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Obama's legacy: Identity politics in the service of war

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29 July 2016

Barack Obama concluded his address to the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia Wednesday night by declaring himself ready to “pass the baton” to the party’s nominee and his former secretary of state, Hillary Clinton. Accounts of the address in the corporate media have repeatedly referred to the US president casting Clinton as the continuator and custodian of his “legacy.”

But what is the legacy of Obama? In its essential political terms, it consists of his having succeeded in overcoming internal divisions on the question of war that have plagued the Democratic Party for half a century. His administration marks the return of the Democrats to their roots as the premier party of US imperialism, a status the party maintained through two world wars and the subsequent Cold War with the Soviet Union.

Obama, who was swept into office on a wave of popular antiwar sentiment, will enjoy the dubious distinction of being the first president to keep the US at war throughout two full terms in office.

He has continued the wars he inherited in Afghanistan and Iraq, while launching a new one that toppled the government and decimated the society of Libya; engineering a proxy war for regime

change that now includes US troops deployed in Syria; and carrying out attacks in Somalia, Yemen, Pakistan and beyond.

With its “pivot to Asia” and steady buildup of US-NATO forces in Eastern Europe, Washington’s military might has been increasingly directed against Russia and China, in a relentless quest for global hegemony that poses the growing danger of a third world war.

Obama’s administration will also be remembered for its vast expansion of drone warfare, targeted assassinations and kill lists, along with vicious attacks on civil liberties and the militarization of America’s police.

What is extraordinary in the face of all of this is that war was not even a subject of discussion at the convention in Philadelphia. The silence on the matter was guaranteed by the fraudulent opposition candidate Bernie Sanders, who publicly backed Obama’s wars during his campaign, and officially ended his “political revolution” by uncritically endorsing Clinton, the chosen candidate of both Wall Street and the massive US military and intelligence apparatus.

In advance of both major party conventions, there were many comparisons in the media of this presidential election year with that of 1968, with predictions that, once again, there could be violence in the streets.

While no doubt the Trump campaign has escalated the atmosphere of violence in American politics, wholly ignored in these largely superficial analogies was the core issue that brought about the violence of 48 years ago: mass popular opposition to the Vietnam War, which ended up tearing the Democratic Party apart.

The incumbent Democratic President Lyndon Johnson was unable to run for re-election because of the hostility within his own party to the war in Vietnam, expressed in support first for the candidacy of Eugene McCarthy and then for that of Robert Kennedy, who broke with Johnson on the issue.

While Robert Kennedy’s assassination was followed by the nomination of Vice President Hubert Humphrey, a supporter of the war, and his subsequent defeat by Republican Richard Nixon, Vietnam shattered the ideological foundations of the old Democratic Party, based on the filthy deal that was the foundation of Cold War liberalism: lip service to social reform at home, combined with unwavering support for US imperialism abroad.

In 1972, the antiwar candidate George McGovern won the nomination and was defeated by Nixon. Nonetheless, the Democratic Party was compelled to take antiwar sentiment into account, in its political calculations, for decades after the war in Vietnam ended.

A chasm had opened up between the party’s leading personnel within the US capitalist state and the Washington think tanks, who remained committed proponents and strategic thinkers of US imperialism, and a political base, including academics and upper layers of the middle class, in which there remained broad hostility to war.

This produced internal conflicts within the party in one election after another. On the one hand, Democratic candidates were compelled to posture publicly as opponents of war, in order to retain credibility with broad sections of the party's electoral constituency. On the other hand, the Democratic candidates sought desperately to maintain credibility with the corporate and military-intelligence establishment, which expected that the candidate, once elected, would conduct foreign policy with the necessary ruthlessness.

In the aftermath of the election of George W. Bush came the mass antiwar demonstrations of 2003, and the subsequent attempts by various pseudo-left forces to channel this opposition back into the Democratic Party.

With the 2004 presidential election, Howard Dean emerged as an early favorite, campaigning as the representative of the “democratic wing of the Democratic Party” and appealing to antiwar sentiment within the party. Even after his candidacy was derailed by the party establishment and the media, John Kerry, who had supported the war, was compelled to posture as an opponent, tying himself up in political knots and handing a re-election victory to Bush.

Finally, in 2008, the decisive reason that Barack Obama won the nomination and Hillary Clinton lost it was Clinton's vote in 2002 to authorize the US war in Iraq.

In the promotion of Obama's candidacy, his racial background was presented, particularly by the pseudo-left, as some kind of credential for progressive and antiwar politics, even as a close examination of his political record showed that he was no opponent of militarism. His family and professional connections to the US intelligence apparatus, meanwhile, were kept out of the news.

While Obama's election was hailed by the pseudo-left as “transformative,” what has emerged over the course of his administration, facilitated by these same political forces, has been the utilization of identity politics in the furtherance of US imperialism.

This formula was on full display at the Philadelphia convention, where identity politics—the promotion of race, gender and sexual orientation as the defining features of political and social life—was woven directly into an unabashed celebration of American militarism.

This found carefully crafted expressions in Obama's speech, including his declaration that “our military can look the way it does, every shade of humanity, forged into common service,” a claim that could be made on behalf of another “all volunteer” imperialist fighting force, the French Foreign Legion.

He went on to state, “When we deliver enough votes, then progress does happen. And if you doubt that, just... ask the Marine who proudly serves his country without hiding the husband that he loves.”

The US military had long been a bastion of fanatical homophobia, with over 114,000 service members forced out, with dishonorable discharges, over the issue between World War II and the scrapping of the “Don't ask, don't tell” policy in 2011. That allowing gays into the military would erode discipline had been an article of faith for the US command.

Central to support for changing this policy was the recognition, within both the ruling political establishment and decisive layers of the military brass, that it would prove politically useful in winning support for the military among a privileged upper middle class layer that had identified with the politics of American liberalism.

The message at the convention was explicit: “These are your troops. These are your wars. They are being fought in your interests.”

Similar issues of identity politics were employed by the Obama administration in its attempts to whip up the anti-Russian hysteria that was on display in Philadelphia. Thus, well-orchestrated campaigns were mounted around Pussy Riot and statements made by Putin in relation to gays during the Sochi winter Olympic games.

In response to the heated rhetoric at the convention, the *Washington Post’s* security columnist wrote a piece entitled “Clinton has now made the Democrats the anti-Russia party.” He noted: “In their zeal to portray Donald Trump as a dangerous threat to national security, the Clinton campaign has taken a starkly anti-Russian stance, one that completes a total role reversal for the two major American parties on US-Russian relations that Hillary Clinton will now be committed to, if she becomes president.”

The anti-Russian campaign has been ratcheted up sharply in response to the WikiLeaks release of Democratic National Committee emails exposing the collaboration of the DNC leadership and the Clinton campaign in the attempt to sabotage the campaign of her rival, Bernie Sanders, and rig the nomination.

Clinton and her supporters have attempted to quash any discussion of the damning contents of these emails by casting their release as a “national security” issue, with the absurd charge that Vladimir Putin was the real author of the leak, aiming to subvert the US elections.

The same method, it should be recalled, was employed in response to earlier exposures of US imperialism’s crimes abroad and wholesale spying at home, with Chelsea Manning, Julian Assange and Edward Snowden bearing the consequences in the form of vicious persecution, imprisonment and exile.

Opposition to this relentless repression, as well as to war, found no expression in the Democratic convention. Needless to say, Clinton not only supported, but participated in both.

Most tellingly, a whole political layer, commonly referred to as the “neoconservatives,” which broke with the Democrats in the 1960s and 1970s and moved into leading positions with the Reagan and Bush administrations, have now come home, issuing open letters and statements in support for Hillary Clinton.

This political evolution of the Democratic Party is not merely the matter of machinations within the party leadership and the state apparatus. It has a social base within a privileged social layer that has moved sharply to the right, providing a new constituency for war and imperialism. The

systematic fixation on the issues of race, gender and sexual orientation—deliberately opposed to that of class—has provided a key ideological foundation for this reactionary turn.

The convention in Philadelphia has exposed a party that is moving in direct opposition to, and preparing for a confrontation with, a growing radicalization of the American working class.

The next period, as the class struggle emerges powerfully, will see a resurgence of opposition by American workers to war.

The Socialist Equality Party is the only party campaigning to prepare and give conscious political expression to this development, fighting for the political independence of the working class and the building of a mass international movement against war based on a revolutionary socialist program. We urge all of our readers to support and build the SEP campaign of Jerry White for president and Niles Niemuth for vice president.