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Old hawks wrong for foreign policy

By Mary Ellen O'Connell, Chicago Tribune

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When President-elect Barack Obama announced his new economic policy team, commentators quickly pointed out that the team included many old hands, names from the Clinton era, some even involved in major decisions linked to the current economic crisis. Where, they asked, was the change Obama promised?

With respect to the unprecedented challenges of the economy, it may make sense to bring in experienced people, with name recognition, sending a message of calm, expertise and experience. At least there is a rationale for doing so.

With foreign policy, the story is different. It appears Obama is also moving to bring in old hands, some with much experience. But in the case of foreign policy, the American people and the world should get the "change" they were promised because the foreign policy challenges are not unprecedented. The problems are known. What works is known. And it is not the policy of the Clinton administration hawks.

Those hawks opened the door to the militant foreign policy that the Bush administration took to new heights. Don't forget how President Bill Clinton pushed past the careful humanitarian initiative of President George H.W. Bush in Somalia. Clinton got involved in Somali politics. The result was "Black Hawk Down." The second President Bush continued the unlawful meddling, pressing Ethiopia to invade with disastrous results—more chaos, more carnage and the scourge of piracy.

Clinton also listened to the "human rights hawks" when they insisted that if human rights were as important as state sovereignty, force had to be used in the former Yugoslavia.

Yet the cases clearly show that major military force is counterproductive in situations of human rights crisis. This reality underpins the international legal prohibition on the use of force enshrined in the UN charter. NATO ignored the law and bombed Yugoslavia for 78 days in 1999. It was the first U.S. use of force since 1945 in which no attempt was made to provide a legal basis for the action—there was none. NATO's bombing killed 500 innocents, and today Kosovo is a place of violence, organized crime and human rights violation.

When confronted with the death toll from NATO's action, its advocates say it preempted greater force by the Serbs against the Kosovo Albanians. Sound familiar? A preemptive use of force—just as the George W. Bush administration has asserted is our right in response to the possession of weapons of mass destruction or the harboring of terrorists.



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There is no right, however, to use force to preempt potential problems. To deal effectively with terrorism requires patient, coordinated transnational police work—not running roughshod over the rule of law, declaring phony wars.

We have sent the FBI to aid India in the aftermath of the tragedy in Mumbai. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is going to try to prevent violence between India and Pakistan. That makes sense. Bombing does not.

The result of preemptive force in violation of international law has been death, destruction, increased hatred of America, skyrocketing debt and the weakening of the very norms of non-violence, respect for human rights and respect for treaties that we need now more than ever. Turning to war has distracted us from the slower but effective ways of negotiation.

The new Obama team seems caught up in the facile calls for force: Vice President-elect Joe Biden is proud of demanding force in Bosnia, Kosovo and Darfur. Sen. Hillary Clinton supported the Iraq War. The candidate for UN ambassador, Susan Rice, is an outspoken hawk.

After 16 years of robustly militaristic foreign policy—all after the end of the Cold War, when we should have been looking for a new way—Obama should have finally begun that long-overdue approach. Instead, he has surrounded himself with old hawks. While it is too late to replace this group, he can put together an external advisory team of the type he put together for the economy. The team should include individuals with a track record of success in diplomacy—James Baker, Jimmy Carter, John Danforth, Anthony Zinni. They can use their great diplomat skills first to teach the old hawks some new tricks.

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