

Inaugural demagogoy

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In his inaugural address Monday, President Barack Obama reached new heights of demagogoy, rhetorically invoking principles of democracy and equality that bear no relation either to the conditions that exist in America or the policies he has pursued and will continue to pursue in his second term.

Obama began by invoking the Declaration of Independence, which proclaimed that “all men are created equal.” He returned several times to this theme, declaring that the country “cannot succeed when a shrinking few do very well and a growing many barely make it.”

Upon hearing these words, one might be tempted to ask who was the occupant of the White House over the past four years, as corporate profits soared and Wall Street bankers enriched themselves.

And as for the ideals of democracy, these have been thoroughly repudiated by Obama and his predecessors, Republicans and Democrats alike, for more than three decades. The massive redistribution of wealth implemented since the early 1980s has produced, as intended, the greatest chasm between rich and poor in nearly a century. Obama accelerated this process in his first term, focusing his economic program on protecting and expanding the wealth of the financial elite and making the working class pay for the economic crisis that erupted in 2008.

In his speech, Obama portrayed his austerity agenda for the next four years as a defense of basic social programs such as Social Security and Medicare. “We reject the belief that America must choose between caring for the generation that built this country and investing in the generation that will build its future,” he declared.

But that is precisely what he began to do in his first term, slashing hundreds of billions from Medicare as part of his health care overhaul and offering a “grand bargain” to the Republicans that included an increase in

the Medicare eligibility age and severe cuts in Social Security benefits. Even in this inaugural address, Obama—in a brazen display of doubletalk—reaffirmed the need to do away with “outworn programs” and proclaimed, “We must take the hard choices to reduce the cost of health care and the size of our deficit.”

At times his deceit assumed delusional proportions, as when he declared: “A decade of war is now ending. An economic recovery has begun.” Both claims are flat-out lies.

Even as Obama spoke, his advisers were locked in discussions over an expansion of US military support for the French invasion of Mali, itself an offshoot of the US-led war in Libya. And his administration continues its central role in the sectarian civil war in Syria and its preparations for military attacks on Iran.

As for economic recovery, to the extent there can be any talk of one, it is reserved for the wealthiest layers of the population. The broad mass of working people face continuing mass unemployment, declining wages, and spreading poverty, hunger and homelessness.

The reality of the policies of austerity and war that Obama will pursue in his second term was spelled out immediately after his speech, when he officially notified Congress of his nominees for CIA director and treasury secretary. For the former post he chose John Brennan, a defender of torture in the Bush administration and head of Obama’s drone assassination program. For the latter position he named Jacob Lew, a former Wall Street banker who was Obama’s point man in budget-cutting discussions with the Republicans.

Of course, the practice of bourgeois politics demands demagogoy. The desperate condition of capitalist society must be hidden, or at least fumigated with perfumed phrases. But reality cannot be entirely suppressed, and it is reflected, if only indirectly, in the rhetorical materials with which the president constructed his

inaugural address.

This speech, one must assume, was the product of exhaustive discussion, with every word selected for its political effect. The decision to employ left-sounding rhetoric certainly indicates awareness at the highest levels of the state that public frustration over economic and social conditions is approaching the boiling point.

At the same time, the absence of any reference to 9/11, the “war on terror,” or even the killing of Osama bin Laden—Obama’s favorite applause line—suggests a recognition that the global military operations lack broad support.

There was an obvious attempt to imbue the speech with a Lincolnesque aura, seen in the symbolism of Obama’s use of Lincoln’s bible for his oath of office and his many references to speeches by the 16th president, including the Gettysburg Address, the Cooper Union speech and Lincoln’s second inaugural. But the comparison between the latter speech in 1865 and Obama’s in 2013 only underscores the opposition between the two.

Lincoln used his second inaugural speech to identify the social and economic source of the tragedy that had befallen the American people. Without equivocation or obfuscation, he indicted the slave system as the cause of the Civil War. Lincoln’s speech identified and denounced the class oppression that was responsible for so much suffering. The power of Lincoln’s magnificent speech—a masterpiece of world literature—lay in its fusion of unflinching political honesty and democratic idealism.

Lincoln spoke as the leader of a rising democratic and progressive capitalist society. One hundred and fifty years later, Obama speaks as the representative of an economically decadent and politically reactionary social system. He does not dare say a single word that might attribute to capitalism any responsibility for widespread social misery.

Unable to identify capitalism as the cause of poverty and war, Obama, of course, cannot identify the dominant form of oppression in modern society—that is, the exploitation of the working class.

Both the ceremony and the speech reflected the completion of a process by which the political preoccupations of the privileged middle-class milieu that has long passed for the “left” in America—in particular, the politics of race, gender and sexual

orientation—have been integrated into the official ideology of the ruling class. Ignoring the *class* divisions in society, Obama’s version of equality was couched almost exclusively in terms of identity politics. There is, in this fraudulent narrative, no exploited working class.

Thus, in accordance with the rules of contemporary capitalist politics, the speech contained not a single reference to class. Nor was there a reference to unemployment.

In Obama’s litany of social struggles that shaped America, he referred to Selma and Stonewall. But there was no reference to the Haymarket martyrs, the IWW, the Flint sit-down strike, the Memorial Day massacre, or any of the great struggles of the working class that wrested, at the cost of workers’ blood, concessions from big business, transforming conditions of life for the great mass of the American people.

The bankrupt conception behind Obama’s speech, that explosive social contradictions can somehow be bridged by means of demagogic evocations of democracy and equality, is itself an expression of the deepening political crisis of American capitalism. It will not take long for the chasm between words and deeds to become all too clear.



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