

Trump's Fourth of July: The militarist bombast of a crisis-ridden system

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US President Donald Trump's Fourth of July speech on Thursday was intended to be a demonstration of military power and greatness, of the enduring and unconquerable domination of American capitalism, of an order that, in Trump's closing words, "will never fade, never fail, but will reign forever and ever and ever." Instead, the grotesque spectacle exposed a social and political system on its last legs.

From the media and political establishment, the reaction to Trump's speech has been largely favorable. Trump, the line goes, abjured partisanship and politics. Instead, in the words of the *New York Times* lead article on Friday, he "used the Lincoln Memorial as the backdrop for a tribute to the country's armed forces and a call for unity that has been largely absent during his divisive presidency."

In contrast to the "dark message of grievance and pointed attacks on his enemies" contained in the reelection speech last month, the *Times* writes, Thursday's speech "offered a different, more optimistic tone."

Prior to the speech, criticism of Trump's plans from Democrats focused on concerns that he would "politicize" the military by seeking to use it as an instrument in his attack on Democrats and the media. The military, according to this narrative, must remain "above politics" and "nonpartisan"—that is, whatever the change in government and personnel, the geostrategic imperatives of American imperialism, and the instruments of violence that uphold them, must remain unsullied. A "call for unity" on this basis elicits no objections from the representatives of the ruling class, no matter how poorly it was delivered or how much history it distorted.

Trump presented a narrative that elevates the military into the supreme unifying moral and political force in American life. "Today, just as it did 243 years ago, the future of American Freedom rests on the shoulders of men and women willing to defend it," Trump proclaimed. After the flyovers of aircraft representing the major branches of the US military, he concluded: "Nearly 250 years ago, a volunteer army of farmers and shopkeepers, blacksmith

merchants and militiamen risked life and limb to secure American Liberty and self-government. This evening, we have witnessed the noble might of the warriors who continue that legacy."

The reality is that today's American militarism stands in direct contradiction to the revolutionary aspirations of 1776. The Declaration of Independence, in listing out the grievances of the colonists against King George III, included the charges that he has "sent hither swarms of Officers to harass our people ... kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies ... [and] affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil power."

Over the past three decades, the United States has been engaged in continuous and expanding warfare, waged by both Republicans and Democrats. No one in the media or political establishment has drawn attention to, let alone criticized, Trump's praise for the army that "brought America's Righteous Fury down to Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and cleared the bloodthirsty killers from their caves. They liberated Fallujah and Mosul [in Iraq] and helped liberate and obliterate the ISIS caliphate just recently in Syria."

This record of militarist violence—which has led to the deaths of more than one million people in "liberated" Iraq alone—was part of the "unity" message of Trump. The attempt to subjugate and conquer the lands of the Middle East and Central Asia is consensus policy in the American ruling class, as is the escalation of tensions with both China and Russia, which threatens to unleash a Third World War.

Whatever he and the ruling class might hope, however, Trump's declaration of eternal American domination stands in flagrant contradiction to reality. The conception of the strategists of American imperialism that it could arrest the long-term decline of American capitalism through military force, that the end of the USSR heralded the beginning of a "unipolar moment," has proven a grandiose delusion. The series of invasions and wars of conquest have produced a series of disasters.

The position of American imperialism is more accurately

summed up in the recent edition of *Foreign Affairs*, published under the overall headline, “What Happened to the American Century?” “A generation ago,” writes Gideon Rose in introducing the issue, “the United States was confidently leading the world into what was supposed to be a new millennium of peace, prosperity, freedom, and community. Now, the globe is heading into turbulence, and the United States is a Leonard Cohen song; that’s how it goes, and everybody knows. How could things fall apart so quickly?”

“*Sic transit gloria mundi*,” Rose concludes. Thus passes worldly glory.

No less ridiculous appear Trump’s efforts to deck American capitalism in its previous accomplishments, from the invention of the telephone and the airplane, to the 1969 Apollo 11 space mission that landed the first men on the moon. The United States, Trump declared, “gave birth to the musical, the motion picture, the Western, the World Series, the Super Bowl, the skyscraper, the suspension bridge, the assembly line and the mighty American automobile.”

As a reality check on the actual state of American capitalism, it would not be out of place here to note that American astronauts now go into space on Russian rockets, that the Chinese telecom giant Huawei is the target of hysterical US attack because it is leading the world in 5G technology, and that the US aircraft manufacturer Boeing is facing disaster for cutting corners on safety to boost profits. As for the “mighty American automobile,” the cities which once produced those vehicles—Detroit, Flint, Toledo, Dayton—are in ruins.

The past half century of American capitalism has been a period of decay, presided over by a criminal oligarchy of corporate billionaires and financial speculators. The United States has the highest social inequality of any major industrialized country; its social infrastructure is in a state of collapse; and its healthcare and public education systems are abysmal. The most basic index of social well-being, life expectancy, is declining, propelled by the sharp rise in drug overdoses and suicides.

The younger generation faces a future of permanent indebtedness, poverty, and low-wage, temporary employment. For them, Trump advised, “now is your chance to join our military and make a truly great statement in life, and you should do it.”

Trump included in his Fourth of July speech the inevitable homilies to American soldiers, the “heroes who proudly defend our flag.” The reality confronting American soldiers, however, was expressed in the outpouring of tales of suicide, depression, violence, addiction, and mental anguish that followed a US Army tweet on “how service has impacted you” in May.

The political and moral degradation of the American ruling class is personified by the present occupant of the White House. The imbecility of Trump, the manifest absurdity of this fascistic-minded authoritarian attempting to evoke anything progressive in American history, from the Revolution to the Civil War to the 1963 March on Washington, is a hallmark of historical decline.

Yet Trump is a symptom of the disease, not its cause. Three decades of escalating political, military and financial crises have reached the point where the entire world order over which American capitalism has presided has fallen apart.

Hence the staggering level of delusion and pretense contained in Trump’s Fourth of July speech. It was staged to try to convince everyone to ignore reality, for the ruling class to convince itself that its domination will continue for all time. “Our nation is stronger today than it ever was before, it is stronger now, stronger than ever.” Yet in the very process, such declarations prove the opposite. The bombast, centered on the exaltation of military violence, reveals not strength, but weakness.

The ruling class feels that the walls are closing in on it from all sides. The greatest danger it sees comes not from abroad, but from within the United States. It senses its extreme isolation, the bankruptcy of its political institutions. It looks at the growth of the class struggle and the leftward movement of workers and youth as an existential threat.

This does not make the dangers facing the working class any less great. Weak governments do desperate things: preparing for world war, promoting fascistic and authoritarian forms of rule, destroying democratic rights. While the ruling class furiously defends its outmoded social and economic order, the task of the working class is to overthrow it.



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