

Clinton's speech to the Democratic convention: toasting success on the eve of the deluge

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In his speech Monday night to the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles, Bill Clinton displayed his most distinctive political asset—his talent for sounding “left” while advancing right-wing policies. As reflected in the enthusiastic response from the delegates on the convention floor, he was very much in his element.

The central theme was summed up in his opening assertion that eight years of Democratic rule had brought “new heights of prosperity, peace and progress.” In this celebration of the status quo there was an interplay of deception and self-deception, illusion and self-delusion, in which speaker and audience participated with equal relish.

Clinton's rosy portrayal of American life may not have coincided with the social reality facing broad masses of working people, but it echoed the sentiments of layers that have profited greatly from the speculative boom of the past seven years—above all, the financial aristocracy and well-off segments of the middle class. Precisely these layers have become the core constituency of the Democratic Party, while its rightward trajectory has alienated masses of working people.

Clinton addressed an audience at the Staples Center far wealthier than the general population, in a building plastered with the logos of corporate sponsors who have doled out millions to insure that their interests are looked after by the next administration. An economic profile of the delegates revealed that 57 percent had family incomes above \$75,000, as compared to 18 percent in the general population, and a full 25 percent had incomes between \$100,000 and \$200,000, figures that nearly match the income levels of delegates at last month's Republican convention.

This narrow constituency goes a long way in explaining the distorted and blinkered view of American society reflected in Clinton's speech. What social forces were represented in the convention hall? Nearly a third were trade union officials or union members close to the labor bureaucracy—what was once called the “aristocracy of labor.” Another third consisted of blacks and Hispanics who have grown wealthy by exploiting the politics of affirmative action and government subsidies of various sorts. Hollywood was well represented, both on the

floor of the hall and in the exclusive sky boxes, as well as trial lawyers and other well-heeled professionals.

If the ambience of the Republican Convention in Philadelphia was one of barely suppressed social hatred, the atmosphere which prevails at the Democratic gathering is one of stupefied complacency and self-satisfaction, into which the reality of social conflict and political crisis barely penetrates.

Toward the beginning of his speech, Clinton sought to highlight the achievements of his administration by comparing the blissful state of America today to that which existed after 12 years of Republican rule. Back in 1992, he said, “our society was divided, our political system was paralyzed” and “income inequality had been skyrocketing.”

No one seemed to notice the gaping contradiction between Clinton's words and the reality of America in 2000. It is a well-documented fact that social inequality has grown at an accelerated pace during the Clinton years. The US is more divided between a fabulously rich upper crust and the vast majority of the people than at any time in the past 50 years. While a few million people have been propelled by the bull market into the ranks of millionaires, and those already rich have seen their fortunes balloon, tens of millions have been able to keep their heads above water only by working longer and piling up debt. Social problems have festered, as reflected in the 45 million Americans without health insurance, the decay of the public schools and the growth of hunger and homelessness.

A recent study by the Conference Board reported that, in percentage terms, far more full-time workers were living in poverty at the end of the 1990s than in the 1970s, and their ranks had steadily grown since 1994.

As for the health of the political system, widespread disgust with the two-party system is reflected in record low levels of voter participation. But the sharpest expression of the crisis of the political system is the internecine warfare within the Washington establishment that resulted in the shutting down of the federal government in 1995-96 and the impeachment and Senate trial of Clinton himself in 1998-99.

Nothing more clearly expresses the self-imposed blindness

and political cowardice of Clinton and the Democratic Party than the absence of any reference in his speech to the right-wing Republican conspiracy to drive him from office. It comes as no surprise that Clinton should choose to avoid the subject, even though the Monica Lewinsky scandal and impeachment drive continue to loom over his administration, the elections and his personal life. Indeed, just four days before his convention speech, Clinton was prostrating himself before an audience of Christian fanatics in an effort to conciliate the fascistic elements in and around the Republican Party that conspired to bring down his administration.

Clinton and the Democrats will not speak about the tensions that are tearing at the political system, and even delude themselves into believing they are of little significance, but there are sharp differences within the ruling elite and they are growing more intense. They form the real backdrop to the public hype of the election campaign.

On economic policy, there are divisions over how to utilize the projected budget surpluses. In his speech Clinton stressed the contrast between the Democratic plan, which is to use the surpluses to pay down the national debt, and that of George W. Bush and the Republicans, which is to give the surpluses away in tax cuts that favor the wealthy. Neither plan addresses the urgent social needs of working people, but the Democratic posture of fiscal discipline corresponds to the consensus of finance capital, represented by such figures as former Democratic Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin and Republican Federal Reserve Board Chairman Alan Greenspan.

This section of the ruling class considers the Republican policy reckless and potentially disastrous. It is well aware of the danger of the speculative boom turning into its opposite, and see in the paying down of the federal debt a means of freeing up more capital for private investment and thereby avoiding a stock market crash and uncontrolled recession.

The Republican representatives of big business, on the other hand, make a point of cultivating the element of avaricious entrepreneurs and middle-sized businessmen who are driven less by long-term considerations and more by unbridled greed.

On social policy as well the ruling circles are divided. The Democratic Party, by virtue of its history, remains more cautious, largely out of fear of the social consequences of an undisguised, frontal assault on the working class. While it has abandoned in substance its previous policies of social reform, it has a long experience of mediating social conflicts.

In the end, however, even the most skillful political sleight of hand cannot obscure the reality of growing inequality and social decay. Clinton's invocation of prosperity and progress has far less impact beyond the confines of the Staples Center.

At the height of the postwar boom, the exaggerated claims of bourgeois politicians about social progress resonated with the broad public, because large sections of the working class had experienced a significant rise in their living standards. That, however, is no longer the case.

Even then the contradictions of US capitalism overwhelmed the limited efforts to establish an American version of the welfare state. Toward the end of his speech Clinton made a curious allusion to the social crisis that engulfed America in the mid and late 1960s, seeking to place the onus for the collapse of the last extended period of economic growth on the election of Richard Nixon in 1968.

In 1964, Clinton said, “when we were enjoying the longest economic expansion in history, we never dreamed that Vietnam would so divide and wound America.” He continued: “And then, before we knew it, there were riots in the streets, even here. The leaders that I adored as a young man, Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, were killed. Lyndon Johnson ... said he would not run again because our nation was so divided.”

Here was the president describing how the United States was ripped apart by social conflict in a period that had seen real and palpable improvements in the living standards of broad masses of people. He, on the contrary, has presided over an economic boom whose benefits have overwhelmingly gone to a thin layer at the top of society. His administration has, moreover, gone further than any of its predecessors in dismantling the social programs that provided a measure of economic security for tens of millions of people.

One would think that if the traumas of the 1960s held any lessons for today, they would point to the inevitability of even greater social upheavals once the present boom comes to an end, as it must. And yet, almost in the next breath, Clinton boasted of how he was leaving the country in a state of domestic tranquility, “with no great internal crisis and no great external threat.”

Both the Democrats and Republicans, in somewhat different ways, practice the politics of illusion. In this, one sees the type of blindness that has characterized every ruling elite on the eve of great shocks and transformations. An enormously explosive charge of social contradictions has been building up in the course of more than two decades of political reaction in the US, for which neither the political establishment, nor the society as a whole, is prepared.



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