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Vote for Change? Atrocity-Linked U.S. Officials Advising Democratic, GOP Presidential Frontrunners



Independent journalist Allan Nairn and American Conservative correspondent Kelley Beaucar Vlahos discuss a little-addressed facet of the 2008 campaign: many of the top advisers to leading presidential candidates are ex-U.S. officials involved in atrocities around the world. [includes rush transcript]

Guests:

Allan Nairn, Independent journalist. Runs the web-blog "News and Comment."
<http://newsc.blogspot.com>

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos, Freelance journalist in Washington. Her article on presidential advisers titled "War Whisperers" appeared in the American Conservative.

RUSH TRANSCRIPT

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AMY GOODMAN: Presidential candidates are scrambling to win last-minute support in Iowa ahead of tonight's caucus. Thousands of reporters have also descended on Iowa this week, covering everything from Mike Huckabee's haircut to John Edwards's rally with singer John Mellencamp.

But little attention has been paid to perhaps one of the most important aspects of the candidates: their advisers, the men and women who likely form the backbone of the candidate's future cabinet if elected president. Many of the names will be familiar.

Advisers to Hillary Rodham Clinton include many former top officials in President Clinton's administration: former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, former National Security Adviser Samuel Berger, former UN Ambassador Richard Holbrooke. Senator Barack Obama's list includes President Carter's National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, former counterterrorism czar Richard Clarke, former Middle East negotiator Dennis Ross.

Rudolph Giuliani's advisers include Norman Podhoretz, one of the fathers of the neoconservative movement. John McCain's list of official and formal policy advisers includes former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, General Colin Powell, William Kristol of *The Weekly Standard*, and former CIA Director James Woolsey. One of Mitt

Romney's top advisers is Cofer Black, the former CIA official who now serves as vice chair of Blackwater Worldwide. Vice President Dick Cheney's daughter Elizabeth is advising Fred Thompson.

As for Mike Huckabee, it's not clear. In December, Huckabee listed former UN Ambassador John Bolton as someone with whom he either has "spoken or will continue to speak," but Bolton then revealed the two had never spoken. Huckabee also named Richard Allen, but the former National Security Adviser also admitted he had never spoken to Huckabee.

To talk more about the advisers behind the presidential campaigns, I'm joined by two guests. Kelley Vlahos is a freelance journalist in Washington. Her article on presidential advisers called "[War Whisperers](#)" appeared in *The American Conservative* in October. Investigative journalist Allan Nairn joins us here in the firehouse studio. We welcome you both to *Democracy Now!*

I want to begin by going to Washington, D.C., to our guest there, to the author of "War Whisperers." Talk about why you focused, Kelley, on the advisers of the presidential candidates.

KELLEY BEAUCAR VLAHOS: Well, it was becoming clear to me and to others here in Washington in certain circles that the advisers that were emerging for the campaigns, whether it be Democratic or Republican, were part of some seriously pro-establishment cliques. And I say "cliques," because there is really no other way to describe it. But these cliques generally can be categorized as not only pro-establishment, but more pro-interventionist, whether it be the so-called liberal interventionists on the Democratic side or your war hawks on the Republican side.

But what became clear is that the candidates weren't reaching outside of these establishment cliques and that they were getting no fresh ideas, no vision outside of these pretty standard parameters. And we thought—me and the editors thought it might be a good idea to explore a little bit under the surface about where these advisers were coming from, in hopes of maybe deciphering where foreign policy might be going in the future.

AMY GOODMAN: Let's begin with Hillary Clinton, Kelley Vlahos.

KELLEY BEAUCAR VLAHOS: OK. Well, Hillary Clinton's—her foreign policy team can be best described as—and I hate to use this word so casually, but—"throwbacks" of her husband's administration. We have, you know, Richard Holbrooke, Madeleine Albright, you have Sandy Berger as your sort of top-tier advisers, your key advisers, the most recognized faces. And then, beyond that, as I say in the article, you have this newer generation—I want to say newer generation, but a generation of former Clinton types who you might not recognize their names, but they've been around for a long time and are seriously scrambling for position in what they see as a new Clinton administration. So you're seeing a lot of old faces, old names, who haven't really changed their ideas from, you know, what I and others can see, in terms of doing the research, haven't changed their real vision of the world and foreign policy since the 1990s.

AMY GOODMAN: Let me bring Allan Nairn into this conversation. You have just written about the advisers, as well, on your blog, [newsc.blogspot.com](#). Elaborate further on Hillary Clinton's advisers.

ALLAN NAIRN: Well, I think one thing you could say about the advisers for all the candidates who have a chance is that the presence of these advisers makes it clear that these candidates aren't serious about enforcing the murder laws and that they're willing to kill civilians, foreign civilians, en masse in order to advance US policy. And they're not serious about law and order. They're soft on crime.

And start with Clinton. Madeleine Albright, she was the main force behind the Iraq sanctions that killed more than 400,000 Iraqi civilians. General Wesley Clark, he was the one who ran the bombing of Serbia in the former Yugoslavia, came out and

publicly said that he was going after civilian targets, like electrical plants, like the TV station there. Richard Holbrooke, in the Carter administration he was the one who oversaw the shipment of weapons to the Indonesian military as they were invading—illegally invading East Timor and killing a third of the population there, and he was the one who kept the UN Security Council from enforcing its resolution against that invasion. Strobe Talbott, he was the one who, during the Clinton administration, oversaw Russia policy, a backing of Yeltsin, which resulted in turning over the national wealth to the oligarchs and a drop in life expectancy in much of Russia of about fifteen years—massive, massive death. And you have various backers of the Iraq invasion and occupation and the recent escalation, people like General Jack Keane, Michael O'Hanlon and others. That's just Clinton.

AMY GOODMAN: Barack Obama?

ALLAN NAIRN: Well, Obama's top adviser is Zbigniew Brzezinski. Brzezinski gave an interview to the French press a number of years ago where he boasted about the fact that it was he who created the whole Afghan jihadi movement, the movement that produced Osama bin Laden. And he was asked by the interviewer, "Well, don't you think this might have had some bad consequences?" And Brzezinski replied, "Absolutely not. It was definitely worth it, because we were going after the Soviets. We were getting the Soviets." Another top Obama person—

AMY GOODMAN: I think his comment actually was, "What's a few riled-up Muslims?" And this, that whole idea of blowback, the idea of arming, financing, training the Mujahideen in Afghanistan to fight the Soviets, including Osama bin Laden, and then when they're done with the Soviets, they set their sights, well, on the United States.

ALLAN NAIRN: Right. And later, during Bill Clinton's administration, during the Bosnia killing, the US actually flew some of the Afghan Mujahideen, the early al-Qaeda people—the US actually arranged for them to be flown from there to Bosnia to fight on the Muslim/NATO side.

Another key Obama adviser, Anthony Lake, he was the main force behind the US invasion of Haiti in the mid-Clinton years during which they brought back Aristide essentially in political chains, pledged to support a World Bank/IMF overhaul of the economy, which resulted in an increase in malnutrition deaths among Haitians and set the stage for the current ongoing political disaster in Haiti.

Another Obama adviser, General Merrill McPeak, an Air Force man, who not long after the Dili massacre in East Timor in '91 that you and I survived, he was—I happened to see on Indonesian TV shortly after that—there was General McPeak overseeing the delivery to Indonesia of US fighter planes.

Another key Obama adviser, Dennis Ross. Ross, for many years under both Clinton and Bush 2, a key—he has advised Clinton and both Bushes. He oversaw US policy toward Israel/Palestine. He pushed the principle that the legal rights of the Palestinians, the rights recognized under international law, must be subordinated to the needs of the Israeli government—in other words, their desires, their desires to expand to do whatever they want in the Occupied Territories. And Ross was one of the people who, interestingly, led the political assault on former Democratic President Jimmy Carter. Carter, no peacenik—I mean, Carter is the one who bears ultimate responsibility for that Timor terror that Holbrooke was involved in. But Ross led an assault on him, because, regarding Palestine, Carter was so bold as to agree with Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa that what Israel was doing in the Occupied Territories was tantamount to apartheid. And so, Ross was one of those who fiercely attacked him.

Another Obama adviser, Sarah Sewall, who heads a human rights center at Harvard and is a former Defense official, she wrote the introduction to General Petraeus's Marine Corps/Army counterinsurgency handbook, the handbook that is now being used worldwide by US troops in various killing operations. That's the Obama team.

AMY GOODMAN: John Edwards?

ALLAN NAIRN: Well, Edwards is a little different. The list of his foreign advisers is not as complete, so it's not as clear exactly where they may be coming from, but it's interesting. Last night on TV, one of the top Edwards advisers, "Mudcat" Saunders, was complaining about the fact that there are 35,000 lobbyists in Washington. And it appears, from the Edwards list, that many of the military lobbyists are working on the Edwards foreign policy team, because the names that—the Edwards names that are out there mainly come from the Army and the Air Force and the Navy Material Command. Those are the portions of the Pentagon that do the Defense contracts, that do the deals with the big companies like Raytheon and Boeing, etc. One of those listed on the Edwards team is the lobbyist for the big military contractor EADS. So, although Edwards talks about going after lobbyists, if he tries to go after the military lobbyists, he may get a little blowback from his own advisers.

AMY GOODMAN: Are you saying that there's no difference between these candidates?

ALLAN NAIRN: Well, fundamentally, there's no difference on the basic principle of, are you against the killing of civilians and are you willing to enforce the murder laws. If we were willing to enforce the murder laws, the headquarters of each of these candidates could be raided, and various advisers and many candidates could be hauled away by the cops, because they have backed various actions that, under established principles like the Nuremberg Principles, like the principles set up in the Rwanda tribunals, the Bosnia tribunals, things that are unacceptable, like aggressive war, like the killing of civilians for political purposes. So, in a basic sense, there is no choice.

But there is a difference in this sense: the US is so vastly powerful, the US influences and has the potential to end so many millions of lives around the world, that if, let's say, you have two candidates that are 99% the same—there's only 1% difference between them—if you're talking about decisions that affect a million lives—1% of a million is 10,000—that's 10,000 lives. So, even though it's a bitter choice, if you choose the one who is going to kill 10,000 fewer people, well, then you've saved 10,000 lives. We shouldn't be limited to that choice. It's unacceptable. And Americans should start to realize that it's unacceptable.

But that's the choice we have at the moment. In Iowa, I think there are steps people could take to start to challenge that system, if they wanted to.

AMY GOODMAN: Well, we'll talk about that in a minute, and we'll continue to talk about the advisers. Our guests are Allan Nairn and Kelley Beaucar Vlahos. We'll be back with them both in a minute.

[break]

AMY GOODMAN: We continue this discussion about the advisers to the presidential candidates, the men and women behind the men and women who are running today. Our guests are Kelley Beaucar Vlahos, a freelance journalist in Washington, wrote a piece in *The American Conservative* called "[War Whisperers: The 2008 Hopefuls Promised a Change in Foreign Policy Then Hired the Old Guard](#)." We are also joined by independent investigative journalist Allan Nairn. He writes a blog called [newsc.blogspot.com](#). His piece today on this issue is called "The US Election is Already Over. Murder and Preventable Death Have Won."

Kelley Beaucar Vlahos, would you like to add to any of the advisers Allan just talked about? And then we'll move on to the Republicans.

KELLEY BEAUCAR VLAHOS: Well, I think Allan has covered most of it and pretty thoroughly. I agree with him that there is very little difference among these people, and I think what he said really speaks to the idea and the challenge that there is no incentive for these candidates to reach out beyond any of this orbit or galaxy of foreign policy advisers who have been linked in, you know, we're talking decades of

war and events and actions and operations. And there seems, whether it be John Edwards reaching out to the Defense contracting community or Hillary Clinton reaching out to her husband's former security advisers and operatives or whether it's Obama reaching out to former Clinton types, there doesn't seem to be any incentive to reach out beyond that. It seems like there is a stranglehold in this town on the kind of advisers that one is supposed to be linked with.

And I think a lot of that is linked to money, where, you know, the candidates have big names, big lobbyists; that in turn brings them in more funders, more bundlers. And it's sort of like this hand-in-glove symbiotic relationship, where the bigger names you have, the more familiar names, the more entrenched you have in these cliques I spoke to previously, the more money you're bringing into your campaign. So there's no incentive to go beyond that, unless you're ready for some amount of rebuke and some of the spigot being turned off.

AMY GOODMAN: I mean, actually, in terms of money, Allan Nairn, someone like Obama raises an enormous amount of money from just the grassroots.

ALLAN NAIRN: Yeah, Obama—that's a very telling example. Like Dean in the last campaign, Obama has the ability to get all the money he needs from the middle class through the internet, through \$50, \$80, \$100 contributions. He actually doesn't need to finance his campaign, to go to the hedge funds, to go to Wall Street. But he does anyway. And he does, I think, because if he doesn't, they wouldn't trust him. They might think that he's on the wrong team, and they might start attacking him. He is someone who, in terms of the money he needs for his campaign, he could afford to come out for single-payer healthcare, for example, but he doesn't. He doesn't need money from the health insurance industry, that's wasting several percentage points of the American GDP in a way that no other industrial rich country in the world does, yet he chooses not to do that, because he doesn't want to be attacked by those corporations.

AMY GOODMAN: And is Edwards and Clinton any different on those issues?

ALLAN NAIRN: Not as far as I can tell. None of them have come out for single payer. The only one who came out for single payer was Kucinich. Campaign contributions is just one of many tools that rich people have to get their way. There are basically two parallel factors in any democracy. One is one person, one vote. The other is one dollar, one vote. And those two are mixed together. So, although the people do have some say, there are usually a lot more dollars out there than people, and they find ways of prevailing in the end, unless the people become aggressive and disruptive and demanding and threaten to shake the system so that big concessions are made.

AMY GOODMAN: Kelley Beaucar Vlahos, let's go to the Republicans: Giuliani, Mitt Romney, Fred Thompson, Mike Huckabee, John McCain. Give us a few of their advisers.

KELLEY BEAUCAR VLAHOS: Well, Giuliani, as you had mentioned, and you had a pretty thorough list of people, but Giuliani is probably strikingly—strikingly is reaching out to the most strident neoconservatives on the scene today. He has familiar neoconservatives on his team, like you said: Norman Podhoretz, also Daniel Pipes, who—and I don't remember if you had mentioned, but—has been leading the charge against "Islamofascism" on college campuses, has put out his Campus Watch, in terms of going after professors that he deems are not pro-Israel enough. He has other less familiar names, like Martin Kramer, Stephen Rosen, Peter Berkowitz of the Hoover Institution. He has basically a small galaxy of neoconservatives from familiar think tanks as the American Enterprise Institute, the Heritage Foundation, Hoover, the Hudson.

And basically, I mean, just to start, you know, with Giuliani, because I think he has the most poignant list of people in terms of where you would think that his foreign policy strategy is moving, he has basically—and I said this in my article—has taken the Bush Doctrine, has just pumped it up with steroids. He is fully on board—he

always has been—with the Bush Doctrine. His people behind him are. We're talking about no-holds-barred forward with the war on terror, the war against "Islamofascism." He believes that the war on terror is a grand war versus good and evil. He is not shy to say that, his people aren't shy to say that. He's fully in grip of these people and the Bush Doctrine.

And, you know, if you want to see where the Rudy Giuliani—President Rudy Giuliani will take us, you just look at the Bush Doctrine as if the Iraq war never happened or, better yet, the problems that have arisen from the Iraq war have never happened, because Rudy Giuliani doesn't seem to acknowledge any of that. Any issues before the surge are incidental. You know, everything is moving forward, and his policy team is right there backing him.

AMY GOODMAN: Allan Nairn, more on Rudolph Giuliani, and then to Mitt Romney.

ALLAN NAIRN: Giuliani, as was mentioned, his big adviser is Norman Podhoretz. Podhoretz's new book is *World War IV*, which he seems to like. Podhoretz says, bomb the Iranians. And he's not just talking about pinpoint Iranian nuclear installations; he's saying bomb the Iranians. And he says he prays that this will happen. Ex-Senator Robert Kasten, an old major backer of the Pakistani military dictatorships and the Suharto dictatorship in Indonesia, he's another key Giuliani adviser.

McCain has General Alexander Haig, who oversaw the US policy of mass terror killings of civilians in Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Honduras, when American nuns and religious workers were abducted, raped and murdered by the Salvadoran National Guard. General Haig said those nuns died in an exchange of gunfire, the pistol-packing nuns. He has a younger—McCain has a younger adviser, Max Boot, who now points to El Salvador, where 70,000 civilians were killed by American-backed death squads, as a model counterinsurgency, a model for what the US should be doing today. Henry Kissinger advises McCain, as he advises many others. And Kissinger, of course, was responsible for mass death in Cambodia, Vietnam, Chile, countless other places. Bud McFarlane from the Reagan administration, who was a key backer of the Contras. Brent Scowcroft, who these days is popular with some liberals because he opposes—he opposed the Iraq invasion, who is a leader of the realist school—the realist school basically says, yes, kill civilians, but make sure you win the war, as opposed to the Bush-Cheney school, which has been killing civilians but losing the war, as the US has been doing until recently in Iraq and is now starting to do in Afghanistan—Scowcroft was the one who, during the Bush 1 administration, went to China right after the Tiananmen Square massacre and reassured the Chinese leadership, "Don't worry about it, we're still behind you."

Romney, as you mentioned, Romney has Cofer Black, a longtime CIA operative who was one of the key people behind the invasion of Afghanistan. During the course of that, according to Bob Woodward, he went in and said, "We're going to go into Afghanistan. We're going to cut their heads off." He's the one who organized Detachment 88 in Indonesia just recently, the supposed antiterrorist outfit that recently went after a Papuan human rights lawyer. Two key figures in backing the old US policy in Central America, Mark Falcoff and Roger Noriega, are also on the Romney team. And Dan Senor, who viewers probably remember as the voice of the early invasion and occupation of Iraq, he's one of the Romney guys. Now, as you mentioned—

AMY GOODMAN: Dan Senor is one of the spokespeople in Iraq, is married to, I think it is, Campbell Brown, who's just been hired by CNN to replace Paula Zahn.

ALLAN NAIRN: Huckabee, who you mentioned, it's not clear who his advisers are. Huckabee recently was attacked by Romney for being soft on crime. So Huckabee responded, "Soft on crime? I executed sixteen people in Arkansas. How many people did you execute in Massachusetts?" Well, Massachusetts didn't have the death penalty. But if Huckabee were really tough on crime, he would have used his post as governor of Arkansas to extradite Bill Clinton to Arkansas to stand trial before the

courts there, as is permissible under international law, for the hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths brought on by the Iraqi sanctions during the Clinton administration. But that's unthinkable in American politics. It probably didn't even occur to Huckabee. But if we had a civilized political order and we defined crime and murder objectively, something like that would have been on the table, and Huckabee would have been challenged on it.

Bloomberg, who may step in as the independent, using his money, he's an interesting example of another aspect.

AMY GOODMAN: The current mayor of New York.

ALLAN NAIRN: Yes. One is, we ought to be enforcing the murder laws evenhandedly, so that anyone who facilitates the killing of civilians faces trial and jail, just like any street criminal, even if they're a CIA operative, even if they're an American general, even if they're American president.

Two, we ought to be preventing preventable death if we can. Kids who are defecating to death, kids who are dying from malnutrition for the lack of a couple of dollars, we should be stopping that every single time it can be stopped in the world. Last year in the world, there were anywhere from three to five million deaths of children under the age of five, children who were suffering from malnutrition. If he had so chosen—and he chose not to—Bloomberg could have personally prevented those deaths, because according to *Forbes* magazine, he's worth \$11.5 billion, and that's more than enough money, if distributed properly, to prevent that many deaths, millions of one year's deaths of entirely preventable, entirely inexcusable malnutrition deaths. But it probably never even occurred to him, and he was certainly never challenged on it politically.

But we can start to challenge people on this politically. For example, in the Iowa caucuses, we're now in a situation where, you know, we have very bitter choices. So what are you going to do? I mean, Kucinich, who has good positions on many of these issues, he's decided to throw in his lot with Obama. Ralph Nader, who has good positions, he's implying support for Edwards. OK, these are tactical choices. But one thing that people can do in the Iowa caucuses tonight, they can go in there and say, OK, I'm caucusing for whomever, but I am making my support conditional on you renouncing support for the murder of civilians, on you firing all of your advisers who have been involved in the killing of civilians in the past, you turning them over to the International Criminal Court if you can get the International Criminal Court to accept it, you signing a pledge that says no more killing of civilians, you signing a pledge that says we will prevent preventable death.

You know, the right wing has been doing this for years on the issue of taxes. They make—they go around, they make all the Republican candidates sign a no-tax pledge. That's been somewhat effective. A very similar thing could be done, and I think it could have appeal, left and right, to anyone who is decent to have candidates pledge no more support for killing civilians, tough on crime, enforce the murder laws, prevent preventable deaths. Let's not have kids dying of diarrhea. If we have spare dollars floating around that people only want, give them to people whose bodies need them.

AMY GOODMAN: You know, it's interesting, there is an Occupation Project, and a group of people were just arrested in Huckabee's offices, among them the longtime peace activist, Nobel Peace Prize nominee several times over, Kathy Kelly, who founded Voices in the Wilderness.

ALLAN NAIRN: Right. That's a good tactic. I think we have to try many tactics from many directions. And one possible one is, you know, getting inside things like the Iowa caucus, getting inside things like the conventions of both parties and threaten to create a disturbance on the floor, ruckus on the floor, if the candidate for whom you are there as a delegate doesn't back these simple things that should be the basis of any civilization: no murder, save someone if you can save them.

AMY GOODMAN: Final question, this is on a totally different issue, Allan Nairn, our top headline, the Justice Department launching a formal criminal investigation to the destruction of the videotapes documenting the interrogation of two prisoners. You have long been writing about investigating the CIA and US policy, whether it's in Central America or Asia. What are your thoughts on the destruction of these videotapes?

ALLAN NAIRN: Well, one—and who knows?—I'm skeptical that they've actually been destroyed. I mean, anyone, you know, who works with computers knows that it's almost impossible to truly eliminate something from a hard disk and also that when there's a document, there are always multiple copies made, especially when you're in a network system. So I'd be surprised if this thing was really destroyed.

But, anyway, it's unfortunate that the issue of torture—I mean, it's good that the issue of torture has finally been put on the table of American politics and people talk about it to some extent, but it's unfortunate that it's been put on the table in the context of the torture of these al-Qaeda people, these people who were openly proud killers, mass murderers of civilians. In that context, a lot of people look at it and say, "Well, yeah, look at these lowlifes. Maybe they should be tortured."

But the fact of the matter is, 90% , at least, worldwide of cases of torture are not of people like this who are open mass murderers. They are usually of dissidents, of rebels, or of common criminals. And often, it is done by regimes that are armed, trained or financed by the United States. This was the case in El Salvador. In El Salvador, I interviewed Salvadoran military people who told of torture training classes they got from CIA officials, and they talked about how the CIA people would be in the room as the torture sessions were going on. And these were not al-Qaeda types that they were torturing; these were labor organizers, these were people who were speaking for justice, these were peasants.

That's what most torture is in the world, and it should be completely banned and abolished, not in the soft rhetorical way that McCain is talking about it, but actually stopping it by stopping support for all the forces that make a practice of torture. And that would involve completely rewriting the Foreign Operations Appropriations Bill, the Defense Appropriations Bill, and it would also involve calling in the authorities and carrying out many US officials in chains, because they've been backing this illegal stuff for years.

AMY GOODMAN: Well, we're going to leave it there. In talking about, by the way, the occupation of offices, it was not only Huckabee's office, it was also Barack Obama's Iowa office, as well as Mitt Romney's Iowa office, people occupied yesterday. Allan Nairn, I want to thank you for being with us. Your blog at "newsc" for "News and Comment," newsc.blogspot.com. And Kelley Beaucar Vlahos, thank you for joining us from Washington, D.C. Her article appeared in *The American Conservative*. The piece was called "War Whisperers."



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