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## Obama's Inaugural Speech Misleadingly Suggests End to Perpetual War

By: Kevin Gosztola  
1/21/2013

President Barack Obama delivered his inaugural address for his second term. It was a veritable stew of historical quotes from American history laced with several nods to progressive positions and achievements. It acknowledged past struggles launched by US citizens for equality and justice but mostly lacked a vision for what Obama hoped to accomplish in his second term.

Part of the speech highlighted war. He suggested, quite absurdly, a “decade of war is now ending” and later described how Americans believe there is no need for “perpetual war.”

**We, the people, still believe that enduring security and lasting peace do not require perpetual war.** Our brave men and women in uniform, tempered by the flames of battle, are unmatched in skill and courage. Our citizens, seared by the memory of those we have lost, know too well the price that is paid for liberty. The knowledge of their sacrifice will keep us forever vigilant against those who would do us harm. But we are also heirs to those who won the peace and not just the war, who turned sworn enemies into the surest of friends, and we must carry those lessons into this time as well. [emphasis added]

President Obama may have been referring to the fact that, during his first term, he withdrew troops from Iraq and in his second term he intends to begin to withdraw troops from Afghanistan (though it is far from certain how many thousands or tens of thousands of troops will remain in the country to “assist” Afghanistan forces even if there is an “end” to the war). He may have

been alluding to what former Pentagon general counsel Jeh Johnson said in a speech about America being on a course when a “tipping point” would come where so many “leaders and operatives of al-Qaida and its affiliates have been killed or captured” that “the group is no longer able to attempt or launch a strategic attack against the United States.” However, in the hours before his inaugural speech, a US drone strike killed two suspected al Qaeda militants and wounded three others in Yemen.

When considers the escalation in the use of drones during Obama’s first term, it is hard to imagine war ending. Obama has nominated John Brennan to be CIA chief. With Brennan at the helm, the use of remote control warfare in countries where Congress has not declared war will continue. Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen will continue to see targets extrajudicially assassinated. The Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF), signed by President George W. Bush, which has become the legal justification for Obama’s executive authority to carry out targeted killings, is likely to remain in force even if there are no more ongoing “conventional wars” in countries like Afghanistan or Iraq.

The AUMF has allowed the military or CIA to detain, kidnap, torture or kill any targets in any country in any part of the world if the government perceives those individuals to have some ties to al Qaeda or its affiliates. The Obama administration has cited the AUMF as giving it the authority to keep detainees in Guantanamo Bay prison indefinitely. It has been cited as part of the legal justification for putting US citizens and suspected terrorists on secret kill lists and killing them with drones extrajudicially. There are few powers a presidential administration cannot claim under the AUMF. It effectively makes war powers permanent. There is no evidence to indicate these powers are going to be given up by Obama or agencies that make up America’s national security state during his second term.

Furthermore, Obama stated in his inaugural speech:

**We will defend our people and uphold our values through strength of arms and rule of law.** We will show the courage to try and resolve our differences with other nations peacefully – not because we are naïve about the dangers we face, but because engagement can more durably lift suspicion and fear. America will remain the anchor of strong alliances in every corner of the globe; and we will renew those institutions that extend our capacity to manage crisis abroad, for no one has a greater stake in a peaceful world than its most powerful nation. **We will support democracy from Asia to Africa; from the Americas to the Middle East, because our interests and our conscience compel us to act on behalf of those who long for freedom.** And we must be a source of hope to the poor, the sick, the marginalized, the victims of prejudice – not out of mere charity, but because peace in our time requires the constant advance of those principles that our common creed describes: tolerance and opportunity; human dignity and justice. [emphasis added]

The truth is struggles for freedom and democracy will only be supported in countries where the power politics of America’s alliances or relationships are not more essential to preserve than the right of people to pursue freedom and justice in their country. Bahrain is a key example of a country where Obama has been silent and complicit toward a crackdown on activists by a brutal regime. Bahrainis have been subjected to widespread torture and activists have been jailed

simply for engaging freedom of speech and assembly. Yet, the commitment to maintaining a security presence in the Persian Gulf has trumped showing any concern for how the people of Bahrain are being treated by their government.

As Glenn Greenwald said in October 2011 when asked whether Obama handled the Arab Spring well:

...[R]ight now his administration is actively supporting and arming the regime in Bahrain, which is oppressing its people at least as cruelly as Gaddafi ever did. He announced recently, after a phone call with the Saudi prince, that the U.S.-Saudi cooperative relationship is stronger than ever. He continues to heap praise on the Yemeni president as he slaughters his citizens in his street. And, of course, the Obama administration stood by the Mubarak regime and continues to support military repression in that country, as well. American citizens, to some degree, aren't aware of these conflicts between his message and his actions, but people in that part of the world are well aware of them. And, of course, we had a long and cooperative relationship with Gaddafi, as well....

There was no better example of the gap between the message and actions than when Egyptians during the uprising in Tahrir Square began to find they were being attacked with tear gas that was made in the United States. The Obama administration, finding the ability to continue counterterror operations including drone warfare was more important than democracy, helped President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Al-Hadi replace Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen. No concern was expressed by Obama when, in the midst of an uprising, Hadi was the only presidential candidate running in an election that was supposed to be some transition from dictatorship to democracy.

Also, so-called American values and the rule of law were undermined by President Obama during his first term when he failed to close Guantanamo Bay prison and free innocent men cleared for release by a review he authorized through an executive order. Values and the rule of law were degraded by the decision to setup a second-class legal justice system for trying terror suspects being held at Guantanamo instead of putting them on trial in federal courts. Values and the rule of law were trampled upon when not a single person involved in torture or rendition was prosecuted by the Justice Department.

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Given Obama's mention of perpetual war, the wisdom of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., who the United States celebrates today, should be remembered.

During an April 4, 1967, speech at Riverside Church on the Vietnam War, he read the following from Buddhist leaders in Vietnam:

**Each day the war goes on the hatred increases in the heart of the Vietnamese and in the hearts of those of humanitarian instinct. The Americans are forcing even their friends into becoming their enemies.** It is curious that the Americans, who calculate so carefully on the possibilities of military victory, do not realize that in the process they are incurring deep

psychological and political defeat. The image of America will never again be the image of revolution, freedom and democracy, but the image of violence and militarism. [emphasis added]

In Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen and Mali, this is the result of perpetual war through the use of drones or kill teams. There are already personal stories from victims of drone strikes describing how drone strikes are making them angry at their government and the Americans. Sultan Ahmed Mohammed, who was “riding on the hood of the truck and flew headfirst into a sandy expanse” on September 2, 2012, said, “If the Americans are responsible, I would have no choice but to sympathize with al-Qaeda because al-Qaeda is fighting.” Another Yemeni who was driving the truck and wounded in the attack, Nasser Mabkhoot Mohammed al-Sabooly, said, “If we are ignored and neglected, I would try to take my revenge. I would even hijack an army pickup, drive it back to my village and hold the soldiers in it hostage...I would fight along al-Qaeda’s side against whoever was behind this attack.”

King said of the “enemy” being fought in Vietnam:

Perhaps the more difficult but no less necessary task is to speak for those who have been designated as our enemies. What of the National Liberation Front — that strangely anonymous group we call VC or Communists? What must they think of us in America when they realize that we permitted the repression and cruelty of Diem which helped to bring them into being as a resistance group in the south? What do they think of our condoning the violence which led to their own taking up of arms? How can they believe in our integrity when now we speak of “aggression from the north” as if there were nothing more essential to the war? How can they trust us when now we charge them with violence after the murderous reign of Diem and charge them with violence while we pour every new weapon of death into their land? **Surely we must understand their feelings even if we do not condone their actions. Surely we must see that the men we supported pressed them to their violence. Surely we must see that our own computerized plans of destruction simply dwarf their greatest acts.** [emphasis added]

King was not afraid to call upon citizens to look inwardly at their country and consider how America’s actions were responsible for inspiring acts of violence. Today, the Obama administration has its own “computerized plans of destruction” that have the potential to bring about a death toll that exceeds the number of casualties from acts carried out by “militants.”

Also, King recognized that a government that spent “more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift” was “approaching spiritual death.” Empire-building was not simply unsustainable but it was also immoral:

...A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand we are called to play the good Samaritan on life’s roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life’s highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation, it will look across the seas and see

individual capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries, and say: "This is not just." It will look at our alliance with the landed gentry of Latin America and say: "This is not just." The Western arrogance of feeling that it has everything to teach others and nothing to learn from them is not just. A true revolution of values will lay hands on the world order and say of war: "This way of settling differences is not just." This business of burning human beings with napalm, of filling our nation's homes with orphans and widows, of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into veins of people normally humane, of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped and psychologically deranged, cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice and love. A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.

In 2011, the United States spent \$739.3 billion on military defense. Most stunning is the following, "The US defense budget is not just dominant; it is operating at a level completely independent of the perceived threat. In the nineteenth century, the Royal Navy sized itself to the fleets of Britain's two most powerful potential enemies; America's defense budget strategists declare it will be 'doomsday' if we size to anything less than five times China and Russia combined."

The military-industrial complex and/or the national security state needs perpetual war. The two, which intersect, cannot remain an expansive, powerful and uncontrollable force with so many working to enable agendas of empire if there is no "enemy" to fight. The strength of introducing robots into covert military operations is that they bring terror to skies and have the ability to inspire populations to take up arms against perceived American imperial oppression. Essentially, the supply of "enemies" inevitably increases and the demand for war persists.

At least 800-1000 US military bases exist in the world for America to use as "leap pads" for whatever operations it chooses, especially those intended to be kept secret from the public. The erosion of civil liberties so that terrorism can be fought has been normalized and acceptable to many Americans. There is no end to war or even an end to "perpetual war" if President Obama remains the conflict averse leader that he has been. There is no reason to even talk of a future where America does not pick and choose when it will and will not follow international law and uphold human rights if he is content with carrying out his second term as a captive of the military industrial