

Bowing to the right on Inauguration Day

22 January 2009

The inauguration speech delivered by President Barack Obama Tuesday has been the object of near-delirious praise from the mass media and the editorial pages of the major US dailies. Even those forced to acknowledge that the 18-minute address was flat in its delivery, banal in much of its content and lacking any oratory that will be long remembered insist that it mattered little what Obama actually said. The important thing was his very presence on the steps of the Capitol—and that of the massive crowd on the Washington Mall—symbolizing “change.”

Eschewing genuine analysis and dedicating its coverage instead to self-delusion and deluding others, the media almost universally fails to grasp the immense contradiction between the sentiments that brought nearly two million people to Washington for the event and the politics that underlay what Obama actually said.

Those standing in the cold came to celebrate the exit from the political stage of a hated president, George W. Bush, and what many hoped would be the beginning of fundamental change. The speech itself, however, was crafted in large measure to appease the Republican right and signal continuity with its essential policies.

Most glaring in this regard were the first substantive lines describing the crisis enveloping the United States as Obama assumes the presidency. Before even referring to the profound economic crisis that has claimed some 3 million jobs and is destroying hundreds of thousands more every month, Obama took his cue from Bush, painting terrorism as the nation’s preeminent challenge.

“Our nation is at war against a far-reaching network of violence and hatred,” he declared.

With these few words, Obama gave his assurance that the “global war on terror” will remain the lasting legacy of Bush, Cheney and Co., providing the continued pretext for aggressive war abroad and the violation of democratic rights at home.

Contained in this formulation is the continuation of all the lies and political intimidation methods utilized by the last administration to foist the wars in Afghanistan and

Iraq onto the American people. Principal among them is the fraudulent claim that the American military has been sent to occupy these countries and kill large numbers of their citizens in order to fight terrorism, when, in fact, the real reason for these wars is the drive for American imperialist hegemony over the vast energy reserves of Central Asia and the Persian Gulf.

Continuity, rather than change, is the hallmark of the incoming administration’s attitude towards both of these wars. To the extent that a partial drawdown of troops is to be carried out in Iraq, it will be done under the timetable worked out by the Bush administration and for the purpose of escalating the counter-insurgency war in Afghanistan. Overseeing the process, moreover, will be Bush’s secretary of defense, Robert Gates, as well as the senior commanders picked by the Republican president.

By invoking an undefined “far-reaching network” of worldwide terror Obama kept in place the ideological pretext for wars yet to come, potentially against Iran, Pakistan or countries as yet unnamed.

This element of the speech won firm approval from the virulently right-wing editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal*. In its lead editorial, the *Journal* applauded Obama for his “clear declaration that we are indeed fighting a ‘war’” against terrorism. It continued: “Many of his supporters on the left, and around the world, have been hoping that Mr. Obama will return US national security policy to its pre-9/11 assumptions. The Democrat was warning our adversaries—and some of our allies—that his foreign policy will have as much continuity as change, and that he isn’t about to jettison policies that protect Americans.”

In other words, the speech reassured the predominant sections of the American financial elite, whose interests the *Journal* consistently defends, that policies of militarism and aggression that it sees as vital to maintaining and advancing its global aims will continue unabated.

As for Obama’s “supporters on the left”—i.e., the majority of the American people who want an end to war

and voted for him in large measure to achieve that aim—they have once again been politically disenfranchised by the two-party system.

The speech received general applause from the media pundits of the right. Former Reagan speech-writer Peggy Noonan noted that Obama used “language with which traditional Republicans would be thoroughly at home.”

Most popular among this socio-political layer were the sections of the speech suggesting that the economic collapse precipitated by Wall Street is the fault of the American people as a whole, who now must accept sacrifice in the interests of the nation. In particular, they fastened on the lines about a “new era of responsibility” and the financial meltdown being the result 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.”

Columnist George Will, who hosted Obama at a pre-inauguration dinner with other right-wing commentators, praised in particular his use of the Biblical phrase, “The time has come to set aside childish things,” interpreting it as an admonition to the vast majority of the American people for demanding “more goods and services than they are willing to pay for.” Driven by his contempt for working people, Will happily endorses the demand that they give up such “childish things” as the belief that they have a right to a job, a home, health care and a decent income.

Similarly, the *Wall Street Journal* noted approvingly in its main article on the inauguration, “The implicit message is that it isn’t sufficient to blame the Bush administration, or Wall Street or the man down the street for today’s economic pain, but to accept that a whole nation is complicit in it.”

This indeed is the implication of Obama’s words. How are workers, who have faced an ever more uphill battle to make ends meet off of steadily declining real wages, “complicit” in the financial fraud and criminality that have dominated Wall Street, generating obscene fortunes for those at the top, while dragging the economy into ruin? This neither Obama nor his right-wing admirers bother to explain.

Absent from Obama’s speech was any reference to the most salient feature of modern-day American life: the uninterrupted growth in social inequality. Only by deliberately ignoring the reality of a society in which the top 1 percent controls 40 percent of the wealth and where a CEO makes 344 times the income of an average worker could the Democratic president weave into his speech the

false and deeply reactionary notions of “collective failure” and “equality” of responsibility.

The meaning of these arguments is unmistakable. The advent of Obama will signal no reprise of the New Deal or the Great Society. There will be no revival of social reformism, but rather a turn to fiscal austerity and counter-reforms directed against what little remains of a social safety net in America, embodied in such programs as Social Security and Medicare.

The central political aim of the new administration, like the one that it is replacing, will be protecting the interests and wealth of a narrow financial elite, who will be bailed out at the expense of millions of American workers and their families.

As this policy unfolds—and as the economic crisis deepens—the media attempts to cast Barack Obama as the personal embodiment of change will inevitably fall flat. The reality that the new American president is an utterly conventional politician, the product of a corrupt political machine and the faithful servant of the financial and corporate interests that funded his election campaign will begin to set in.

At that point, the stark contradiction between the aspirations and objective interests of the large numbers of working people on the Washington Mall Tuesday and the class nature of the Obama administration will find its expression in the eruption of social struggles directed against this government itself.

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