

Obama's State of the Union Address: Cynicism, Clichés and a Call for Austerity

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Over many decades, the annual State of the Union Address, nominally the occasion for the president to give an accounting to the American people, has acquired an entirely ritualistic character. The joint session of Congress to which the speech is delivered is scripted in every detail. The event has long since become a calculated exercise in cynicism and deceit.

President Barack Obama's first State of the Union speech, delivered Wednesday night, was no different. The main aim of this address was to find a rhetorical bridge between the packaging of Obama as the candidate of "change" and "hope," and the reality of his presidency, which has been unswervingly devoted to the defense of privilege.

The political and moral character of both the speech and the speaker was summed up in the fact that the catastrophe in Haiti, which has cost 200,000 lives and counting, did not merit a mention until one hour and five minutes into the address. Even then, the monumental tragedy was cited only as an occasion for gratuitous self-congratulation and yet one more invocation of the "American spirit."

More than one year after an economic disaster that has ravaged the lives of millions of Americans and hundreds of millions of people around the world, no explanation was offered, only clichés. These included the now standard wrist-slaps of "irresponsible" bankers, who are never named and never called to account.

It was as if the bonanza for Wall Street and disaster for workers of the past year was the result of an accident or cosmic forces, and not the outcome of conscious policies set into motion for the sole purpose of protecting the personal wealth of a handful of multi-millionaires and billionaires. "If there is one thing that has unified Democrats and Republicans," Obama declared, "it's that we all hated the bank bailout."

Amidst the banalities and lies, the contradictions in the speech were glaring. The president who called Wednesday for "reforms" to rein in the bankers has stuffed his administration with Wall Street insiders.

The speech featured endless invocations of the "American people" from the representative of a political system that has excluded the people from any participation in the political life of the country or any say in the policies of the government.

For the most part, the petty measures to aid the "middle class" listed in the speech were put there to serve as sound-bites. Obama and everyone else in the chamber knew they had little chance of being enacted.

Obama made no attempt to explain why his previous proposals—above all, his plan to slash health benefits for millions of people in the guise of health care “reform”—had aroused mass opposition.

The speech was replete with pleas for bipartisanship. Even within the framework of bourgeois politics, Obama’s deference to the Republican right was extraordinary. Less than 15 months after the electorate decisively repudiated the party of George Bush and handed the Democrats the White House and large majorities in the House and Senate, Obama did not dare denounce the minority party for seeking to block every one of his initiatives.

The greatest lie of all was the pretense that Obama and the assembled congressmen and Washington dignitaries had any connection to the broad masses of the American people. Obama indulged repeatedly in the inevitable, sickening device of naming towns—Elkhart, Indiana; Allentown, Pennsylvania—that have been devastated by the policies of successive administrations, including his own, to show how deeply he identified with the common people.

All the time, seated behind him were Vice President Joseph Biden, his bejeweled watch flashing when the camera lights hit it, and Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, wearing one of her designer suits and her omnipresent string of pearls and sporting her perfectly coiffed hairdo.

The substantive policies that Obama advanced represented a continuation and deepening of his right-wing agenda. In the name of creating jobs and improving the lot of the people, Obama called for a three-year freeze on social spending, while ruling out any reduction in the gargantuan budgets for war and “homeland security.”

This is a mere down payment for the more serious task of gutting core social programs—Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security. To begin that job, Obama announced the establishment of a bipartisan commission to propose spending cuts and taxes on consumption.

To show that he had gotten the message sent by voters in Massachusetts, who handed the Democrats a humiliating defeat in this month’s special Senate election, Obama declared that “jobs must be our number one focus in 2010.” This was immediately followed by the line that got the most enthusiastic response from his audience: “Now, the true engine of job creation in this country will always be America’s businesses.”

Obama proceeded to outline a series of tax cuts and windfalls for business that comprise the bulk of his so-called jobs program—\$30 billion for community banks, tax credits for small businesses that hire new workers, the elimination of capital gains taxes on small business investment, tax incentives for companies that invest in new plants and equipment.

The enthusiasm in the chamber swelled when Obama added to this list special incentives for the nuclear power, coal and biofuels industries and waivers for offshore drilling by the oil giants.

The enthusiasm waned when he said he would not extend Bush’s tax cuts for those earning more than \$250,000 a year, which includes virtually all of the politicians and officials who were present.

Under conditions where over 15 million workers are officially unemployed—3.9 million more

than when Obama took office—where nearly one in five are underemployed, and homelessness, hunger and poverty are rapidly rising, Obama did not propose using a penny of government funds to actually hire a worker.

On foreign policy, Obama touted his escalation of the war in Afghanistan, hinted at retaliation against Washington's trade rivals, and issued threats against Iran and North Korea.

On full display was the utter contempt for the intelligence of the American people felt by Obama and the entire political establishment, as if somehow the implications of their policies and the realities of American society can be evaded by means of rhetorical tricks.

No amount of lies or hokum can alter the fact that the candidate of "change" is discredited in the eyes of the American people. The lesson that must be drawn is that nothing will change until the masses of working people intervene independently in the political life of the country, in opposition to Obama and both parties of big business and on the basis of a socialist and revolutionary program.

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