

Obama in Dallas: Platitudes and lies on police killings

Bill Van Auken
13 July 2016

The American people are long past any reasonable expectation of a US president delivering a speech offering an honest explanation of any aspect of the crisis of American capitalist society. That being said, the address delivered by President Barack Obama to a memorial service for the five Dallas policemen shot dead last Thursday during a protest against the police killings earlier in the week of black men in Louisiana and Minnesota plumbed new depths of dishonesty and demagoguery.

This was the 14th such address given by Obama in the wake of a mass killing—including Fort Hood, Texas (twice); Aurora, Colorado; Newtown, Connecticut; Charleston, South Carolina; San Bernardino, California; Orlando, Florida and several others in between.

On this occasion, he was assisted by former President George W. Bush, who gave warm-up remarks that were every bit as dishonest and reactionary as those of his successor.

These events have become so ritualized that the media cynically refers to Obama as the “consoler in chief.” The speech in Dallas, much like those that came before it, involved random quotes from the Bible—“The Scripture says...”—delivered in the poorly imitated style of a Baptist minister, and included thumbnail sketches of the victims and the insistence that the latest outburst of homicidal violence is not representative of “the America that I know.”

It was the black activist H. Rap Brown who famously stated that “violence is as American as cherry pie.” In terms of police killings, which take place at the rate more than three a day, this is today more true than ever. In all likelihood, someone somewhere in the US was the victim of a summary execution at the hands of the police in the period of time consumed by the Dallas memorial service.

The “America” that Obama knows is that of the military-intelligence apparatus, the political establishment and the financial oligarchy. It does not suffer from violence. It inflicts it, both at home and abroad.

To deliver an honest speech, Obama would have been obliged to dispense with the Bible quotes and tell those

gathered in the Dallas church something along the following lines:

“Asking me to speak here is like asking a murderer to deliver a sermon for his victim. The bloody events of the past week, from the police killings that have sparked nationwide protests to the gunning down of the cops here in Dallas, are either the direct product of, or blowback from, the policies pursued by my administration and that of my fellow war criminal sitting here on the stage beside me.”

No less ritualistic than Obama’s actual speech was the reaction of the corporate media, which declared it “eloquent” and “emotional.” Really? Obama himself was compelled to admit the inadequacy of his own words and intimated that he was getting sick of delivering the same vacuous remarks over and over again. What passed for emotion was the occasional forced change in the timbre of his voice as he spewed out his empty blather.

His explanation for the killing of the Dallas cops was the endlessly repeated, all-purpose invocation of “Evil.” The shooter was “demented” and “vicious,” and “there is evil in this world,” which is “why we need police departments.”

But Micah Johnson, the man who did the shooting, was, as in many less publicized cases, one of the more than 2 million Americans who have been sent into—and in most cases traumatized by—the neocolonial wars begun by Bush and continued by Obama in Afghanistan and Iraq. He was trained as a killer by the US military and, from the accounts of his family and friends, returned from Afghanistan a changed man, depressed, withdrawn and angry.

The endless eruption of violence and mass killing in the US is bound up with the unceasing violence unleashed by US imperialism abroad, the victims of which in the Middle East and Afghanistan number in the millions. Obama, who inveighed in Dallas against “senseless violence,” regularly selects victims for his administration’s drone assassination program, which has claimed the lives of thousands of innocent men, women and children. The notion that mass murder is a legitimate means of resolving problems originates at the pinnacle of the American state.

To the extent that there was a coherent message in Obama's address, it was an attempt to portray America as a society riven by racial tensions, and to cast police killings themselves as entirely a matter of racism—not just the racist and backward attitudes of police officers, but something embedded in the psyche of literally every American.

"If we're honest, perhaps we've heard prejudice in our own heads and felt it in our own hearts," he said. "None of us is entirely innocent. No institution is entirely immune, and that includes our police departments. We know this."

This is a libel against the American people. Attitudes on race have undergone immense changes over the past half-century. Police departments themselves are integrated, with many, like the one in Dallas, headed by black chiefs. Yet police killings continue and increase in number.

This is because, notwithstanding the racial injustices suffered by African-Americans at the hands of the police, the fundamental question is not race, but class. The one thing that virtually all of the victims of fatal police shootings in the US—more than half of whom are white—have in common is that they are all drawn from the working class and the poor. One can be certain that if the opposite were true, and police were regularly gunning down Wall Street bankers and hedge fund financiers, the problem would be corrected in short order.

In the final analysis, America's police represent the "thin blue line" protecting the interests of an immensely wealthy financial oligarchy from masses of working people living either in or on the brink of poverty. As social polarization and inequality have reached unprecedented levels, the police have been turned into a militarized force, officially deemed part of Washington's "total army."

The Obama administration has continued and expanded the transfer of weapons of war from the Pentagon to local police departments. Meanwhile, it has routinely rejected calls for killer cops to be prosecuted under federal civil rights laws and invariably opposed every attempt to bring police violence cases before the Supreme Court.

Touting the virtues of American democracy, Obama declared that "in this country, we don't have soldiers in the streets or militias setting the rules." The images of police in military-style gear confronting demonstrators from Ferguson, Missouri two years ago to Baton Rouge, Louisiana today tell a very different story. The distinction between cops and troops increasingly consists of little more than their insignia, and with increasing frequency local police are joined by soldiers to suppress protests.

Obama came perilously close to indicating the real roots of social tensions in the US when he declared that the police were being relied upon to do "too much," under conditions in which: "As a society, we choose to under-invest in decent

schools. We allow poverty to fester so that entire neighborhoods offer no prospect for gainful employment. We refuse to fund drug treatment and mental health programs."

He continued, "We tell them [the police] to keep those neighborhoods in check at all costs and do so without causing any political blowback or inconvenience; don't make a mistake that might disturb our own peace of mind."

The great lie, however, is the attempt to present this "we" as the American people as a whole. Another slander! American working people did not choose to deprive their children's schools of funding, wipe out decent jobs, slash food stamps and unemployment benefits, and gut vital social programs.

These are deliberate policies, supported by both major capitalist parties and implemented by the Obama administration with the aim of imposing the full burden of the capitalist crisis on the backs of the working class and transferring vast amounts of wealth from the bottom of the income ladder to the top.

He cynically told his audience, "In the end, it's not about finding policies that work," but rather about reaching "consensus" and "finding the will to make change." The main issue was the "need to open our hearts to each other" and "see in each other a common humanity."

Anyone expecting the corrupt, parasitical and ruthless oligarchy that Obama represents to "open its heart" or see in those it oppresses "a common humanity" is in for a rude awakening. The only path to the eradication of police violence and all forms of racial discrimination is the fight to unite the working class of every race and nationality in a common struggle to put an end to the capitalist system.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact