

# At UN general assembly, Obama urges international support for US wars

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On Wednesday, President Barack Obama used his first address to the United Nations General Assembly to defend US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and reiterate the American right to act unilaterally. At the same time, Obama implicitly appealed to foreign capitals to subordinate themselves to US geostrategic objectives.

In a generally vacuous and hypocritical speech, Obama also threatened Iran, and declared Israel to be a “Jewish state.”

The speech, like the Obama presidency itself, sought to present a changed image to the world. If the assembled heads-of-state and foreign ministers had expected Obama to repudiate the policies of the Bush administration, however, they were quickly disappointed. In the opening moments of his speech, Obama blamed the rest of the world for the “anti-Americanism” that emerged in the Bush years, and implied that world leaders had manipulated this sentiment to avoid doing US bidding.

“I took office at a time when many around the world had come to view America with skepticism and distrust,” Obama said. “Part of this was due to misperceptions and misinformation about my country. Part of this was due to opposition to specific policies, and a belief that on certain critical issues, America has acted unilaterally, without regard for the interests of others. This has fed an almost reflexive anti-Americanism, which too often has served as an excuse for our collective inaction.”

Obama quickly added that he would, like Bush, continue to “act in the interest of my nation and my people, and I will never apologize for defending those interests.” By “defending those interests,” Obama is not referring to “my nation and my people,” but the predatory aims of the financial oligarchy primarily responsible for his election, and in whose interests the preemptive wars on Afghanistan and Iraq were launched.

Later in the speech, Obama declared that the US would “permit no safe-haven for al Qaeda to launch attacks from Afghanistan or any other nation,” reasserting the US right to violate the sovereignty of any state in pursuit of whomever Washington declares to be terrorists.

Yet this reiteration of US unilateralism was joined with an appeal to enlist the support of world powers behind American aims.

“Those who used to chastise America for acting alone in the world cannot now stand by and wait for America to solve the world’s problems alone,” Obama sanctimoniously declared. “We have sought—in word and deed—a new era of engagement with the world. Now is the time for all of us to take our share of responsibility for a global response to global challenges.”

Obama’s appeal for assistance, far from a return to a greater degree of international harmony, is another manifestation of the relative

decline of the US on the world stage.

Elsewhere, Obama’s rhetoric was little changed from that of Bush, including its focus on the threat posed by terrorism. Obama declared he would “disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda and its extremist allies.”

“America will forge lasting partnerships to target terrorists, share intelligence, coordinate law enforcement, and protect our people,” Obama said. “We will stand by our friends on the front lines, as we and many nations will do in pledging support for the Pakistani people tomorrow.”

In fact, the US invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, and its expansion of the war to Pakistan, have led to a major humanitarian crisis. Tens of thousands have been killed, millions have been turned into refugees, and the two nations remain among the poorest in the world.

Those portions of his speech where Obama attempted to differentiate himself from Bush were, of necessity, the most obviously dishonest and hypocritical. “On my first day in office, I prohibited—without exception or equivocation—the use of torture by the United States of America,” Obama said. “I ordered the prison at Guantanamo Bay closed, and we are doing the hard work of forging a framework to combat extremism within the rule of law.”

These assertions, referring to a series of executive orders Obama signed on his first day in office, are so absurd, and so obviously false, that they received indifferent applause from the general assembly.

Obama did not abolish torture “without exception or equivocation.” He in fact appointed a presidential advisory panel to research new “interrogation methods” where the ostensible guidelines established by the Army Field Manual fall short of what is demanded.

As high-ranking White House officials have indicated, Obama’s order to close Guantanamo by the end of January is in serious doubt. And Obama has kept other notorious US-run prisons, such as that at Bagram in Afghanistan, open.

The Obama administration has also said it will carry on the practice of rendition, whereby “terror” suspects are spirited off to unknown prisons where they may face torture, and it has promised to prevent any serious investigation into the illegal activities of the Bush administration.

Moreover, Obama, like Bush, has refused to allow any public or independent investigation of the international prison system built up in “the war on terror.” At the same time, detainees are denied any legal recourse to their imprisonment. Without media, humanitarian, or legal scrutiny, Obama’s claims that torture has ended cannot be accepted.

Obama also said the US is “responsibly ending a war” in Iraq, and that he would “keep our commitment to remove all American troops by the end of 2011.” This assertion, too, was met with little applause. It is widely understood in foreign capitals—and in the Pentagon—that the US has no intention of leaving Iraq. Any withdrawal, should it take place, will be a highly qualified affair.

Obama made much of his efforts to stop nuclear proliferation and his support of the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT), improbably presenting the US as a model that others might follow.

In this section of the speech, Obama singled out North Korea and Iran, the two members of Bush’s “Axis of Evil” yet to be invaded by the US (Iraq was the third). Obama said he was “committed to diplomacy.” But he warned that if North Korea and Iran did not bend to US demands, “they must be held accountable.”

It should be noted that the US has the largest stockpile of nuclear weaponry in the world, and it is the only country to have used nuclear weapons on civilian targets—Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan. It has also encouraged violation of the NPT when it suits its interests. The US has surreptitiously supplied Israel, a nation that has launched numerous wars on its neighbors, with nuclear technology that the latter has used to construct a substantial arsenal of weapons.

Obama’s hypocrisy was boundless. The president declared himself an advocate of world peace. Realizing peace, Obama said, “must begin with an unshakeable determination that the murder of innocent men, women and children will never be tolerated.”

Never be tolerated? This from the head of a government that every month kills, without apology, hundreds of Afghan and Pakistani civilians, declaring them after the fact either “terrorists” or “collateral damage.”

In what must be taken as a warning to the world, Obama outlined new “peacekeeping” missions for the American military and its European and Australian accomplices. “We will pursue a lasting peace in Sudan through support for the people of Darfur, and the implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, so that we secure the peace that the Sudanese people deserve,” Obama said. “And in countries ravaged by violence—from Haiti to Congo to East Timor—we will work with the UN and other partners to support an enduring peace.”

Obama offered up ritual comments on Israel’s oppression of the Palestinians, as usual treating it as a matter of two equally culpable parties. “We continue to call on Palestinians to end incitement against Israel, and we continue to emphasize that America does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements,” Obama said.

Ominously, in reasserting US support for a two-state solution, Obama called for the formation of “a Jewish state of Israel.” With this comment, Obama was giving support to a central demand of Tel Aviv in its negotiations with the Palestinian Authority. Some 20 percent of Israel’s population is Arab. Growing sections of the Israeli ruling class favor a new wave of expulsions.

Obama’s speech was celebrated in Tel Aviv. “I commend his unequivocal support of Israel as the nation state of the Jewish people,” Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said.

There was little in Obama’s speech that would indicate the world is passing through its greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression. On the contrary, Obama presented the crisis as if it had been resolved by the massive “stimulus” spending of the biggest economies, most of which found its way to the coffers of the big banks.

“To overcome an economic crisis that touches every corner of the

world, we worked with the G-20 nations to forge a coordinated international response of over two trillion dollars in stimulus to bring the global economy back from the brink,” Obama said. Then, in the next breath, he shamelessly boasted that the US and other major powers had created a “\$20 billion global food security initiative”—which remains unfunded—“that will lend a hand to those who need it most, and help them build their own capacity.”

This \$20 billion for “food security” is less than what Washington has doled out to single Wall Street banks.

Obama posed as if he favored strict new regulations on financial markets, saying that nations should join together in “setting new rules of the road and strengthening regulation for all financial centers, so that we put an end to the greed, excess and abuse that led us into disaster, and prevent a crisis like this from ever happening again.”

In fact, it is well known that in the G20 negotiations, it is the Obama administration that is the most fervent opponent of new regulations. In the same portion of the speech, Obama hypocritically lectured “developing nations” that it is they who “must root out the corruption that is an obstacle to progress—for opportunity cannot thrive where individuals are oppressed and businesses have to pay bribes.”

Obama concluded with a subtle reference to the failure of the elections in Afghanistan, which aimed to provide a democratic gloss to the US occupation.

“Democracy cannot be imposed on any nation from the outside. Each society must search for its own path, and no path is perfect. Each country will pursue a path rooted in the culture of its people, and—in the past—America has too often been selective in its promotion of democracy,” Obama said.

The failure of “democratic” rationalizations does not mean an end to US invasions, however. “That does not weaken our commitment, it only reinforces it,” Obama quickly added. “[T]he United States of America will never waiver in our efforts to stand up for the right of people everywhere to determine their own destiny.”



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