

Obama's West Point Speech: A Prescription for Unending War

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The US media has broadly cast the speech delivered by President Barack Obama at West Point on Wednesday as a farewell to the decade-long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and an embrace of a more multilateral and less militaristic American foreign policy.

This interpretation willfully ignores the content of the speech, which even more than those Obama has given in the past asserts a policy of permanent and global war in pursuit of the interests of the US financial elite. The media distortion is driven, on the one hand, by the partisan motives of Obama's Republican rivals, who seek to portray him as weak-kneed, and, on the other, by the support from a wealthy and privileged "liberal" elite for wars of aggression waged under the banners of "human rights" and "democracy."

The real content of the speech was in sync with the venue in which the president chose to deliver it. As is so often the case, the audience selected for what was supposedly a major foreign policy address was uniformed and captive, subject to military discipline. In this case, it was the graduating cadets of the US Military Academy, who are joining an officer corps that is entrusted with organizing and leading Washington's global military interventions.

Reflecting the ever-increasing dominance of the military and intelligence apparatus over the US government and American political life, Obama's speech was replete with paeans to the military. He told the West Point graduates that "our military has no peer" and that they would "embody what it means for America to lead the world."

"The military that you have joined is and always will be the backbone" of US "leadership" on the world stage, Obama declared, providing his audience with a succinct definition of American militarism in the 21st century.

In his speech, Obama quoted Dwight Eisenhower, the supreme commander of allied forces in Europe in World War II and subsequent US president, who told the same corps of cadets in a 1947 commencement speech, "War is mankind's most tragic and stupid folly; to seek or advise its deliberate provocation is a black crime against all men."

That speech came barely half a year after the last of the trials of surviving Nazi leaders held in Nuremberg, and it was in that context that Eisenhower made his remark. The principal charge against the Nazi leaders was initiating and waging aggressive war.

In what immediately followed his quotation from Eisenhower, however, Obama elaborated a doctrine with which Adolf Hitler would have had little quarrel.

“The United States will use military force, unilaterally if necessary, when our core interests demand it—when our people are threatened, when our livelihoods are at stake, when the security of our allies is in danger... International opinion matters, but America should never ask permission to protect our people, our homeland, or our way of life.”

Clearly Obama is not elaborating here a policy of defensive war to be waged only in response to an attack or the threat of an imminent attack. He is spelling out that the US reserves the right to intervene militarily wherever it believes its “core interests”—i.e., the access of its corporations and banks to markets, raw materials, cheap labor and profits—are involved.

When he speaks of “our livelihoods” and “our way of life,” he is referring not to the ever-declining living standards of the American worker, but to the eight-figure compensation packages of American CEOs, whose fortunes are founded on the exploitation of the working populations and resources of the entire planet.

The US president went on to assert the right to launch wars even where no case could be made that there was any threat posed to the US, but rather where there were issues that “stir our conscience.”

As recent history has proven, this “conscience” is highly flexible. When unsubstantiated claims were made in 2011 that the Libyan military was on the verge of invading the rebellious eastern city of Benghazi and massacring its inhabitants, Washington and NATO launched a full-scale bombing campaign and proxy ground war that killed tens of thousands and ended with the overthrow and lynching of the country’s leader, Muammar Gaddafi. Today, having already succeeded in toppling the elected president of Ukraine, Washington is providing full support to a right-wing coup regime in Kiev as it sends troops and fascist thugs to invade the eastern city of Donetsk and massacre protesters there.

And while touting “America’s support for democracy and human rights” wherever Washington seeks to carry out regime-change, Obama included a specific exception for the Sisi regime in Egypt, which overthrew an elected president, has murdered thousands, jailed tens of thousands and outlawed the country’s largest political party. “In countries like Egypt, we acknowledge that our relationship is anchored in security interests,” he said.

In America’s “humanitarian” wars of choice, Obama proclaimed, “the threshold for military action must be higher.” Washington, he said, “must mobilize allies and partners to take collective action.” He continued: “We have to broaden our tools to include diplomacy and development; sanctions and isolation; appeals to international law; and, if just, necessary and effective, multilateral military action.”

This scenario fits precisely the roadmap followed by Obama’s predecessor, George W. Bush, in mobilizing his “coalition of the willing” to wage the “war of choice” against Iraq.

Everything put forward by Obama is a repudiation of international law and an endorsement of the policy of aggressive war practiced by the Nazis three-quarters of a century ago.

In how many countries is the US already carrying out military interventions and proxy wars? Obama’s West Point speech was preceded by his announcement that nearly 10,000 US troops are to remain in Afghanistan after the formal end of the US occupation at the close of this year, and that a residual force will remain there indefinitely.

Drone strikes, night raids and other actions are being carried out in Yemen, Somalia, Pakistan and elsewhere, while American forces are fanning out across Africa on the pretext of combating Kony, finding the Nigerian school girls or battling Islamists.

In Ukraine, Washington instigated a coup that brought it into direct confrontation with Russia, a nuclear power, and has since sent US ground troops into Poland and the former Soviet Baltic republics, while deploying warships in the Black Sea. It has carried out even more provocative naval exercises and B-52 fly-bys directed against China.

In Syria, the Obama administration is currently discussing a plan to deploy US military forces to train and arm the so-called rebels, thereby escalating and prolonging the sectarian civil war that has decimated that country. In his speech, Obama called for the creation of a new \$5 billion “Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund” to promote interventions and arm and train repressive forces in the Middle East, Africa and anywhere else on the planet that falls within the crosshairs of the White House.

Obama used the speech to defend his assertion of unlimited power to carry out drone massacres and assassinations, which have already claimed at least 5,000 victims, most of them civilians. The US president made the obscene claim that such strikes are carried out only when there is “a near certainty of no civilian casualties.”

The speech comes in the immediate wake of congressional testimony in which administration officials asserted that the president has unlimited powers to launch wars and carry out drone assassinations, including against American citizens, with no need for either congressional authorization or judicial approval. This only makes explicit what is already Washington’s modus operandi, in which Congress is nothing more than a rubber stamp for the US war machine.

The executive, embodying the power of the military-intelligence apparatus, has the right to do virtually anything. But what rights are left to the American people? Those that remain are being rapidly erased. The last vestiges of democracy must be dispensed with in order to impose conditions of war, inequality and economic austerity opposed by the vast majority of the population.

Obama’s high-flown rhetoric about the US having passed through its “long season of war” notwithstanding, what his speech indicates more than anything is that American imperialism is preparing a global catastrophe of unprecedented dimensions.

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