

# “The steel in our ship of state”: Obama cowers before the military

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2 September 2010

With its extraordinary reference to troops as “the steel in our ship of state,” the speech delivered by President Barack Obama from the Oval Office Tuesday night reflected an administration that cowers before the ever-expanding power of the US military.

The address, with its glorification of a war of aggression that has claimed the lives of over a million Iraqis and its gratuitous praise for the author of this war crime, will unquestionably go down as one of the most cowardly and duplicitous moments in Obama’s political career.

Perhaps the President’s most telling remark, however, was the phrase with which he ended his 19-minute address:

“Our troops are the steel in our ship of state,” he said. “And though our nation may be traveling through rough waters, they give us confidence that our course is true, and that beyond the pre-dawn darkness, better days lie ahead.”

Like every other attempt at a rhetorical flourish in this leaden speech, the concluding phrase rang false, largely because it represented an attempt to evoke American traditions that are totally at odds with the policies pursued by the White House. The metaphor employed by Obama’s speechwriters featured most prominently in the 1850 poem of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, “The Building of the Ship.”

*Thou, too, sail on, O Ship of State!  
Sail on, O Union, strong and great!  
Humanity with all its fears,  
With all the hopes of future years,  
Is hanging breathless on thy fate!  
We know what Master laid thy keel,  
What Workmen wrought thy ribs of steel...*

The intention of Longfellow, America’s most

prominent 19th century poet and an abolitionist, was clear. He was invoking support for the Union under conditions where slavery was already threatening to tear it apart. The steel of his ship of state consisted of the founding principles of the American republic, forged in the American Revolution, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

For Obama, the “steel” lies not in democratic principles, but in armed might.

The founders of the American republic warned repeatedly against the threat posed by a “standing army,” referred to by Thomas Jefferson in 1789 as one of those “instruments so dangerous to the rights of the nation and which place them so totally at the mercy of their governors.”

Alexander Hamilton wrote in the *Federalist Papers*: “The continual necessity for his services enhances the importance of the soldier, and proportionally degrades the condition of the citizen. The military state becomes elevated above the civil. The inhabitants of territories often the theatre of war are unavoidably subjected to frequent infringements on their rights, which serve to weaken their sense of those rights; and by degrees, the people are brought to consider the soldiery not only as their protectors, but as their superiors.”

At least several state constitutions still carry clauses insisting that “the military shall be subordinate to the civil power” and that “no standing army shall be maintained by this State in time of peace.” The legal principle of Posse Comitatus formally bars the use of the military in enforcing domestic laws.

The threat perceived over two centuries ago has in recent years grown exponentially. The “military-industrial complex” that President Dwight D. Eisenhower described as a threat to democracy half a century ago is today far more massive than the former

World War II commander could have ever imagined.

Consuming approximately \$1 trillion annually in military spending, its leading generals act as imperial pro-consuls, wielding far more power than any civilian official in entire regions of the world. Moreover, it is augmented by a huge array of private contractors providing everything from multi-billion-dollar weapons systems to fuel and supplies and armed mercenaries.

Today's "standing army," having existed in its present form for barely 35 years, is an unprecedented phenomenon in American society and the realization of the worst nightmares of the founders of the American republic.

In the wake of the US debacle in Vietnam, the military was rebuilt as a "voluntary" force of professional soldiers. Aided and abetted by the politicians and the media, the military has virtually turned itself into a separate caste. Generals and soldiers alike are referred to as "warriors," a title that would have been unthinkable in previous periods.

The generation that served in the Second World War viewed the military, and its top brass in particular, with suspicion if not outright contempt. These sentiments were reflected in sarcastic phrases such as SNAFU and Whiskey Tango Foxtrot.

Under conditions in which the bulk of its ranks were temporarily drawn from the civilian population, the military was compelled to take into account the social and political pressures from society at large. This is no longer the case. In its very makeup, the military has emerged ever more openly as an independent force.

The illegal war of aggression in Iraq and the "global war on terrorism," both of which Obama sought to justify and rehabilitate in his speech Tuesday, have fed this process immensely. The military has been used to impose colonial-style regimes over entire peoples, while being empowered to carry out extra-judicial executions, torture, and drum-head trials of civilians, such as those now taking place at Guantánamo.

With his remark on the steel in the ship of state, Obama was, in effect, acknowledging the reality that the military has become the dominant force within the US government.

But what is one to make of the rest of his statement? It is the troops that "give us confidence that our course is true." This bestows upon the military the role of arbiter in determining the correctness of US policy, a

power that the Obama administration has indeed ceded to the generals.

Having won election based on his posturing as an opponent of war, Obama has from the outset of his presidency groveled before the military, allowing it to dictate his policy in both Iraq and Afghanistan, while appointing an unprecedented number of four-star generals to his cabinet.

Anti-democratic and militarist tendencies intensified under Bush, but they were present before his administration and have continued to grow uninterrupted under Obama. They represent not merely the policy of one or another politician, but rather express the deep-rooted crisis of American capitalism, which has become increasingly dependent upon militarism as a means of offsetting its decline as a global economic power.

At the same time, the buildup of military power and the elevation of national security have more to do with what is happening within the United States than with events abroad. These processes have unfolded in the context of unprecedented levels of social inequality in America. The gap between wealth and poverty is wider now than even before the Great Depression, and this social polarization has driven a deep-going crisis of democratic forms of rule.

With unemployment at its highest level since the 1930s and wages and social conditions under relentless assault, Obama and the financial aristocracy that he represents have good reason to see the military as the steel within their ship of state. In the end, they know they can sustain a system that piles up immense wealth for a tiny minority and growing poverty for working people in the US and around the world only by means of armed force. This is why President Obama feels obliged to continuously assure the military of his devotion.

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