

Obama's Second Inauguration: The Overnight Transformation of "Candidate Jekyll" into "President Hyde"

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Four years ago, close to 2 million people converged on Washington DC to witness the swearing in of Barack Obama as the 44th president of the United States. There were widespread illusions, not only in the US but around the world, that the elevation of an African American to the highest office in America would signal a break with the policies of war and social reaction of the hated Bush administration and the adoption of a program of progressive reform.

Today, as Obama officially begins his second term, the popular mood is vastly changed. Despite the efforts of the media, there is little public enthusiasm for the event. The general sentiment is disillusionment and alienation. To the extent that Obama retains a constituency among working class voters, his support is of a passive character, composed far more of resignation than conviction.

What accounts for the popular mood of disappointment and frustration? The candidate of "hope" and "change," during his first term in office, stifled the former and offered little of the second. As president, Obama presided over bank bailouts, wage cuts and austerity at home, and expanded war, torture and state killings abroad. The former professor of constitutional law oversaw a systematic assault on core constitutional rights, including the expansion of the drone assassination program and authorization of indefinite military detention. These measures have been employed against American citizens, effectively abrogating the constitutional protection against the deprivation of life or liberty without due process of law.

It came as a surprise to many of Obama's supporters, especially those who had taken his campaign rhetoric seriously, that the new president transformed himself almost effortlessly from a critic of Bush's invasion of Iraq and his predecessor's violations of human rights into a ruthless prosecutor of imperialist wars and devotee of Washington's new weapon of choice: the drone missile.

The overnight transformation of candidate Jekyll into President Hyde is the expression of a political process. Whoever the occupant may be, the White House is the center of a global empire of repression, reaction and murder. Upon entering the White House, the individual becomes, wholly and completely, the instrument and property of the state. Any traces of humanity that may have somehow survived the self-debasing years-long process of electioneering are entirely destroyed the moment the new president enters the Oval Office.

Obama seemed to make the transition from an obscure and inexperienced politician to the head of a global murder machine without any evident internal struggle. It appears that spending a good deal of his time drawing up “kill lists” and authorizing drone killings comes almost naturally to this president. He is reported to have called his decision to authorize the drone assassination of US citizen Anwar al-Awlaki a “no brainer.”

Obama’s particular contribution to the US assassination program has been to institutionalize and bureaucratize it, introducing more precise systems, routines and procedures so as to make the process of killing people more effective. His callousness when it comes to killing is of a piece with the strangely bloodless character of his public persona. This is a man who seems incapable of expressing any genuine emotion or uttering a sincere sentence.

Touted both before his first election and since as a master orator, he has in four years in office failed to deliver a single memorable line. His speeches have all the poetry of a CIA briefing book. They are, from the standpoint of vocabulary and grammar, somewhat more polished than those of George Bush. But as far as their content is concerned, they are no less banal.

In Obama we see the complete fusion of the presidential personality with the real constituencies served by his administration: the corporate-financial elite and the military-intelligence apparatus.

To install and maintain Obama in office, these forces have employed the political tropes of racial and identity politics developed by the upper-middle-class liberal and “left” layers who provide the ideological framework for American ruling class politics. The reactionary mixture of liberal Democrats, pseudo-left political groupings and trade union bureaucrats continues to provide political cover for Obama.

It is already clear that the second term will mark an intensification of the right-wing policies of the first. The byword in domestic policy is austerity, targeting the core programs remaining from the 1930s and 1960s—Social Security and Medicare. The appointment of former Wall Street banker and point man in budget talks with the Republicans, Jacob Lew, as treasury secretary is an unmistakable signal.

In foreign policy, the elevation of Obama’s administrator of drone attacks, John Brennan—a man who under Bush publicly defended torture—to the position of CIA director signals an expansion of military aggression and extrajudicial killings. It also points to further attacks on democratic rights.

And yet, for all its ruthlessness and criminality, the ruling class has no means of reversing the inexorable decline of American capitalism. In the final analysis, its dependence upon military violence to uphold its global position will intensify, rather than diminish, the crisis of US imperialism.

Obama’s second term will see a growth of popular anger and protest against mass unemployment, poverty, repression and war. In the US as around the world, the working class will enter into mass struggles that will, with stunning rapidity, expose the bankruptcy of the Obama administration and the vast structure of economic fraud and political deceit upon which it rests.

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