

Glenn Beck in Washington: Preaching the gospel of Mammon and militarism

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The Washington rally organized by right-wing Fox News TV personality Glenn Beck on Saturday offered a twisted mix of religion, potted history and the glorification of the military under the banner of “restoring honor” to the USA.

Crowd estimates for the rally varied wildly. Beck and his supporters claimed over half a million. Most media outlets put the figure at “tens of thousands” or approximately 100,000. CBS News provided a more precise figure, relying on a company that performed analysis of aerial photographs to produce a figure of 87,000.

Whatever the real number, this amorphous event received immense promotion and coverage, not only by Beck’s own employer, Rupert Murdoch’s Fox News, but by every section of the media. This treatment stood in stark contrast to the media’s virtual blackout of far larger demonstrations held in recent years against the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Beck, who has described himself as a “rodeo clown” and entertainer, while using his television and radio programs to promote right-wing conspiracy theories, reinvented himself for Saturday’s appearance at the Lincoln Memorial. He came before the crowd as the nation’s preacher-in-chief, promoting a gospel of Mammon, Americanism and militarism that reflects the very direct interests of the powerful financial figures who have turned the former drug addict into a multi-millionaire.

The word “Obama” did not cross Beck’s lips. Instead, he advanced the themes of “Faith, Hope and Charity.”

Perhaps the most outrageous pretense of the event was that it somehow had “reclaimed the civil rights movement,” by presenting the idiotic and reactionary rant of Beck on the same site and 47 years to the day that Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his “I have a dream” speech.

Beck and his fellow right-winger, former Alaska governor and Republican candidate for vice president in 2008, Sarah Palin, repeatedly invoked King’s legacy, while giant jumbotrons carried King’s image and snippets of the words he spoke in August 1963.

In the months leading up to the event, Beck used his radio and television broadcasts to suggest that the American right was somehow the legitimate heir of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, insinuating that it had arisen to counter similar adversities and oppression. One might suspect from such cynical rhetoric that supporters of the “Tea Party” and Beck’s viewers were being lynched, beaten, jailed and assassinated in various parts of the country.

The association of King with a rally glorifying militarism was perhaps the greatest obscenity. “What is it that America still believes in?” Beck asked in his opening remarks. “Our military.”

A year before his assassination, King denounced the Vietnam war, accusing Washington, in terms that are fully applicable to the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, of fighting “on the side of the wealthy and the secure while we create hell for the poor.”

While Beck hailed King and the civil rights movement Saturday as “people of faith” who merely believed that “everybody deserves a shot,” earlier this year he used one of his broadcasts to denounce King as a “radical socialist” and question why a national holiday had been proclaimed in his honor.

The day after the rally, Beck dismissed the demands raised at the 1963 march on Washington for jobs and decent housing as “racial politics” and said that the civil rights movement’s economic agenda was “a part of it that I don’t agree with.”

In crafting his speech, Beck and his handlers appeared to be guided by the famous axiom of P.T. Barnum that “nobody ever went broke underestimating the intelligence

of the American people.” It was a rambling invocation of God and country that included a full-length recitation of the Gettysburg Address, selective quotations from the Declaration of Independence, the invocation of every hackneyed cliché of Americana and liberal doses of both the New and Old Testaments.

Palin had even less to say, presenting herself as the mother of a “combat vet” and leading the crowd in the chant of “USA, USA, USA.”

While right-wing populist movements in America have a long history of wrapping themselves in the flag and the bible, they have also tended to advance definite economic and social policies that at least invoked the interests of the common man. Those influenced by the Christian revivalism of the 1870s and 1880s railed against monopolies and Mammon. Father Charles Coughlin in the 1930s denounced capitalism and mixed a poisonous brew of anti-Semitism with calls for inflationary monetary policies, a guaranteed annual wage and limited nationalizations.

The fascist huckster Gerald L. K. Smith would have no doubt appreciated Beck’s performance. “Religion and patriotism, keep going on that,” he confided in the 1930s. “It’s the only way you can get them really ‘het up.’” But he put forward demands that included limits on the income of the rich and universal old-age pensions.

In his speech Saturday, Beck offered precisely nothing in terms of proposals. His most concrete advice was to tell people they should pray on their knees and leave their doors open so that their children can see them doing so.

When he first announced his planned Washington rally, Beck had promised he would use it to present “The Plan,” which he promised would provide “specific policies, principles and, most importantly, action steps” to found “a new national movement to restore our great country.”

During his speech Saturday, he attributed his decision to do no such thing to what he described as a conversation he had had with God. One could be forgiven for believing that rather than the divine word of God, Beck was responding to instructions from his more temporal lords: Murdoch, the right-wing Scaife family foundation and the other billionaires and corporate entities that bankroll FreedomWorks and the so-called Tea Party movement that played the principal role in organizing the rally.

Instead of policies, principles and action steps, Beck offered reactionary bromides, telling the crowd, “The poorest among us are still some of the richest in the world... and yet we don’t recognize it.”

“We all must realize how nice we have it here, in spite

of our problems,” added Beck, who resides in a \$4.5 million dollar mansion in New Canaan, Connecticut. He counseled the crowd that “charity begins at home first.”

With 26 million American workers on the unemployment lines or unable to find a full-time job, millions more having lost their homes, and working people faced with relentless wage-cutting while Wall Street reels in record profits, such complacent clap trap will find no support from the vast majority of the population. If Beck were to advance an explicit political program based on the interests and aims of the financial aristocracy for whom he speaks, the hostility and opposition would be overwhelming.

Behind Beck’s fuzzy rhetoric about individualism and patriotism there does lie a program which these wealthy, right-wing layers support. It includes the systematic dismantling of all forms of social spending that constitute a drain on profit, including Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid. It envisions the reduction of wages in the US to a level that would be competitive with those in China. And it seeks the even greater strengthening of the police-military powers of the government to suppress all opposition from the working class at home and to escalate militarist interventions abroad.

Beck and his backers wisely chose to keep this “plan” under wraps. They recognize that the self-described clown is hardly the man, and the amorphous and politically confused layers attracted to the Tea Party are not the movement to implement such a fascistic program.

They lack a mass base for such politics in the US today. The real danger arises from the political subordination of the working class to the Democratic Party and the ruling elite that it serves. Those so-called liberals and “lefts” who promote illusions in Obama bear responsibility for this subordination, which impedes the emergence of a genuine alternative to the policies pursued by both big business parties and allows demagogues on the right to exploit the crisis for their own purposes.



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