

Obama's legacy

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This evening, Barack Obama will deliver his fifth State of the Union address, an annual political tradition that over the years has become a hollow ritual, with little or no relationship between the president's words and the actual state of American society. This year will be no different.

In the days leading up to this year's address, administration officials have dampened expectations of significant initiatives. Instead, the speech will propose a series of minor measures aimed at shaping the "narrative" of the Obama presidency. According to a *New York Times* analysis over the weekend, Obama has "come to feel acutely the limits on his power," but sees the State of the Union address as "a critical opportunity to drive an agenda that may yet shape his legacy."

For the officials who occupy high-level positions within the state apparatus, separated by an immense social and political gulf from the realities confronting the majority of the population, Obama's "legacy" is crafted with a handful of phrases borrowed from the latest handbook on corporate marketing. However, history—and, more immediately, the general public—will judge the administration not on the basis of honeyed phrases, but by its actions.

Here are some of the major actions that will determine how this administration is seen historically:

*** It ordered the assassination of a US citizen without due process.**

The former constitutional law professor, whose initial job was with a CIA-linked corporation, is the first president in American history to openly boast of executing a US citizen, Anwar al-Awlaki, without judicial review. More than any other, his administration has sought to institutionalize and bureaucratize extra-judicial state killing, presiding over weekly meetings and the drawing up of "kill lists" to select targets for US drone missiles.

*** It vastly expanded the global police state spying apparatus.**

The revelations of Edward Snowden have exposed to the American and world population a spying apparatus

that operates without constraint, monitoring the communications of virtually every person on the planet.

*** It criminalized those who reveal government crimes.**

The administration's attitude to democratic rights is summed up in the fate of those who have exposed illegal state actions: Bradley Manning is in prison, Julian Assange remains trapped in the Ecuadorian embassy in Britain, and Edward Snowden has been forced into exile in Russia, facing death threats from US officials. Meanwhile, the administration has adamantly opposed the prosecution of government officials who ordered torture and carried out war crimes.

*** It waged war without limit.**

Obama continued the Bush administration's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and sent countless drone missiles to pulverize targets in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and other countries. He initiated a war in Libya to overthrow and murder Colonel Muammar al-Gaddafi in 2011. For two years, the Obama administration and its allies have financed and armed an Islamist-dominated opposition in Syria, igniting a civil war that has claimed tens of thousands of lives and turned millions of Syrians into refugees.

The administration has carried out a "pivot to Asia" to militarily encircle and economically and diplomatically undermine China. It has deliberately provoked regional tensions that threaten, 100 years after the eruption of World War I, to unleash a new global conflict.

*** It oversaw the greatest transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich in world history.**

The 2008 bailout of the banks and the "quantitative easing" programs begun under Bush have been vastly expanded under Obama. His administration has made available virtually unlimited resources for speculation by Wall Street. Over the past five years, the Federal Reserve has purchased more than \$1.5 trillion in essentially worthless mortgage-backed securities from financial institutions, and even more in US Treasuries. It has printed trillions of dollars and injected them into the

financial markets.

As a direct consequence, the stock market has soared. The Dow Jones Industrial Average has more than doubled since the first months of Obama's first term. The net wealth of the Forbes 400 richest Americans has risen accordingly, from \$1.27 trillion in 2009 to over \$2 trillion today, an increase of 60 percent, or more than \$700 billion. Ninety-five percent of all income gains between 2009 and 2012 went to the wealthiest one percent of the US population.

Corporate profits are higher than ever, while wage growth is at the lowest level since the end of the Second World War. In the aftermath of the Obama administration's 2009 restructuring of the auto industry, real wages for auto workers have fallen 10 percent and wages for manufacturing as a whole have fallen 2.4 percent. As a result of the collapse in wages, for the first time in history the majority of Americans receiving food stamps are working age.

*** It gave a free pass to Wall Street criminals.**

Not a single top banker has been held accountable for the crimes he committed and the disaster he inflicted on the world's population. The Obama administration has shielded Wall Street criminals from prosecution, as epitomized by the fate of JPMorgan Chase CEO Jamie Dimon, known to Washington insiders as Obama's "favorite banker." Despite repeated and well-documented illegal activities, Dimon not only walks free, but has been awarded a 74 percent pay raise for 2013.

*** It carried out a social counterrevolution, beginning with the decimation of health care for workers under Obamacare.**

Obama has overseen a relentless assault on every social program. As he delivers his speech tonight, 1.3 million jobless people face destitution, having been stripped of cash assistance by the decision of the White House and congressional Democrats to allow benefits for the long-term unemployed to expire. Yesterday, Democrats and Republicans reached a deal to cut \$8 billion from the food stamp program, following a \$5 billion cut imposed last November.

Obama boasts that his administration has lowered domestic discretionary spending to its lowest share of the US economy since the 1950s.

His principal domestic initiative, the health care overhaul, is a gigantic fraud, aimed not at expanding health care, but slashing it. His administration has sought to palm off a requirement that individuals purchase expensive, sub-standard health insurance from private

insurers as a significant social reform. Obamacare is the opening shot in an assault on the core social welfare programs dating from the 1930s and 1960s, Social Security and Medicare.

Obama's legacy is an indictment not only of one individual or one administration, but of the social and political system in which his policies are embedded. Obama is the willing tool of the massive corporations and the military-intelligence apparatus that run American society.

His administration has operated with the support of the trade unions and the liberal and "left" forces, wedded to identity politics, that championed his election in 2008 as a "transformative" event in American history. The State of the Union address will be aimed in large part at providing a phony "reformist" image around which these forces can coalesce to bolster support for the Democratic Party and block the emergence of an independent movement of the working class.

The political pundits believe that a staged event in Washington can somehow override views formed in the course of five years of bitter experience. But the mood in the country has changed markedly since Obama's election as the candidate of "hope" and "change." Among broader layers of the population, disillusionment is now deeply rooted. For them, Obama's speech will have little effect.

Perhaps Obama's most significant legacy will be that his administration demonstrated to millions that the ruling class has absolutely nothing to offer, and that it presides over an economic system, capitalism, that is historically bankrupt. The conclusion that follows, and is beginning to be drawn by wider sections of the working class, is that it must be overthrown.



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