

Clinton at the Detroit Economic Club

The politics of self-delusion

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President Bill Clinton's appearance in Detroit January 8 was an exercise in political self-delusion. Clinton gave a speech to the Economic Club of Detroit which painted an idyllic picture of life in today's America, ignoring both the raging political crisis in Washington and the deep-seated social tensions wracking Detroit and other major urban centers.

Clinton's remarks were a paean to an "American economic renaissance." He congratulated American capitalism and his own administration for producing surpluses in the federal budget deficit, the lowest peacetime unemployment rate since 1957, record levels of home sales, and the lowest black and Hispanic unemployment levels since separate figures began to be recorded in 1972.

"America is working again," he declared. "Our social problems are receding." He cautioned only that there were some concerns about the stability of the global financial institutions, and urged his audience, largely comprised of auto industry executives, not to embrace extreme protectionist measures which would exacerbate the international crisis.

His other note of concern was to assert that, despite record federal budget surpluses, Social Security and Medicare were in long-term financial danger and that now was the time to take action to "save" them--i.e., carry out a combination of benefit cuts and privatization in the most important entitlement programs, on which more than 40 million elderly depend.

The overall picture, however, was entirely positive, and his well-heeled audience, flush with the second highest auto industry profits in history, gave Clinton a series of warm ovations.

The unspoken question which hung over the gathering, however, was this: how to account for the

lynch mob atmosphere in Washington. If America is truly enjoying unprecedented prosperity, if social problems are diminishing, why is the political climate so noxious? Why is Clinton the target of a frenzied right-wing campaign to drive him out of office, a campaign which has culminated in the first impeachment and Senate trial of a sitting president in 130 years?

Clinton made no mention of the impeachment drive in his speech, and the question period which followed was censored capably by the meeting's host, Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer, who restricted the discussion to issues of world trade and the federal budget.

The impeachment drive is not merely the product of the personal hatred of Clinton on the part of the Christian Coalition and other elements in the right wing of the Republican Party. Or, to put it more precisely, their hatred of Clinton, a powerful factor in the politics of impeachment, must be traced to its social source, in social contradictions within American society which have, despite the presidential rhetoric in Detroit, enormously intensified over the past two decades.

At the root of the deepening political crisis is the development of social and economic inequality on a scale which dwarfs anything seen in America since the days of the robber barons a century ago. The top 1 percent of the population owns well over 40 percent of the nation's wealth. This ruling elite and a privileged upper-middle-class layer have monopolized the prosperity of which Clinton boasted--real incomes for the bottom 80 percent of the American people have declined or stagnated for a quarter-century.

Clinton's attempt to pass off this bonanza for the wealthy as a "tide which lifts all boats" was particularly grotesque given the city in which he gave his address. Detroit has been a byword for poverty and urban

distress for more than two decades. There are only two operating auto plants within the borders of the former "Motor City," down from two dozen in 1980, and the city's population has sunk below the 1 million mark.

On the morning Clinton delivered his speech, Detroit school children had gone four days without attending classes because the city government is so starved for funds that it could not afford to plow the streets after a heavy snowstorm. Under a tide of public criticism, Mayor Archer announced on the eve of Clinton's visit that he would seek to mobilize trucks from the suburbs, together with volunteers and forced labor from jail inmates in a belated effort to begin digging out the residents of the city.



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