

Obama at the Lincoln Memorial

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President Barack Obama's attempt to drape his administration in the mantle of Martin Luther King, Jr., the civil rights movement, and the 1963 March on Washington is a grotesque falsification of history.

On Wednesday, Obama delivered remarks at the Lincoln Memorial as part of an official celebration of King's "I Have a Dream" speech, which was delivered fifty years ago from the same spot to a crowd estimated at 250,000.

Yesterday's gathering in Washington recalls Tacitus's observation that in the Roman Empire's decline, "all things atrocious and shameless flock from all parts to Rome." Even as Obama, former presidents Carter and Clinton, and the assembled epigones of the civil rights movement spoke, US warships in the eastern Mediterranean were preparing to rain down bombs on yet another impoverished Arab nation.

The disgusting hypocrisy of Wednesday's gathering, epitomized in Obama's speech—indeed, in his very presence at the event—nearly defies description. King's power as an orator arose from his ability to articulate the social grievances of the oppressed. He and the organizers of the 1963 march, for all of their political limitations, spoke for a genuine mass movement that mobilized hundreds of thousands of workers and poor in the South and in the cities of the North. This movement was animated by ideals of democracy and equality.

Obama represents the opposite. He is a creature of the state. He speaks for the military-intelligence apparatus and Wall Street. This was reflected in the emptiness, insincerity and affectation of his speech, which consisted of a litany of clichés: "from every corner of our country," "the doors of opportunity," "reignite the embers of empathy," "the road will be long," etc. As usual, Obama evinced no regard for the intelligence of his audience.

He praised the veterans of the civil rights movement for "willingly [going] to jail to protest unjust laws, their cells swelling with the sound of freedom songs."

But the Obama administration is seeking the extradition and prosecution of Edward Snowden for exposing the

unconstitutional surveillance being carried out by the National Security Agency (NSA), persecuting Julian Assange for publishing revelations of US war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, and condemning Private Bradley Manning to spend the next 35 years of his life in prison in retribution for his fidelity to the principles proclaimed at the Nuremburg Tribunal after World War II—that soldiers have a duty to defy illegal orders and oppose war crimes committed by their superiors.

The very principle of civil disobedience that was central to the civil rights movement and praised by Obama on Wednesday is repudiated in practice by his administration, which insists, in the manner of all authoritarian regimes, that any violation of the law for whatever reason is tantamount to treason.

King, were he alive and holding the same positions he did 45 years ago, would doubtless be targeted by Obama alongside Snowden and Manning. In fact, King was hounded by the FBI.

He was considered a threat in part because he increasingly opposed American foreign policy, a fact judiciously skipped over by Obama. King called the US war in Vietnam "one of the most unjust wars that has ever been fought in the history of the world," and one that had "torn up the Geneva Accord" and "strengthened the military-industrial complex [and] the forces of reaction in our nation." He quite accurately called the US government "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world."

At one point in his speech Wednesday, Obama seemed to acknowledge the growth of social tensions in the US. "[W]orking Americans of all races have seen their wages and incomes stagnate," he said. "Even as corporate profits soar, even as the pay of a fortunate few explodes, inequality has steadily risen over the decades. Upward mobility has become harder. In too many communities across this country in cities and suburbs and rural hamlets, the shadow of poverty casts a pall over our youth, their lives a fortress of substandard schools and diminished prospects, inadequate health care and perennial violence."

Obama spoke as though these processes had nothing to do with himself or his own actions. But everyone knows his White House has overseen the transfer of trillions of taxpayer dollars to the financial industry, while spearheading the gutting of workers' wages and savage cuts in jobs and social services. And while he bailed out General Motors, Chrysler and the Wall Street banks, he has lined up behind financial hatchet man Kevyn Orr's efforts to use the bankruptcy court to slash Detroit workers' pensions, privatize and gut city services, and sell off the artistic treasures in the Detroit Institute of Arts.

What accounted for the social decline of the past 50 years outlined by Obama? In his remarks, the president blamed the people themselves.

"Legitimate grievances against police brutality tipped into excuse-making for criminal behavior," he declared. "[What] had once been a call for equality of opportunity, the chance for all Americans to work hard and get ahead," he continued, "was too often framed as a mere desire for government support...as if poverty was an excuse for not raising your child..."

What Obama dared not raise was the real source of the social crisis—the crisis and decline of American capitalism.

King in his final years moved toward a broader conception of social equality, launching his "Poor People's Campaign." As he did, he gravitated toward class questions and a critique of capitalism. Yet ultimately King and the civil rights movement found themselves in a blind alley. He could criticize capitalism, but he did not break from it. In a 1967 speech in which King criticized capitalism, he acknowledged having read Karl Marx but explicitly rejected socialism, saying that he favored "a higher synthesis." What King had in mind was not revolution, but the reform of capitalism.

The implications of this false perspective became increasingly clear after King's assassination, a tragic event rightly understood by workers and youth all over the world as the price he paid for his opposition to war and social oppression. Within a few years, the civil rights movement had lurched sharply to the right, embracing identity politics, affirmative action, and what Richard Nixon hailed as "black capitalism."

This was bound up with the response of the American ruling class to the turbulent, crisis-ridden 1960s, when the mounting contradictions of American and world capitalism began to violently undermine the foundations of the post-World War II economic boom. The

Democratic Party repudiated the social reform policies dating from Roosevelt's New Deal, masking its lurch to the right behind the promotion of racial and gender politics. The trade unions trailed behind, adamantly opposing a political break from the Democrats and an independent political movement of the working class.

The ruling class cultivated the development of a privileged layer of African Americans in the corporations, the military, academia, and, above all, the Democratic Party. A new generation of self-promoters such as Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton utilized the symbols of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, including the figure of Martin Luther King, Jr., to integrate themselves into the political establishment and, above all, enrich themselves. They were joined by a parade of corrupt African American politicians, from Coleman Young to Cory Booker, who administered the cities in behalf of the banks and corporations and oversaw the further impoverishment of African American workers and the working class as a whole.

Barrack Obama is the historical denouement of this process—an individual whose personal background has nothing to do with the bitter struggle for equality of African American workers, a politician who champions war, police state methods and the destruction of the living standards of workers of all races.

King's rejection of Marxism was linked to his support for the Democratic Party. While his demands for equality were sincere, equality could not then, and cannot now, be realized except through a struggle against the entire capitalist economic and political framework.



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