

The New York Times worries about the high political cost of Obama's \$400,000 speeches

By David Walsh
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The august editorial board of the *New York Times* weighed in anxiously May 1 on the decision of former president Barack Obama to accept “a reported \$400,000 to speak to a Wall Street firm” (“The Cost of Barack Obama’s Speech”). The editorial is brief and unconvincing, bringing forward arguments and issuing an appeal to Obama that the editors themselves hardly seem to believe in.

In its own way, the *Times*’ piece reflects the ongoing disintegration of the two-party system in the US and the apprehension of the American ruling elite about what this foretells.

The pompous editorial paints a picture of a politician who, like Jesus during his time in the desert, has confronted temptations numerous times before and until now successfully resisted them--or at least come out even. Obama, we are told, has long “wrestled with what it means to be a representative public servant in an era of purchased influence.”

Citing then Senator Obama’s comment, in *The Audacity of Hope* (2006), that he had found himself at a certain point in his political career spending much of his time with “law firm partners and investment bankers, hedge fund managers and venture capitalists,” “the top 1 percent or so of the income scale,” the *Times* implies (without providing any proof) that Obama’s admission amounted to a career-defining self-criticism, and that this self-critical attitude sustained him through his years in the White House.

Now, however, does his acceptance of a \$400,000 speaking fee represent “a betrayal of that sentiment”? “Perhaps not,” write the editors, “but it is disheartening that a man whose historic candidacy was premised on a moral examination of politics now joins almost every modern president in cashing in.”

The newspaper’s presentation of Obama’s career is

thoroughly deceitful. Insofar as the latter ever “wrestled” with any choices in the direction of his life, they all had to do, from a very early point in his career, with the best means of defending American big business and “national security” interests while maintaining, if possible, the lie that the Democratic Party was more oriented to the “average” man and woman.

Obama emerged from the Illinois Democratic Party, one of the most corrupt entities ever created by man, with the public backing of a layer of trade union officials, “lefts” and upper middle class African American politicians. Less publicly, influential financial, political and intelligence forces no doubt saw in Obama years ago a marketable and valuable commodity, a man who could present himself--as we wrote in our review of *The Audacity of Hope* --as both “white and black, liberal and conservative, foreign and American, a man above party ideology and the petty bickering of partisan politics.”

During Obama’s two terms in office, the stock market soared, the fantastically wealthy grew even richer and the social divide in America substantially widened. The *Times* editorial remains silent about this. It is silent because the newspaper’s owners and top staff too have sucked up their share of the same parasitical, reckless stock market and real estate bonanza that is the ultimate source of Obama’s enrichment and, for that matter, that of his successor, Donald Trump.

But appearances and tone count for a good deal in bourgeois politics, especially in America where almost nothing of substance separates the two major parties. The *Times* comment points to this reality, observing that “As a couple and a family, the Obamas brought grace, empathy and high standards to their time in the

White House, in stark contrast to the workaday vulgarity of its current occupants.”

The editorial jumps over the content of Obama’s tenure in office to express disappointment with his decision to “conform to a lamentable post-presidential model created fairly recently,” i.e., of supping “at the corporate table.”

In the immediate aftermath of the revelations about Obama’s huge speaking fees, the US media felt it necessary, by and large, to accommodate themselves to the obvious widespread disgust. By now, however, Obama’s open defenders have found their voice. Syndicated columnist Froma Harrop, for example, asks in a headline, “What’s wrong with Barack Obama receiving \$400,000 for a speech?” and goes on to assert, “If after 20 grueling years in public service Obama wants to pick up some financial security by giving speeches, call off the dogs and let him be.” Isaac J. Bailey, of the *Charlotte Observer* editorial board, in his headline, claims, “You don’t have to be poor to fight for the poor,” and proceeds from there.

But these kinds of arguments, and there are many along these lines, clearly create unease at the *Times*. It’s all very well for Obama, now out of office, to make a small fortune speaking to corporate events, and for his shortsighted apologists--who only *dream* of making that type of money--to defend him, but the *Times*’ editors must take a slightly broader view.

The May 1 editorial pointedly reminds Obama that the practice of accepting vast amounts from big business “contributed to the downfall of the Democrat he hoped would cement his legacy. The tens of millions that Hillary Clinton raised from speaking to corporate interests most likely haunts her now--or should.” So much for “white racism” and “misogyny”!--the *Times* more or less acknowledges that it was Clinton’s identification with Wall Street and the status quo that did her in.

Then there is the broader question of the fate of the Democratic Party as a whole. The editors note that “the traditional party of working people has lost touch with them. In a poll released last week, more than two-thirds of voters, including nearly half of Democrats themselves, said the Democratic Party is out of touch with the concerns of the American people. For the first time in memory, Democrats are seen as more out of touch with ordinary Americans than the party’s

political opponents. There’s little doubt that Democratic leaders’ unseemly attachment to the party’s wealthiest donors contributed to that indictment.”

It’s not simply a matter of wealthy donors, of course, but of decades of attacks by Democrats and Republicans alike, black and white, male and female, on the jobs, living standards and democratic rights of broad layers of the population. This combined process of the endless shift to the right by the entire political establishment and ever-increasing popular discontent with its policies has reached a nodal point.

The *Times* editors are perturbed, but they are entirely powerless to halt the course of this development.

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