

Obama Defends Drone Assassinations in State of the Union Address

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The most significant point in President Barack Obama's State of the Union address Tuesday night was a passing and euphemistically worded reference to his program of extra-judicial drone assassinations. "Where necessary, through a range of capabilities, we will continue to take direct action against those terrorists who pose the gravest threat to Americans," he declared.

Every congressman, senator, cabinet member, Supreme Court justice and general in the House chamber knew that with that statement Obama was defending his asserted power to secretly order the assassination of anyone in any part of the world, including American citizens. The president went on to make clear he was intent on making state murder a permanent and completely institutionalized government function.

His administration, he said, had worked "tirelessly to forge a durable legal and policy framework" to guide such operations. He went on to indicate he might be open to suggestions for giving the assassination program a fig leaf of "transparency" and legality, pledging to "engage with Congress to ensure... our targeting, detention and prosecution of terrorists remains consistent with our laws and system of checks and balances..."

That such a statement could be made before a joint session of Congress, to the general approbation of those in attendance, underscores the crucial aspect of the real state of the American union that received no mention in Obama's address or any of the media commentary—the catastrophic state of American democracy.

The speech came just over a week after the publication of a Justice Department white paper laying out a pseudo-legal justification for Obama's claim to the power, unchecked by judicial or congressional oversight, to order the assassination of American citizens. This assertion, already acted on in the drone missile murder of three Americans, abrogates democratic principles that go back hundreds of years and renders the Bill of Rights and its guarantee of due process a dead letter.

The US government now claims the type of unchecked powers previously associated with fascist regimes and military juntas. The white paper follows the enactment of military funding bills that sanction indefinite military detention of accused terrorists and their alleged supporters, including US citizens.

Tuesday's State of the Union address will soon be followed by Congress' stamp of approval on this sweeping assault on democratic rights, with the Senate's confirmation of Obama's pick to head the Central Intelligence Agency, John Brennan, currently the chief White House

counterterrorism adviser and overseer of the administration's drone assassination program.

The real question, completely evaded in Obama's demagogic and dishonest speech, is what in the state of the American union gives rise to the accelerating movement toward police state forms of rule.

The speech itself was an attempt to use left-sounding rhetoric to give a "progressive" gloss to a reactionary, anti-working class program. Obama began with the lying claim that war is a thing of the past and the economic crisis is over. ("After a decade of grinding war, our brave men and women in uniform are coming home... Together, we have cleared away the rubble of crisis...").

Presenting himself as the defender of the great American "middle class"—a complete abstraction designed to conceal the existence of a working class—Obama declared that the task of government is to work "on behalf of the many, and not just the few." This is a principle that bears no relation either to the conditions that exist in the US or the policies Obama has pursued and will continue to pursue.

In fact, in very the next breath, Obama boasted of having already slashed \$2.5 trillion from the deficit, "mostly through spending cuts," and proposed to cut hundreds of billions more from the social entitlement programs—Medicare and Social Security—upon which tens of millions of elderly Americans depend. Using Republican proposals for even deeper cuts as a foil, he proposed to accompany this unprecedented attack on social programs with the elimination of unspecified tax loopholes for the wealthy, supposedly resulting in "everybody doing their fair share."

The rest of his laundry list of token proposals to help the middle class was of the same character. He proposed, for example, to make America a "magnet for new jobs and manufacturing." He hailed the return of manufacturing by Caterpillar, Ford, Intel and Apple to American shores, neglecting to mention that US corporate "in-shoring" was based on massive cuts in workers' wages and benefits.

Obama made much of a proposal to raise the minimum wage to \$9 an hour. This would, in fact, leave a family of three existing on a minimum wage paycheck below the absurdly low official poverty threshold.

On foreign policy, Obama proclaimed that the Afghanistan war would be over by the end of 2014. He then invoked 9/11 and the "war on terror," praised US military interventions in Libya, Yemen and Somalia and US support for the French invasion of Mali, threatened North Korea and Iran, and reiterated Washington's policy of regime-change in Syria.

There was absolutely nothing in the speech that reflected the actual state of American society. Far from the crisis being over, more than four years after the Wall Street crash of 2008, unemployment—which Obama barely mentioned—remains at near-Depression levels. Poverty, hunger and homelessness continue to increase.

Workers' wages continue to decline, while corporate profits and CEO pay reach record heights. Under Obama, the chasm between rich and poor has grown wider.

Two statistics provide a sense of the scale of social inequality in America. During Obama's first term, 93 percent of all income gains went to the richest 1 percent of Americans, and over the period 2007-2010, US median net worth declined by 38.8 percent.

Such staggering and growing levels of social inequality are incompatible with democratic forms of rule. The Wall Street aristocracy whose interests Obama serves intends to widen the gap further by intensifying the assault on wages and working conditions and dismantling what remains of the social reforms of the 1930s and 1960s.

This will only heighten class tensions, already reaching the boiling point. The American ruling class is not blind to the buildup of working class opposition—not only in the US, but internationally—to the policies of austerity and war. It is in anticipation of social upheavals in the US on a scale not seen since the 1930s that the Obama administration and the entire political establishment are putting into place the framework for mass repression and dictatorial rule.

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