

A warning from Senator Webb: Democrat cites danger of deepening “class lines” in America

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The official Democratic Party response to President Bush’s State of the Union speech Tuesday night was delivered by newly elected Senator James Webb of Virginia, a former Republican and secretary of the Navy in the Reagan administration.

Webb’s eight-minute speech dealt with two issues: the war in Iraq and the growth of economic inequality within the United States. Webb’s criticisms of the Bush administration’s conduct of the war in Iraq were typical of the congressional Democrats. He criticized Bush’s incompetence and cast the Iraq war as a diversion that weakened the position of the US in the global “war on terror,” although he was more scathing than most of his counterparts about the war’s toll on the United States, in both human and financial terms. (See: “Bush’s State of the Union speech highlights crisis of US ruling elite”).

The senator’s discussion of the economic conditions in the United States, however, went considerably beyond the pallid quasi-populist rhetoric normally employed by many Democrats. He spoke bluntly about the widening divide between rich and poor and the vast chasm that separates corporate CEOs from ordinary workers.

In beginning his remarks, Webb said there were other urgent issues beyond the scope of his brief speech, including “such domestic priorities as restoring the vitality of New Orleans.” This was an attack on Bush, who made no reference whatsoever to the greatest natural disaster in American history, an omission that exposed the utter indifference of the White House to the needs of the vast majority of the American people.

Webb continued: “When one looks at the health of our economy, it’s almost as if we are living in two different countries. Some say that things have never been better. The stock market is at an all-time high, and so are corporate profits. But these benefits are not being fairly

shared. When I graduated from college, the average corporate CEO made 20 times what the average worker did; today, it’s nearly 400 times. In other words, it takes the average worker more than a year to make the money that his or her boss makes in one day. Wages and salaries for our workers are at all-time lows as a percentage of national wealth, even though the productivity of American workers is the highest in the world.”

After hailing the passage by the House of Representatives of an increase in the minimum wage—a drop in the bucket compared to the actual social need—Webb turned to the subject of the Iraq war. He returned to the theme of economic inequality towards the end of his speech:

“Regarding the economic imbalance in our country, I am reminded of the situation President Theodore Roosevelt faced in the early days of the 20th century. America was then, as now, drifting apart along class lines. The so-called robber barons were unapologetically raking in a huge percentage of the national wealth. The dispossessed workers at the bottom were threatening revolt.”

In his description of the deepening social divisions in America, Webb was stating facts that are well known throughout the media and political elite, but almost never referred to publicly or seriously analyzed outside of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

He used language, including the phrase “class lines,” that has been virtually banned from official bourgeois politics for many decades. Right-wing pundits and politicians regularly denounce any explicit reference to the socioeconomic polarization of American society as “class warfare,” in effect declaring that the class contradictions in America are so severe that even to acknowledge their existence is impermissible.

A man of the military and state apparatus, Webb is himself an ardent anticommunist. The former Marine officer and Vietnam War veteran held high political office in the Reagan administration. But he is one of the more thoughtful representatives of the US ruling elite, and, as a successful war novelist, able to articulate his concerns.

His remarks are thus significant both for what he did say, and what he didn't. Webb drew very tame political conclusions from the explosive social facts he cited. He praised the example of a Republican president, Theodore Roosevelt, who struck a public posture of opposition to the excesses of the wealthy ("trust-busting"), in order to safeguard the profit system from the attacks of what Webb described, quoting Roosevelt, as "demagoguery and mob rule"—i.e., socialism.

In pointing to the growing class divide in America, the Democratic senator was addressing two audiences. He was, on the one hand, attempting to pump new life into the tattered myth of the Democratic Party as a party of the working man, while channeling economic discontent along nationalist lines and protectionist lines. At the same time he was alerting the ruling elite to the dangers it confronts as a result of its unabashed rapacity.

Webb's remarks Tuesday night were very similar to a newspaper column he wrote more than two months ago, just after his upset election victory over incumbent Republican Senator George Allen. Again, the theme was the class divide in America, and Webb chose as the venue for his column the op-ed page of the *Wall Street Journal*, where it would be read by very few workers but many members of the moneyed elite.

In that column, Webb cited the same figures about CEO salaries and workers' wages as in his reply to the State of the Union speech, noting that the gap was continuing to worsen. "America's elites need to understand this reality in terms of their own self-interest," he warned.

"More troubling is this: If it remains unchecked, this bifurcation of opportunities and advantages along class lines has the potential to bring a period of political unrest. Up to now, most American workers have simply been worried about their job prospects. Once they understand that there are (and were) clear alternatives to the policies that have dislocated careers and altered futures, they will demand more accountability from the leaders who have failed to protect their interests."

There is little left to the imagination here: Webb was outlining for his well-heeled audience what, to borrow Bush's language from the State of the Union speech, is the true "nightmare scenario" of the American ruling

class: the development of a mass movement from below, sparked by the ever-widening gap between the wealthy elite and everyone else, which could burgeon into a political challenge to the existing social order.

Official media and political circles responded to these comments by virtually ignoring them. In its account of Webb's Democratic Party reply, the *Washington Post* published only one paragraph on his comments on the economy, quoting a single sentence about "the middle class of this country ... losing its place at the table." The *New York Times* published two paragraphs, quoting the same sentence, as did CNN's web site.

The *Chicago Tribune* made no reference to the criticism of social polarization, citing only Webb's comments on the war in Iraq. The Associated Press did the same. The *Los Angeles Times* reported Webb's reference to New Orleans and his contrasting "the declining economic fortunes of the middle class with the skyrocketing salaries of corporate chief executives."

Not a single one of these news outlets, nor any of the television networks—which broadcast Webb's speech in full—made any comment on the significance of Webb's comparison of contemporary America to the America of the robber barons, when "America was then, as now, drifting apart along class lines."

It is not that the television anchormen and media pundits—most of them closer in salary to CEOs than to blue-collar or white-collar workers—are indifferent to the political implications of these social divisions. Doubtless there was plenty of off-camera discussion, and perhaps a measure of agreement that the Bush administration has been too cavalier in trampling on the social needs of working people in order to enrich the wealthiest one percent. These are matters, however, best taken up behind the scenes, rather than talked about openly before a mass audience on network television.



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