

Obama warns against “cynicism” at Ohio State commencement address

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At a commencement address on Sunday at Ohio State University, President Barack Obama counseled students not to be “cynical” about government and politics.

There was an almost comically absurd element to Obama’s remarks, delivered with his characteristic demagoguery and attempted gestures at profundity. In his first four years in office, along with the first months of his second term, Obama proceeded to systematically repudiate every campaign pledge and to deflate every illusion that, with the assistance of a highly coordinated marketing campaign, led millions of people, including a large number of young people, to vote for him in 2008.

The Obama administration handed trillions of dollars to the banks; has overseen a massive attack on public education; is leading the campaign to slash Social Security and Medicare, the core federal retirement and health care programs; expanded the war in Afghanistan, led a war against Libya, and is preparing a new war in Syria; and has asserted the right to kill anyone, anywhere, including US citizens, without due process.

After this record of service to the corporate elite, he declares: “When we turn away and get discouraged and cynical... we grant our silent consent to someone who will gladly claim it. That’s how we end up with lobbyists who set the agenda; and policies detached from what middle class families face every day; the well-connected who publicly demand that Washington stay out of their business—and then whisper in government’s ear for special treatment that you don’t get.”

The references to the “whispers” of the wealthy and well-connected is particularly rich, coming only a week after Obama nominated Penny Pritzker for commerce secretary. The selection of Pritzker—a longtime Obama confidant, billionaire heiress and owner of a private equity company—only underscores the fact that the administration is a government of, by and for the financial aristocracy. She will be the wealthiest person ever to

serve in a presidential cabinet.

Previous to his appointment of Pritzker, Obama appointed Mary Jo White to head the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), one of the main financial regulators. White made millions of dollars as an attorney for banks responsible for the financial crisis, including Bank of America and JPMorgan Chase, whose CEO, Jamie Dimon, called White the “perfect choice” to head the SEC.

Practically every cabinet appointee of Obama’s has close personal connections to the ruling class, many having come directly from corporate boardrooms. Under Obama’s watch not a single executive at a major financial firm has been criminally tried, much less sent to jail, for their role in the financial crisis.

As a whole, Obama’s speech was characterized by a complete separation from the actual conditions facing the graduates he spoke to, who confront joblessness, falling wages, and a lifetime in debt. “You have every reason to believe that your future is bright,” he told his audience. “You’re graduating into an economy and a job market that is steadily healing.”

He added later, “The trajectory of this great nation should give you hope.” Really? This is under conditions in which over 11 percent of college graduates are unemployed a year after getting out of school, and another 16.1 percent simply drop out of the labor force, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Most of those who do find a job are paid barely enough to get by, let alone pay off student loans. Wages for young adults are falling faster than any other part of the population, and are down by 6 percent in the past four years.

Most of the students that Obama addressed Sunday will be so burdened with debt that they will delay or have to completely put off starting a family or buying a home.

It is not surprising that Obama should neglect to dwell on this disastrous situation, because his administration

bears responsibility for it. In the government-sponsored restructuring of the auto industry, the White House insisted that the wages of new-hires be slashed in half, setting the stage for vast reduction of wages throughout the economy.

Obama sought to paint opposition to the government's violation of democratic rights as right-wing hysterics. "Unfortunately, you've grown up hearing voices that incessantly warn of government as nothing more than some separate, sinister entity," Obama said. "They'll warn that tyranny is always lurking just around the corner. You should reject these voices."

This comes from a president who has personally overseen the illegal assassination of thousands of people, including at least three American citizens, in weekly "Terror Tuesday" meetings. The assertions of executive power have been systematically expanded, going beyond those claimed even by the Bush administration. The specter of a police state—the response of the ruling class to growing social opposition—is in fact lurking around the corner.

The moribund state of American politics, of which the Obama administration is a principal expression, is, according to the president, the fault of the American people. "Democracy doesn't function without your active participation," he admonished. If politicians "don't represent you the way you want... you've got to let them know that's not okay. And if they let you down, there's a built-in day in November where you can really let them know that's not okay."

Such limp efforts to encourage illusions in the viability of the "democratic process" in the United States will not go very far. The experience of the past four years has not passed in vain. Millions of people, including many of those in the audience at Ohio State, are drawing the quite justified, if "cynical," conclusion that the entire political and economic system is rotten to the core.



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