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Obama's legacy of war, repression and inequality

Joseph Kishore

10 January 2017

US President Barack Obama's "farewell address to the nation," scheduled for tonight, has been preceded by a concentrated media buildup on the theme of Obama's legacy. This has included fawning tributes portraying the president as a brilliant orator, progressive reformer, visionary and man of the people.

Seeking to mold the narrative of Obama's presidency, the White House put out a video over the weekend featuring comedians Ellen DeGeneres and Jerry Seinfeld, actors Leonardo DiCaprio and Tom Hanks, former basketball star Michael Jordan and other celebrities extolling the "historic moments that prove, yes, we can create progress." Such absurd and nauseating effusions testify not to the qualities or accomplishments of the 44th president, but to the intellectual, political and moral debasement of the American cultural establishment.

For Obama and the privileged social layers that surround the Democratic Party, a legacy can be crafted with honeyed phrases and clever marketing. Millions of people, however, will judge the administration by its actions.

It would take far more space than is available here to outline in detail the real record of the Obama White House. However, any objective appraisal of the past eight years would have to include the following elements:

1. Unending war

Obama is the first president in American history to serve two full terms in office with the nation at war. This includes the continued bloodletting in Afghanistan and Iraq, the bombing of Libya, the six-year-long war for regime change in Syria, and support for the Saudi-led destruction of Yemen. A recent survey reported that in 2016, US Special Operations forces were deployed in 138 nations, or 70 percent of the countries of the world.

The “wars of the 21st century,” begun under Bush and expanded under Obama, have killed more than a million people and driven millions more from their homes, producing the worst refugee disaster since the Second World War. Obama’s “pivot to Asia” has inflamed tensions from the South China Sea to India and Pakistan. The current president will leave the White House as NATO troops deploy to Eastern Europe in the midst of an anti-Russia war hysteria stoked by the media and the Democratic Party.

Obama is the “drone” president, supervising the killing of some 3,000 people in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and Libya by means of unmanned aerial vehicles, along with several thousand more in Iraq and Afghanistan.

2. Democratic rights

At least three of the individuals killed in drone strikes were US citizens. The declaration of the Obama administration in 2011 that the president has the authority to assassinate anyone, including US citizens, without due process sums up the attitude of the former constitutional law professor to basic democratic precepts.

The US detention and torture center in Guantanamo Bay, which Obama pledged on his inauguration day to close, remains open. Chelsea Manning, who courageously exposed war crimes in Iraq, is serving a 35-year prison sentence at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and the Obama White House has prosecuted more whistleblowers for espionage than all previous administrations combined. Edward Snowden was forced into exile in Russia under threat of prosecution or worse, while WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange remains trapped in the Ecuadorian embassy in London.

The massive spying programs of the National Security Agency exposed by Snowden remain in place, and not a single individual has been prosecuted for clearly illegal and unconstitutional activity. Proclaiming the need to “look forward, not backwards,” Obama gave a free pass to Bush administration officials who institutionalized torture, with some of them, including current CIA Director John Brennan, finding top posts in Obama’s administration.

Obama has expanded the militarization of police departments and intervened in court to uphold police abuses that violate the Constitution.

3. Social inequality

Obama came into office in the immediate aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, and the focus of his administration has been to restore the wealth of the financial aristocracy. Since their low point in March of 2009 (two months after Inauguration Day), stock values—fueled by the “quantitative easing” policies of the US Federal Reserve—have more than tripled, with the top one percent the overwhelming beneficiary of this new orgy of speculation. Aggregate quarterly corporate profits rose from \$671 billion at the end of 2008 to \$1.636 trillion in 2016, and the wealth of the richest 400 Americans increased from \$1.57 trillion to \$2.4 trillion.

At the other pole, eight years of the Obama administration have produced declining wages, rising living costs and growing indebtedness. Nearly 95 percent of all jobs added during the Obama administration’s “recovery” have been temporary or part-time positions, according to a recent study by Harvard and Princeton, with the share of workers in temporary jobs rising from 10.7 percent to 15.8 percent. Obama presided over the bankruptcy of the auto companies early in his administration (imposing an across-the-board 50 percent cut in wages for new-hires). He supported the bankruptcy of Detroit and slashing of city workers’ pensions. In the name of education “reform,” he oversaw a wave of public school closures and attacks on teachers, who were laid off in the hundreds of thousands.

As for Obama’s principal domestic initiative, the Affordable Care Act, its intended and actual outcome has been the shifting of health care costs from corporations and the state to individuals, with corporations slashing coverage and workers forced to pay exorbitant prices for substandard care. One statistic sums up the consequences: For the first time since the height of the AIDS epidemic in 1993, life expectancy fell in the US between 2014 and 2015 due to rising adult mortality from drug overdoses, suicides and other manifestations of social distress.

No account of the legacy of Obama would be complete without noting two additional statistics. Since 2009, approximately 10,000 people have been killed by police in the United States, while the Obama administration has deported about three million immigrants, more than any other US administration in history.

Then there is the man himself. What is most striking is Obama’s emptiness. From his first major speech, at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, the media has hailed Obama as a great orator. Yet over the span of 12 years in political office at the federal level, including eight in the White House, Obama leaves behind not a single sentence from a speech or interview that will be remembered.

Everything about Obama, who came into office having been named “Marketer of the Year,” is false and contrived. The only thing he consistently conveys is indifference, a strange remoteness, a man without qualities.

The personality is related to the function. More than anything else, Obama has been the president of the intelligence agencies. His political convictions appear to extend no further than his CIA briefing books. To those who care to look more closely into the background, there always seemed to be hands guiding his way to the White House.

For the ruling class, Obama's particular function was to fuse in his person and his administration identity politics with the absolute domination of Wall Street and the military-intelligence apparatus. The "change" Obama was to represent was in the color of his skin, not the content of his policies.

The nominally liberal and pseudo-left organizations of the upper-middle class that surround the Democratic Party hailed his election as a "transformative" event, seizing upon the elevation of an African-American as an opportunity to abandon their oppositional pretenses. However, his tenure has merely demonstrated that it is class, not race, that is the decisive social category.

Amidst all the commentary on Obama's "progressive" legacy, no one seems capable of explaining why it is that eight years of the Obama White House paved the way for the election of Donald Trump. Yet the bitter realities of social life, the widespread anger and disappointment, led to a collapse of the Democratic Party vote amidst a general feeling of disillusionment with the entire political establishment.

Obama now bequeaths to the world a ferocious conflict between two right-wing factions of the ruling class: The Trump administration, which is preparing an authoritarian and militarist government of the oligarchy, and its critics, furious that he is reluctant, for the present, to proceed with their preparations to wage war against Russia.

The record of the Obama administration and the character of the individual himself speak, in the end, to the structure of American politics—an ossified and reactionary political establishment that lacks any broad base of support, standing atop a cauldron of seething social tensions. The true legacy of Obama is the deepening of the crisis of American capitalism and the emergence of a new period of social and revolutionary struggles.