

Clinton's State of the Union address: a speech in full denial

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"To describe the State of the Union, I suppose I must begin by noting that I am the first elected president in the history of the United States to be impeached, and even as we meet more than half of the senators who are in this chamber are planning to convict me in the trial that is presently under way. This trial is the product of a political conspiracy aimed at removing the government by means of a pseudo-legal coup d'etat. This situation, clearly, does not indicate that the State of the Union is all that healthy. Rather, to be blunt, our Union is a very sick one."

That is how Clinton should have begun his speech on Tuesday night ... but didn't. Instead, as was to be expected in a country where honest political discussion is all but impossible, Clinton ignored the political crisis that has paralyzed his administration for the past year. In a speech notable only for its mind-numbing clichés, he portrayed the United States as a country in the midst of unprecedented prosperity, peace and stability.

Belying Clinton's rhetoric, the TV cameras focused several times on the empty chairs of Republicans who boycotted the speech. Republican House leaders Tom DeLay and Dick Armey refused to stand when the president entered the chamber. And Representative Jennifer Dunn, in the Republican response to Clinton's speech, began by assuring the American people that the capital was not in "chaos," declaring: "There are no tanks in the streets."

Listening to the speech, one had the feeling of having heard it before. Typical of Clinton's State of the Union addresses, it began with an idealized version of American life, listed a series of policy initiatives, many of which are not within the province of the federal government and others which have no chance of being passed by Congress, touched on trouble spots--such as the financial collapse of much of Asia--and concluded

with a patriotic flourish.

Clinton tailored the speech to create the impression, for the benefit of his mass audience, that he was addressing the problems of the elderly, public education and other social issues, while reassuring Wall Street that he would continue the policies that had produced the greatest boom in share values and corporate profits in American history. He boasted that his administration's "fiscal discipline" was responsible for a windfall of budget surpluses that would continue for the next 25 years.

In the name of saving Social Security, he proposed to plow \$700 billion of a projected \$4.4 trillion in surpluses over the next 15 years into the stock market. Another \$2 trillion would be used to pay down the federal debt. The other major bonanza for big business was his plan for the largest increase in military spending since the Reagan administration.

There was no discussion of how the budget surpluses had been achieved. In fact, they are the result of a systematic assault on social programs for working people and the poor, which, combined with pro-business tax and regulatory policies, have provided the indispensable economic climate for the phenomenal rise in the stock market and the fortunes of the most privileged layers of the population.

Clinton evaded the obvious question: If things are so wonderful in America, why is the country's political system in the midst of a historic political crisis?

Of course, Clinton's assessment of conditions in the US is a gross distortion of reality. Nevertheless, the clues to the roots of the political crisis are lodged among his own statements. It is only necessary to cut through the rhetoric and, so to speak, decipher the speech in order to reveal them.

Consider, for example, what Clinton had to say about

the conditions of the elderly. "Even today, without Social Security, half our nation's elderly would be forced into poverty." Given the woefully inadequate level of Social Security benefits, this is a tacit admission that tens of millions of senior citizens are living on the borderline of poverty. This was reinforced later in the speech, when Clinton said, "Yet today, millions of people retire with little to live on other than Social Security."

Two other passing references indicated the desperate conditions confronting the elderly: The fact that "their greatest need--affordable prescription drugs" is presently unmet, and that "our growing old [places] an intolerable burden on our children and their ability to raise our grandchildren."

Against the backdrop of the enormous social dilemma suggested by these remarks, one can gauge the miserly character of Clinton's proposals to aid the elderly: some form of coverage for prescription drugs, tax credits for private savings accounts, and a \$1,000 tax credit for long-term care. As for Social Security benefits, Clinton would actually make cuts, but not "drastic" ones.

What about the state of public education in America? "While our fourth graders outperform their peers in other countries in math and science," Clinton said, "our eighth graders are around average, and our twelfth graders rank near the bottom." In other words, as soon as youngsters in the US begin to receive instruction in math and science, they begin to fall behind their counterparts abroad.

Clinton went on to inveigh against what he called "social promotion," saying, "No child should graduate from high school with a diploma he or she can't read." This is to acknowledge that public education for working class youth in America has declined to the point that illiteracy is rampant and the schools have given up equipping millions of young people with the most elementary skills. Later on in his address Clinton spoke of the "millions of working people who read at less than a fifth-grade level."

Consider two other remarks on the public schools:

"But in too many schools, teachers don't have college majors, or even minors, in the subjects they teach."

"Today, too many of our schools are so old they're falling apart, or so overcrowded students must learn in trailers."

What did Clinton propose in response to this

educational disaster? A combination of token reforms and measures of an outright reactionary character. Among the former were after school and summer school programs for a mere 1 million students, \$200 million to "help the states turn around their failing schools," and funds to build or modernize 5,000 schools. Among the latter were the promotion of charter schools and a requirement that states and school districts close down their "worst performing" schools.

Here are some other conditions raised in the course of Clinton's speech: the lack of child care, the lack of paid family leave, the victimization of patients by HMOs, the lack of medical insurance for millions of working families, the impact of factory closures and layoffs, the "devastation" of family farms.

To top off this grim picture of social reality there was Clinton's reference to "the deadly cycle of drugs and crime," and a mention of the recent wave of public school shootings in such places as Jonesboro, Paducah, Pearl, Edinboro and Springfield.

Thus the State of the Union address amounted to an unwitting acknowledgment that America faces huge social problems, for which neither Clinton nor any other representative of the bourgeoisie has any answers.

The general direction of their policy was indicated most clearly in those parts of Clinton's speech where he appealed to American chauvinism, hailed last summer's bomb attack on Afghanistan and the December air war against Iraq, and threatened greater military interventions in the period ahead. It is significant that, despite the political warfare between Clinton and the Republicans, both sides of the aisle erupted in applause when Clinton threatened trade war measures against Japan over steel imports.

For all its wealth, American capitalism is incapable of addressing the mounting social crisis at home, or advancing a progressive solution to the deepening economic crisis internationally. It is riven by social antagonisms, which are the ultimate source of the breakdown of its political institutions.



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