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Trump's State of the Union address: A spectacle of reaction and militarism

US President Donald Trump's first State of the Union address, delivered Tuesday night, was a festival of reaction and political filth. The speech dragged on for more than 80 minutes, interrupted by ovations from the assembled members of the Senate and House of Representatives. It was filled with paeans to the police and military (which won the particular support of Democrats), fascistic attacks on immigrants, and invocations of religion, patriotism and the American flag, culminating in howls of "USA! USA!" during the closing section of the address.

The annual State of the Union speech has long since decayed into a hollow ritual, whose essential emptiness is an expression of the crisis and decay of American democracy, weighed down by militarism and rampant economic inequality.

With Donald Trump, the real state of the union is revealed, not by the endless torrent of lies fashioned by his speechwriters, or the people they exploited as human props, but in the persona of the president himself: the first billionaire to occupy the White House, preening over the signal accomplishment of his first year in office—trillions of dollars in tax breaks for corporations and the super-rich.

In a speech that quickly received positive responses in the media, Trump cited the record-breaking rise in the stock market and the decision of major corporations to repatriate funds to the United States—since they can now do so virtually tax-free—as though these would benefit American workers.

However, Trump's efforts to paint a portrait of a country on the rise, with living conditions improving, will not have fooled anyone. Only a few minutes after claiming that Americans have never had it so good, he noted that 64,000 people died of drug overdoses in America last year, a record number. This was one of his few concessions to social reality, which Trump used to demand increased police powers.

Trump's arrogant demeanor reflected something of the political conjuncture. The Democrats pretended to oppose the tax cut, but did nothing to stop it, because their most important social base, Wall Street, supported it enthusiastically. The Democrats pretended to fight for immigrant youth covered by the DACA program, but abandoned the effort after a two-day shutdown of the federal government. Trump has taken the measure of this toothless "opposition" and feels strengthened accordingly.

His State of the Union speech made no concessions whatsoever on immigration, with Trump elaborating on the plan released last week by the White House, which ties an onerous 12-year process of legalization for DACA-age immigrants to a raft of reactionary measures, including his wall along the US-Mexico border, a massive build-up of the Border Patrol and immigration police, and drastic cuts in legal immigration, limiting family reunification measures to spouses and minor children.

Trump appealed to anti-immigrant prejudice with a grotesquely false depiction of immigrants as a threat to the jobs and even the lives of American workers, using the Salvadoran M-13 gang—a product of the Los Angeles slums and the US prison system, not El Salvador—as the replacement for ISIS in US government scaremongering.

Leading Democrats joined in the applause, especially when Trump praised the military, the police, the Border Patrol, Immigration and Customs Enforcement and other repressive forces. This included a bipartisan standing ovation for Secretary of Defense James "Mad Dog" Mattis, who is preparing to execute Trump's orders for nuclear war with North Korea.

Only the intelligence agencies were left off the list, an omission that was the sole indication in Trump's speech of the struggle raging within the American state between the White House and sections of the military-intelligence apparatus, which has taken the form of the Russia investigation.

The Russia probe is the only issue on which the congressional Democrats have fought intransigently, voicing the demands of the CIA and Pentagon that there should be no change in the anti-Russian foreign policy stance adopted by the Obama administration during its second term.

Last week, the leading congressional Democrat, Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer, called for incorporating into the new budget resolution, which must be passed by February 8 to prevent another federal shutdown, a provision to block Trump from firing Special Counsel Robert Mueller, who heads the Russia investigation. This came only days after Schumer dropped demands that the budget resolution include protection for DACA recipients.

There is little point in attempting to provide a point-by-point rebuttal of the barefaced lies in Trump's speech. He was describing America as it is seen by the billionaires, for whom, as he said, this seems the best of times, with stock prices and profits soaring, income and corporate taxes slashed, government regulations on business either not enforced or scrapped outright.

On foreign policy, Trump said relatively little, but all of it was reactionary. He called for Congress to "fully fund our great military," hailed US military operations in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, while announcing he had signed an executive order to keep open the US torture prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba to house new prisoners seized in the "war on terror." He insisted that alleged "terrorists" should be treated as "enemy combatants," and made clear that the US would maintain and expand its network of detention and torture centers.

He threatened Cuba, Venezuela and Iran, as well as the more than 100 countries that voted in the UN General Assembly to condemn the US recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. He cited North Korea as a nuclear threat to the United States and promised a further build-up of the US nuclear arsenal.

The truly foul character of the speech, the media coverage and the ceremony as a whole only testifies to the exclusion of any genuine opposition to the political and social agenda of corporate America. Official American politics consists of various gradations of right-wing politics, from the pro-corporate, pro-CIA agenda of the Democratic Party to the fascistic ravings of sections of the Republican Party who view even Trump as too soft on immigrants.

The official Democratic Party response, delivered by Massachusetts Representative Joseph Kennedy III, a grandson of Robert F. Kennedy, combined demagogic posturing, mostly along the lines of identity politics, but with some criticism of Wall Street profiteering thrown in, and scaremongering against Russia, which he described as "knee-deep in our democracy."

Even at his most demagogic, however, Kennedy could make no reference to the working class or to any movement from below against the growth of economic inequality. That is because the Democratic Party is just as much an instrument of the corporate and financial aristocracy as the Republican Party. Whatever differences they have on secondary issues and matters of tactics are subordinated to a common defense of the profit system and the interests of Wall Street and American imperialism.

The State of the Union showed an extremely degraded and reactionary president and an impotent and bankrupt “opposition.” The real opposition, to both Trump and the Democratic Party, must come from below, from an independent movement of the working class in opposition to the capitalist profit system.