

The Nation and the Obama Doctrine

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President Barack Obama's Nobel Peace Prize speech has been hailed virtually unanimously across the entire spectrum of the American political establishment.

Bristling with imperialist arrogance, Obama's speech amounted to a full-throated defense of US aggression and a brief for the unlimited use of military violence to recolonize large parts of the world. Delivered by a president who only a week before had announced an escalation of the war in Afghanistan and Pakistan that will lead to the deaths of many thousands, the speech essentially asserted the right of the United States to invade any country in the world.

"The instruments of war do have a role to play in preserving the peace," Obama insisted. The US, he said, has the right to "act unilaterally if necessary" and to launch wars whose purpose "extends beyond self-defense or the defense of one nation against an aggressor." This was a reassertion of the Bush administration's doctrine of preemptive war, which is a violation of international law.

Obama referred to the historical concept of "just war," which maintains that wars must be waged only in self-defense, must employ proportional force and do so in a manner that avoids civilian casualties. He then said it was necessary to "think in new ways" about these notions, implying that such quaint ideas had to be rejected and the world had to accept the right of the US and other imperialist powers to inflict death and destruction on targeted populations as they saw fit.

Obama was not just defending the ongoing wars in the Persian Gulf and Central Asia. As in his December 1 West Point speech, he made clear that these are only the first of many future wars. Speaking in Oslo, he singled out as potential targets a series of countries, including Iran, North Korea, Somalia, Sudan, Congo, Zimbabwe and Myanmar.

In an implicit threat to rival powers, Obama made a point of referring to the US as "the world's sole military superpower."

The White House clearly decided to use Obama's Nobel acceptance speech as an opportunity to stage an

international defense of American militarism and imperialist war. It was confident that the different factions of the US political and media establishment could be brought on board behind a policy—dubbed by media commentators the "Obama Doctrine"—that both reiterates and extends that elaborated by the Bush administration.

On the right, the speech won the support of the former Republican speaker of the House of Representatives, Newt Gingrich, House Minority Leader John Boehner, Karl Rove and Sarah Palin, among others. One Republican strategist, Bradley Blakeman, remarked,

"The irony is that George W. Bush could have delivered the very same speech. It was truly an American president's message to the world."

The Wall Street Journal wrote that the speech put paid any notion that Obama would give a "wooly-headed address about peace in our time." Instead, Obama "stated clearly that sometimes war is necessary..."

"Congratulations, Mr. President," wrote the organ of the Republican right.

The New York Times, the voice of American liberalism, said the speech was "appropriately humble" as well as "somber and soaring." It drew particular attention to Obama's defense of the war in Afghanistan as "morally just and strategically necessary."

Hastening to align itself with the imperialist establishment and declare its support for the speech was the Nation magazine, the main organ of what passes for "left" liberalism. John Nichols, one of the magazine's principal commentators, in a blog entry published almost immediately after the speech and featured as the lead item on the magazine's web site, wrote that it was "an exceptionally well-reasoned and appropriately humble address."

Nichols gushed, "The president's frankness about the controversies and concerns regarding the award of a Peace Prize to a man who just last week ordered 30,000 US new troops into the Afghanistan quagmire, and the humility he displayed...offered a glimpse of Obama at his best."

“As such,” he continued, “the speech was important and, dare we say, hopeful.”

In an interview on National Public Radio’s “All Things Considered” news program, the Nation’s editor, Katrina vanden Heuvel, praised the speech’s supposed “humility and grace.” The host of the show, evidently expecting more criticism, noted that vanden Heuvel “seemed to be resolving the conflict between the wartime president...and the speech about peace rather easily...”

Vanden Heuvel responded with blather about the “complexity” of American life. It was a “complex speech,” she said, and she was “interested in its complexity.”

Contrary to vanden Heuvel, there was nothing “humble” or “graceful” about Obama’s speech. Nor was it complex. It was an open brief for unrestrained aggression and colonial oppression.

There should be no confusion as to the position of the Nation and the privileged upper-middle-class layers for which the magazine speaks, including former radicals and one-time critics of US imperialism. They have moved squarely into the camp of American imperialism. They support Obama’s wars in Central Asia and Iraq and, more generally, the efforts of the United States to assert global hegemony.

In the run-up to the 2008 elections, the Nation was among the most enthusiastic supporters of the Obama campaign, presenting his victory as the first stage in a radical reform and revitalization of American democracy. It vouched for Obama’s supposedly antiwar credentials.

One year later, the candidate of “change” and “hope” presides over a right-wing administration that is expanding US military aggression while it bails out Wall Street and attacks the jobs and living standards of the working class.

The unmasking of Obama before the entire world has not in any way lessened the support he receives from the Nation. On the contrary, the coming to power of an African-American president has served as the vehicle for American liberalism, including its supposedly “left” wing, which long ago abandoned any serious reform agenda and rejected class as the basic category of social life in favor of race, gender and other categories of identity politics, to lurch further to the right.

It has provided the means by which the Nation has completed its passage into the camp of American imperialism and political reaction.

Remarking on Obama’s speech, Walter Russell Mead, the Henry Kissinger senior fellow at the Council on

Foreign Relations, remarked, “If Bush had said these things the world would be filled with violent denunciations. When Obama says them, people purr.”

The “purring” of the Nation comes at a time of growing popular opposition to the Obama administration and its policies. In his speech, Obama himself made reference to the fact that his expansion of war is deeply unpopular, noting the “disconnect between the efforts of those who serve and the ambivalence of the population.” He made clear, however, that this “disconnect” will have absolutely no effect on the policy of his government.

What will happen as the “disconnect” turns into anger and opposition? How will the Nation respond? Its greatest concern is the growth of a political movement that breaks free of the Democratic Party. While it responds now with lies and political hucksterism, under different conditions the Nation will support repression—the purring kitten will turn out to have sharp claws.

The evolution of the Nation underscores the fact that a genuine movement against imperialist war must develop in opposition to the defenders of the Obama administration, the Democratic Party and American capitalism.

As the economic crisis intensifies and aggressive war expands, the working class will emerge as the leading political force in the opposition to war and imperialism. The critical task is the construction of a political leadership based on the understanding that imperialist war is rooted in the capitalist system, and that the fight against war must be an international struggle linked to the socialist reorganization of society.

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