defend themselves against armed aggression. Bush’s policy is now perfectly clear, Palestinians will suffer even more severe punishment than Operation Cast Lead via the IDF – the forceful re-occupation of Gaza as a last gasp of Bush’s neoconservative hubris.

Johndroe revealed that President Bush was constantly monitoring the situation while conferring with Vice-President Cheney. During the Lebanon War of 2006, Vice President Cheney maintained close communications with the IDF in their assault that resulted in an embarrassing outcome for Israel for they did not achieve their principal objective of destroying

Hizbullah, the armed Pro-Palestinian political faction in Lebanon. In the government of Lebanon, Hizbullah's political strength is growing in both the parliament and the cabinet.

It now seems likely that the Gaza War will be counterproductive. Hamas will emerge more popular than before the US-backed Israeli attack. Five months after the failure of The Bay of Pigs, Che Guevara wrote a letter to JFK thanking him for the attack and stating that it strengthened the popularity of the revolution in Cuba.

Demonstrating the decline of US influence that has fallen off a cliff during the Bush presidency, the rest of the world is condemning the US-backed Israeli operation. Public protests against the Israeli attack began on Saturday morning when 1,000 Israeli protesters challenged the bombing of Gaza in a demonstration in front of the Ministry of Defense in Tel Aviv. Today, a wave of public protest is sweeping across the globe from Turkey to Pakistan in the Middle East to leading cities in Europe, Asia and the Americas – people are convulsed in a cascade of criticism aimed at the disproportionate attack. In several major cities, hundreds of angry protesters are surrounding Israeli embassies to demand an immediate cessation of hostilities. This Saturday, there will be a major demonstration in London's Trafalgar Square.

However, statements from Israeli officials have made it clear that the confrontation will not end soon. Speculation is mounting about an Israeli ground assault to re-occupy Gaza and reverse the bold policy of Ariel Sharon who ordered the IDF withdrawal in 2005. This tactic is shaped by anticipation of a new foreign policy that will be unveiled by President-Elect Obama after he takes the oath of office in January.

In February, Israel will hold its elections. The ranking contenders are: Tzipi Livni, the current Foreign Minister; Ehud Barak, the current Minister of Defense, and Binyamin Netanyahu, the head of the right-wing party, Likud. All three support Operation Cast Lead. The outcome of the conflict may prefigure the outcome of the election.

During this phase of the conflict, President-Elect Obama, Vice-President-Elect Biden and Secretary of State Designate Hillary Clinton are maintaining a policy of non-intervention stating through spokespersons that there can be only one president at a time and that Obama will assume the presidency on the 20th of January. At the same time, Obama is receiving a stream of intelligence briefings on the crisis that has transformed his sojourn in Hawaii into a working holiday if ever there were one. During this period, Obama will be in routine contact with Jim Jones, his National Security Advisor.

Of all the problems facing President-Elect Obama, the Arab-Israeli conflict is the proverbial Gordian Knot. In order to move beyond the neoconservative era of Bush and Cheney, the first task facing the Obama administration is not merely the US withdrawal from Iraq, but the pacification of the Middle East. Unless there is a resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict, Obama will face the untenable prospect of continuing the failed foreign policy of Bush.

After Obama announced the appointments of his national security team, a seismic surge of diplomacy has been the source of tremors presaging an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict. After the announcement of her appointment, Hillary Clinton held a lengthy telephone conversation with outgoing Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. Shortly after their teleconference Olmert called for stronger US leadership from the next president in guiding Israel and the Palestinians toward peace. In a second interview Olmert criticized the systematic aggression of Israeli settlers on the West Bank that he characterized as a "pogrom" where Palestinian lands have been seized and occupied over the past forty years.

Obama's key advisors have designed a diplomatic course that will relegate the neoconservatives to the dustbin of history. Zbigniew Brzezinski and Brent Scowcroft believe that Obama must resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict promptly in order to project a viable foreign policy. Obama's designated National Security Advisor, Jim Jones proposed a NATO peacekeeping force to occupy the West Bank – a policy that would preclude any further assaults like Operation Cast Lead. Current UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown criticized the Israeli settlements on the West Bank as a blockade to peace. Former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair who is now the Middle Eastern Envoy for the European Union

told a reporter that a secret deal has been struck between the Arabs and Israelis . The new American pro-peace, pro-Israel lobby, J Street criticized the growing violence of the Israeli settlers. Now, J Street is calling for the immediate cessation of Operation Cast Lead and the launch of peace negotiations.

Against the backdrop of a new American administration preparing to assume power and make changes, Lame Duck President George W. Bush authorized the Israeli assault on Gaza by pledging US support for the attack. It should never be forgotten that Bush is a dedicated Christian Zionist who broke into tears when he was fawningly eulogized in the Knesset during his last visit to Israel in May.

Like the portrait of Dorian Gray that morphed into increasingly hideous configurations while its subject descended into deeper levels of vice, immorality and personal corruption, Bush's broken presidency is morphing into a crescendo of violence and pathos in a childish fit of pique designed to destroy Obama's presidency before it begins – in effect foisting a catastrophe upon the incoming president before he has a chance to take the oath of office.

This macabre scenario vividly recalls the Bay of Pigs, the ill-conceived assault on Castro's Cuba planned in secret by Allen Dulles, the Director of Central Intelligence, and then-Vice President Richard Nixon in the summer of 1960. JFK permitted the tragedy to unfold, and he took the blame for the fiasco that was the most searing foreign policy scandal of his short term in office.

Today, Obama is facing the same gambit on the chessboard as JFK – a disastrous last gasp of neoconservatism threatens to scuttle his presidency before it begins. This is the first major test of Obama predicted by Biden. Failure to respond appropriately to this challenge will plunge the Middle East into a maelstrom that could very well consume Obama's presidency in a Cold War over energy with American prestige on the decline.

In ancient Persia, the Parthians produced one of the most devastating cavalry techniques in ancient warfare. While retreating from the battlefield, Parthian archers would turn in their saddles to fire a volley of arrows at their pursuers. While Bush is being democratically forced from power, he is firing a volley of military crises at Obama, and his fingerprints are all over the current crop of corpses in Gaza.

Obama is not JFK, and Gaza is not Cuba. With American prestige on the decline and the global economic meltdown, Obama is facing a distinctly different but equally challenging nightmare as JFK did in 1961 in the midst of recession and the macabre machinations of the Cold War.

Biden was right. Obama is facing a brazen challenge that will test his mettle for the office he will soon hold. Let us hope that history will not repeat itself marring a presidency long-anticipated as the vanguard of a new era of global progress.