

In Counterterrorism Speech, Obama Hints at Danger of American Dictatorship

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In a speech delivered Tuesday to a military audience at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida, President Barack Obama made a veiled warning about the threat to American democracy posed by 15 years of unending war.

The speech, delivered at a base that headquarters US special operations forces, was a defense of his administration's own record, little more than six weeks before Obama turns over the White House to Donald Trump. The departing commander-in-chief criticized specific policies associated with Trump, including support for torture and unilateral US military action, without naming his successor.

Obama began by acknowledging that when he leaves office January 20, "I will become the first president of the United States to serve two full terms during a time of war," an assertion that his audience applauded.

He reiterated his confidence in the military, declaring, "I believe that the United States military can achieve any mission; that we are, and must remain, the strongest fighting force the world has ever known." This too, was greeted with applause.

The bulk of the speech, however, consisted of drawing lessons from the struggle against Al Qaeda and ISIS, most of them presented as warnings against making the "war on terror" the focal point of American national-security policy. Terrorists "don't pose an existential threat to our nation," and therefore do not require an all-out military mobilization on the scale of World War II or the Cold War, he argued.

He also warned that "we cannot follow the path of previous great powers, who sometimes defeated themselves through over-reach." That was why, he said, he had withdrawn the bulk of US ground troops from Iraq and Afghanistan, so that they would be available elsewhere—i.e., against Russia and China, although he did not cite these as targets for future US military operations.

Obama's main focus was the impact of the "war on terror" on democratic procedures and the potential transformation of the United States into a garrison state. "These terrorists can never directly destroy our way of life," he said, "but we can do it for them if we lose track of who we are and the values that this nation was founded upon."

One of those values was opposition to torture, he stressed, implicitly rebuking President-elect Trump, who has proclaimed his support for waterboarding and other forms of torture during his campaign, and who has appointed a pro-torture congressman, Mike Pompeo, to head the CIA.

He also opposed efforts to impose religious tests on immigrants and refugees, to single out American Muslims for discrimination or repression, and to use the US military for “grabbing the resources of those we defeated.”

These sallies were all aimed at statements made by Trump during the election campaign. Without drawing any explicit connection, Obama then cited the Nuremberg Tribunals after World War II, at which Nazi leaders were found guilty of war crimes and executed or imprisoned.

The colossal hypocrisy of Obama’s speech, and the absurdity of his pose as the defender of “the rule of law” and democratic rights, are underscored by reference to the Nuremberg Tribunals. What Obama did not mention is the declaration of the chief prosecutor at the tribunal, US Supreme Court Justice Robert Jackson, that the basic crime alleged against the accused Nazi leaders was the planning and execution of a war of aggression, from which, Jackson said, all the other war crimes flowed. By this standard, the top officials of the Obama administration, including Obama himself, deserve to be hauled before a new tribunal to face war crimes charges.

Obama concluded with a more general warning over the impact of protracted war, with each new military operation justified by reference to the now-distant events of September 11, 2001. “Democracies should not operate in a state of permanently authorized war,” he said. “That’s not good for our military, it’s not good for our democracy.”

While his explicit argument was that Congress should pass a new Authorization for the Use of Military Force against ISIS, rather than leaving the president to rely on the authority dating back to 9/11, the implications of these comments were more sweeping. They recall the speech he delivered in May 2013 on the dimensions of the “war on terror,” when he declared, “We have to be mindful of James Madison’s warning that no nation could preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare.”

At the time of the May 2013 speech, the *World Socialist Web Site* noted the contradictory character of Obama’s remarks. On the one hand, he admitted the reactionary and anti-democratic implications of the “war on terror,” in which the US government had waged illegal wars, tortured and murdered prisoners, and spied on the American people. On the other hand, Obama asserted, as chief executive, his own authority to continue the spying, to wage drone-missile warfare, and even to assassinate American citizens, without any legal or judicial restraint.

Obama’s speech at MacDill Air Force Base had something of the same character. He outlined at some length the supposed efforts of his administration to wage war without atrocities, interrogate prisoners without torture, and protect the American people from terrorism without resorting to mass surveillance.

In reality, the Obama administration has carried out the most sweeping attacks on democratic rights in the name of the struggle against terrorism: authorizing blanket capture of all telecommunications and Internet traffic; keeping open the Guantanamo Bay detention camp; shielding the Bush administration officials who oversaw CIA torture; persecuting whistle-blowers who exposed US government crimes such as Julian Assange, Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning; and carrying out a systematic program of drone-missile assassinations worldwide, on an unparalleled scale.

But Obama's speech amounted to an admission that the policies he has pursued have paved the way for an even more right-wing and undemocratic policy once Trump enters the White House. Obama is aware that the incoming government will be one of immense repression and violence, and he cautions Trump against excesses.

At the same time, he and the Democratic Party are doing everything possible to smooth the way for Trump, declaring him the legitimate president-elect despite losing the popular vote by more than 2.6 million.

Underlying Obama's warnings are not only concerns that he might at some point face his own Nuremberg trial, but, more basically, a wariness over the far-reaching and potentially explosive implications of the overt trashing of constitutionally guaranteed rights. Historically, the United States is based on the US Constitution. Once that tie is severed, there is little to hold the country together.

Beyond his advice to Trump, Obama appeared to be appealing more to the military itself, which exercises an overbearing and dominant influence over the entire state, including his own administration and the incoming Trump-led government. The choice of the venue was significant. Rather than addressing the American people about the perilous state of American democracy, he spoke before the headquarters of US Special Operations Command, concluding with an appeal that "our men and women in uniform and the citizens who support you... carry forward what is best in us."

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