

Obama's State of the Union address and the breakdown of American democracy

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“In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible. Things like the continuance of British rule in India, the Russian purges and deportations, the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan can indeed be defended, but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face, and which do not square with the professed aims of the political parties. Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism...A mass of Latin words falls upon the facts like soft snow, blurring the outline and covering up all the details.”

George Orwell in “Politics and the English Language,” 1946

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The final State of the Union address given by President Barack Obama on Tuesday night was a litany of lies, banalities and military threats. The speech underscored the inability of the American political establishment to honestly address a single social question facing the broad masses of the population.

The address was generally praised by the media as a statement of confidence in America's future. In fact, it combined bluster about the strength of the US economy absurdly at odds with economic and social reality with self-praise for “taking out” the enemies of American imperialism and assurances of more military havoc to come.

To the extent that Obama touched in passing on the growth of social inequality, the ever greater domination of the corporate-financial elite, falling wages and rising poverty, these pervasive features of social life in America were ascribed to cosmic forces of “change” entirely disconnected from government policies in general and those pursued by his administration in particular over the past seven years.

There is an objective significance to the reduction of the State of the Union address, an American political

tradition that goes back to George Washington, to an empty and cynical media spectacle. This process did not begin with Obama. It has been underway for decades, in parallel with the ever further turn of the ruling elite and both big business parties to the right and the widening chasm between the entire political system and the broad mass of working people.

While there was never a golden age of American bourgeois politics, the annual State of the Union address before a joint session of Congress once had a certain democratic content. There was a time when the president in the form of this speech sought to make a sober assessment of the actual state of the nation's economic, political and social life and the condition of its relations with other nations. It was both a means of internal communication within ruling circles and a report to the broader population.

In Abraham Lincoln's December 1862 message to Congress, the Great Emancipator spoke in favor of abolition. “Fellow-citizens,” he declared, “we cannot escape history... In giving freedom to the slave we assure freedom to the free and honorable alike in what we give and what we preserve. We shall nobly save or meanly lose the last best hope of earth.”

In a later period, Franklin D. Roosevelt pledged a “Second Bill of Rights” that would include provisions ensuring “freedom from want.” (The proposal was a dead letter almost as soon as it was made.) In 1963, John F. Kennedy cautioned that “the mere absence of war is not peace.”

Even some of the more reactionary presidents of an earlier period could seriously acknowledge the existence of social problems. In 1922, Warren G. Harding began his State of the Union address by declaring, “So many problems are calling for solution that a recital of all of them, in the face of the known limitations of a short session of Congress, would seem

to lack sincerity of purpose.”

The immense growth of social inequality in parallel with the dismantling of much of US industry, the decline in the global economic position of American capitalism and the increasing domination of a parasitic and quasi-criminal financial elite have made any objective accounting of the real “state of the union” a political impossibility. All those in attendance Tuesday night were well aware that the important policy decisions on both the domestic and international front are made neither by the president nor Congress, but rather by the military brass, the intelligence establishment and Wall Street. The same conviction is growing within broad layers of the population who are increasingly alienated from and disgusted by the entire political and economic set-up.

Having come to power by posing as an opponent of the war in Iraq and the militarism of the Bush years, Obama could hardly make an honest assessment of his foreign policy, which has added to the war in Afghanistan new wars in Libya, Syria and Iraq, an expansion of drone assassinations and a policy of military provocation against Russia and China that has brought the world closer to world war than at any time since 1945.

A major part of his address Tuesday was given over to boasting of America’s destructive military power and his readiness to use it. Responding to his critics among the Republican right, he proclaimed: “The United States of America is the most powerful nation on Earth. Period. Period. It’s not even close. It’s not even close. It’s not even close. We spend more on our military than the next eight nations combined. Our troops are the finest fighting force in the history of the world. No nation attacks us directly, or our allies, because they know that’s the path to ruin.”

Having posed as a critic of Bush’s anti-democratic buildup of the police powers of the state in order to get elected, Obama was in no position to discuss his expansion and institutionalization of police state measures such as pervasive government spying; the jailing and persecution of whistleblowers like Julian Assange, Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden; the shielding of the authors and organizers of torture programs; the militarization of the police and defense of killer cops.

Among the most blatant lies in Obama’s speech was

the assertion, “For the past seven years, our goal has been a growing economy that works better for everybody.” Had Obama added “who counts” to the end of this sentence he would have been closer to the truth.

Trillions of dollars for the banks and speculators whose recklessness, lawlessness and greed triggered the Wall Street crash and ensuing depression, not a single “bankster” prosecuted in seven years—that on one side. On the other, sweeping wage reductions for autoworkers imposed by Obama’s “Auto Task Force,” and austerity, school closures, pension cuts and attacks on health benefits for millions of working people under “Obamacare.”

The result: 95 percent of all income gains during the Obama presidency going to the richest 1 percent of households!

In what has become a hallmark of American political rhetoric, Obama concluded his speech with sheer bathos: “I see [the voice of America] in the worker on the assembly line who clocked extra shifts to keep his company open, and the boss who pays him higher wages instead of laying him off... The protester determined to prove that justice matters—and the young cop walking the beat, treating everybody with respect, doing the brace, quiet work of keeping us safe.”

A political system that must resort to such stupid and transparent posturing is a political system in terminal crisis. The mounting indignation and militancy of the masses will seek new avenues of struggle outside of and in opposition to the entire rotten edifice of official politics.

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