

Obama's farewell address: One last round of clichés and lies

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President Barack Obama capped his eight years in office with a vacuous and hypocritical farewell address Tuesday night delivered at the McCormick Place convention center in downtown Chicago.

The first-ever presidential farewell address delivered outside of Washington, DC had the atmospherics of an overblown, cheap spectacle. Obama strode onto the stage like a rock star, flanked by oversized American flags, a massive illuminated presidential seal and an introductory soundtrack by the rock band U2.

As with every address Obama has delivered over the last eight years, his speech in Chicago was full of clichés, his rhetoric padded with empty phrases and delivered with a false gravitas, signaled by his trademark pursed lips and affected whisper.

The speech was rife with contradictions, the starker being the juxtaposition of Obama's boasting of the great social progress achieved by his administration and his warning of threats to American democracy arising from ever-growing social inequality and economic insecurity.

The president declared: "If I had told you eight years ago that America would reverse a great recession, reboot our auto industry, and unleash the longest stretch of job creation in our history... if I had told you that we would open up a new chapter with the Cuban people, shut down Iran's nuclear weapons program without firing a shot, and take out the mastermind of 9/11... if I had told you that we would win marriage equality, and secure the right to health insurance for another 20 million of our fellow citizens—you might have said our sights were set a little too high.

"By almost every measure, America is a better, stronger place than it was when we started."

He made no attempt to explain why, given this impressive record of social progress and foreign policy

success, his party was routed in the elections and the billionaire demagogue Donald Trump was preparing to succeed him in the White House.

A basic component of the answer, of course, is the grotesquely false rendering of his record and the state of American society as he leaves office. Hardly a week goes by without a new report on signs of extreme social crisis or ever-more obscene levels of wealth among the financial elite. Just in the past month, studies have been published showing the first decline in US life expectancy in 23 years, plunging pay for young adults, a 72 percent surge in deaths from synthetic opioids, and home ownership rates at historic lows for young people.

Other surveys have documented a \$237 billion increase in the wealth of the world's richest 200 billionaires, driven largely by the US stock market boom under Obama, and an acceleration of the transfer of wealth from the bottom half of the US population to the top one percent.

In boasting of presiding over a record number of consecutive monthly job increases, Obama neglected to mention that 94 percent of the new jobs created in the last eight years have been either part-time or temporary.

Noticeably absent from Obama's remarks was any mention of the social conditions in the city where he was speaking, which is ravaged by high levels of poverty and unemployment, an epidemic of police killings and violence, and a skyrocketing homicide rate.

He lamented in general terms the growth of social inequality and the dangers it poses to American democracy—that is, the threat of a social explosion in the United States.

"While the top one percent has amassed a bigger share of wealth and income, too many families, in inner cities and rural counties, have been left behind—the laid-

off factory worker; the waitress and health care worker who struggle to pay the bills—convinced that the game is fixed against them, that their government only serves the interests of the powerful—a recipe for more cynicism and polarization in our politics.”

As always, he spoke as if none of these social ills had anything to do with the policies pursued by his administration, including severe cuts in social spending on the one side and the bailout of the banks and flooding of money into the stock market on the other.

Another piece of monumental hypocrisy was Obama’s pose of fighting to defend democracy when he has done more to destroy it than perhaps any other US president.

“Democracy can buckle when we give in to fear,” he declared. “So just as we, as citizens, must remain vigilant against external aggression, we must guard against a weakening of the values that make us who we are. That’s why, for the past eight years, I’ve worked to put the fight against terrorism on a firm legal footing. That’s why we’ve ended torture, worked to close Gitmo, and reform our laws governing surveillance to protect privacy and civil liberties.”

This is from a president who has personally authorized the assassination of American citizens and thousands of others around the world with drones-fired missiles, protected and promoted those in the CIA responsible for torture, kept the prison at Guantanamo Bay open, persecuted journalists and jailed whistleblowers, militarized the police, and expanded the illegal surveillance of electronic communications.

Obama also used his farewell address take parting shots at Russia and China, lumping the war against ISIS with efforts to counter both countries, and arguing that aggressive action against the world’s second- and third-largest nuclear-armed powers was the only way to avoid war.

“[T]he fight against extremism and intolerance and sectarianism are of a piece with the fight against authoritarianism and nationalist aggression,” he said. “If the scope of freedom and respect for the rule of law shrinks around the world, the likelihood of war within and between nations increases, and our own freedoms will eventually be threatened.”

Obama spent his eight years in office waging war abroad and war on the working class at home. With Tuesday’s speech, he passed the reins to Trump with a

shrug.



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