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# Serious People

A guide to Obama's national-security transition team.







By Fred Kaplan

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Looking over the list of top players on President-elect Barack Obama's transition team, one gets the sense that serious people are coming back to power. [On the national-security team](#) in particular, they're professional, thoughtful, cognizant of the world's complexities, engaged with cutting-edge ideas but not dogmatic about them. This may not sound exciting, but those who think it doesn't constitute "change" haven't paid enough attention to these last eight years of [Jacobin](#) zeal and blundering.

Let's look at a few of these players:

**Sarah Sewall**, director of Harvard University's Carr Center for Human Rights Policy and deputy assistant secretary of defense for peacekeeping during the Clinton administration, was a member of the panel that Gen. David Petraeus assembled a few years ago to write the U.S. Army's [field manual on counterinsurgency](#). She also wrote an insightful foreword to the [book version](#) of the manual (published by the University of Chicago Press), in which she grasped the truly radical nature of the strategy, the overhaul in tactics, training, and weapons procurement that its full adoption would require, yet also the risks that it entails—the danger of becoming enmeshed in endless, unnecessary wars—and the still greater demands that it places on informed civilian control.

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**Michèle Flournoy**, another former deputy assistant secretary of defense during the Clinton administration, is president of the Center for a New American Security, a Washington think tank that in its mere two years of existence has emerged as a magnet for innovative strategic thinkers. When John Nagl and Nathaniel Fick, two of the military's most creative officers, quit the Army and the Marines, respectively, they came to CNAS—not Brookings, as might have been the case a decade ago—or, more to the point, CNAS reached out to them. Richard Danzig, a member of the center's board, is said to be a strong candidate for Obama's secretary of defense (or deputy secretary if Robert Gates is asked to stay on for a while). Flournoy's papers on the Iraq war call for gradual troop withdrawals and a policy of ["conditional engagement,"](#) in which the United States agrees to maintain any troop presence only if the Iraqis hammer out their political differences. This may seem tepid in light of the current debate over the Status of Forces Agreement—which will almost certainly demand a total U.S. pullout by 2011—but at least her views are grounded in an understanding of war as a political instrument with, in Iraq's case, a goal of stability, not some utopian dream.



Wendy Sherman

**Wendy Sherman**, a former assistant secretary of state, played a big role in negotiating the nuclear accord with North Korea toward the end of the Clinton years. The accord had its imperfections (it was called an "Agreed Framework," which is to say, it was meant to have a sequel, which Clinton lacked the time to complete and George W. Bush lacked the slightest interest in so much as beginning). But it did keep the Yongbyon nuclear reactor's fuel rods locked up and thus kept Kim Jong-il from building an A-bomb. (Bush's moralistic refusal to hold talks left Kim an

opening to do just that.)



**Rand Beers**, a counterterrorism specialist in the National

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**Clark Kent Ervin** used to be inspector general in the Department of Homeland Security, until he was canned by George W. Bush after complaining about incompetence in the department's intelligence-gathering divisions.



Clark Kent Ervin

**Judith "Jami" Miscik** was a longtime analyst at the Central Intelligence Agency—rising, in 2002, to be the agency's deputy director for intelligence—who resigned in 2005, along with many career veterans, during the short-lived, scapegoat-hunting tenure of Porter Goss. In the

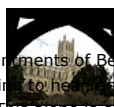
» **Month up to the invasion of Iraq**, Miscik came under sustained pressure from the White House—especially from aides to Vice President Dick Cheney—to find links between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaida. According to Ron Suskind's book *The One Percent Doctrine*, Miscik came back from one such meeting "shaking with rage" and telling then-Director George

Tenet that she would not put up with any more pressure. (Tenet backed her up, at least for a while.)

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**Fred Kaplan is Slate's "War Stories" columnist and the author of Daydream Believers: How a Few Grand Ideas Wrecked American Power. He can be reached at war\_stories@hotmail.com.**

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 Photographs of: Wendy Sherman by Manny Ceneta/AFP/Getty Images; Rand Beers by Luis Acosta/AFP/Getty Images; Clark Kent Ervin by Brendan Smialowski/Getty Images.

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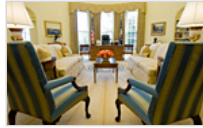
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