

Howard commencement speech: Biden appeals to identity politics and covers up the White House's promotion of war and reaction

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On May 13, Democratic President Joe Biden addressed Howard University's graduating senior class. Biden appeared at the prestigious Historically Black College and University (HBCU) just days after he officially declared his intention to run for re-election for the country's presidency in 2024. This is a clear indication that the Democratic Party intends to focus, yet again, on the promotion of identity politics in its election campaign, in an effort both to divide the working class and to cultivate support among privileged layers of the upper middle class.

Biden's speech was a mixture of well-known empty platitudes and lies and an effort to cover up the reactionary record of his administration and above all its focus on pursuing a war against Russia in Ukraine. After stumbling semi-coherently through his initial remarks, Biden told the outgoing class that they have "a chance to change the trajectory of the country," presumably by voting for him in next year's election.

However, he warned, the "oldest, most sinister forces" were arrayed against them. Biden made references to "crazed neo-Nazis" such as those who had rioted in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017, where "a young woman objecting to their presence was killed," and "white supremacy" as "the single most dangerous terrorist threat in our homeland."

The use of the term "white supremacy" is a deliberate deception that covers up the threat of fascist dictatorship. This arises not out of racial conflict, but out of the convulsive crisis of capitalism, which is driving the capitalist class to do away with democratic forms of rule, targeting the democratic and social rights of workers of all races and national origins.

Nor is this threat primarily one of "terrorism," in the sense of individual violence. It is rather organized, political violence, directed or manipulated by sections of the ruling class, such as that manifested in the assault on the Capitol on January 6, 2021.

The president made a clear reference to these events and to the role of Donald Trump, stating that the latter put a "dagger at the throat of democracy." Fortunately, Biden assured everyone, "Our democracy held. Again, hope prevailed."

The reality is that the fascist threat not only remains very real

but that the Democratic Party has done everything it could to cover it up in an effort to both suppress social opposition and close its ranks with the fascist Republican Party in their joint pursuit of war abroad and against the working class at home.

Like Biden's recent State of the Union address, the speech was most noteworthy for what it purposely chose to hide. Biden made no mention of the fact that tens of millions working people and youth in the country are struggling to feed themselves and their families as their pay checks are ravaged by inflation and low pay. These are the policies of an entire series of administrations, Democratic and Republican, including his own, which have attacked working class living standards while slashing social support programs.

This reality is immediately observable at Howard University, where adjunct and non-tenured faculty are some of the lowest-paid higher education workers in the region, and school nurses struggle with impossible burdens placed on them on a daily basis. Biden, naturally, did not mention the poor and unsanitary dorm room conditions many of the students face here.

Biden also made no mention of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has claimed well over one million lives in the United States. Just two days before his speech, his administration officially ended all emergency public health policies associated with the pandemic, leaving it to spread freely.

Also off the agenda was discussion of the Biden administration's central policy of pursuing a war against Russia in Ukraine, which threatens a nuclear Third World War, and preparing for an even more catastrophic and bigger conflict with China. Biden did not inform the graduates that the United States government had committed the population to a "fight for the long haul" in order to create a "new world order" that "we've got to lead," as he said in statements to the NATO powers last year.

Howard University's leaders are thoroughly implicated in this war strategy, having agreed to a \$90 million deal with the U.S. Department of Defense to become the military's first HBCU-based "University Affiliated Research Center." As part of this integration of Howard into the war machine, students will assist in working with "advanced battle management

systems (ABMS) and tactical autonomy,” said Danda Rawat, head of the school’s Data Science and Cybersecurity Center in January. These programs will help assist “actions associated with a longer-term strategic vision in war.”

Biden’s speech was pitched entirely to the complacent, pro-capitalist and pro-war layer of the upper middle class, along with sections of the ruling class, that composes the administration of Howard University and whose training forms a central component of the university’s orientation. Biden’s hosts included multimillionaire school president Wayne A.I. Frederick and Laurence C. Morse, head of the university’s Board of Trustees and partner at Fairview Capital Partners, a prominent investment firm—both of whom the U.S. President thanked by name.

Biden finished his speech by noting, “HBCUs help produce 40 percent of Black engineers; 50 percent of Black lawyers; 70 percent of Black doctors and dentists; 80 percent of Black judges.” He discreetly did not mention black corporate executives, military officers, CIA and FBI agents, and capitalist politicians, like Vice President Kamala Harris. Biden only emphasized this is “why Kamala and I are so committed to investing in you and HBCUs.”

This expressed the real concerns of American capitalism, including its need to cultivate privileged sections of the black upper-middle class which share its right-wing outlook and serve as its political agents. It is these layers, not the vast majority of African American workers and youth, who benefit from the relentless promotion of racial and identity politics.

Racial and gender-based identity politics have become the preferred ideology of the American ruling class and the Democratic Party in particular. They have made use of Howard University and other universities as ideological training centers for fostering reactionary pro-capitalist, anti-Marxist views.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has reported, by presenting ethno-nationalism in a positive light, such ideologies are increasingly being used to lend a “progressive” cover to far-right fascist forces serving NATO in Ukraine.

Over the past years, Howard has enlisted a growing number of advocates of right-wing identity politics. In April, Howard spokespeople announced that Stacy Abrams, the twice-defeated Democratic Party candidate for governor of Georgia, would occupy the university’s Ronald W. Walters Endowed Chair for Race and Black Politics, a position created specifically for her. She joins figures such as Nikole Hannah-Jones, lead author of the falsified racist history of America in the *New York Times*’ “1619 Project,” and reparations advocate Ta-Nehisi Coates, at Howard. These favored apologists for the Democratic Party will receive millions of dollars from Howard, while students have to live in infested dorms.

With this in mind, it is clear why the Howard University administration banned a public anti-war meeting at its campus in March. Nothing threatens the capitalist class more than the assertion that society is fundamentally divided by class, not

race. The censorship of this meeting, organized by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality and expressing opposition to the war and to the Putin government from a left-wing socialist perspective, represents an attack on the democratic rights of the Howard University student body.

Opposition to the Biden administration is building throughout the population. Even the *New York Times* had to acknowledge that Biden’s speech could hardly be qualified a success. Far from being enthusiastic about hearing the President speak, many students held up signs at the graduation which stated “Biden and Harris don’t care about Black people.” Others made references to Jordan Neely, the homeless man who was strangled to death in a New York City subway while in a mental health crisis. However, to the extent these criticisms of the Democratic Biden administration remain limited to the framework of identity and racial politics, they offer no way forward for students to oppose the Democratic Party and capitalism from the left.

Genuine left-wing and socialist opposition to the Biden administration requires a complete break from racial and identity politics and the middle class layers whose interest they serve. Instead, young people and students at Howard must turn to the working class throughout the United States and internationally. The IYSSE is fighting to build a club at Howard University, based on the internationalist and Marxist politics of Trotskyism. As part of this fight, we are developing a campaign to oppose the censorship of our anti-war meeting at Howard.

We call on all students, faculty members and other university workers to sign our petition to demand our right to hold our planned meeting on the Ukraine war on campus! Get in touch with us today to discuss these questions and get involved in the building of the IYSSE and a global movement against capitalism and imperialist war!



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