

Clinton at the Democratic convention: Rhetoric vs. reality

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On Wednesday, former President Bill Clinton gave the main address at the Democratic National Convention, in which he sought to elaborate a coherent narrative for the campaign to reelect Barack Obama. Clinton sought to marshal facts and make a cohesive argument, a rarity in contemporary American politics. Nevertheless, his speech, like the Obama reelection campaign as a whole, was an exercise in fantasy and myth-making.

According to the story as told by Clinton, the country under Obama's stewardship is much better off than it was four years ago. Obama, he declared, "stopped the slide into depression and put us on the long road to recovery." He waged a one-man campaign to "build a new American Dream economy" based on "shared prosperity, where the middle class is growing and poverty's declining."

Reelecting Obama, Clinton said, is the only way to prevent a Republican agenda of tax cuts for the rich and the dismantling of government health care programs for the poor and the elderly.

Obama's actual record has been one of complete subordination to the dictates of the corporate and financial elite. There were hints of this reality in Clinton's speech, since, as always in the rhetoric of the Democratic Party, phrases presented for public consumption are interwoven with reassurances to the ruling class.

Thus, Clinton began by praising Obama's commitment to "constructive cooperation" with the Republicans. The former president made no attempt to square this supposed virtue with his attempts to present the two parties as sharply opposed to one another. He noted that after his election, Obama appointed Republicans to the cabinet posts of secretary of defense and transportation, and named another Republican to head the Army.

These appointments were meant to assure the ruling class that the new Obama administration would continue the basic thrust and maintain the same rightward trajectory on both domestic and foreign policy of the Bush administration, despite the massive popular repudiation of Bush and the Republicans by the electorate.

The praise of bipartisanship was particularly noteworthy coming from the first and only elected president to be impeached. As Clinton is well aware, he was targeted in a relentless and ruthless campaign by the Republican right to unseat him by means of one manufactured scandal after another. At the time, Clinton worked to cover up the significance and aims of the anti-democratic conspiracy, prefiguring the role of the Democratic Party in the theft of the 2000 election.

From the first day of his administration, Obama sought to

politically rehabilitate the Republican Party and either legitimize or obscure its extreme right-wing agenda. He did so because, in the end, this agenda is shared by both parties, whatever their tactical differences.

With regard to foreign policy, Clinton, like most speakers at the convention, had almost nothing to say, except to praise Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton for demonstrating that "democracy does not have to be a blood sport" but can be "an honorable enterprise that advances the public interest."

This was said of a president who, according to published reports, holds weekly meetings to personally select individuals, including US citizens, to be targeted for assassination. Secretary of State Clinton did not attend the convention, as she is currently in Asia pursuing Washington's unending efforts to diplomatically isolate and militarily surround China.

The Obama White House has, moreover, targeted one head of government after another for overthrow or assassination, with Syria's Bashar al-Assad currently in Washington's cross-hairs.

Though Clinton did not mention it, part of Obama's efforts to maintain continuity with the Bush administration was his selection of Timothy Geithner as treasury secretary. Geithner, as president of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, had worked closely with Bush's treasury secretary, Henry Paulson, in overseeing the bank bailout.

Clinton himself had presided over an administration that was slavishly devoted to Wall Street. The manic speculation and soaring stock market of the 1990s were made possible by financial deregulation (including a ban on the regulation of derivatives and the repeal of the 1930s Glass-Steagall Act, moves that were promoted by Clinton's top economic adviser, Robert Rubin, a former top executive at Goldman Sachs).

The orgy of speculation on Wall Street under Clinton (dubbed "irrational exuberance" by then-Fed Chairman Alan Greenspan) led to the bursting of the dot.com bubble in 2000 and the financial crash of 2008, which set off the greatest world economic crisis since the Great Depression.

Clinton uttered the word "bank" only to claim that "banks are beginning to lend"—a patent falsehood. The handout of unlimited resources by Bush and Obama to Wall Street came with no requirement that the banks use this money to make credit available to individuals and small businesses. Instead, the funds were reinvested in the stock and bond markets and used to speculate in commodities and derivatives, or handed out to executives and big

investors.

Clinton reserved particular praise for the restructuring of the auto companies. He claimed that there were 250,000 more auto industry jobs now than when GM and Chrysler were forced into bankruptcy in 2009. In fact, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, only 140,000 motor vehicle and parts jobs have been added since the low point three years ago. In any event, this is only a fraction of the jobs lost since Obama took office.

Neither Clinton nor any other Democrat who came to the stage on Wednesday—including United Auto Workers President Bob King—mentioned that many of the jobs that have been added over the past three years have been at poverty-level wages. Obama's managed bankruptcy of General Motors and Chrysler was premised on a 50 percent wage cut for new-hires and sharp cuts in benefits for all workers and retirees. This attack has since been carried through the economy as a whole, under the Obama administration's banner of "insourcing"—i.e., restoring a portion of the lost jobs by lowering the wages of American workers to those that prevail in the cheap labor havens of Asia and Latin America.

Nor did Clinton take note of the fact that 23 million Americans are unemployed or underemployed, and that long-term unemployment remains at record highs.

According to the former president, Obama has taken great strides to address the jobs crisis, but has been stymied by Republicans. In fact, from the beginning Obama rejected out of hand any government program to put people to work, insisting that job creation be subordinated to the profit interests of the corporations. The "jobs" proposals he has offered consist almost entirely of tax breaks for businesses. Many of the jobs that have been added are low-wage service jobs, while higher paid jobs have been wiped out, according to a recent report from the National Employment Law Project.

The reality is that under Obama, as numerous studies have shown, poverty, hunger and homelessness have worsened and wages have fallen, while the rich and the super-rich have added to their fortunes, leading to a further growth of social inequality. The devastating decline in the economic well-being of the American people was summed up in a bulletin released by the Federal Reserve last June, which reported that the median net worth of US families fell by nearly 40 percent from 2007 to 2010.

Clinton focused particular attention on welfare and health care, defending Obama against the Republicans. In both cases, however, Clinton touted policies that underscore the anti-working class character of the Obama administration.

"Welfare reform" was a key policy initiative of the Clinton administration. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996 required that individuals on welfare find work after a certain period of time or face termination of benefits. It was a major step in the dismantling of the social safety net in the United States and a significant factor in the huge growth of poverty since the 2008 crisis.

Clinton defended Obama against Republican charges that he wants "to weaken the work requirements in the welfare reform bill I signed." In fact, Clinton explained, Obama was merely responding to Republican governors who wanted certain waivers "to try new ways to put people on welfare back to work"—i.e.,

force them into poverty jobs. "The requirement [from Obama] was for more work, not less," Clinton declared.

On health care, Clinton responded to Republican attacks on "Obamacare," opposing any suggestion that it is "a government takeover." After noting certain regulations on insurance companies used by the administration to sell the reform to the American people, Clinton stressed that the outcome of the legislation would be that "insurance companies—not the government, the insurance companies—will have millions of new customers..."

The fundamental component of Obama's health care overhaul is the requirement that individuals purchase private insurance or face financial penalties. It will strengthen the domination of these companies over health care, while setting the course for the dismantling of government programs, including Medicare and Medicaid.

The main purpose of Obama's health care "reform" is to cut costs for corporations and businesses, a fact to which Clinton pointed when he touted a slowdown in the rate of increase in health care costs. Whatever their differences, the Democrats and Republicans share the basic aim of slashing health care costs by reducing care.

Capping off his discussion of domestic policy, Clinton praised Obama's efforts to address the deficit by offering "a reasonable plan of \$4 trillion in debt reduction over a decade" based on a 2.5 to 1 ratio of spending cuts to tax increases.

Clinton's remarks were hailed by "left" factions of the Democratic Party. The *Nation's* John Nichols declared that Clinton "took a rock star turn" in making the case for the reelection of Obama. The speech was "a remarkable performance of a political underkind turned senior statesmen," Nichols wrote.

These comments merely underscore the anti-working class character of the entire political establishment, from the festival of reaction at the Republican National Convention last week to the cynicism and hypocrisy on display at the Democratic National Convention this week.



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