

The New York Times and Obama's inauguration

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24 January 2009

The inaugural address delivered by Barack Obama Tuesday has elicited a torrent of commentary, in the US and around the world. Some of the most deluded and dishonest comments issue from the pages of the *New York Times*, the "newspaper of record" and voice of American liberalism.

In an editorial published January 21, the *Times* declares that "In about 20 minutes, he [Obama] swept away eight years of President George Bush's false choices and failed policies and promised to recommit to America's most cherished ideals."

David Sanger, in the newspaper's lead news article on the event, asserts that "Barack Obama's Inaugural Address on Tuesday was a stark repudiation of the era of George W. Bush and the ideological certainties that surrounded it."

What is the *Times* talking about?

In fact, Obama's speech had two principal currents running through it.

The new president felt himself obliged—as the departure point for his remarks—to make obeisance to the "war on terror," initiated by the Bush administration with the complicity of the Democrats in Congress. Obama declared: "Our nation is at war against a far-reaching network of violence and hatred."

Turning to the economic crisis, Obama placed the blame squarely on the shoulders of the American people: "Our economy is badly weakened, a consequence of greed and irresponsibility on the part of some, but also our collective failure to make hard choices and prepare the nation for a new age."

The responsibility for the unfolding calamity, the worst since the Great Depression, lies entirely with the American elite and Wall Street, which have stolen and swindled their way to unimaginable wealth at the expense of essential services, infrastructure and the living

conditions of the vast majority of the population.

Obama further declared that "the time has come to set aside childish things" and preached the virtues of "a new era of responsibility" to masses of people who have seen their incomes stagnate or decline for decades and, in the most recent past, have seen the values of their homes fall sharply while millions have lost their jobs.

These remarks were extraordinary, and provocative. That they go virtually unanswered speaks to a consensus within the political and media establishment that there must not be the slightest let-up in bailing out the banks and imposing the full measure of the crisis on the working population.

Various right-wing commentators recognized Obama's speech for what it was, a determined defense of the essentials of the Bush administration's foreign policy and "free market" ideology.

One television satirist was prompted to run a montage of portions of past speeches by George W. Bush and segments of Obama's inaugural, demonstrating, to comic effect, the virtual identity of their rhetoric and content. A *Kansas City Star* editorial page columnist published selected passages from Obama's 2009 address and Bush's first inaugural address in 2001, without specifying their source, and dared his readers to identify the speaker in each case.

All of this, however, is lost on the *New York Times* and its correspondents. They are determined to discover a "progressive" Obama, or invent one. The political and media establishment is well aware that the election of the first African-American president has generated widespread expectations, hopes and illusions. People are suffering, and they want relief. The task of the *Times* is to promote and reinforce every false hope and illusion, to lull its readers (and perhaps itself) to sleep as far as this can be done.

According to the editors, in his inaugural address,

Barack Obama "said he intended to reshape government so it will truly serve its citizens" and was "unsparing in condemning the failed ideology of uncontrolled markets."

This isn't true. On the nature of government, Obama offered a formula, as many commentators remarked, which would not have displeased Ronald Reagan: "The question we ask today is not whether our government is too big or too small, but whether it works.... Where the answer is yes, we intend to move forward. Where the answer is no, programs will end."

As far as the market goes, the newly installed president paid it fulsome tribute: "Nor is the question before us whether the market is a force for good or ill. Its power to generate wealth and expand freedom is unmatched."

The *Times* editorial refers to "more than seven years of Mr. Bush's using fear and xenophobia," but is not dismayed by Obama's own belligerent phrases: "We will not apologize for our way of life nor will we waver in its defense. And for those who seek to advance their aims by inducing terror and slaughtering innocents, we say to you now that, 'Our spirit is stronger and cannot be broken. You cannot outlast us, and we will defeat you.' "

What has the US military done in Afghanistan and Iraq for most of this decade if not "induce terror and slaughter innocents" on a vast scale? And Obama promises more of the same.

David Sanger's aim in his *Times* piece is to prove that Obama's speech represented a devastating critique of the Bush regime, "a delicate task, with Mr. Bush and Dick Cheney sitting feet from him." Sanger writes that "not since 1933, when Franklin D. Roosevelt called for a 'restoration' of American ethics and 'action, and action now' as Herbert Hoover sat and seethed, has a new president so publicly rejected the essence of his predecessor's path."

It is possible to dismiss this comparison without idealizing Roosevelt, a canny politician resolved to preserve American capitalism in the midst of economic catastrophe.

Roosevelt was obliged for his own purposes to denounce "the rulers of the exchange of mankind's goods," who had failed, "through their own stubbornness and their own incompetence Practices of the unscrupulous money changers stand indicted in the court of public opinion, rejected by the hearts and minds of men."

He went on to denounce the corruption of public officials who value political position "only by the standards of pride of place and personal profit," and called

for an end "to a conduct in banking and in business which too often has given to a sacred trust the likeness of callous and selfish wrongdoing."

Roosevelt went out of his way to proclaim "The people of the United States have not failed."

An attack on the bankers and the profit motive would be inconceivable in official American political discourse today. Obama, Bush, Clinton and the rest are creatures of the recent decades during which the upper echelons of American society have been vastly enriched.

It is not accidental that none of these words or phrases—"poverty," "homelessness," "foreclosure," "Wall Street," "bankers," "profit," "depression" and "inequality," along with "torture," "rendition," "Abu Ghraib," and "Guantánamo"—appear in Obama's inaugural speech.

Of course there are tactical differences between the Bush and Obama camps, differences in tone, emphasis and nuance. After the disasters of the past eight years, the powers that be went to considerable effort to promote a new face. However, only the most fanatical ultra-right elements or those close to Bush personally were offended by Obama's speechifying. The more astute observers recognized the address for what it was: an old dish served with a new dressing.

In concluding their editorial January 21, the *Times* editors exclaim that they are filled "with hope that with Mr. Obama's help, this battered nation will be able to draw together and mend itself."

There is no objective or rational basis for such a hope. The American population will learn through its own experiences the bitter realities of capitalism in crisis and draw its own conclusions about Obama.



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