

Delusion and deception in Obama's State of Union

By Patrick Martin
21 January 2015

Two weeks ago, the *World Socialist Web Site* published its initial review of the results of the year 2014 and the prospects for 2015. We wrote, "In examining the strategies and policies of the ruling elites of one or another country, it would be a mistake to either underestimate their ruthlessness or overestimate their intelligence."

The State of the Union speech delivered by President Barack Obama Tuesday night confirms this assessment in the case of the United States. The US ruling elite exhibits a determination to stop at nothing in the defense of its wealth and privileges, and pig-headed blindness and stupidity, both on a colossal scale.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Obama's hour-long address, riddled with tired clichés and empty rhetoric, was the sheer unreality of the picture he presented of America, totally at odds with the actual experience of tens of millions of working people: mounting social and economic crisis, escalating attacks on democratic rights and the growing danger of world war.

"The shadow of crisis has passed," Obama claimed, declaring that the US has successfully emerged from the economic slump that followed the 2008-2009 financial crash. "At this moment, with a growing economy, shrinking deficits, bustling industry, and booming energy production—we have risen from recession freer to write our own future than any other nation on Earth."

No one not hypnotized by the ever-rising share prices on the New York Stock Exchange can accept that as a serious description of American social reality. A few figures released in the past month make this clear:

* Nine million workers are officially unemployed, another six million have dropped out of the labor force, eight million work part-time when they want full-time jobs and 12 million work for temporary employment agencies.

* Real wages have fallen steadily for American workers

since 2007, dropping another five cents an hour in December 2014. The real income of the average working-class family is now back to the level of 2000—15 years of stagnation in living standards.

* The US poverty rate has risen from 12.6 percent in 2007 to 14.5 percent in 2013. Nearly half of all Americans and more than half of all US school children are poor or near poor.

* One fifth of American children do not get enough to eat, while the overall rate of food insecurity has jumped from 11 percent in 2007 to 16 percent in 2013. One million Americans will be cut off food stamp benefits this year.

Obama evaded any discussion of such figures, substituting instead the proposal for "middle-class economics," a term deliberately chosen to conceal the ongoing attack on jobs and living standards of American workers. It is the latest brand-name his speechwriters have concocted for the policy of both capitalist parties, Democratic and Republican alike, of promoting the interests of American corporations and banks against their foreign rivals and the working class at home.

The State of the Union speech made a brief reference to the monstrous growth of economic inequality, where "only a few of us do spectacularly well," but Obama passed over in silence the connection between the growth of the fortunes of the super-rich and his own policies. Skyrocketing wealth for the few and mounting social misery for the many are not merely coincidental. They are product of a deliberate policy, spearheaded by the Obama administration, of handing trillions of dollars to the banks while orchestrating a coordinated attack on jobs, living standards and social programs.

Equally unreal was Obama's depiction of the state of American democracy. "As Americans, we respect human dignity, even when we're threatened," he said, "which is why I've prohibited torture, and worked to make sure our

use of new technology like drones is properly constrained.”

The formal prohibition of torture, however, has been combined with a lengthy rearguard action against the Senate Intelligence Committee report on CIA torture, in the course of which Obama blocked any prosecution of the torturers. The White House is directly implicated in illegal activities, including the CIA’s spying on the US Senate and its efforts to withhold documents implicating the highest levels of the state in clear violations of national and international law.

As for “constraints” on the use of drones, there are none. The Obama administration has declared that the president has the unlimited right to order the assassination of any person on the planet, including American citizens, using drone-fired missiles, without any judicial review and without regard to US and international law.

Similarly, Obama claimed that “our intelligence agencies have worked hard ... to increase transparency and build more safeguards against potential abuse.” In fact, the NSA, CIA, FBI and other intelligence agencies carry out unlimited surveillance on the population of America and the world, vacuuming up all electronic communications, telephone and Internet, and creating massive databases and political dossiers.

In the 13 years since the 9/11 attacks, the threat of terrorism has been used as the pretext for building up the structure of a police state in America. This process will only accelerate in the wake of the rise of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria and the attacks in Paris January 7. Obama declared, “We will continue to hunt down terrorists and dismantle their networks, and we reserve the right to act unilaterally, as we’ve done relentlessly since I took office.”

This was only one of the many occasions in the State of the Union speech where the US president asserted his willingness to use force to insure the primacy of American imperialism over all its rivals. Half his speech was devoted to such threats, including against Russia, a nuclear-armed power, over Ukraine, and against Iran, where Obama, for the second time in five days, threatened to go to war to destroy the country’s nuclear technology program.

Perhaps the bluntest assertion of American supremacy came when Obama discussed negotiations over trade practices within the Asia-Pacific region (including China and Japan, the world’s second-largest and third-largest economies). “We should write those rules,” Obama declared, as though no other country mattered.

While Obama claimed that he had brought the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to a close, reducing the total troop deployment in the two countries from 180,000 to 15,000, this represents a shift in focus to a more extensive, not scaled-back, imperialist intervention. The US Special Operations Command (SOCOM) deployed forces to 133 countries in 2014, more than two thirds of the globe.

Obama concluded his speech with an appeal to the Republican Party, which now controls a majority of seats in both the House of Representatives and the Senate, for bipartisan collaboration over the next two years. He warned against “always looking over your shoulder at how the base will react to every decision.”

This language was chosen, not so much to urge the Republicans to resist the pressure of their ultra-right Tea Party faction, as to urge the Democrats to get on with devising bipartisan attacks on the working class, regardless of the popular reaction among workers, particularly the poorest and most oppressed who, if they go to the polls, generally vote for the Democratic Party.

Obama proposed a handful of measures aimed at sustaining the threadbare pretense that the Democrats still adhere to policies of liberal reform—free tuition for community college students and a child care tax credit for working families, to be paid for by increased taxes on the wealthy and the banks. But no one in official Washington takes these seriously for a minute. They are window dressing, while the policy of the US ruling elite moves further and further to the right.

Aside from the delusional character of the speech, perhaps the most distinctive characteristic of Obama’s remarks was the fact that, for the vast majority of the population, it was a non-event. Obama stands at the head of a state apparatus that, increasingly, is talking to itself.

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