

The Sarah Palin speech:

Democrats and media cower in face of Republicans' right-wing demagoguery

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Republican vice-presidential nominee Sarah Palin's Wednesday night speech to the Republican National Convention in St. Paul, Minnesota was greeted with rapture by the mass media. Newspapers and broadcast news declared it a "homerun" and a "star performance."

The *New York Times* declared that Palin's turn at the podium "electrified a convention that has been consumed by questions of whether she was up to the job." The *Washington Post* chimed in that the one-term Alaska governor "proved to be an instant jolt of energy for a political party that has been worried and demoralized for much of 2008."

Meanwhile, NBC's Tom Brokaw proclaimed on the air minutes after Palin finished her speech: "Tonight makes a very auspicious debut as the vice presidential candidate before this hall and a national television audience. She could not have been more winning or engaging."

There was little or no criticism of the brazen cynicism of the speech—which managed to avoid any mention of Palin's political party, now deeply unpopular—or its essential vacuousness. While presenting herself as an everywoman, Palin made no mention of the actual social problems which confront working class families: rising joblessness, plummeting real wages, the lack of affordable health care, the immense growth of economic inequality.

The fawning coverage was the media's cowardly response to its own vilification by the Republican Party, which denounced even the limited scrutiny given by the press to Palin's background as biased, unfair and out of bounds.

The losing candidates in the Republican presidential primaries who preceded Palin to the platform all sounded this same theme. Former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee sarcastically thanked "the elite media" for having helped "unify the Republican Party." Former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani affirmed that it was the American people, not the "left-wing media" who would pick the next president.

And former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, the multi-millionaire son of a governor, complained, "For decades, the Washington sun has been rising in the east—Washington has been looking to the eastern elites, to the editorial pages of the *Times* and the *Post*, and to the broadcasters from the coast."

For their part, the Democrats continued their virtual silence on Palin. The party's own vice-presidential nominee, Senator Joseph Biden, appeared on morning talks shows Thursday. On NBC's "Today" show, Biden affirmed that Palin had given "one heck of a political speech" and declared that she would be a "formidable opponent" and a "very skilled debater."

Speaking on ABC's "Good Morning America," he was slightly more critical. "It was a very skillfully written, very skillfully delivered speech," he said. "But there was not a word about the middle class or health care or how people are going to fill up their gas tanks or a single word about how

we're going to get our kids through college."

The reality is that Palin's speech was a piece of ultra-right demagoguery delivered to an audience assembled by what is unquestionably the most reactionary party on the face of the planet, committed to the unrelenting defense of wealth and privilege against the interests of the vast majority of the American people and all of humanity.

Assembled in the hall were the foulest elements of American society. The lily-white crowd—the number of black delegates had fallen from 150 in 2004 to 36 in 2008, barely 1.5 percent of the total—included a collection of religious fanatics, racists, anti-Semites and militant defenders of torture, militarism and inequality.

Only such a party could even conceive of someone like Sarah Palin as a candidate for vice president.

Palin cast herself as the small-town "hockey mom" determined to go clean up Washington, and as an innocent victim of media disparagement. One would never guess that she was a politician with intimate ties to movements best described as theocratic fascist, who has campaigned for the outlawing of abortion and the teaching of creationism and, as mayor of a small town, sought the banning of books.

"I've learnt quickly these past few days that if you're not a member in good standing of the Washington elite, then some in the media consider a candidate unqualified for that reason alone," she told the Republican delegates.

Any sober reading of the Palin speech makes it clear that it is as noteworthy for what was not in it as for what was.

Among the things missing—and this has been true for virtually all those who have addressed the convention—were the words "George W. Bush," who was physically frozen out of the convention, relegated to an eight-minute address from Washington via a video screen. This is all the more significant given that the words coming out of Palin's mouth Wednesday night were written by Matthew Scully, the Bush White House speechwriter who helped craft the lies used to sell the war in Iraq and contributed his prose to the infamous "mission accomplished" speech delivered on the deck of an aircraft carrier in the invasion's aftermath.

Bush's absence, attributed to Hurricane Gustav, was the result of deliberate political calculations. The Republicans have decided to pretend that they have nothing to do with the incumbent president and his administration and bear no responsibility for the deepening economic and social crisis gripping the country and the disastrous wars of aggression launched over the past eight years.

After controlling the White House for all but eight out of the last 28 years, boasting a majority in the House of Representatives for 12 out of the last 14 years and in the Senate for more than eight out of the last 12, as well as having appointed seven out of the nine justices to the US Supreme Court, the attempt by the Republicans to masquerade as outsiders taking

on Washington and its “elites” is quite simply ludicrous.

Also notable for its absence in Palin’s speech was any hint of a political program, outside of pursuing a policy of bellicose militarism abroad, unfettered drilling for oil and maintaining tax cuts for the wealthy.

Her denunciation of Obama for threatening to raise the “death tax,” a measure that would affect a handful of estates of the super-rich, won some of the strongest applause from the audience, in which the country’s real “elites” were amply represented. According to CBS News, 51 percent of the delegates have assets of over \$500,000.

Among the main speakers warming up the crowd for Palin was the billionaire former eBay CEO Meg Whitman, who had the gall to lecture the American people on the need for “tightening the belt during hard times.”

Neither Palin nor any of the other speakers at the convention made even a passing reference to the millions upon millions of working people in America facing the loss of jobs and homes as well as steadily declining real wages.

The issues with which she and the Christian right wing of the party have been so closely identified were likewise missing. There was no mention of abortion, gay marriage, gun rights or creationism. Even God got one solitary mention, outside of the obligatory “God bless America” which has become the mandatory closing line of politicians from both big business parties.

No doubt speechwriter Scully and Republican strategist Karl Rove concluded that there was no need to make an appeal on these issues; her presence on stage as the nominee would by itself suffice. Republican presidential candidate John McCain’s selection of Palin—his first choice was reportedly Senator and former Democratic vice-presidential candidate Joe Lieberman—represented a capitulation to the veto power exercised by the Christian right over the program and personnel of the Republican Party.

A few oblique biblical references—Palin’s vow to go to Washington with a “servant’s heart” and her talk of the “spirit” that brought her to the Alaska governor’s office—were thrown in just to keep the religious hucksters happy.

After comparing herself to Harry Truman—because they both traced their origins to small towns—Palin praised the virtues of that segment of America, declaring that small-town residents are the ones who do “the hardest work ... who grow our food, run our factories, and fight our wars.” There was not even a hint at the devastation that has been wrought upon small towns throughout the US over the past quarter century, as industries have moved out, leaving poverty and unemployment in their wake, as well as young people with few options outside of joining the military to “fight our wars.”

Palin then segued into one of many anti-Obama barbs, declaring, “in small towns, we don’t quite know what to make of a candidate who lavishes praise on working people when they are listening, and then talks about how bitterly they cling to their religion and guns when those people aren’t listening.”

This was perhaps the most disingenuous line in the entire speech. In the first place, the Republicans are well known for extolling the virtues of working people “when they are listening,” only to kick them in the teeth at the first opportunity, with attacks on wages, working conditions and basic rights.

Palin was referring to Obama’s lament, delivered in what he thought were off-the-record remarks to an audience of well-heeled contributors in San Francisco last April, which began by acknowledging that small towns in Pennsylvania and throughout the Midwest had seen the loss of jobs and deep deterioration for the past 25 years, under Democratic and Republican administrations alike. As a result, he said, their residents were “bitter” and tended to “cling to guns or religion.”

If anyone knows what Obama was talking about it is Palin, who began

her rise to the Alaska governorship by launching a virulently right-wing campaign to win the race for mayor in her Anchorage suburb of Wasilla, invoking precisely religion and guns, spewing anti-abortion demagoguery and proclaiming that her victory would give the town its “first Christian mayor.”

The political trends to which Obama referred—and to which Palin appealed—did not develop in a vacuum. They are the product of the betrayal and collapse of the official labor movement as well as the Democratic Party’s own sharp turn to the right, casting off of any remnants of New Deal social reformism, which in turn helped accelerate the growth of social inequality and economic insecurity.

Under these conditions, the Republicans were able to appeal to religious backwardness and spout pseudo-populist demagoguery against so-called “liberal elites.” With the selection of Palin as McCain’s running mate, the Republicans hope, despite the immense popular hatred for the Bush administration, to do so again. They have turned even further to the right than in the 2000 and 2004 campaigns of Bush and Cheney, now bringing onto their ticket a member of the Christian fundamentalist right with longstanding ties to political organizations of a semi-fascistic character.

What Palin’s speech signaled above all is that the Republican Party, despite the odds, has no intention of giving in. Over the course of decades it has been the most consistent and most ruthless representative of the interests of the ruling class. It has no intention of ceding that role to the Democrats, in no small part out of fear that its leading representatives could ultimately face criminal prosecution.

For their part, the Democrats and Obama are—like the media—clearly intimidated by the Republican attacks and unable to mount a reply. They are terrified that a determined attack on the Republican Party and the Bush administration could, despite their best intentions, encourage among working people both popular anger against the capitalist system and unrealistic expectations of change. Such an outcome would cut across the interests of the Democrats’ real constituencies, Wall Street and corporate America.

These fears render the Democrats incapable of speaking with either sincerity or anger—the latter reserved exclusively for those to their left. Their cowardice and duplicity are what provide a political opening to the fraudulent right-wing populist demagoguery of the likes of Palin and the Republicans.



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