Obama’s inaugural address: Amid banalities, a call for austerity

21 January 2009

In his inaugural address Tuesday, President Barack Obama offered nothing in the way of concrete pledges or programs to confront the economic crisis or bring an end to war. Instead, he indicated that the American people would have to accept even greater sacrifices.

The pomp and ceremony dating back 220 years to the birth of the American republic, reinforced by the accession of the first African-American to the presidency, stood in sharp contrast to the banality of Obama's words and the hollowness of his message.

For the millions who packed the Washington Mall, the emotions of the day were driven by hopes that the coming to power of an African-American would signify genuine change and by relief at the exit of George W. Bush, whose first appearance on the Capitol steps drew loud boos from the assembled crowd. At the end of the ceremony, the departure over the Mall of the helicopter bearing Bush, the most hated president in the country's history, drew a chant from the crowd most often heard from sports fans jeering an opposing team: "Na-na-na-na, Na-na-na-na, Hey Hey, Goodbye."

There was a general hope that the inauguration of a new president would signal an end to an eight-year national nightmare that began with a stolen election and brought two wars of aggression, historically unprecedented attacks on constitutional rights, an uninterrupted growth of social inequality and the deepest economic crisis in modern American history. These sentiments were shared by people around the world who watched international broadcasts of the ceremony.

Yet Obama's speech seemed crafted in large measure with the aim of damping down such expectations. The message universally trumpeted by the corporate media, headlining the lead stories on the web sites of both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, was Obama's call for a "new era of responsibility."

There is more than a small dose of irony in this invocation, as the principle of responsibility is to be very selectively applied. In recent weeks, Obama and his advisors have repeatedly made clear that they have no intention of holding Bush, Cheney or other senior officials in any way accountable for policies that constituted war crimes and crimes against the Constitution during their tenure in office.

As for the deepest financial crisis in the history of American capitalism, no one at the top bears any particular responsibility, at least in Obama's estimation. "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," he declared at the beginning of the speech.

This formulation holds tens of millions of workers facing the loss of their jobs and homes through no fault of their own equally responsible for the present crisis as Wall Street executives and hedge fund managers whose financial parasitism and criminality helped drag their own institutions and the world economy into ruin.

Now Obama is telling working people that they must take "responsibility" for the crisis that is destroying their livelihoods by accepting deeper attacks on jobs, wages and social benefits, even as trillions of dollars in public funds are used to bail out Wall Street while its CEOs continue to draw down their seven- and eight-figure compensation packages.

In some of Obama's rhetoric there were indications that he and his speechwriters had attempted to mine the first inaugural address given by Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933, in the depths of the Great Depression. Clearly there are historical parallels, made ever more apparent as the stock market plunged below the 8,000 mark Tuesday, its broadest index losing over 5 percent of its value even as Obama was being sworn in.

Yet what was most notable was Obama's inability to speak in the frank manner of Roosevelt 76 years ago. What characterized the new president's inaugural address above all was an appalling lack of concreteness about anything.

When Roosevelt addressed the nation, he vowed to "speak the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly." While he certainly did not do that, and his aim was to save capitalism from social revolution, he did speak in fairly explicit terms about what had created the crisis and what he intended to do about it.

The crisis of the 1930s, Roosevelt declared, had arisen not because of any lack of nature's "bounty" or "human efforts" to multiply it, but because "the rulers of the exchange of mankind's goods have failed, through their own stubbornness and their own incompetence." He continued: "Practices of the unscrupulous money changers stand indicted in the court of public opinion, rejected by the hearts and minds of men."

Obama appeared to have drawn part of his speech from the first part of this conception, declaring, "Our workers are no less productive than when this crisis began. Our minds are no less inventive, our goods and services no less needed than they were last week or last month or last year." Left unstated, however, was why, if this is the case, the economy is spiraling downward into depression with nearly 3 million jobs wiped out in the US over the last year alone.

© World Socialist Web Site

Involved in this evasion is a stunning level of contempt and condescension towards those who support him. He obviously feels he owes them no such explanation, and the less said the better.

Obama is unable to even mention the role of today's "money changers," who paid a large share of the money for his campaign and bankrolled the inauguration itself. All of the vague rhetoric about "equality" notwithstanding, it is their interests he intends to defend at the expense of the broad mass of American working people.

This is the real significance of his claims to have transcended the "stale political arguments of the past" about the role of government and the capitalist market, and his vow that the time for "putting off unpleasant decisions has ended."

"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," he said. "Where the answer is no, programs will end." Again, there was no specificity about what programs will be terminated, but in the past week he has indicated his intention to radically cut back bedrock social programs, including Social Security and Medicare, as a means of attacking the government's fiscal crisis.

"Nor is the question before us whether the market is a force for good or ill," Obama continued. "Its power to generate wealth and expand freedom is unmatched." He allowed that the present crisis showed the need for a "watchful eye" and voiced the belief that the "reach of prosperity" should be extended by offering "opportunity to every willing heart." There is nothing here that could not have been lifted from the speeches of Ronald Reagan or any of the other right-wing politicians that have ruled on behalf of Wall Street and corporate America for the last three decades.

It was no accident that, in illustrating the kind of actions he sees as vital to overcoming the crisis, Obama cited the "the selflessness of workers who would rather cut their hours than see a friend lose their job." This, under conditions where workers all over the country are being hit with cuts in hours and pay in the name of saving jobs, even as bailed-out bankers reject any sacrifice whatsoever.

"War on terror" to go on

There was a second fundamental theme that ran through the speech, which was that America's bellicosity and militarism will continue, albeit with slightly greater attention to wrapping a predatory foreign policy in the rhetoric of morality and altruism.

In the first substantive line of the speech, Obama declared, "Our nation is at war against a far-reaching network of violence and hatred." The implication was unmistakable: The "global war on terror," the pretext used by the Bush administration for launching two wars of aggression, carrying out torture, extraordinary rendition, unlawful detentions and domestic spying, continues unabated.

Obama vowed that under his administration, "We'll begin to responsibly leave Iraq to its people and forge a hard-earned peace in Afghanistan." There was not a word of criticism, however, for the decision to launch these wars. Indeed, the incoming administration has already indicated that far from leaving Iraq "to its people," occupation, on a more economical scale, will continue indefinitely, while tens of thousands of additional US troops are to be sent to Afghanistan in an escalation of the war there.

There was an ugly note of arrogance and jingoism in the speech, with Obama declaring, "We will not apologize for our way of life, nor will we waver in its defense" and his chastisement of foreign leaders--presumably in the historically oppressed countries of Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Latin America--who "blame their society's ills on the West."

He issued a rhetorical challenge to "those who seek to advance their aims by inducing terror and slaughtering innocents," vowing, "We will defeat you." Coming in the wake of Israel's three-week onslaught against Gaza in which thousands of Palestinian innocents were killed or maimed with US supplied weapons and the tacit support of a silent Obama, these words reeked of hypocrisy.

Finally, Obama paid tribute to the US troops "who at this very hour patrol far-off deserts and distant mountains," declaring "their spirit of service" to be "precisely [the] spirit that must inhabit us all."

The newly inaugurated president thus provided a textbook definition of modern militarism--upholding the ethos and spirit of the military as the ideal for the nation--as the substance of his "vision" for reviving America.

It was noteworthy, given the inauguration of the first African-American president, that what went completely unmentioned was the civil rights struggle—or, for that matter, any form of social struggle.

There are two reasons for such an omission. Obama has no intention of encouraging such mass social struggles today, and he is anxious not to offend the forces of social reaction upon which he rests and which now surround him.

Whatever his intentions, however, the immense economic and social crisis that is now unfolding in America and across the globe will produce such struggles and on an even greater scale. The policies that are only hinted at in what was a banal and dishonest inauguration speech are completely at odds with the social interests and aspirations of the vast majority of the American people. Sooner rather than later, they will produce a political confrontation and a new eruption of class struggle that will challenge the foundations of US capitalism.

Bill Van Auken

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site