

Obama's Denver speech: Populist demagoguery in the service of militarism

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The speech delivered by Senator Barack Obama Thursday night, accepting the Democratic presidential nomination at a football stadium in Denver, combined populist rhetoric with invocations of patriotism and pledges to escalate the war in Afghanistan and build up the US military “to meet future conflicts.”

The acceptance speeches of the Democratic and Republican nominees are among the most important ceremonies in American politics and are given massive media attention. Obama's speech, according to television reports Friday, attracted an audience of 38 million people, more than twice the number who watched John Kerry in 2004.

The candidates use these occasions to speak simultaneously to two quite distinct audiences: the financial and political elite, who, in the final analysis, play the critical role in determining the outcome, and the masses of voters who will cast ballots November 4, but whose interests are given only lip service by the two big business parties.

Obama devoted the bulk of his remarks to populist-sounding denunciations of the Bush administration and Republican presidential candidate John McCain, and media coverage focused largely on this aspect of the speech. But the central purpose of the speech was to show that he can provide a new and supposedly more “progressive” rationale to mobilize popular support behind American militarism.

The Democratic candidate made many harsh criticisms of the Republicans, and spoke with apparent confidence, clearly feeling that powerful sections of the ruling elite stand behind him and want new management of the affairs of US imperialism in the wake of the Bush administration's debacles in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere.

But his indictment of Bush, McCain & Co. was notable for what it left out. There was no mention of Guantánamo, torture, secret CIA prisons, illegal wiretapping, or all the other violations of democratic rights carried out on the pretext of conducting a “war on terror.” In a key Senate vote last month, Obama backed expanded wiretapping and surveillance powers for agencies like the National Security Agency and the FBI.

Equally significant, Obama criticized the war in Iraq as a strategic blunder, not an act of aggression that has resulted in the slaughter of over one million innocent people. He presented the US occupation, which has shattered Iraq as a functioning society, as though the Bush administration was favoring that country at American expense. “Iraq has a \$79 billion surplus while we're

wallowing in deficits,” he complained.

Obama began his speech with a brief description of the grim economic circumstances facing tens of millions of people in the United States, including declining real wages, foreclosures and falling home values, and skyrocketing gas prices, credit card debt and college tuition costs. He blamed these conditions not, of course, on corporate America, but on the Bush administration and the Republican Party, and declared that McCain was simply ignorant of the difficulties confronting working people.

The measures which he proposed to counter the effects of the crisis were vague and hollow, as in his pledge of “affordable, accessible health care” at the end of a laundry list of other promises, with no explanation of how this was to be accomplished in the teeth of opposition from the insurance, drug and for-profit hospital industries.

He embraced many of the nostrums of the Republican right, calling for the elimination of capital gains taxes on many businesses and modest tax cuts for most working families, rather than the mobilization of federal resources to provide jobs, raise living standards and rebuild economically blighted areas.

Most importantly, Obama sought to direct popular anger over deteriorating social conditions along the lines of economic nationalism, blaming foreign scapegoats rather than the real source of the crisis, the American capitalist class and the system of private ownership and private profit.

Thus, in his indictment of the conditions facing working people in the industrial centers of the Midwest, he referred to a factory worker “who has to pack up the equipment he's worked on for twenty years and watch it shipped off to China.”

He hailed the capitalist market, while claiming that “businesses should live up to their responsibilities to create American jobs,” and he pledged to “stop giving tax breaks to corporations that ship jobs overseas.”

This economic nationalism was the basis of his most important domestic policy promise: a ten-year program to “finally end our dependence on oil from the Middle East.” Obama used this pledge to suggest, again, that foreigners, not American corporate bosses, were responsible for the crisis at home.

There is actually less to this promise than meets the eye, since barely 10 percent of the oil consumed in the United States comes from the Middle East. Persian Gulf oil mainly flows to Europe and Asia, while the US draws the bulk of its oil imports from the western hemisphere (particularly Canada, Mexico and Venezuela),

as well as from Africa.

The goal of American military intervention in the Persian Gulf is not to guarantee current shipments of oil to the US market, but to put the United States in control of the oil lifelines of its main economic competitors and strategic rivals, particularly Western Europe and China.

Even Obama's pledges of improved social conditions were linked to the growth of American militarism. Thus he called for a guarantee of an affordable college education to every young American "if you commit to serving your community or your country."

While this language might appeal to young people facing skyrocketing tuition costs, it has a very definite, and very reactionary, subtext: Obama is planting the seeds for a new Democratic administration to reestablish the draft. Such an effort would certainly be accompanied not only by manufactured panic over some new foreign policy crisis or terrorist attack, but by claims that compulsory military service is needed in the name of "fairness" and "shared sacrifice."

When he finally turned explicitly to foreign policy, Obama came out aggressively against the Bush administration's mismanagement of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and declared himself more than willing to match up his credentials to serve as "commander-in-chief." This theme was underscored in the run-up to his speech by the appearance on the platform of a parade of retired generals who vouched for the Democratic candidate's militarist credentials.

Obama won the Democratic nomination, at least in part, by claiming to be more antiwar than Hillary Clinton. But in his acceptance speech, he made it clear that he was running not as a principled opponent of the Iraq war, but as an advocate of a different war.

"While Senator McCain was turning his sights to Iraq just days after 9/11, I stood up and opposed this war, knowing that it would distract us from the real threats we face," he said. "When John McCain said we could just 'muddle through' in Afghanistan, I argued for more resources and more troops to finish the fight against the terrorists who actually attacked us on 9/11."

Obama argued that Bush's bellicose posturing over Iraq had served as a substitute for a more coherent global strategy. "You don't protect Israel and deter Iran just by talking tough in Washington," he said. "You can't truly stand up for Georgia when you've strained our oldest alliances."

Even more ominously, he declared, "We need a president who can face the threats of the future, not keep grasping at the ideas of the past." In other words, instead of continuing the stalemate in Iraq, Obama wants to extract US troops from that quagmire so they can be used in Afghanistan, against Iran, or in the struggle against more powerful antagonists like China and Russia.

The candidate invoked Roosevelt and Kennedy as Democratic predecessors, not for their association with liberal social reforms, but in their capacity as leaders during World War II and the Cold War. "As commander in chief, I will never hesitate to defend this nation," he said, adding, "I will rebuild our military to meet future conflicts."

Obama ended his speech with a brief citation from the speech

delivered by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. at the March on Washington 45 years before to the day. Remarkably, he did not speak of King by name, referring to him only as "the preacher."

He avoided the core of the 1963 speech, which is not the oft-quoted "I have a dream," but rather King's indictment of the injustice and oppression of blacks in the American South, and his declaration that American society as a whole had failed to fulfill the democratic promise of the American Revolution.

King told his audience, "Nineteen sixty three is not an end, but a beginning. And those who hope that the Negro needed to blow off steam and will now be content will have a rude awakening if the nation returns to business as usual. And there will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights. The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges."

There is not the slightest hint of revolt by the oppressed in the Obama campaign, despite efforts by some Democrats, sections of the media and "left" apologists like the *Nation* magazine to present him as the leader of a mass insurgent movement against the political establishment.

Media reaction following the speech fell along predictable lines, with MSNBC, ABC, CNN and much of the press hailing Obama's nomination as the culmination of the civil rights struggles of the 1960s, while Fox television and the *Wall Street Journal* howled that, despite his conservative tone and paeans to the military, he was seeking to revive New Deal or Great Society liberalism.

One liberal commentator who gushed over the speech, columnist Harold Meyerson, noted Obama's invocation of Kennedy and Roosevelt, and wrote that in his combination of military muscle-flexing and economic appeals to working people, Obama was reminiscent of another Democratic president: "Add this rhetoric of toughness to his hard-times populism, and Obama comes off as the leader not just of Roosevelt's and Kennedy's party, but of Truman's as well."

It is both true and damning to note that Obama's rhetoric and approach are reminiscent of the Democratic president responsible for the single greatest atrocity in the history of American imperialism, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Obama seeks the presidency under conditions where the protracted economic decline of American capitalism makes impossible any return to the liberal reform policies of a Truman. An Obama administration would involve the use of liberal demagoguery—without any actual economic concessions to working people—to support an aggressive program of American militarism in the Middle East, Central Asia and throughout the world.



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