Trump’s speech on the elections: A ruling class in crisis lurches toward dictatorship

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Donald Trump’s prime time address from the White House Thursday night is a sharp warning to the working class in the United States and internationally. Its purpose was to manufacture a pretext for suppressing, rigging or overturning the coming elections, beginning with the November midterms.

The speech itself, manic and at times barely coherent, was the expression of an administration and a ruling class in the grip of a staggering crisis. Trump rambled through a litany of absurd and unsubstantiated allegations—that China had stolen the files of 220 million American voters, that “burn bags” of incriminating documents left behind by Obama had escaped incineration through “gross incompetence,” that voting machines had been rigged in league with Venezuela “in ways that could not be detected even with an audit.”

Trump denounced China as the author of a vast plot to destroy him, even as his administration prepares a September summit with Xi Jinping.

The address opened with a torrent of self-glorification—the United States “the hottest country in the world,” the markets at their highest “of all time,” the border sealed, crime at a 125-year low, “we won in Venezuela,” “winning big in Iran.” This parallel universe is itself a symptom of a regime losing its grip on reality and on events.

The whole performance smacked of a desperation that is well founded. Geopolitically, American imperialism has failed to achieve a single one of its aims in the war on Iran, which it is now escalating—driving up oil prices and inflation, threatening a collapse of overvalued financial markets and adding to an already unsustainable national debt.

Economically, the administration presides over social inequality without precedent, even as fresh reports appear by the day of the looting of society by Trump, his family and his inner circle: more than $1.4 billion pocketed from cryptocurrency ventures in a single year, while small investors drown in lost billions.

Politically, broad sections of workers and youth are moving to the left. The oligarchy’s answer is to escalate its violence against the working class, in the first instance against immigrants.

Trump delivered his speech in the midst of protests against two more Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) murders—Lorenzo Salgado Araujo in Texas and Joan Sebastián Guerrero in Maine—as the government escalated its rampage of violent repression in cities and towns across the country.

On the same day as the White House address, Secretary of State Marco Rubio and White House adviser Stephen Miller gave fascist speeches at a State Department conference promoting a global attack on so-called “left-wing terrorism.”

The claims in the speech are transparent lies, and everyone knows they are lies. Previous intelligence assessments, including those produced under officials Trump himself appointed in his first term, found no evidence that US elections had been compromised. But the purpose of the lies is not to persuade. It is to lay down, four months in advance, the justification for treating a widely predicted Republican defeat as the product of foreign subversion and to prepare the machinery to act on it.

That machinery is already being assembled. Trump announced that he was ordering the intelligence agencies, the FBI and the Justice Department to identify, fire and prosecute officials accused of concealing the supposed fraud—a purge of the state of anyone not personally loyal. He threatened ABC and NBC with the revocation of their broadcast licenses

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after they declined to interrupt regular programming, accusing them of joining a plot to conceal the truth.

Trump also demanded passage of the SAVE America Act, which through sweeping proof-of-citizenship and photo-ID requirements and the effective abolition of mail voting would disenfranchise millions of naturalized citizens, elderly, low income and working class voters. Citing a fabricated claim that 278,000 non-citizens are on the voter rolls, he ordered states to purge them.

What is most significant is the absence of any serious response within the political establishment. The constitutional forms upheld for two centuries as guarantees against dictatorship have been hollowed out. This is the measure of how far the crisis has advanced.

The supposed opposition, the Democratic Party, offers a mixture of complacency and complicity. Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer called Trump "weak and flailing" and told him to "give it up" on his voting bill. House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries called him "feeble" and "pathetic." California Governor Gavin Newsom dismissed the speech as "make believe" and told voters to organize for November.

Bernie Sanders appealed for "ALL Americans" to "unify against authoritarianism"—a formula that conceals the class forces behind the attack on democratic rights. There can be no unity against dictatorship with the corporations, banks and intelligence and military agencies that created Trump and are backing his police state policies.

Trump's ability to proceed depends on the Democratic Party. Two concerns govern the Democrats' conduct. The first is to prevent an independent movement of workers and youth from below, which they fear more than they fear Trump, and which they channel into the courts, the media and the November elections. The second is to press for the escalation of war, above all, a deeper commitment against Russia in Ukraine.

The Democrats' role flows from their character as a party of the same ruling class. What is unfolding is not the criminality or mental decline of one man. Trump is the instrument of a financial oligarchy that has monopolized the wealth of society to a degree without precedent and can no longer rule through democratic forms.

The breakdown of democracy is the political expression of the breakdown of the social order—a society split between a handful of billionaires and the mass of working people. Democratic rights cannot coexist with inequality on this scale. The turn to dictatorship is that of the entire ruling class, Democrats included, who differ with Trump over tactics, not over the defense of the oligarchy.

The defense of democratic rights is inseparable from the fight against the oligarchy and the capitalist system itself. The same forces driving the ruling class toward dictatorship—war, inequality, the collapse of its legitimacy—are driving workers and youth into struggle, as the opposition to ICE, to the war and to the union bureaucracy already shows.

Putting a stop to the drive to dictatorship requires the independent industrial and political mobilization of the working class, armed with a socialist program and directed against dictatorship, war and the capitalist system that produces both.

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