

A reactionary Congress applauds the Pope

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The address by Pope Francis to a joint session of Congress Thursday morning was another milestone in the decay of democratic principles in the United States. Never has the separation of church and state, laid down in the US Constitution and Bill of Rights, been so flagrantly trampled upon. (See “The Pope in America”)

The event was carried out with all the pomp and circumstance of a presidential State of the Union address, complete with Supreme Court justices in their robes and Pentagon brass in their uniforms, as well as the Obama cabinet, with House Speaker John Boehner and Vice President Joseph Biden seated on the platform behind the Pope side by side.

The speaker was not an elected public official, however, but the head of a religious institution, who was given an hour to expound on his policy preferences, justified quite openly on the basis of the particular religious doctrines he espouses. His audience of congressmen, senators and other high officials interrupted him repeatedly with applause and several standing ovations.

What qualifies Pope Francis to pronounce on what makes a good political leader? He presides over the Roman Catholic Church, one of the most reactionary institutions on the planet, for centuries the foremost enemy of science, reason and social progress.

Prior to his elevation to the papacy in 2013, he had a long career in Argentina, where the Catholic hierarchy embraced the bloodstained military junta that slaughtered tens of thousands between 1976 and 1983. During that period, Jorge Bergoglio, now Pope Francis, was a leading clerical official in Buenos Aires.

The shameless and ignorant American media has transformed yesterday’s collaborator with a regime of torture and mass murder into today’s “People’s Pope”—the branding logo used by CNN for its nonstop coverage of the papal visit.

All five major networks broadcast the pope’s address

live, and will provide round-the-clock coverage of his subsequent appearances in New York City and Philadelphia. No effort will be spared to spread religious claptrap and stultify public opinion.

Besides his remarks at the White House Wednesday and the Capitol Thursday, Francis will address the UN General Assembly on Friday and spend two days in Philadelphia, where the main event is the World Meeting of Families, a biennial event sponsored by the Catholic Church whose goal is to uphold “family values” against such modern “evils” as divorce, cohabitation and gay marriage.

Despite the efforts by the America media and the Obama administration to present Francis as liberal and progressive—the *Nation* magazine even declared him, in its cover story, a “radical pope”—the views elaborated by the pontiff are, in keeping with the role of the Catholic Church as an institution, deeply reactionary.

Francis issued an encyclical during the summer declaring climate change a reality and a major threat both to human civilization as a whole, and to the poor in particular. But he placed responsibility for the environmental crisis, not on the capitalist system and its drive to maximize private profit, but on industrial technology as such. He demanded, as he did again in his speech to Congress, that technology be “curbed” to limit the production of greenhouse gases.

This is pure Malthusianism—an updating of the reactionary doctrine of Thomas Malthus, an economist (and Protestant cleric) of the early 19th century, who declared that economic development inevitably produced overpopulation, with catastrophic consequences. The solution for Malthus, like the Pope—and many so-called environmentalists—is to turn the clock back and condemn much of humanity to a primitive subsistence life.

It is true that in his speech to Congress, as well as in

other appearances in Washington, Francis voiced opinions on issues like the capital punishment and immigration that put him at odds not only with the Republican Party, but the Democrats as well. (Obama, for example, is a firm supporter of the death penalty).

This only provides another yardstick to measure how far to the right the official political spectrum in the United States has shifted. Even the representative of the Catholic Church finds himself on the “left,” at least some of the time, compared to official Washington.

But Francis was careful not to offend the US political establishment. He criticized capital punishment, but made no mention of the drone missile strikes—assassinations carried out by presidential order, without the sanction of any court or trial—which have become routine under the Obama administration.

He began his speech to Congress by praising the United States, in the most hackneyed jingoistic terms, as “The land of the free and the home of the brave.” How that squares with the reality of omnipresent NSA spying, police killings and a military establishment that regularly incinerates defenseless people with remotely controlled missiles and bombs, he did not bother to explain.

At most, as when he told Congress, “The people of this continent are not fearful of foreigners, because most of us were once foreigners,” Francis was warning the US ruling elite against going overboard in whipping up chauvinism and anti-immigrant sentiment, because this could discredit it internationally and make the conduct of US imperialist foreign policy more difficult.

In the course of his visit to the US capital, Francis made two calculated gestures to encourage the most reactionary forces in American society. The first was his public praise of the American bishops for their “courage” in handling the crisis over the exposure of rampant sexual abuse by priests, a declaration that outraged advocates for the victims.

The second was an unscheduled stop at the headquarters of the Little Sisters of the Poor. This was a clear political signal, because this religious order has been at the forefront of the reactionary campaign to deny contraceptive benefits under the Affordable Care Act, in the name of preserving the “religious liberty” of employers to impose their prejudices on their employees.



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