Obama addresses UK parliament: A joint agenda for austerity and war

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Barack Obama's three-day state visit to the UK was more than an extravagant PR opportunity for an increasingly discredited US president and Britain's deeply unpopular Conservative-Liberal Democrat government.

It underscored the unity of Washington and London in attempting to push through a social counter-revolution in their own countries, while insisting on similar "medicine" for the peoples of the world and threatening punitive action against any potential challengers.

With the lavish state banquet, 410-gun salute and the rare invitation for Obama to address both houses of parliament, Britain's ruling elite made clear how critical the "special relationship" is in enabling it to punch above its weight globally—especially as the UK teeters on the brink of another, even worse, recession.

But more striking were the lengths to which Obama went in reciprocation—praising the "English who first spelled out the rights and liberties of man" and the "rule of law", making pointed references to war-time Prime Minister Winston Churchill and saluting "Queen Elizabeth's lifetime of extraordinary service to her nation and to the world."

Shown a letter by George III expressing alarm at the loss of the American colonies, Obama told the queen that it "was only a temporary blip in the relationship." Similar jokes followed—"a small scrape about tea and taxes", otherwise, it had been "smooth sailing".

This was not merely a special relationship but, in the words of the joint statement in the *Times* by Obama and Prime Minister David Cameron to coincide with the visit, "an essential relationship—for us and for the world".

The "key to our relationship", it explained, is that "it advances our common interests and shared values. It is a perfect alignment of what we both need and what we both believe. And the reason it remains strong is because it delivers time and again."

In his speech to MPs in Westminster Hall, Obama stressed, "[T]ogether, we have met great challenges": two world wars, the Cold War and collapse of the Stalinist states in the early 1990s.

Then there was the first decade of the 21st "began with war and ended in recession," he said. "But as we enter this new chapter in our shared history, profound challenges stretch before us."

Just what are the "profound" (not merely "great") challenges Obama is referring to?

Obama and Cameron are the political representatives of the two countries most synonymous with the financial parasitism, unbridled speculation and outright theft that brought the world economy to the brink of collapse in 2008.

Obama told the assembled MPs that the "global economy… is now stable and recovering."

That he can make such a claim underscores that for Obama, and his audience, the only economic indices that matter are the profits of the super-rich.

While the balance sheets of the financial oligarchy have been buoyed by the multi-billion dollar bailouts taken from public funds, Washington and London are at the forefront of efforts to use the economic crisis to refashion social relations at home and abroad still further in the interests of the financial oligarchy.

Accordingly, while stating blandly, "We've also been reminded in the last few years that markets can sometimes fail", Obama claimed there was "no greater generator of wealth and innovation than a system of free enterprise."

The free market defined America and Britain, he declared.

The British coalition government is imposing the most severe spending cuts since the 1920s. Even so, it is widely acknowledged that this is just the start. Only at the weekend, Business Secretary Vince Cable told the *Guardian* that the economic situation "is painful… The political class as a whole is not preparing the public for how massive the problem is."

The Democratic administration in Washington has unveiled austerity measures of $4 trillion in cuts over the next 12 years. Demands are being made for even greater inroads, however, given that the US national debt now exceeds $14 trillion.

So when Obama claimed that the US and the UK stood

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committed “to basic security for our citizens”, he spoke as the head of a government attacking Medicare and Medicaid to an audience that is intent on dismantling the National Health Service.

The social explosion that will inevitably result from this unprecedented assault on the gains and conditions of the working class is one of the challenges faced by the elites in Washington and London.

They also face a mounting threat from their international competitors.

A central feature of contemporary politics is the extraordinary historic and economic decline of US imperialism. This is the particular source of the acute tensions between Washington (and, by the same token, London also) and its major rivals.

Referring to the rising economic power of China and India, Obama said it had “become fashionable in some quarters to question whether the rise of these nations will accompany the decline of American and European influence around the world. Perhaps, the argument goes, these nations represent the future, and the time for our leadership has passed.”

This he categorically rejected. “The time for our leadership is now,” he said, adding that “even as more nations take on the responsibilities of global leadership, our alliance will remain indispensable” to shaping the century.

This ties in to another challenge; the increasing resort to militarism.

The US president made great play of troop reductions in Iraq and Afghanistan, while praising the mass movements in Egypt, Tunisia where “people are mobilizing to free themselves from the grip of an iron fist.”

In their joint statement, Obama and Cameron claimed, “[P]rogress in the region will be uneven and it is not our place to dictate the pace and scope of this change.”

The lie was given to this by the fact that the evening before the statement appeared, NATO had conducted its most intensive bombing campaign against Tripoli yet with the aim of ousting Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi.

At a press conference, both men denied there was any relationship between their attack on Libya and the wars undertaken by George Bush and Tony Blair in Afghanistan and Iraq. Cameron claimed they had “ruled out occupying forces and invading armies,” while Obama said military power was being used “in a strategically careful way.”

In truth, there is a direct line of continuity between the pre-emptive wars conducted by Bush and Blair, and the equally criminal military venture now being waged by Obama and Cameron. Once again, the “common interests” and “shared values” are control over oil resources, as well as establishing a bulwark in a country of strategic geo-political significance.

Cameron told the assembled press that the US and the UK would “be turning up the heat in Libya,” adding that “all options” were under consideration. These include the despatch of UK attack helicopters for use in Libya, as well as reports that the two leaders discussed arming the so-called “rebel” forces via Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.

Obama said there would be “no let-up” in the pressure applied to Gaddafi. “We are bringing to bear an array of air power that has made a huge difference”, he said, spelling out that this “is going to be a slow, steady process in which we’re able to wear down the regime forces.”

Obama acknowledged that London and Washington “must overcome suspicion and mistrust among many in the Middle East and North Africa” and “charges of hypocrisy.”

These charges relate to the US and British silence—de facto support—for the repression of protestors in Bahrain. Only last Friday, Cameron welcomed the crown prince of Bahrain, Sheikh Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa, on an official visit to Downing Street.

They also include the recent agreement of Washington and London to expand the use of their special forces into Yemen, threats of retaliatory action against Syria and Obama’s reference in London to plans for further action against Iran. As usual, there was no mention of Saudi Arabia.

As for his earlier public statement in support of a “peace settlement” between Israel and Palestine, angrily denounced by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on a tour of Washington, Obama warned the Palestinians against trying to get a supportive resolution through the United Nations.

Significantly, the statement in the *Times* had pledged, “We are reluctant to use force, but when our interests and values come together we know that we have a responsibility to act.”

Even as troop reductions in Afghanistan are under consideration, it is with a view to their use elsewhere.

It is in this context that the two leaders announced the creation of a US-British Joint Strategy Board to “develop a coordinated approach to long term challenges in the global economic and security environment.”

To be co-chaired by the US National Security Staff and the UK National Security Secretariat, it will help “develop new strategies on defence, international aid and foreign policy in areas where they do not already co-operate—away from Afghanistan or Libya, for example, and looking more towards future threats,” the *Independent* reported.

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