

**THE  
DEMOCRATIC PARTY  
FROM SLAVERY TO OBAMA:  
LOYAL DEFENDERS OF  
CAPITALISM**



**A SPEAK OUT NOW PAMPHLET**

**\$3.00**

# Table of Contents

Introduction	2
The Democratic Party – Rooted in Slavery	4
The Civil War: The Democrats Fight to Maintain Slavery	6
The Party of Racism and Terror in the South	8
1877-1914: Keeping the Working Class Under Control	10
World War I: The Democrats’ War for Imperialism	12
The Great Depression: Roosevelt and the Democrats Save Capitalism	13
Harry S. Truman – The First Cold War President	17
John F. Kennedy – A False Hope For Change	18
Lyndon Johnson – The Vietnam War President	19
1968: A Year of Struggles	21
The Carter Administration	23
The Presidency of Bill Clinton	27
The Democrats under George W. Bush	35
The Obama Presidency - False Hopes and Little Change	39
The 2016 Presidential Election	54
Speak Out Now: Where We Stand	58



## Introduction

The two-party system in the United States is nearly as old as the country itself. Despite the attacks that Democratic and Republican Party leaders make on each other, they both defend this political arrangement and the capitalist economy it promotes. In different historical periods, both parties have made appeals to working-class and oppressed people to prevent political activity outside the two-party system.

Bernie Sanders' decision to run for president in 2016 in the Democratic Party's primary elections rather than as an independent disappointed some of his followers. But it allowed him to maximize his media exposure and nearly prevented Hillary Clinton from being the Democrats' candidate in the general election. The Sanders campaign made "socialism" part of the mainstream political vocabulary. It showed that a large part of the electorate, including many working-class people, were comfortable considering alternatives to capitalist "business as usual." But Sanders' decision to support Clinton in the general election was an attempt to steer them to support the Democrats and rein in any independent politics among his supporters. And Clinton's conspicuous ties to Wall Street were among the factors leading to Donald Trump's victory in the general election.

Trump's campaign pledge to "drain the swamp" of Washington insiders – both Democrats and Republicans – appealed to those who felt betrayed by the two-party system. In fact, many Democratic Party voters who supported Sanders in the primaries then supported Trump in the general election. Though this might seem self-contradictory, both times they were voting against the established political system. It's true that Trump also appealed overtly to racism, misogyny, and xenophobia, understanding that such reactionary attitudes were common among Democratic as well as Republican voters. But, though he ran as a Republican, he distanced himself from many Republican as well as Democratic "insiders," which was an important part of his appeal.

In a way, part of his campaign reflected reality. The leaderships of both the Democratic and Republican Parties have, from their beginnings, defended the interests of the wealthy and powerful. In the first years after the American Revolution, what became the Democratic Party represented Southern slave-owners, while the Federalist Party represented bankers and businessmen of the Northern states. Led by Thomas Jefferson, the Democratic Party became stronger with the Louisiana Purchase and the westward expansion of the country. The Federalist Party became very weak and was eventually

replaced as the second party in the two-party system by the Republican Party, again representing Northern banking and business interests. So the Democratic Party represented chattel slavery while the Republican Party represented wage-slavery. The conflict between the two systems led to the Civil War.

### **Making History or Symbolic Gains?**

Every four years we are confronted with the question of national elections – of voting for the president as well as a variety of national, state and local representatives. The media and the politicians portray these elections as an opportunity for us to chart the course of our future. But each election has shown the futility of this gesture at the voting booth. In 2016, the system gave us a choice between Donald Trump, a blatantly racist, sexist billionaire, and Hillary Clinton, a notorious multi-millionaire friend of Wall Street.

If voting really changed anything, why don't we see the most basic things we need in place? Why aren't the needs and desires of the majority represented? It isn't because the majority votes against their interests. If people's votes really counted, we would have a good system of healthcare, education, transportation, employment and other things that the vast majority of people want, and that so many politicians have promised before getting elected. We would have seen an end to wars long ago. History has made it clear that elections are not the means of change for the majority of people in our society.

To believe that the election of Barack Obama, an African American man, to the presidency in 2008 was anything more than a symbolic accomplishment, is to ignore the reality of the past 40 years, during which time we have seen African American, Latino, and women mayors, governors and members of Congress elected throughout the country. And what has been the result? A quick glance at our cities and prisons, as well as at the conditions workers, people of color, and women face, shows us that life has not gotten better for most of those who are supposedly represented by these politicians.

While the Democratic Party has posed as the friend, supporter and champion of workers, people of color, and women, the reality of its past differs sharply from how the party represents itself. The Democratic Party, from its beginnings to the present, has always represented the ruling class. Its origins were as a party of the Southern

slave-owners, and after the defeat of the slave system, it has defended the interests of big business and the banks.

Since that time, the Democratic Party has partnered with the Republican Party to defend the interests of the U.S. ruling class. While the two parties usually emphasize their policy differences, under their leadership, the top one percent of the population has dramatically increased its wealth at the expense of everyone else. Tax policies have allowed the corporations to pay little or no taxes and enabled the wealthy to keep their inheritances. Meanwhile, middle-income and working-class people face stagnant wages and sharp cuts to their benefits and social services. Legislation has favored the interests of the rich, and when profits are threatened, Democratic Party politicians help to arrange bailouts and subsidies for failing corporations or banks.

The Democrats have repeatedly used the Taft-Hartley Act and other anti-labor legislation against unions and workers on strike. They have called out federal troops and used violent repression against striking workers, and used COINTELPRO (an FBI counter-intelligence program) and Red Squads to spy on and attack activists in the labor, Civil Rights, anti-war and other social movements.

When the Democrats have appeared to supposedly act in the interests of the oppressed, it has been only when they were forced to by the pressure of social movements or struggles in the workplaces and in the streets or among young people and students. It was only when the ruling class faced a mass upheaval of working and poor people during the Great Depression of the 1930s that the Roosevelt administration pushed legislation through that would appear to meet the needs of the people. Presidents Kennedy and Johnson didn't intervene in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s or pass any civil rights legislation until the Movement exposed the racist nature of this system to the world. As the media showed African Americans tearing down racist segregation in the South while being met with the violence of the cops and mobs of white racists, the Democratic Party politicians had no choice but to act.

The Democratic Party poses as the party of peace and the defender of freedom around the world. But in reality, the Democrats have supported U.S. participation in every major war of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, from World War I to Iraq. Of course, when the population has demonstrated massively against these wars,

to the point where it is possible to ride this opposition to win an election, then these Democratic Party politicians are ready to appear as anti-war candidates. They did this during the U.S. war against Vietnam and again with the war on Iraq.

What the Democrats mastered early in their history and turned into a fine art is the ability to co-opt and channel social struggles. They have a well-developed tradition of appearing to respond to the demands of social movements. They are masters at appealing to those who have mobilized their forces in struggle to work within the system instead.

Once elected, the Democrats have then legislated some of what the masses had already won for themselves. History is then written to make it seem that the politicians delivered the victory, not that the politicians simply took credit for what people themselves had already accomplished.

And each time that people have fallen for these lies, have put their trust and faith in these politicians – what

has been the result? Over and over again, the lure of supposedly working within the system has been used to trick able organizers into becoming functionaries and bureaucrats for the system they opposed. And instead of those who are active in struggle learning to count on their own efforts, they are corralled back into the voting booth. This has been true for unions, civil rights organizations, women's groups, and even many so-called left and revolutionary organizations. As a consequence, those engaged in these struggles have ended up trading their dreams of a different society, of real social justice and economic equality, for the mere acceptance of a new set of politicians and temporary reforms.

This pamphlet explores the role the Democratic Party has played since its founding, as well as the interests it has represented. When we look at the history of the Democratic Party, we see a pattern of defending a system based on greed and exploitation – a capitalist system that maintains the class, racial, and other divisions of this society.

---

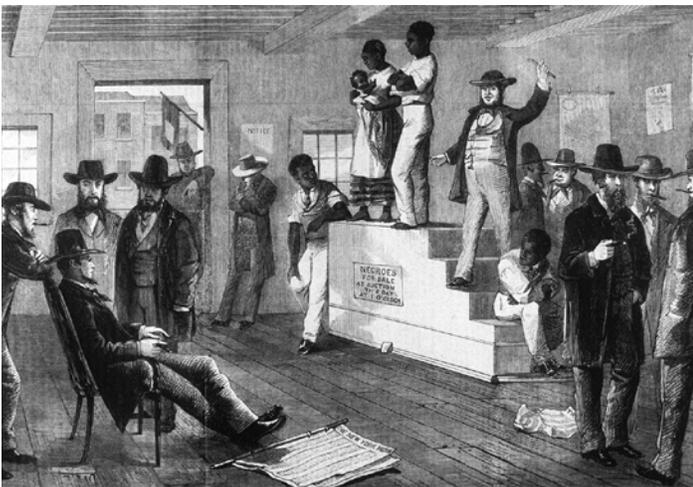
## The Democratic Party – Rooted in Slavery

One of the first major political struggles after the American Revolution was between the two groups of elites who had supported the Revolution against Britain. The most powerful group was the large landowners from Virginia, Georgia, and the Carolinas. Their wealth came from the exploitation of Africans who had been ripped from their homes and brought to the colonies as slaves. Their plantations produced cotton and

other crops, which were sold directly to Europe. They saw themselves like European nobles living on their estates with servants and imported European finery.

The other elite group was wealthy merchants based in the North. Some of the merchants had profited from the slave trade, but as they grew wealthier they searched for new areas for investment. They wanted a central government that could develop roads, waterways, and other infrastructure to get goods to domestic markets and industry. They also wanted a strong central bank that could set tariffs to protect their enterprises from competition with the more advanced European capitalists. Advocates of the merchants' interests formed the Federalist Party.

The slave-owners opposed both setting up tariffs, which would cut their direct connection to European markets, as well as a strong central government, which might interfere in the slave trade. The conflict between these groups played out in Congress and in the elections for the presidency. In 1787, during the drafting of the Constitution, the two groups of elites made an agreement on how to govern the country. The agreement



*Slave auction in Virginia (1861)*

was written into the Constitution as the “Three-Fifths Compromise” of 1787. The ruling class in the slave-states got proportional representation in the House of Representatives based on the white population, plus three-fifths of the slave population. That meant that each slave gave the slave-owners of that state three-fifths more of a vote in the House of Representatives. The compromise reflected the importance of the slave economy and ultimately ensured the slave-owners’ control of the country. After Washington’s two terms as president, these parties fought for political office. The party of the Southern planters, the Democratic-Republicans (later the Democratic Party), were the ruling party for most of the early years of U.S. history. Thirteen out of eighteen presidents before the Civil War were from this party.

### Conquest and Genocide

The Federalist Party and the Democratic-Republican Party were united in their goal of building up the United States by conquest and genocide. Both agreed that the U.S. would come to rule the continent of North America by taking land from Mexico and from Native Americans. They wanted the state to use the army to clear new territories for expansion. The party split into two parties, and Democratic Party candidate Andrew Jackson was elected president in 1828. His first action was to support the “Indian Removal Act,” which was passed in 1830. Under Jackson and the next Democratic Party president, Martin Van Buren, 70,000 Native Americans east of the



*Between 1845 and 1849, Mexico lost half of its territory to the United States*

Mississippi were terrorized and driven out of their lands by the military. In 1845, Democratic Party president James Polk took the United States into a war with Mexico to acquire the territory from Texas to California. That summer, in a leading Democratic political magazine, the editor John O’Sullivan proclaimed that it was the U.S.’s

“manifest destiny to overspread the continent.” In other words, it was the so-called God-given right of the United States to dominate the continent of North America by force.

### Democratic Party Strategy

To maintain their hold over the government, the Democrats tried to play off the working class of the North against the Northern capitalists. They could oppose the capitalists’ economic policies because they had very different interests. They presented themselves as defenders of the Northern workers and small-farmers against the wealthy merchants. Since the 1790s, tradesmen and farmers in the North had organized into political clubs to fight against the policies of their employers in the Federalist Party. In most cases, workers did not have the right to vote. There were voting restrictions on those who did not own a minimum amount of property, or could not afford to pay a substantial tax at the polls. These laws were designed to keep workers and poor farmers from having any power in politics.

The Democrats were able to co-opt some of the farmers and workers by supporting a few of their demands – for a ten-hour day, and for voting rights for the property-less. Because of this, they could present themselves as champions of the poor in the North while they defended a system of brutal exploitation of slaves in the South. Not all workers were tricked into this alliance with the capitalists’ slave-owning cousins. Between 1828 and 1834, workers built

their own parties and ran worker-candidates in 61 cities, with some success. For the most part, however, the Democrats were able to control the Northern workers and farmers and incorporate their political activity into the Democratic Party.

---

# The Civil War

## The Democrats Fight to Maintain Slavery

The Northern merchants continued to expand industrial production, which increased their need for transportation, access to raw materials, and protection from more powerful European markets. Slave owners saw the harsh cotton-growing agriculture strip their plantations of fertile soil. They started to look for new lands in the South and West. The question was posed: Would the new territories be a space for industry and markets to develop or for slave-based plantations to expand? If Congress remained under the control of the Democrats, the slave-owners would control the wealth of the country. A deadly struggle was developing between the Northern industrialists and the Southern plantation-owners over which system of exploitation would rule in the new territories, and ultimately in the whole country.

The balance of forces was maintained, at least for the time being, because the capitalists in the North preferred to compromise with the Southern slave-owners. Pushing a conflict would upset trade and force a confrontation that the Northern merchants feared losing. The old Federalist Party had been reorganized in the 1830s as the Whig Party by Federalists who supported a policy of compromise with the Democrats. The Whigs opposed the Democrats in elections, criticized their policies, and argued that the new territories should be free from slavery, but they accepted the South's dominance based on the Three-Fifths Compromise. Step by step they gave in to the Democrats' demands. For example, in 1850, Whig president Millard Fillmore pushed for California and the other territories taken from Mexico to be made non-slave states. In return for the support of the Democrats, he signed the Fugitive Slave Act, which promised the aid of the federal government in tracking down slaves that escaped to non-slave states. This meant that even in states where slavery was illegal, a slave was still a slave and could be arrested and sent back to the slave-owner.

### The Anti-Slavery Struggle

The institution of slavery did not go unchallenged. The first opponents of slavery were the slaves themselves. The system of slavery was constantly under the threat

of a generalized slave rebellion. In 1791, Haitian slaves overthrew the French colonial administration in Haiti and set up their own government. The thought of a similar rebellion in the U.S. was an inspiration to slaves and a nightmare that haunted the slave-owners. Many small-scale rebellions took place. The largest on record occurred in 1811 when nearly five hundred slaves at a plantation near New Orleans took up arms and marched to neighboring plantations, attempting to launch a general slave rebellion. In 1822, a conspiracy for a major rebellion in South Carolina was organized by a freed slave named Denmark Vesey, but it was uncovered before it was launched. In 1831, a slave named Nat Turner led a famous slave rebellion in Virginia, which set the whole South on guard against other uprisings. In all cases, the rebellions were crushed by the military and the police, and the leaders and participants were executed.

There were also many people in the North who organized politically to fight for the abolition of slavery. These people were collectively known as the Abolitionist Movement. The abolitionists were led in the North by religious leaders such as the Quaker William Lloyd Garrison, and ex-slaves such as Frederick Douglass. The abolitionists produced a great amount of literature condemning slavery and arguing against it on moral grounds. Abolitionist ideas provided moral ammunition for those who opposed slavery. The Abolitionist Movement was never a mass force, but its criticism of the slave system threatened the Southern elite, who feared anything that might encourage the slave rebellions. In 1830, the U.S. Postmaster General banned abolitionist literature from being sent to the South. Schoolteachers who were suspected of being abolitionists were expelled from Southern states.

The struggle between the North and the South became impossible to contain in spite of the Whig Party's compromises. Bloody battles took place in the new territories. In 1855, Kansas became known as "Bleeding Kansas" because of conflicts between pro-slavery and anti-slavery settlers. In 1859, the abolitionist John Brown, who fought pro-slavery settlers in Kansas, led a raid on the

military armory of Harpers Ferry, Virginia (in present-day West Virginia). Brown hoped to take the armory and rally local slaves in a revolt. The attempt failed and John Brown was tried and executed, but the incident became a symbol of the conflict over slavery.

### Origins of the Republican Party

The conflicts outside of the political system led to a dramatic change in the two-party system. Many Northern capitalists were tired of compromise and wanted to weaken their opponents by striking at the heart of their system. They formed a new political party which was thoroughly opposed to the Democrats, the Republican Party. The Republican Party, like the Whig Party, fought for the economic interests of the Northern capitalists. Unlike the Whigs, however, the Republicans called for an end to the power of the Southern slaveholders to dominate the federal government. The Republicans started to use some of the abolitionists' moral condemnation of slavery in their rhetoric.

### Civil War

After the founding of the Republican Party, the conflict between Northern merchant elites and Southern Democrats came out into the open. In 1860, Abraham Lincoln, a Republican lawyer for the railroad companies, was elected President. Southern Democrats seceded from the Union when they saw that the Republicans were coming to power. Eleven Southern states from Texas to the Carolinas broke away to form the Confederate States of America. This began the Civil War. In fact, the Civil War took the shape of a revolution, led by the capitalists of the North against the political domination of the slave-holders. In order to destroy the slaveholders' power, the Republicans would be driven to destroy the system of slavery which was its basis.

The Civil War raged for over four years, and for much of that time it seemed that the North might be beaten by the South. The South had a more effective and experienced army. The most skilled army officers had been slave-owners from the South – an aristocratic plantation tradition. The North, however, had a weapon which it could use against the slave-owners' power. There were

four million African Americans living in the South under the Confederacy. The slaves already understood that the Civil War meant a shake-up for slavery. With the forces of repression off fighting the war, thousands of slaves left the plantations as the Northern army approached. This force of rebellious slaves could provide the forces the Northern capitalists needed to defeat the Southern slave-owners.

In 1863, Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing the slaves in the South. The Emancipation Proclamation was a military maneuver. It was a recognition that thousands of slaves had already freed themselves and constituted a powerful force in the conflict. By giving the signal that a Northern victory meant securing their freedom, the Republicans could use the newly freed slaves to shut down the Southern economy, cut the Confederate army's supply lines, and give the Union Army an overwhelming military advantage. Lincoln and the Republicans were by no means abolitionists. In fact, the Proclamation did not declare that all slaves would be freed, but only those in the states that had participated in the rebellion. This left slavery intact in the five slave states which remained in the Union.

After the Emancipation Proclamation, the Union Army prevailed and the South was occupied by Union troops. By the end of the war in 1865, Congress signed the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, outlawing the old form of slavery in the whole United States. The power of the slave-owners organized in the Democratic Party was effectively broken.



*Black soldiers in the Civil War*

---

# The Party of Racism and Terror in the South

President Lincoln was assassinated shortly after the war ended, and power passed to his Vice President Andrew Johnson, a Northern Democrat. Some Democrats in the North, like Johnson, rejected the Confederacy and supported the North during the war. They had supported the North, but they were not politically committed to seeking a radical restructuring of the South and preferred to make an alliance with the defeated slave-owners.

The Northern capitalists wanted to rebuild the South so that they could start shipping cotton and other agricultural products to Northern factories and cities. To do this they had to find people who could govern the South for them.

President Johnson pardoned the ex-slave-owners, returned their property, and gave them political control of the South. The ex-slaveholders immediately used their regained political power, as well as their wealth and ownership of the land, to re-institute slavery in all but name. They vetoed new state constitutions which gave African Americans the right to vote. For a short period of time, it seemed that the Southern plantation-owners would regain control of the South and the Civil War would begin again.

## Reconstruction

The Northern capitalists were unwilling to give political control back to the Southern plantation-owners whom they had just defeated. At first, the Republicans' attempt to impeach Johnson failed by one vote in Congress. Then, in the 1868 election, Republican Ulysses S. Grant, a general for the North in the Civil War, was elected president on a platform of radically restructuring the South to stop the ex-slave-owners.

The South was still occupied by the Union Army, and the North divided the South into military districts. Under Grant, anyone who had been involved in organizing or supporting the Confederacy in the Civil War was



*First Black Senator and Representatives during Reconstruction (1872)*

barred from holding office – this meant the majority of the plantation owners. Conventions were held to write new sets of laws and state constitutions. The Northern capitalists relied on the ex-slaves and poor white people to prevent the ex-slave-owners from exerting political control. This period, known as “Reconstruction,” is one of the most important democratic experiments in U.S. history.

For a brief period, the ruling class was suppressed, and it was up to the poor farmers and workers to make policy. What did they do? African Americans and poor and working class whites were elected to state governments, where they cooperated because they had the same goals and interests. They passed laws to improve their lives. They set up some of the first public schools in places like South Carolina. They built roads and bridges for small farmers. They ensured equal rights for white and African American citizens. The experiment of Reconstruction even reached the federal level. In 1869, there were two African American members of the U.S. Senate and twenty Congressmen. Congress passed a Fourteenth Amendment, which guaranteed equal rights for all races.

The plantation lands, however, were held by the federal government after the Civil War and returned to the ex-

slave-owners. The Republicans were willing to allow the ex-slaves to exercise new political rights, but they were not willing to overturn property relations in the South.

After the experience of Reconstruction, the Southern elite and their Democratic Party representatives made it clear to the North that they accepted the defeat of slavery and would not threaten the new order. Above all, the wealthy industrialists of the North wanted the South to be a stable source of agricultural produce. The Southern elite promised to meet this demand, and they struck a deal with the Northern industrialists.

The Reconstruction democracy was vulnerable because it had a fatal weakness: its existence rested on the protection afforded by the guns of the Union Army. It was the Union Army that had crushed the slaveholders

and opened a political space for the participation of African Americans and poor white people.

### A Reign of Terror

Throughout this period, big landowners and their Democratic Party representatives used their wealth and authority to organize paramilitary groups like the Ku Klux Klan. During the 1860s and 1870s, the KKK and other groups terrorized African Americans and poor white people who were politically organized. They beat those who resisted, burned their homes, and lynched people. The violence was designed to reverse the gains that poor people had made during Reconstruction and to use racism to drive a wedge between the races. Southern plantation owners still owned the land and rented it out

to sharecroppers in return for a big part of the produce, and they wanted to maintain this system. In 1877, the Union Army was withdrawn from the South, leaving the Reconstruction governments at the mercy of the Southern plantation owners.

The Democratic Party was re-organized by the plantation owners to take back the state and federal legislatures. The Democrats recaptured the Southern states and took their place alongside the Republicans in Congress. They passed many state-level laws in the South known collectively as the Jim Crow laws. These laws institutionalized the system of cradle-to-grave segregation that had been established by violence and effectively stripped African Americans from having any voice in the political system. And in 1896, with the Plessy v. Ferguson decision, the Supreme Court effectively reversed the Fourteenth Amendment, legalizing a system that denied African Americans equal rights to education, housing, and jobs, turning an entire population into second-class citizens. The population of the South had been divided and conquered by force, and the Democrats were re-integrated into the political system as the party of racism and terror. The most democratic experiment in U.S. history died at their hands.



*"Worse than Slavery" – A Thomas Nast cartoon from 1874 on the reassertion of white supremacy in the South*

---

# 1877-1914

## Keeping the Working Class Under Control

Victory for the North in 1865 meant a victory for industrial capitalism. During the decades following the Civil War, industry expanded rapidly across the continent with the help of government subsidies, trade protection against foreign industry, and the development of transportation, particularly the railroad. The agricultural goods of the South were no longer shipped for manufacture to English factories. The resources of the South were at the disposal of Northern industry. American industrialists began to look for foreign markets to sell their goods. The Democrats became the loyal opposition to the Republican policies of industrial development and imperialism, and they continued to try to control the working class.

Most industrial capitalists supported the Republican Party, which favored tariffs, internal development, and imperial wars – everything that could protect and extend their markets. The Democratic Party was able to represent another group of American capitalists engaged in overseas trading, banking, and railroads along with the traditional Southern elite. These capitalists, known as the Bourbon Democrats, opposed the Republicans because of the tariffs, high taxes, and imperial wars – everything that might upset or slow down the day-to-day functioning of the market. They represented a different leadership team in case a majority of the capitalists wanted to change its strategy.

### **The Working Class and the Democratic Party Machine**

During this time, many American farmers could not afford the agricultural machinery they needed to compete in the market. They were forced to sell their farms to the larger landowners and moved to the cities, becoming workers in the rapidly expanding industrial sector. Alongside the American workers, many immigrants – people from Ireland, Italy, Eastern Europe, China and elsewhere – began to work in the factories, in the mines, and on the railroads.

The cities swelled with this influx of population made up of both immigrants and those born in the U.S. From

1860 to 1914, New York grew from 150,000 people to four million. Chicago went from 110,000 people to two million, and Philadelphia went from 650,000 to one and a half million people. This created a large working class made up of both immigrants and native-born Americans.

The Democrats controlled these new communities of industrial workers through the growth of their so-called political machines, which traded votes for favors. If you wanted your garbage taken out or your streets swept, you had to pay with your vote. If you wanted a job or a house in a particular neighborhood, you had to make a deal with the local political boss. The Democratic Party machines in cities like Chicago, Boston and New York made sure that workers voted for the Democratic Party, or else they would make it difficult to receive housing and basic municipal services.

The Democrats played their most important role in responding to the challenge that the working class posed to the capitalists. With the growth of capitalist industry came the resistance of workers to their exploitation. Capitalism has an inherent tendency to break down in what are called crises of overproduction – when profits and investments by the capitalists sometimes result in production being much greater than what can actually be sold. This causes the whole system to come to a grinding halt. When goods are overproduced, people are thrown out of work and have no wages to buy the goods they produced. This traps the economy in a vicious cycle of layoffs and decreasing buying power. These periodic depressions meant hunger, insecurity, and misery for many workers.

### **1877: Workers on Strike**

The year 1873 marked the beginning of a deep economic depression. By 1877, the workers and farmers of the North were in rebellion. The owners of the railroads attempted to use the depression to reduce railway workers' wages. This touched off a huge railroad workers' strike. It was the biggest coordinated action that workers in the U.S. had ever taken till then – the Great Upheaval of 1877. The strike crossed the country from coast to

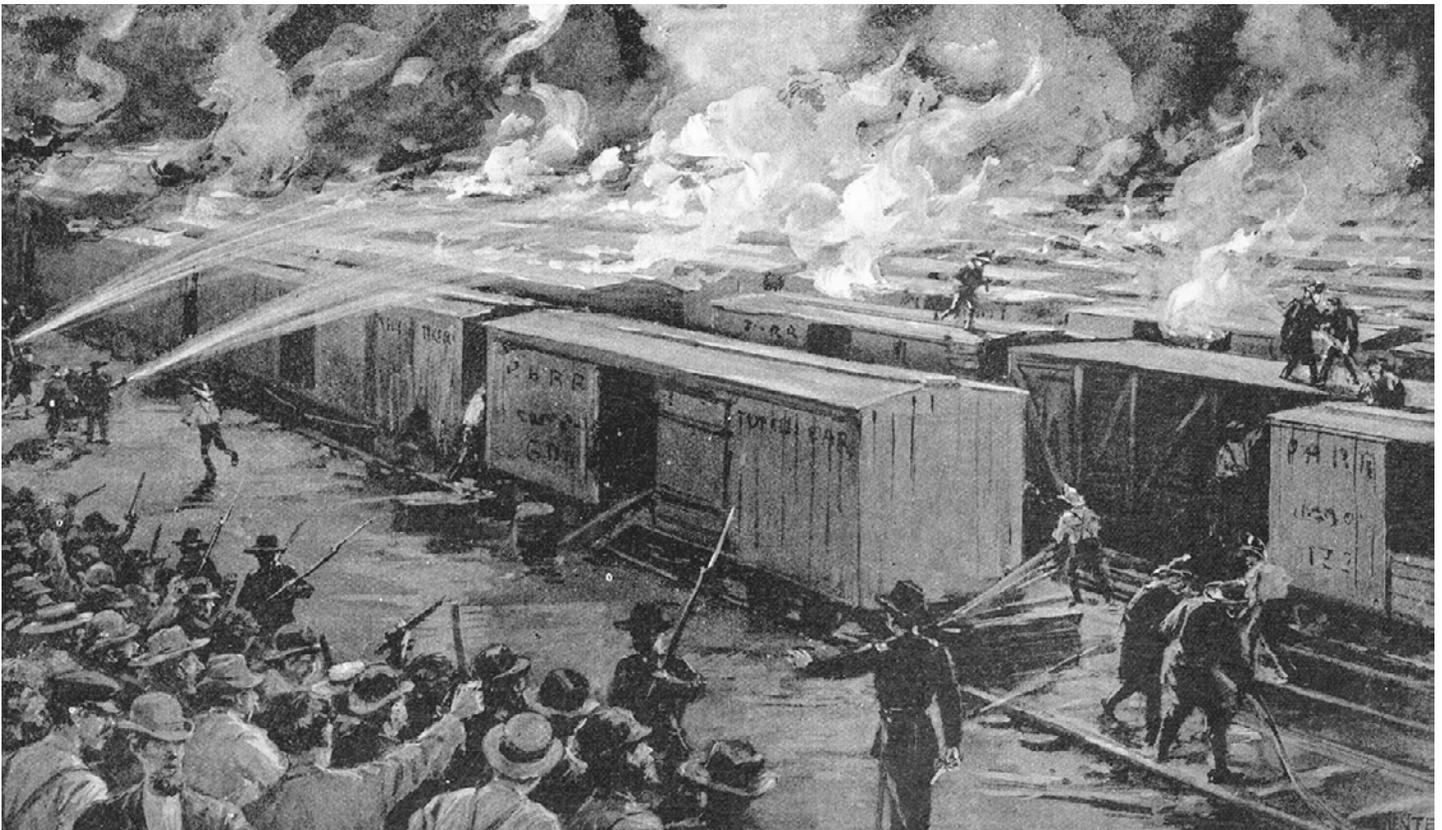
coast at the speed of the railroad, pulling railway workers and other sections of the working class into action. The strike shut down whole cities as more workers joined. The Northern industrialists called on the Republican government to suppress the rebellious workers. The state repression against the strike was brutal. Federal troops, fresh from the South, were sent to suppress workers and re-assert the control of the bosses. Cities full of striking workers were besieged by government troops. One hundred people were killed in clashes with the police and army, and a thousand were jailed.

The railway corporations backed down on the wage-cuts, but the government built up military defenses against the workers to protect the capitalists against future strikes. National Guard barracks or armories were built in the major cities with fortified positions to fire on the workers. The strike shook American capitalists to the core.

Now that the workers had shown their power on a national scale it was essential for the capitalists, both North and South, to divert workers' energies away from mass organizing. The Democratic Party stepped in to play this role. During the 1880s, Democrats even criticized

the Republicans for being the tools of big business. The Democrats were a minority in Congress and didn't hold the presidency, so they could blame the problems on the Republicans and seem like a real alternative.

Many workers saw through the policies of the Democrats. After the Great Upheaval of 1877, workers began to organize on a more political basis in their own interests. The Socialist Party of the U.S. was formed in 1901 from a number of smaller revolutionary groups. Revolutionary workers also began to form radical unions, especially amongst unskilled immigrants and the poorer layers of the working class. The most important development was the IWW (Industrial Workers of the World), founded in 1905 with the goal of organizing workers, not just for better wages and conditions, but also for revolution. The IWW was an industrial union embracing all workers in any given industry, regardless of their skill, race, or gender. By 1912 it had an estimated 50,000 industrial workers organized in its ranks, particularly in the Pacific Northwest. Between the Socialist Party and the IWW, a significant section of the working class was becoming conscious of its own interests.



*Burning of freight cars in the 1877 Great Upheaval*

---

# World War I

## The Democrats' War for Imperialism

The economic expansion happening within the U.S. was also taking place in the economies of Europe. The European capitalist states were engaged in a world-wide competition for resources and markets. Each country expanded its military forces to protect its domain and increase its influence. Eventually the competition for control resulted in an open military conflict – World War I. Germany had been clashing with other European powers as it made attempts to get into the markets of China and to acquire the raw materials of Africa. Germany and its allies finally went to war against France, Britain, and Russia in 1914. Before long, much of Europe was in flames.

The American capitalists initially preferred to stay out of the conflict in Europe. They were content to sell goods to both sides and watch their European competitors rip each other apart. The ruling class was mostly anti-war because it could profit from its so-called neutrality. The Republicans took a more pro-war stance, and so the seemingly anti-war stance of the Democrats resonated with the population, who did not want to be dragged into the war. Most Americans saw World War I as a purely European affair – nothing Americans should be a part of. Democratic Party candidate for president Woodrow Wilson spoke against the entrance of the United States into World War I and won the election.

### Democrats Take the U.S. to War

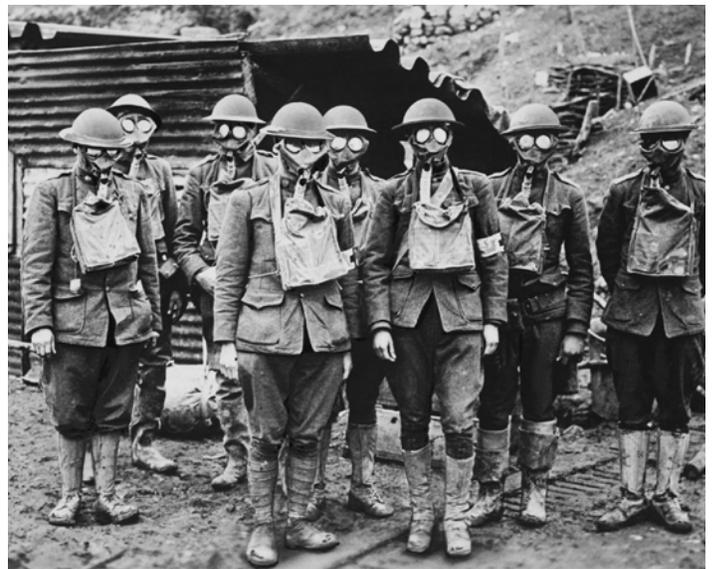
Wilson began his presidency with the support of anti-war public opinion and substantial portions of the capitalist class who didn't want to risk entering into a war. By 1917, however, even the most cautious American capitalists had seen that the war in Europe would decide the future control of the world's resources. The United States had also entered yet another economic crisis, with industry overproducing and markets over-saturated with goods. Spending tax dollars on war production offered a way out of the economic crisis. Wilson and other politicians began making the case that the U.S. would enter the war to "make the world safe for democracy." The Democratic Party shifted its policy. In 1917, even though Wilson

was elected on an anti-war platform, he took the United States into World War I.

### The Workers' Movement Responds

Millions of Americans actively opposed the war and organized mass demonstrations in major cities. Revolutionaries had anticipated the entry of the U.S. into the war, and were at the center of organizing against it. The Wilson administration met the anti-war movement with severe repression. The repression was directed at all dissent, making it a crime to criticize the war. Anyone involved in the revolutionary movement or associated with it was persecuted. Anti-war activists, socialists, and anarchists were jailed. Socialist Party presidential candidate Eugene Debs ran for office opposing the war while he was in jail. More than two hundred revolutionaries were deported to Russia.

The repression struck major blows against the workers' movement. In 1917, however, a new element was added to world politics: there was a workers' revolution in Russia. American workers involved in the Socialist Party and the IWW looked to Russia as an example of how to fight on a political level to finally overthrow the capitalists, their political parties, and their state. Despite the intense repression, the most militant socialists and IWW activists



*US soldiers in France during WWI*

started to group themselves together, and by 1919 the U.S. Communist Party was formed. This party gathered some of the best organizers from the workers' movement. It represented a political voice which had the potential to finally break the hold that the Democrats had on the working class and the poor of the United States.

World War I raged across Europe until Germany and its allies were finally defeated in November 1918. The United States came out of World War I with an advantage over Europe – the war had not taken place on its territory. Despite that advantage, 50,000 Americans had died and a whole generation had experienced the horrors of war.

The war improved the economy for the capitalists. They profited from selling weapons and resources to both sides during the war, and benefited from wartime spending. The value of stockholders' investments increased by 16.4 percent. Workers' conditions remained poor in comparison. Wages in manufacturing only went up 1.4 percent. Deaths on the job averaged 25,000 per year and 100,000 were permanently disabled by accidents. During this time, workers, many of them demobilized soldiers, organized major strikes from Seattle to the Carolinas. The newly formed Communist Party actively organized workers, especially in the South, where the labor movement hadn't reached before.

---

## The Great Depression

### Roosevelt and the Democrats Save Capitalism

The year 1929 saw the onset of a major crisis in the economy, the Great Depression. The capitalist system, based on accelerating production, again reached a barrier as markets overflowed with products. The economy crashed and millions were thrown out of work. People faced unemployment and hunger amidst enormous wealth. The breakdown of the system led to a great revolt by U.S. workers in the 1930s and 1940s. The political representatives of the capitalists, both Democrats and Republicans, were confronted with the challenge of both restarting the economy and keeping

the population from challenging the capitalist system.

On the world scale, another threat to the system was looming in the form of another world war. Germany was re-arming and rebuilding its industry. German capitalism, with Adolph Hitler and the Nazis in control, threatened to make another grab for territory and challenge Britain, France, and the U.S. for a place in the world market. Likewise, the Japanese capitalists were rapidly developing industry and military ambition, threatening to become a regional power in Asia. The lines were being drawn between capitalist countries for another worldwide conflict over the world's resources. To secure a place for U.S. capitalism and imperialism, the capitalists in the U.S. would need to mobilize the population of the U.S. to fight.

### The New Deal

The Great Depression hit with the Republicans still in office. The situation called for drastic measures, and the Democrats were ideally placed to criticize the Republicans for their non-intervention in the U.S. economy and in the world. The Democrats ran Franklin D. Roosevelt as their presidential candidate in 1932. Roosevelt was a wealthy senator from New York who had served as Assistant Secretary of the Navy. He was recast as a man of the people, ready to save the nation from greed and corruption. He campaigned under the slogan of "the New



*Breadline during the Great Depression*



*West Coast Longshoremen Strike of 1934*

Deal,” promising a change from previous administrations. The New Deal signaled a major change in the way the Democratic Party presented itself. It proposed major government spending in order to restart the economy, and instead of resisting the growing workers’ movement, it proposed some reforms to pull workers out of severe poverty and unemployment. People responded to Roosevelt’s appeal with overwhelming support in the elections.

### **Workers Organize**

People didn’t just sit and wait for a savior to come rescue them, though. Workers started organizing and acting to meet their needs directly. People seized food from stores and warehouses to feed the hungry. Under the leadership of the Communist Party, people organized unemployed councils all over the country, with membership in the tens of thousands. Unemployed councils blocked evictions, pressured authorities to keep workers’ gas and water turned on when they were late on the bills, and fought discrimination against African Americans and immigrants. In Seattle, fishermen caught fish and traded for firewood cut from the forests. Doctors, nurses, barbers, and seamstresses traded their skills for goods, and essentially showed that the only thing that wasn’t working in society was an economy based on profit-making.

In 1934, the working class launched a series of strikes involving a million and a half workers in San Francisco, California; Minneapolis, Minnesota; and Toledo, Ohio. The three big strikes inspired workers all over the country. The workers’ struggles forced Roosevelt and the

Democrats to write legislation that appeared to respond to the demands of the movement. Roosevelt passed the Wagner Act of 1935 that set up the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). Under the Wagner Act workers working in the private sector had the legal right to form unions and enter into collective bargaining through the NLRB. The bosses didn’t want to have to deal with the unions and preferred to have the government mediate if the unions couldn’t be stopped outright. The NLRB was easier to control than striking workers who felt their power.

The Democrats played the leading role in establishing labor laws to control workers’ organizing activity. Legalizing union organizing and bargaining meant creating laws that institutionalized the power of union officials. If workers decided to carry out a job action when the bosses broke a contract, the bosses could use the NLRB to say that the workers were breaking the law. Union officials who had negotiated the contract were legally bound to say that the workers’ actions were illegal. If they didn’t enforce the contract against the workers, the officials could face legal charges and lose their power over the union. This became especially important in the late 1930s and 1940s, with the workers’ movement creating industrial unions.

In 1936, a new sort of strike swept the country – the “sit-down” strike. The sit-downs were started by striking workers in the rubber plants of Akron, Ohio. Rather than leaving the factory, they sat down at their machines and refused to leave. The workers could essentially hold the factory hostage in a sit-down, making it impossible for the bosses to restart production with replacement workers (known as scabs). The largest sit-down strike took place from 1936-1937 at the General Motors (GM) plants in Flint, Michigan. For 44 days the workers of Flint occupied the plants, shutting down the GM empire. After Flint, strikes flared across the country in record numbers. The strikes were so enormous that the Democratic Party and Roosevelt stepped in and set up mediation with the unions in order to get the workers to call off their strikes.

The strike waves weren’t only a revolt against the bosses and their Great Depression. The workers were also rebelling against the old structure of craft unions. Skilled workers had been organized since 1886 in the American Federation of Labor. The AFL avoided strikes and relied on the highly marketable skills of its membership

to bargain for wages and rights. But the AFL saw the power of the strike wave and put together an industrial organizing committee, headed by John L. Lewis of the United Mine Workers, to organize new industrial unions. Lewis took this committee and formed the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). It embraced all workers regardless of their level of skill or their race. This was the new union structure, industrial unionism, which the thousands of newly organized and militant workers claimed as their own. Organizers from the Communist Party played an important role in building the new CIO unions. Everywhere, workers were winning contracts, building unions, and joining the CIO.

The CIO was built by the militancy of the workers, but it soon became a structure that could also contain them. The CIO began to tighten control of its membership, discouraging strikes and militancy. Lewis issued a statement to the bosses saying, "A CIO contract is adequate protection against sit-downs, lie-downs, or any other kind of strike."

There was no mass organization that could give the workers a different perspective. The Communist Party might have been able to organize a real opposition to the policies of Lewis and the CIO. It was by far the most important political organization in the working class. However, it had been dramatically affected by events in Russia. The Russian Revolution was a workers' revolution, but it had taken place in a poor, underdeveloped country. The revolutionaries had believed that the Russian example would spark other revolutions in the industrialized countries of Europe. Workers all over Europe made a number of revolutionary attempts but none succeeded. The exhausted Russian working class received no help and fell away from power. A layer of bureaucrats, led by Joseph Stalin, grew and took power. This grouping used its power to defend the national interests of Russia as opposed to extending the revolution internationally, and it increasingly took privileges of power and wealth for itself. Everywhere in the world, Stalin and his forces transformed the Communist parties into tools of Russian foreign policy.

In the U.S., as in many countries, the bureaucracy took control of the Communist Party and transformed it from a party of workers' revolution to a tool of the bureaucracy. In 1935, the Communist Party came out in full support of the Democrats and Roosevelt because it hoped to make

an alliance with the U.S. against the growing threat of Germany. The Communist Party had led many of the key fights of the workers from the beginning of the strike wave. However, the Communist Party's policy of support for Lewis, Roosevelt and the Democrats during the period of the 1930s meant that there was no organized opposition to the Democrats' policies of co-opting the workers' struggle.

## World War II

In 1939, World War II began when Germany sent its armies into neighboring Poland. France and Great Britain responded by declaring war. The Democrats under Roosevelt took up where Woodrow Wilson had left off and argued for using U.S. military might to secure influence around the world and protect American imperialism. The U.S. capitalists were already concerned



*Woolworth Workers' Strike of 1937*

about the rise of Japan and its invasion of China in 1937. Roosevelt pushed for a direct military intervention in Europe against Germany, and in Asia against Japan. In 1941, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. The direct attack on U.S. territory gave Roosevelt the excuse to rally the population for war.

In Europe, the entry of the U.S., along with the resistance of the Russian population to the German invasion, defeated the German forces. After the war, the representatives of the victors – Stalin for Russia, Roosevelt for the U.S., and Winston Churchill for Britain – met at Yalta in Ukraine to carve up the world markets. Russia was allowed to impose its control over Eastern Europe and the eastern part of Germany. The U.S. and Britain made agreements to divide the resource-rich areas in the

Middle East, Africa and Asia. The territories that Britain had dominated came under the control of the United States. For example, Saudi Arabia received aid from the U.S. and in return, ARAMCO (short for Arabian American Oil Company) received the right to exploit the oil of the region. This began the U.S. support for the Saudi regime, a brutal religious monarchy that wouldn't last a week if the U.S. weren't supplying it with money, weapons, and the occasional military intervention.

Roosevelt also used World War II to pull the U.S. economy out of its tailspin. Roosevelt ordered a wage freeze for workers while U.S. industry expanded rapidly to meet the needs of the war. Union officials, with the support of the Democratic Party and its NLRB, had established nationwide bureaucracies based on the new industrial unions. Most who headed the unions agreed to accept a "No-Strike Pledge," supposedly to aid in the war effort. Where the workers refused to abide by the pledge, police and National Guard forces were called out. Before troops ever landed in Japan or Europe, Roosevelt ordered federal troops to crush strikes by workers in the United States. And after the war was over, the Taft-Hartley Act passed in 1947, allowing the government to more easily forbid and break up strikes.

### **Post-War America**

Overall, American capitalism boomed with the opening of enormous military markets and guaranteed profits bought and paid for by the state. At the height of wartime production, military contracts represented 34 percent of the GDP (Gross Domestic Product). The war economy set up in World War II has been maintained ever since under Democratic as well as Republican leadership, with an average of \$278 billion in annual spending on the military since World War II. Using this permanent war economy, the capitalists in the U.S. have maintained profits that otherwise would have been impossible.

The middle of the twentieth century saw a major change in the social structure of the country. The racism that kept African Americans as second-class citizens was being shaken from the top and from below. A reform of the racist system was becoming necessary for the capitalists themselves. The industrial boom of the 1940s opened up new opportunities for African Americans to escape the Jim Crow South. During World War II,

many African Americans moved out of the South to the industrial centers of the North and West to work in the war economy. The U.S. was criticized around the world for its racism, especially by oppressed peoples fighting against colonialism and by the Soviet Union. The U.S. portrayed itself as a beacon of freedom and democracy in the world, especially where it attempted to extend its influence in Africa and Asia. The terrorized and disenfranchised African American population in the South exposed the falseness of this claim. Under Roosevelt, local Democratic Party politicians in the South maintained their racist order, but nationally the Party began promising reforms. The Democrats' promises and the new opportunities opening up resonated with African Americans' hopes, and, where African Americans could vote, they began to vote for the Democrats. Meanwhile, the racism directed at Japanese Americans reached brutal proportions. During the war, Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, forcing over 100,000 Japanese Americans into internment camps.

Certainly not everyone thought that voting for Democrats was the way to make change. In 1941, the Sleeping-Car Porters Union, led by A. Philip Randolph, threatened a massive march of African Americans on Washington to address racism. In 1943, Harlem exploded in riots protesting substandard housing and job discrimination. This response to racism was hardly what the Democrats had in mind when they aimed to reform the system of segregation in the South.

Roosevelt died in 1945 while still in office. The presidency passed to his vice president, Harry S. Truman. The Democrats after Roosevelt were faced with a new set of challenges. They needed to maintain the wartime economic boom and secure the post-war world for exploitation by American corporations and also contain the rising tide of the Civil Rights Movement.

The New Deal and Roosevelt are talked about today in glowing terms. Roosevelt is remembered as a savior of the working class. But it was the working class who fought for and won the concessions that the Democratic Party has taken credit for. Some politicians and pundits will say that we need another Roosevelt and another New Deal. Roosevelt's goal, however, was to save the system and secure a leading role for the U.S. against the other major capitalist powers in the world.

---

# Harry S. Truman – The First Cold War President

President Truman maintained the imperialist policies established under Roosevelt. He also oversaw the end of World War II and began the Cold War, a struggle against the Soviet Union but also against domestic opposition and independence movements in the rest of the world.

During the final stages of World War II, Truman ordered atomic bombs to be dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan. The most horrible weapons known to humanity instantly killed 200,000 civilians. It was well known prior to the bombings that the Japanese were going to surrender, but Truman wanted to use the bomb to show the rest of the world that the U.S. was willing to use devastating force to secure and keep control of the world's resources.

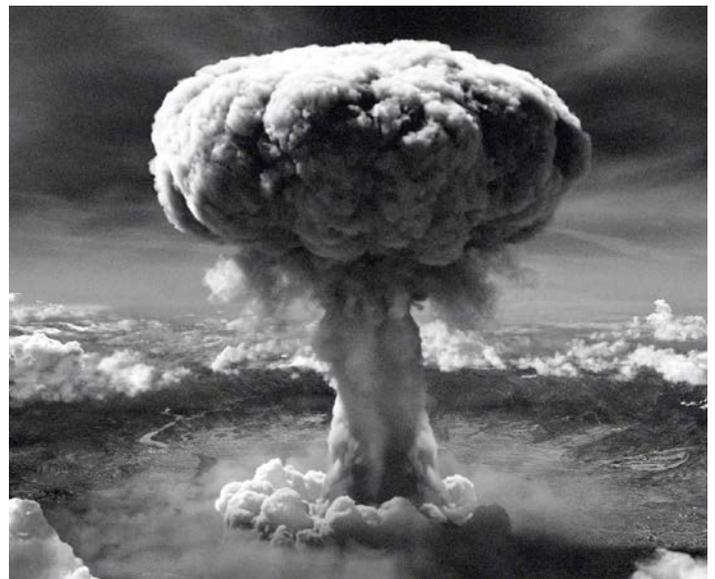
After World War II, Europe was weakened and the Soviet Union and the U.S. were left as the two major powers in the world. Even though the Soviet Union had degenerated, it still represented a force which stood outside of the bounds of capitalism. In spite of the Stalinist bureaucracy's betrayal of the working class, the Soviet Union was at the very least a check against imperialism. The 40 years after World War II were marked by the struggle between the U.S. and the Soviet Union known as the Cold War. After World War II, nationalist movements erupted in the former colonial countries of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, aimed at achieving national independence from the old colonial regimes. The Soviet Union supported them, hoping to weaken the imperialist countries by depriving them of access to markets and raw materials. The U.S. supported the old European colonial powers or intervened directly in countries like Korea, Vietnam and Cuba to establish and maintain its power and also to counter the influence of Soviet Union.

Domestically the Cold War was used as a means to attack the unions and the workers. The Communist Party was painted as a grave internal threat, even though most of the working class and its organizations had supported Roosevelt and the War, and even though the CP had done everything it could to shackle the workers to the Democratic Party with the help of the union bureaucracy.

In 1949, over 140 leaders of the Communist Party were jailed under the Smith Act. The leading figure in these Cold War witch-hunts was Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy. Under McCarthy, the unions were purged of anyone who had ever been linked to the Communists or radical politics. Communists and radicals of all stripes were forced out of the same unions that they had played a major role in building. Thousands of workers were put on blacklists circulated among employers, which made it impossible for them to find work.

By 1949, the foreign policies of the Democratic Party and the Republican Party were almost identical. The difference between the parties was a matter of presentation and which illusions the parties would draw on to get people's support. The Roosevelt era, however, left the Democrats with a pro-worker image (even though the Southern Democrats remained thoroughly committed to racist segregation). The Republicans appeared to be tougher on communism.

The Cold War gave the Republicans a means to win the election of 1952 and reclaim the presidency. Dwight Eisenhower, the Republican candidate, used Cold War rhetoric to criticize the Democratic Party for being weak in defending Americans against the Soviet Union. The Democrats wouldn't return to the presidency until 1961.



*The Atomic bombing of Hiroshima*

---

# John F. Kennedy – A False Hope For Change

John F. Kennedy was the next Democratic Party president after Truman. The Democrats under Kennedy argued that Eisenhower had let the United States fall behind the Soviet Union in the Cold War. Kennedy shared the same politics as his predecessors. During the 1950s, he was one of the most rabid Cold War anti-communists, urging the government to push out and prosecute Communists as a domestic threat. Kennedy proposed that his foreign policy would be tougher on communism than Eisenhower's. In 1961, Kennedy presided over the failed Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba by a Cuban exile army that was armed and organized by the United States. He was also directly responsible for increasing U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

Vietnam, once a French colony, was one of many places in the world where people rose up and attempted to throw off the domination of the imperialist powers. Every success by the oppressed gave inspiration to people fighting elsewhere in the world. In Vietnam, the U.S. had supported the French since 1954 because they feared the consequences of a victory for the Vietnamese. The U.S. military maintained a string of military bases in the Philippines, Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea. If Vietnam successfully kicked out the French, the U.S. feared that it

could inspire these other countries to do the same to the U.S. military.

While the Democrats were fighting the Cold War, a major social movement was beginning to grow among the African American population. African American veterans had experienced a world in Europe where white people were not raised to be racist. They had seen that racism was not natural, and that it was possible to live in a society without a racial caste system. The migration of hundreds of thousands of African Americans to the cities, employment in industry, and the experience of the war had all broadened many African Americans' perspective. They were going to fight for changes they wanted. The impact of these pressures was reflected in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, in which the Supreme Court struck down the "separate but equal" doctrine that had been the legal basis of segregation since the 1890s. The Supreme Court did not set any sort of plan to desegregate the South, but African Americans themselves did. They launched protests and boycotts, notably the Montgomery bus boycott, which forced local governments and employers to address some of the problems of racism.

In 1960, students in North Carolina decided to sit-in to integrate the lunch counter at the local Woolworth's. This form of direct action spread in a matter of weeks to fifteen cities in five Southern states. Over 3,600 of the participants were jailed for some time, but by sheer force of numbers, they forced the lunch counters to accept integration. According to the Department of Justice, there were 1,412 demonstrations in only three months of 1963. That same year, civil rights organizers planned a march on Washington, at which 200,000 demonstrators came to the capital. President Kennedy, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, and other national Democratic Party leaders had ignored calls for federal intervention when civil rights activists were brutally assaulted and even killed by the KKK and cops in the South. But they knew that the world was watching, and finally moved to embrace the Civil Rights Movement and pretend to be on the side of the demonstrators.



*Lunch counter sit-in, 1961*

---

# Lyndon Johnson – The Vietnam War President

Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, and Vice President Lyndon Johnson took over. Johnson continued Kennedy's foreign and domestic policies. His most important role was escalating the U.S. military presence in Vietnam to a full-scale war. Domestically he was confronted with the growing upsurge of the Civil Rights Movement and the growth of a major anti-war movement.

In 1964, the Johnson administration manufactured an excuse for a large-scale invasion by manipulating the news of events happening in Vietnam. Johnson claimed that U.S. ships had been attacked while patrolling the Gulf of Tonkin. Johnson portrayed this as an unprovoked attack on U.S. personnel. In fact, those ships had been deep in North Vietnamese waters and the attack was a fabrication – it never happened. Johnson wanted a reason to go to war, and with the help of the news media, he sold the Gulf of Tonkin events to the American people as another Pearl Harbor. Congress almost unanimously passed a resolution to go to war on the basis of this lie. A draft was instituted to fill the ranks of the army and fight the war. The U.S. sent 200,000 troops to Vietnam in 1964, 200,000 more in 1966, and by 1968 there were 500,000 U.S. troops fighting in Vietnam. The U.S. military policy was to terrorize the population into submission.

## The Civil Rights Movement

As the war on Vietnam escalated, the struggle of African Americans against racism intensified. In 1964 Civil Rights organizations called for a massive voter registration drive and other actions in Mississippi. During that summer, groups of young people went to Mississippi and faced extreme violence from local racists. Activists hoped that by throwing their bodies on the line they would bring attention to the crimes happening in the South. Three organizers were killed in cold blood with the help of the police department in Philadelphia, Mississippi. As under Kennedy, no action on the part of Johnson to defend civil rights organizers was forthcoming.

As in most of the South, Black people in Mississippi were effectively banned from registering to vote. The state and local governments used discriminatory practices and

violence to prevent African Americans from registering. So, in the summer of 1964, a group of civil rights activists formed the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) and held a convention to elect 64 delegates to the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey in August. They played by all the rules of the national Democratic Party and appealed to be seated in place of the segregated official Mississippi Democratic Party. But the national party, led by Johnson, Hubert Humphrey, and Walter Mondale, refused and offered the MFDP two token non-voting seats, allowing the racist Mississippi Democrats to keep their seats, even telling the MFDP which of their two delegates would get the two token seats. The MFDP refused the offer and the following year lobbied Congress to replace the official Mississippi Senators and Representatives, who had been elected in violation of federal law. This effort failed as well.

The federal government under Johnson's leadership tried to channel the movement into the legal system. In 1965, Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act, which ensured access to the ballot box, dismantling local laws designed to block African Americans from voting. If they could get people to believe that the Democrats represented what they wanted, they could keep them from acting for themselves. In the years that followed, a



*Civil Rights protester attacked by Birmingham police, 1963*

growing number of middle class African Americans ran for public office across the country at the local, state, and federal levels, and became part of the Democratic Party establishment.

Even while the Johnson administration was trying to placate the Civil Rights Movement by passing legislation, the ghettos exploded with anger. In 1964, a demonstration in Harlem erupted in a riot that lasted for three days. In 1965, the Los Angeles ghetto of Watts exploded in an enormous rebellion for five days. In the summer of 1967, a wave of riots took place, the largest in Detroit and Newark. A Congressional inquiry reported eight major uprisings that summer as well as 33 riots and 123 “minor” disorders. African Americans had undergone a shift in consciousness through their struggle for their basic rights. The slogan changed from “Civil Rights” to “Black Power.” It was a new spirit – what the elite were not willing to give peacefully, people were ready to demand by force.

Many people in the United States drew connections between the Civil Rights struggle and the Vietnam War. In 1966, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, one of the most important Civil Rights organizations, issued a statement against the war and called for the troops to come home. In 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., one of the chief spokespeople of the

Civil Rights Movement, came out against the Vietnam War, calling the U.S. “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today.” The connections between, war, racism, capitalism, and U.S. foreign policy became more and more obvious.

The anti-war movement grew along with the war itself. It was often led by white, middle class college students, many of whom faced being drafted into the military. Anti-war demonstrations of hundreds of thousands got world headlines.

But the most important resistance took place in the military. Many soldiers had been politicized by their involvement in the Civil Rights struggle. Why should they fight the Vietnamese when the people who were oppressing them were back in the United States? Soldiers circulated underground newspapers throughout the front. They began refusing to fight. Angry soldiers rolled grenades into the tents of their commanding officers. Thousands deserted the army. In 1967 alone, 47,000 soldiers were reported “missing in action.” Young men who had been drafted began refusing to report. In 1966, there were 380 people prosecuted for avoiding the draft. By the end of the 1960s, the number of young men refusing to serve was 33,960. Between 50,000 and 100,000 draftees fled to Canada or Europe to escape being sent to Vietnam.



*Protest against the Vietnam War in Philadelphia*

---

## 1968 – A Year of Struggles

The year 1968 presented a crisis for the ruling class and the Democratic Party. The North Vietnamese launched the Tet Offensive on January 30, the Vietnamese New Year. Vietnamese forces struck at the U.S. army in over a hundred cities and launched a major assault on the capital, Saigon. At the height of the attack, the National Liberation Front flag flew over the U.S. embassy in Saigon. The attack was a deep shock to the American public, who were growing increasingly opposed to the war. The politicians were telling them that it was nearly over and the U.S. was nearing victory. The Tet Offensive showed that this was an outright lie.

Then Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in April. Immediately, the inner cities of the United States erupted with anger. Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Kansas City, Newark, Washington, D.C. and many other cities were in flames as people expressed their outrage. By the end of the summer, 125 different American cities had seen urban rebellions. The local police forces could not be relied upon to contain the rebellions, and National Guard troops were flown in from other states.

The Democrats struggled to react to these major challenges to their authority. A section of the party began to see the war as too costly to maintain. Major newspapers and TV networks began to reflect their corporate owners' questioning of the war and became critical of the government's policy. The Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, and the urban rebellions made capitalists understand that they could no longer rely on the population to fight a war abroad and that they also faced a growing resistance at home. Still, a good deal was invested in the war, and sections of the capitalist class refused to accept defeat in Vietnam and were unwilling to make concessions to the Black movement.

The year 1968 was also an election year. The Democratic primaries became an electoral contest between those who wanted to change policy, and those who wanted to stay the course. There were two candidates who came out against the war: the little-known Senator Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota, and the much more famous Senator Robert F. Kennedy (JFK's brother) of New York. Both Kennedy and McCarthy had served

long terms in various government positions. McCarthy was a senator on the fringes of the Democratic Party. He had been a consistent critic of the Vietnam War. The first primary election was in New Hampshire. Young supporters of McCarthy poured into the state. Johnson won 49% of the vote but McCarthy won 42%. McCarthy's strong showing caused many leaders in the Democratic Party to reconsider their attitude towards the anti-war movement. It motivated Robert Kennedy to renounce his support for Johnson and declare his candidacy.

Robert Kennedy was part of the wealthy Kennedy family and had served as Attorney General during his brother's administration, and later as a senator from New York. He had not uttered a word of public opposition



*U.S. cities in flames after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in April 1968*

to the Vietnam War. After the New Hampshire primary, Kennedy came out against the war. The usual arguments were made to excuse his late-coming anti-war convictions: that he was being pragmatic and was only trying to stay what his supporters called “electable” before 1968.

The introduction of anti-war candidates split the Democratic Party. Some politicians were impressed with McCarthy and Kennedy’s popular stance on the war and wanted a shift in policy, but a substantial portion of the party apparatus, especially its local city and state government officials, supported Johnson and the continuation of the war. With the party split three ways, and his popularity falling in opinion polls, Lyndon Johnson appeared on television two weeks after the New Hampshire primary and announced that he would not run in the election. Many Southern Democratic politicians broke away and supported third-party candidate George Wallace, the militantly racist governor of Alabama.

This election was a major focus, even a distraction for some of the people who had been engaged in the social movements in the 1960s. On the one hand they were excited to see their views reflected by establishment politicians McCarthy and Kennedy. It was amazing for people in the movement to see Lyndon Johnson decline to run because of the pressure against him and the war. People felt that they were truly changing things because the politicians were changing their tune. They failed to

see that the emergence of anti-war candidates was yet another attempt by the Democrats to co-opt people’s energy. People were being fooled yet again by the same old promise of politicians who were supposedly on their side. Then in May, Robert F. Kennedy, who had won the California primary over Eugene McCarthy, was shot and killed. This demoralized many people because of the amount of energy and hope that they had invested in Kennedy.

The pro-war section of the Democratic Party dominated the Chicago Democratic National Convention in August, but anti-war protests outside of the convention drew thousands of protesters. The convention was surrounded by thousands of police, the National Guard, and barbed wire fences. Chicago’s Democratic Party Mayor Daley ordered police to meet the protesters with force. Despite police violence, the protests raged outside the convention for eight days. Inside the convention, the pro-war candidate, Lyndon Johnson’s Vice President Hubert Humphrey, won almost three times as many votes as the anti-war candidate Eugene McCarthy. After Johnson’s withdrawal, Humphrey’s forces concentrated their energy on winning delegates in non-primary states. (Only 14 states, plus Washington D.C., held primaries at this time.) Much like today, the Democratic Party candidate was not selected by popular vote. Democratic Party bosses controlled the selection process. The real decision makers in the Democratic Party – the corporate donors and professional politicians – had decided that without Kennedy they would not even try to appeal to the anti-war sentiment. The pro-war Hubert Humphrey became the candidate of the Democratic Party.

The election of 1968 saw two pro-war candidates running against each other – Democrat Hubert Humphrey and Republican Richard Nixon. Humphrey alienated people who were against the war and did nothing to significantly distinguish himself from his opponent. He was identified in the public mind with Lyndon Johnson. Nixon played into the fear of many Americans who did not understand the urban rebellions in the inner cities and the U.S. losses in Vietnam. Nixon won with a campaign appealing to this “Silent Majority” for a return to normalcy and order. Nixon also suggested that he had a plan to end the Vietnam War.



*Chicago police attack anti-war protesters outside the Democratic National Convention, 1968*

### After 1968: The Democrats in Disarray

The Democrats were in complete retreat with the party split internally. In 1972, the former Kennedy and McCarthy supporters won the Democratic Party nomination for a South Dakota senator, George McGovern. McGovern promised an immediate withdrawal of troops from Vietnam as well as a decrease in war spending. Meanwhile, the rest of the Democratic Party establishment not only opposed McGovern, they actively campaigned against him after he was nominated. The result was a split campaign in which leading Democrats campaigned against the Democratic Party candidate.

People were presented with no clear alternative in the election of 1972. The Democrats were split and in chaos. For many people they no longer seemed like an alternative. Voter turnout in the election was only 55.2 percent of the electorate despite the charged political

atmosphere. Nixon was elected again by a wide majority, but only among the small voter turnout.

People did not stop resisting. In fact, people became more desperate to find ways to oppose the war machine, which seemed to carry on regardless of protests. This opposition took on many forms, both collective and individual. Veterans formed the group Vietnam Veterans Against the War and held protests of returned soldiers in front of the White House. Daniel Ellsberg, a top-level employee of the Pentagon, leaked secret documents known as the Pentagon Papers to the press. Women, many who had been active in the Civil Rights and anti-war movements, began to organize to address women's issues. This movement, the Feminist Movement, fought for a change in the way women were treated in society. The movement demanded equal pay for equal work, equal opportunities in education, and free childcare.

---

## The Carter Administration

Jimmy Carter became president when there was a deep mistrust of the government and the entire electoral system. Many people felt that the government was part of the problem and had no concern for ordinary people. The population had just been through two major social movements (the Civil Rights and anti-war movements), a rebellion within the army, followed by movements for women's rights, gay rights, prisoners' rights, and the American Indian and environmental movements. In the previous decade, many people proved to themselves that if they wanted things to change, they had to rely on their own actions, not the politicians. Coupled with this newly established self-confidence was a complete mistrust in the entire government, born from lies about Vietnam, assassinations and imprisonment of political activists, and the Watergate scandal with President Nixon, which led to his resignation. In the 1976 election, only 53 percent of eligible voters even bothered to vote. Carter was elected by only 50 percent of those that voted – that totals only 25 percent of the eligible voting population. He was hardly seen as a solution.

In his campaign for president, Carter tried to regain the trust of the disillusioned public by pretending to share their political views. Even though Carter had

supported the Vietnam War until it ended, he tried to convince people he had been against the war. He promised to cut the military budget, provide healthcare for the poor, and diminish the inequities of wealth between the African American and white populations. He attempted to gain people's respect by appearing as an ordinary, hardworking farmer from the South. In reality, Carter was a millionaire peanut grower who inherited the land from his father. When he was elected, Carter even made a few token appointments within his administration to keep the charade going. He appointed an African American woman, Patricia Harris, as Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, a veteran of the Civil Rights Movement, Andrew Young, as ambassador to the United Nations, and a former anti-war activist, Sam Brown, to head up a new department in charge of the Peace Corps.

But his other appointees were a continuation of the past. His National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and his Secretary of Defense, Harold Brown, were strong supporters of the Vietnam War. His Secretary of Energy, James Schlesinger, was Secretary of Defense under Nixon, and supported a continued increase in the military budget. The majority of Carter's other appointees

had strong connections to the corporate elite, including the Trilateral Commission, an international grouping of major capitalists, like David Rockefeller, and foreign policy experts, like Brzezinski. The main purpose of this group was to improve international military and economic strategies of emerging U.S. multinational companies. This group chose to support Carter in the election because they believed that, following the Watergate scandal with Nixon, a Republican would not be elected.

### **Carter's Foreign Policy**

Carter has been portrayed in the media as an international humanitarian activist. He even won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002. When we look at the actual foreign policy record of Carter's presidency, however, we see the exact opposite of humanitarianism. We see Carter's unflinching support of U.S. corporate interests, a consistent support of brutal dictators, and the policy of crushing popular movements.

In his State of the Union address of 1980, Carter gave the following warning:

*Let our position be absolutely clear: An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.*

The Carter Doctrine was a warning to the rest of the world that the U.S. would not hesitate to defend its oil interests in the Middle East with military force. The Carter Doctrine simply summed up what had been carried out by U.S. imperialism for about 100 years, and modeled the kind of foreign policy that was maintained throughout the Carter administration.

### **Suharto Dictatorship**

Just before President Carter took office, the Indonesian military, under the dictator General Suharto, invaded the small island of East Timor, and within the next few years, slaughtered 200,000 people, about one third of the

population. The Carter administration gave uncritical support to Suharto, and even increased military aid to his government by 80 percent, amounting to several hundreds of millions of dollars. Without U.S. aid, Suharto's military may have run out of weapons and been defeated by the East Timorese resistance. The U.S. did not want this to happen because Suharto's government was extremely obedient to U.S. economic interests. During the presidency of Richard Nixon, encouraged by the Ford Foundation, the U.S. supported the rise to power of General Suharto through a military coup against a nationalist movement in Indonesia. As soon as Suharto was in power, he practically handed over the Indonesian economy and resources (primarily oil, ore, and timber) to U.S. corporations. The Carter administration did not hesitate to come to the military aid of this brutal tyrant.

### **Support for Mobutu**

In the central African country of Zaire, through a coup in 1965, President Mobutu Sese Seko came to power. His regime was as brutal as they come. He built a personal fortune while the country was sinking further into economic debt and collapse. He carried out public hangings and torture of suspected opponents. Mobutu would sometimes sentence members of the government to death, have them tortured, and then pardon their sentence and reappoint them to a position in the government, this



*Carter with the Shah of Iran*

time with the confidence they wouldn't dare betray him. This was his method of assuring loyalty.

Publicly, the Carter administration tried to distance itself from Mobutu's government, but actually it was a major supporter. The majority of aid to sub-Saharan Africa under Carter went to Mobutu. And in 1977, an uprising against Mobutu broke out in the southern province of Shaba. The Carter administration, as well as France and Belgium, responded immediately with two million dollars in military supplies. The U.S. gave permission to Moroccan soldiers, armed with U.S. weaponry, to fly into Zaire and aid Mobutu in crushing the uprising. And soon afterwards, newspapers reported that behind the scenes, the CIA was recruiting mercenaries to send to Zaire to support Mobutu's weak military.

### **Dictatorships Around the World**

Carter's administration aided military death squads in El Salvador responsible for the murder of thousands of people who resisted the land reforms in the country, which kicked thousands of peasants off their land and handed it over to U.S. agricultural companies. It gave continued support to the Somoza regime in Nicaragua, responsible for the rape, torture and murder of thousands of Nicaraguans. And in order to maintain U.S. military bases and economic investment in the

Philippines, the Carter administration continued the U.S. military aid of the previous decade to the brutal dictator of the Philippines, Ferdinand Marcos. Under the Carter administration, the U.S. continuously vetoed U.N. resolutions to impose sanctions on the apartheid government of South Africa. The Carter administration also gave consistent military support to the brutal Shah of Iran, who guaranteed U.S. companies access to Iranian oil. SAVAK, the Shah's covert police force trained by the CIA, tortured and murdered thousands of Iranians. Their brutality included torture by electric shock, whipping, beating, inserting broken glass and pouring boiling water into the rectum, tying weights to testicles, and ripping out teeth. In short, Carter's administration represented an undeniable continuation of the military dominance and brutality of previous administrations.

### **The Camp David Lies**

Another part of Carter's false legacy is the supposed pro-Palestine agenda he tried to push during the Camp David Accords of 1978. The Camp David Accords of 1978, signed between Israel and Egypt, have been presented as a major concession by Israel to the people living in the occupied territories of Palestine. The agreement has been represented as providing the Palestinian people with their own state. For signing the treaty, Egypt received billions of dollars in military aid from the U.S. But the so-called Palestinian state was nothing more than small, isolated plots of land connected through Israeli military checkpoints. In effect, the Camp David Accords supported the expansion of Israeli settlements on Palestinian land, and it conceded nothing to Palestinians except further occupation.

### **Handouts to Corporations and Attacks on Workers and the Poor**

During his administration, a snapshot of the economy accurately reflected the interests Carter supported. The top one percent of the country had more than 33 percent of the wealth. The top ten percent of the population had more than 30 times the bottom ten percent



*Sadat (Egypt), Carter, and Begin (Israel) at Camp David*

of the population. And 83 percent of all corporate stock was owned by only five percent of the population. Exxon Mobil's profits increased over 56 percent per year, to over four billion dollars, and their CEO made over \$830,000 per year. Meanwhile, over ten million children had no healthcare. Eighteen million children had never been able to see a dentist. The prices of food and necessities were rising faster than workers' wages, with an inflation rate of 18 percent by 1980. Official levels of unemployment were between six and eight percent, but for African Americans unemployment levels reached between 20 to 30 percent.

Carter was elected promising to cut the U.S. military budget and decrease arms sales around the world. But during his term in office, he did neither. The U.S. remained the leading arms dealer throughout the world, maintaining the export of around \$9.5 billion per year in arms. And in his first budget proposal to Congress, Carter increased the military budget by \$10 billion, spending \$1 trillion on the military for the next five years. He denied \$25 million earmarked for poor schoolchildren. Carter also supported attacks on women's access to abortion. In 1976, he signed the Hyde Amendment into law. This prohibited the use of federal funding (through Medicaid) for poor women to have abortions. When criticized for the blatant unfairness of the law, he said: "Well, as you know, there are many things in life that are not fair, [many things] that wealthy people can afford and poor people cannot." He also passed tax legislation that increased the taxes on the poorest 50 percent of the population and gave about \$18 billion in reductions to corporations and extremely wealthy individuals. And Carter began the deregulation of key industries in the U.S. – trucking, shipping, and airlines. Deregulation meant the lifting of government regulations that could set price limits for consumers and regulate the formation of monopolies. Carter eliminated these regulations and paved the way for the rapid formation of larger monopolies in these industries, with more of the profits going to fewer corporations.

Throughout his presidency, Carter supported attacks on workers in defense of corporations. Between 1977 and 1978, over 165,000 coal miners went on strike across the Appalachian Mountains. Coal companies were trying to force a new contract on workers that would make them

pay for health benefits and would impose massive layoffs, which would result in even more dangerous conditions with fewer workers operating the mines. The company was also trying to force workers to give up their right to strike over many issues, and to allow the company to fire workers who were known organizers of wildcat strikes (usually strikes organized by rank and file workers, and not necessarily sanctioned by the union), which had been growing as workers defended themselves against increasingly unsafe conditions. Towards the end of the strike, Carter threatened the striking workers with the Taft-Hartley Act. This authorized the government to send in federal troops to break the strike. Ten days after Carter's threat to send in federal troops, the coal miners' union, the United Mine Workers, pushed the striking miners to accept the harsh contract, which was a major setback, not just for the miners but for the whole U.S. working class.

Carter also laid the foundation for the crushing of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO), the union of about 17,000 air traffic controllers. Throughout the 1970s, these workers faced concessions, like understaffing, forced overtime, and pay cuts, but they were a well-organized workforce that was able to resist these cuts going further. The government wanted to break the union and impose massive pay cuts. This was finally achieved in 1981 when President Reagan ordered the firing of over 11,000 of 17,000 workers and the elimination of the PATCO union. But it was Carter who paved the way. One year before the contract was up, Carter ordered the formation of what was called a "Management Strike Contingency Force." Its goal was to train replacement workers (scabs), and put pressure on the most militant workers in the union before any strike broke out. So, when Reagan acted in 1981 to break the union, the scabs were already trained and on-hand, ready to take over the jobs of the 17,000 workers. So when we think about Reagan and the crushing of PATCO, we should really think about Carter too.

Jimmy Carter was a true representative of the Democratic Party – an avid defender of the ruling elite of this country and a staunch opponent of working and poor people.

---

# The Presidency of Bill Clinton

With the endless war and economic hardships of the arrogant, openly scandalous, and reactionary Bush administration of 2000-2008, the Clinton administration has mysteriously developed a positive legacy. It has become common for some people to think of the Clinton years as ones that were opposite in every possible way to the Bush years. People remember Clinton for fixing the budget, keeping employment up, prioritizing education, assisting African Americans – it seems the only flaw the media and the public pin on Clinton is his dishonesty during the scandal with his White House aide, Monica Lewinsky.

What the records show, however, is that the Clinton administration consistently carried out a pro-business economic agenda and an aggressive imperialist foreign policy, one in which corporate interests were at the top of the list. Rather than representing something new, Clinton was a continuation of the same effort to channel more wealth away from the working class and poor and into the pockets of corporations.

## Clinton's Campaign

Bill Clinton was elected and re-elected with under 60 percent of the eligible voters participating – that's over 40 percent deciding not to vote at all. In both elections, he was elected by less than 50 percent of those who voted. He too was hardly a popular president.

In his 1992 election campaign, he tried to appear as an outsider to Washington, someone who could bring a new perspective to old problems. He criticized other candidates for being indebted to corporate interests through campaign contributions. Attempting to maintain this outsider façade, he pledged not to take any Political Action Committee (PAC) money during the 1992 primaries. PACs are loosely defined, informal organizations set up to funnel money into individual campaigns – they can be directly linked to specific corporations, wealthy individuals, and lobbying groups. Clinton's decision to avoid PAC money in the primary was simply a campaign strategy to try to distance himself from the other Democratic nominees.

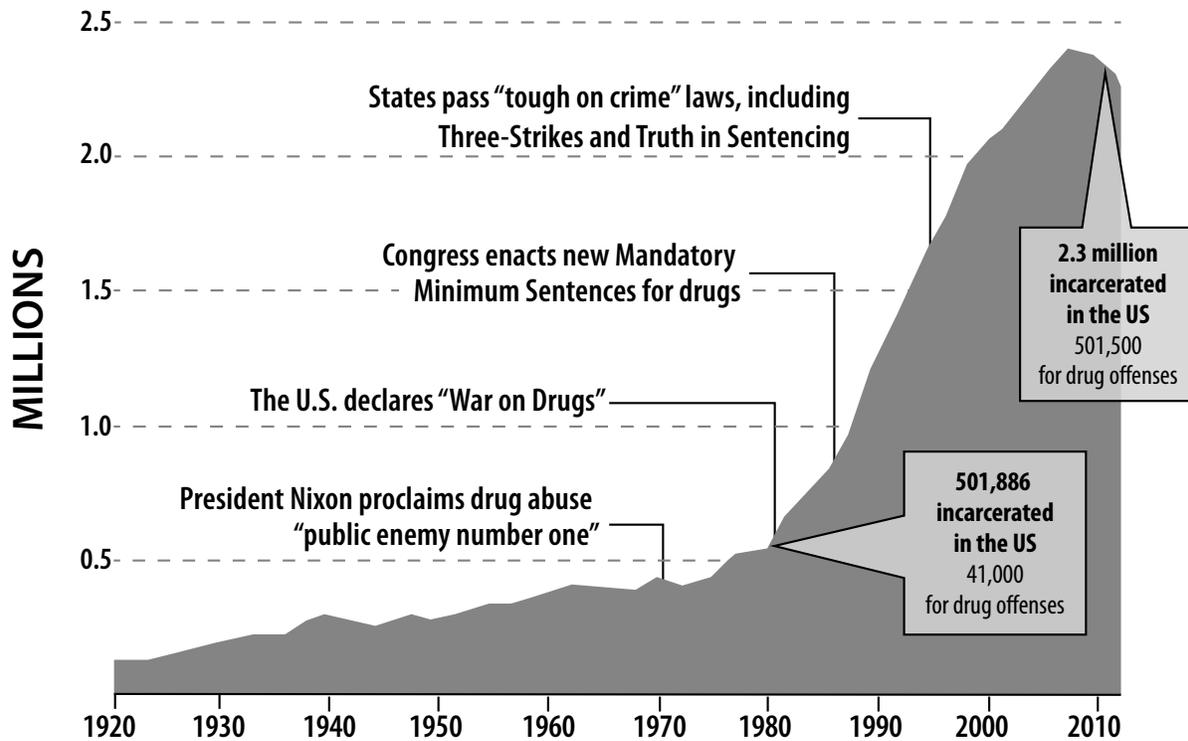
In fact, months before the first primary took place, Clinton had already raised more money than any of his Democratic rivals. Early on in his campaign, he heavily solicited Wall Street, Hollywood, the high-tech companies, telephone companies, computer companies, media conglomerates, and many others. His outsider image was nothing more than an election strategy based on a lie, as most election strategies are.

Clinton wasn't an outsider to Washington or big business. More than half of his campaign advisers were regulars in Washington, many of them with full-time jobs working for foreign corporations and governments, the tobacco industry, insurance companies, oil and gas firms, investment banks and other corporate interests. As Governor of Arkansas, Clinton developed strong relationships with the elite clique of big businessmen and landlords ruling Arkansas. Another big supporter was Tyson Foods, the largest company in Arkansas, which ranked 110 on the Fortune 500 list in 1995. During his 1992 presidential campaign, a spokesman for Martin Marietta Corporation (an enormous weapons manufacturing company) expressed Clinton's relationship with corporations best: "I think the Democrats are moving more toward business and business is moving more toward the Democrats." Clinton was no outsider to Washington or Big Business; he was in fact their tested and approved servant.



*Protest against Clinton's cuts to welfare, Los Angeles, 1996*

## MASS INCARCERATION IN THE U.S. (1920-2013)



### Balancing the Budget

When Clinton came to office there was already a four trillion-dollar deficit racked up under the Carter, Reagan, and Bush administrations, primarily from massive increases in government spending. Clinton promised to eliminate this deficit. Two obvious solutions would be to either massively cut military spending, which caused the bulk of the deficit, or increase taxes on the super-rich, the top one percent, the only group whose wealth had been steadily rising while everyone else's decreased. Instead, the Clinton administration decided to impose massive cuts in social services to the poorest and most vulnerable layers of the population, and impose no new taxes for the super-rich. The military budget was reduced, but it was a much smaller reduction than expected.

Before Clinton came into office, the Soviet Union had officially collapsed, ending the decades-long Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Thus, the pretext for maintaining such high levels of military spending no longer existed. In fact, the previous administration of George H.W. Bush, under what was called a "Peace Dividend," had begun to reduce military spending under the rationale that the Cold War was coming to an end. The Bush administration cut military spending by about 17 percent by the end of its term.

Under the Clinton administration, there was good reason to expect a significant reduction in military spending. At the time, there were projections of large increases to education, urban renewal, and much-needed social programs. Instead, by the end of Clinton's second term, military spending was only reduced by seven percent. Most of the cuts came through closing obsolete military bases, retiring old Navy ships, and decreasing the overall number of active troops. Beyond these cuts, military spending stayed at Cold War levels. These reductions were a far cry from significantly reducing military spending. In fact, more of the military budget became concentrated in the corporate sector responsible for armaments production.

The flipside to this small "Peace Dividend" was what could be called a "War Dividend." Under Clinton, the U.S. became the world's biggest arms dealer, selling more weapons than all other nations combined. This rapid increase came from the U.S. replacing the Soviet Union as an arms dealer to many nations. Under Clinton, a ban on sales of advanced weaponry to South America was lifted. For the first time, U.S. corporations were producing more arms for other countries than they were producing for the Pentagon. This was a clear handout to weapons manufacturers and a devastating blow to poor

people around the world who had to live under the brutal dictatorships that received these weapons.

Another component of Clinton's strategy for reducing the four trillion-dollar deficit was to funnel money away from the poor. Clinton cut over five billion dollars to education in 1997. Healthcare was denied to 10.5 million uninsured children. Housing assistance programs, which were cut under Reagan and Bush, were eliminated under Clinton.

The biggest attack on the poor was Clinton's virtual elimination of welfare. These cuts occurred on many levels, including cutting welfare benefits to immigrants. Over one million immigrants received letters explaining that their food stamps and financial assistance would be cut off in a few months unless they became citizens. The requirement of citizenship was just a ruse, because it took longer than a few months to become a citizen.

The bulk of the cuts to welfare came under the law with one of those all-too-familiar hypocritical titles: "Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996." This bill cut off families' welfare benefits after two years, reduced lifetime benefits to only three years, and cut food stamps to people without children to only three total months in any three-year period. These cuts alone eliminated over ten billion dollars per year in social spending.

The official reasoning for pushing millions of people in the poorest section of the population into further desperation was to provide them with employment, and to eliminate their dependency on the government for assistance. The administration argued that once off welfare, people would be pushed to find jobs. This was commonly known as the "welfare to work" program: that is, get off of welfare and go to work. But this logic was completely backwards. People weren't unemployed and underemployed because they were on welfare – they were on welfare because they were unemployed and underemployed. There weren't enough jobs to employ all of the people who needed them, and the majority of those who did have jobs saw their incomes decrease every year since the 1970s. Every time there were job openings more people applied than were hired. In New York, over 100,000 people applied for 2000 job openings at the Sanitation Department. In Chicago, over 7,000 people showed up for 550 jobs at a restaurant chain. Overall, there was very little transition from welfare into

employment. There was only a transition from poverty to even greater poverty.

Clinton did eventually balance the budget. But he did so by forcing millions of people into desperate poverty.

### **Send the Poor to Prison**

Some may wonder what happened to the people who were eventually kicked off of welfare and couldn't find jobs. Unable to find work, with no money to live, many turned to petty crime. And with increases in police forces and new harsh sentencing laws, many of the poor ended up in prison.

Under Clinton, the prison population skyrocketed, growing by a greater number during his eight years in office than it had during the previous twelve years of Republican administrations. Clinton administered the largest increase in the prison population in U.S. history. Reagan ended his second term with approximately 49,000 federal prisoners. Clinton ended his second term with over 147,000 new federal prisoners and over 500,000 new state prisoners – about two million people locked up behind bars, with over 4.5 million people in the parole system. Over 70 percent of these new prisoners came from extremely poor neighborhoods. By signing bills like the Violent Crime Control Act of 1994, Clinton shifted unprecedented amounts of money away from higher education into building prisons. In 1995, \$2.6 billion was spent on prison construction and only \$2.5 billion on the construction of universities. Under Clinton, for the first time, prison construction became a full-blown industry, with private companies responsible for construction and providing guards, food, and clothing.

The rapid growth of prisons and the large increase in the number of inmates were direct consequences of Clinton's cuts to social services.

### **Prelude to the USA PATRIOT Act**

Before the USA PATRIOT Act of 2001, there was the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996. This bill was signed into law by Clinton following the Oklahoma City bombing of 1995. It eliminated habeas corpus for those suspected of being terrorists, which meant people could be arrested and imprisoned without any evidence being produced. Individuals could not challenge the accusation of being a terrorist because the law allowed the state to use secret evidence against the

individual, evidence they would never have to produce or explain. The law also expanded the definition of terrorism to make it easier for the government to charge a person with being a terrorist. Together, these changes make it almost impossible for a person to defend against the charges of being a terrorist.

The law also imposed new statutes of limitations for all inmates, regardless of their crimes, limiting when they can appeal their convictions. It limited appeals for death penalty convictions to six months, and appeals to all other convictions to one year. This meant that after this time, anyone convicted could no longer file an appeal. This was a huge blow to many prisoners on death row who were wrongly convicted and needed a lot more than six months to put together their appeal. At the same time, it also prevented appeals that were based on new evidence.

Even though only U.S. citizens were convicted of the Oklahoma City bombing, the law vastly expanded the ability of the state to deport immigrants. It allowed the deportation of any immigrant ever convicted of a crime, regardless of how long ago or how serious the crime was. Even legal permanent residents who had married U.S. citizens were not exempt from the deportation.

It was the Clinton administration that paved the way for the severe stripping away of civil liberties after 2001.

### **Corporate Plunder Around the World**

One reason for the rising unemployment was because many industries in the U.S. were closing down factories, chasing larger profit margins through employing cheaper labor in poorer countries around the world. U.S. administrations have had a consistent policy of facilitating the entry of U.S. corporations into other countries, to both exploit the resources and wealth as well as expand export markets without restrictions. The Clinton administration's NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) serves as an example of how these policies work.

NAFTA practically removed all restrictions for U.S. corporations and products to enter Canada and Mexico. Overall, NAFTA increased unemployment both in the U.S. and Mexico, and pushed millions more Mexicans into despair.

One goal of NAFTA was to crush Mexico's agricultural market. Before NAFTA, corn (or maize) was the largest crop in Mexico and the corn industry was one of the



*Maquiladora sweatshop in Mexico*

largest sources of employment. But when NAFTA eliminated trade restrictions and tariffs with Mexico, U.S. agribusinesses flooded Mexico with corn exports, sold at artificially low prices because U.S. agribusinesses received farming subsidies from the U.S. government. This influx of artificially cheap corn wiped out most of Mexico's small farmers because they couldn't compete with such low prices. Mexico quickly turned from a country that produced its own corn into a country that imported corn. Over one million farmers and workers connected to agriculture soon lost their source of income, and the rate of extreme rural poverty soared from 35 percent to 55 percent in just the first three years after NAFTA took effect.

The overall result of NAFTA was that millions of poor farmers and workers left the land in search of a livelihood. At the same time, the Mexican government privatized indigenous common lands, and many farmers were forcibly kicked off by the Mexican army. Most of this land was eventually sold to U.S. companies for further agricultural development. People who had farmed the lands for centuries were kicked off, only to come back to work on the same land for a U.S. company, at poverty-level wages.

As millions of people were kicked off of their land, the unemployment rate skyrocketed. U.S. corporations profited from this desperation by hiring these workers for extremely low wages. As part of NAFTA, U.S. corporations set up factories throughout the country, and even created a new hub of factories along the U.S.-Mexico border, known as maquiladoras. These areas are like extensions of U.S. territory because they have no tariffs for products brought into the U.S. The Mexican



*Serbian village bombed by the US/NATO*

government enforces very minimal labor legislation, safety regulations, wage standards, and environmental restrictions. U.S. corporations took advantage of these policies, and they were backed by the Mexican state, with its army and police to impose harsh working conditions.

One obvious result of NAFTA was an increase in the emigration of Mexico's population. With no land left to live on, no crops to sell, and intense competition for the jobs in the maquiladoras, many Mexicans fled the country to look for work. Most of them, of course, headed to the U.S. The Clinton administration was well aware that this would happen as soon as NAFTA took shape. This is why, just a few months after the passage of NAFTA, Clinton approved "Operation Gatekeeper." This dramatically increased the militarization of the border between the U.S. and Mexico. It doubled the budget of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) to \$800 million, and also doubled the number of border agents and the length of the border fence, and tripled the number of underground sensors and surveillance equipment. Prior to the Clinton years, most undocumented immigrants crossed the border near major cities. Under Operation Gatekeeper, the wall was deliberately designed to funnel people into the most desperate, remote, and dangerous terrain. As a result, thousands have died while trying to cross the border since Operation Gatekeeper began.

One year after NAFTA was passed, Clinton helped to establish the World Trade Organization (WTO). The WTO establishes various rules over the trade relations between countries. These rules, however, benefit the members of the WTO that hold the most sway. The U.S. uses the WTO as a way to enforce trade and economic policies that benefit U.S. corporations. This is a process

whereby U.S. corporations take over the economies of foreign countries. The Clinton administration's policy under NAFTA was just an example of U.S. international economic policy in general. Practically every part of the so-called developing world has been forced to surrender its economy to rules that benefit U.S. corporate interests. And the creation of the WTO made it even easier for U.S. corporations to carry out these policies.

### **Foreign Policy as Usual**

In his 1998 State of the Union speech, Clinton said:

*Together we must also confront the new hazards of chemical and biological weapons, and the outlaw states, terrorists and organized criminals seeking to acquire them. Saddam Hussein has spent the better part of this decade, and much of his nation's wealth, not on providing for the Iraqi people, but on developing nuclear, chemical and biological weapons and the missiles to deliver them...I know I speak for everyone in this chamber, Republicans and Democrats, when I say to Saddam Hussein, "You cannot defy the will of the world," and when I say to him, "You have used weapons of mass destruction before; we are determined to deny you the capacity to use them again."*

Clinton became president immediately following the first Gulf War in 1991. The invasion lasted six weeks; about two thousand tons of bombs were dropped per day, and over 250,000 people were killed – Iraq was left in ruins. Throughout its two terms, the Clinton administration maintained economic sanctions against the devastated country. It was clear early on that the sanctions – which restricted trade with Iraq and banned many important chemicals used in basic medicines and water treatment – made the lives of the majority of the deeply impoverished population even worse. After twelve years of sanctions, over 750,000 children had died from starvation and disease. In 1996, Madeline Albright, Clinton's Secretary of State, said that even though 500,000 children had died from the sanctions, "the price is worth it." The sanctions also strengthened the regime of Saddam Hussein, uniting the people against this outside threat.

But imposing economic sanctions on Iraq was not the extent of Clinton's policy towards Iraq. Under Clinton, Iraq underwent the longest sustained bombing campaign



*Kigali residents fleeing during the Rwandan genocide*

since Vietnam. With opposition from the majority of the United Nations, the U.S. and British militaries bombed suspected targets in so-called “no-fly zones.” These were areas where the U.S. decided to forbid Iraq’s military from flying and carrying out any military operations. Thousands of bombs kept dropping on Iraq throughout Clinton’s presidency, killing numerous civilians. In 1993, Clinton ordered U.S. warplanes to destroy Iraqi intelligence centers.

Another part of the sanctions policy required Iraq to be opened up to the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM) weapons inspectors, to seek out and dismantle any facilities that could produce weapons of mass destruction. UNSCOM was supposed to be used simply to dismantle Iraq’s weapons production facilities. But instead, under Clinton, the CIA secretly used UNSCOM as a means to get access into Iraq and spy on Saddam’s regime. They set up secret operations inside UNSCOM facilities, wire-tapped their communications, and had CIA agents pose as UNSCOM inspectors. The information the CIA gathered throughout this process was used to identify the “no-fly zones,” the targets for continuous bombardment by the U.S. and British military.

In 1998, Clinton’s covert policy of “regime change” in Iraq became overt. On October 31, Clinton signed the “Iraq Liberation Act” which made it an official policy of the U.S. to bring about “regime change” in Iraq. Clinton ordered a massive four-day bombardment all over Iraq in December of 1998, once again aimed at weakening Saddam’s regime and possibly assassinating Saddam Hussein. Clinton claimed the reason for the bombing was

because Saddam Hussein had kicked out the UNSCOM weapons inspectors and had refused to comply with the inspection teams when they were in the country, implying that his weapons production facilities still existed. But according to chief weapons inspector Scott Ritter, inspection teams were able to identify and dismantle the majority of Iraq’s weapon facilities, eliminating any military threat from Iraq. They were kicked out only because of the CIA’s use of UNSCOM for spying. Ritter resigned in 1998, before the bombing, when he found out about the CIA’s infiltration and manipulation of UNSCOM.

Clinton’s policy towards Iraq laid the foundation for the invasion and ongoing occupation of Iraq in 2003. And once the 2003 invasion of Iraq was underway, Clinton was quick to appear on 60 Minutes and assure viewers he supported President Bush’s decision to go to war.

### **Kosovo: The So-Called Humanitarian War**

With the obstacle of the Soviet Union removed in 1991, the U.S. quickly set its sights on setting up military bases and establishing new economic relationships in the former Soviet Bloc. Ongoing ethnic tensions in the area of former Yugoslavia were seen as an opening for U.S. intervention.

A major dispute flared up in Serbia, a part of former Yugoslavia. In the province of Kosovo, there was overwhelming support for independence from Serbia, based on ethnic tensions between the majority Albanian Kosovars and the Serbs. Serbian president Slobodan Milošević ordered an attack on Kosovo and killed about 2,000 people in 1999. Milošević had already demonstrated his ruthlessness toward opposition movements in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1995, killing thousands.

Using NATO, the U.S. proposed to take over full control of Kosovo, and occupy all of Yugoslavia. This proposal was rejected by the Serbian government as an obvious attempt by the U.S. to occupy the country, and they issued a counterproposal, denying NATO occupation, but calling for negotiations. The counterproposal was rejected by the U.S. influence in NATO, and NATO forces, led by the U.S., were ordered to begin bombing the country.

The bombing was portrayed in the U.S. media as a means to stop the ethnic cleansing of Kosovo, the forced

removal of the Albanians from the area. But by two months after the bombing, over 800,000 Albanians were forced to leave Kosovo anyway. In reality, the bombing campaign hastened and exaggerated the attacks on the Albanians and their removal from Kosovo. Thousands of civilians were killed by the NATO bombing.

The motives for the attack on Yugoslavia were revealed immediately after the bombing. The U.S. began to station thousands of troops all over former Yugoslavia. The U.S. military seized 1,000 acres of farmland in southeast Kosovo, and immediately began building Camp Bondsteel, the largest U.S. military base at that time. In 2006, it stationed nearly 7,000 troops – three quarters of all the U.S. troops in Kosovo. It has over 15 miles of roads and over 300 buildings. It was so big that it had three different downtown areas, retail outlets, a bowling alley, a 24-hour gym, a church, a library and one of the best-equipped hospitals in Europe. Soon after the base was operational, the U.S.-owned Albanian Macedonian Bulgarian Oil Corporation (AMBO) went ahead to finalize plans to build the major “trans-Balkan” pipeline from the Black Sea to the Adriatic Sea, passing through former Yugoslavia, including Kosovo.

What was sold to U.S. citizens as a bombing campaign of morality was nothing more than a move by the U.S. to establish a military and economic presence in the former Soviet Bloc.

### **Somalia**

In 1993, the Clinton administration used the U.S. military to lead a disastrous intervention in a civil conflict in Somalia for the benefit of U.S. oil corporations. By the end of 1990, nearly two-thirds of Somalia’s countryside had been allocated to U.S. corporations (Chevron, Amoco, Conoco, and Phillips) for oil exploration under Somalia’s pro-U.S. President Mohamed Siad Barre. In January of 1991, after years of drought and desperate poverty throughout Somalia, Barre was overthrown by one of several clan-based Somali rebel groups. At that point, the country descended into a chaotic battle between various rebel factions. So long as Somalia was torn apart by internal warfare, all plans for U.S. oil exploration had to be halted. So, in 1993, the Clinton administration ordered the U.S. military to intervene in the conflict. The official reason for the U.S. mission

in Somalia was to provide humanitarian assistance to the country’s impoverished population. But quickly the real purpose for the U.S. military’s presence in Somalia became clear: to overthrow some of the rebel groups, end the conflict, and reopen U.S. oil exploration.

The U.S. attacked a meeting of tribal elders on one side of the conflict, bombing a house and then shooting almost everyone inside. This only incensed the population against the United States. Later the U.S. ordered an attack on one of the leading rebel groups in Somalia’s capital and most populated city, Mogadishu. The attack was a disaster and led to the deaths of 19 U.S. soldiers and over 2,000 Somalis.

### **Haiti**

In 1991, Jean-Bertrand Aristide was Haiti’s first democratically elected president following decades of U.S.-backed military dictatorships in the country. Aristide was a well-known minister with roots in the poor Haitian population. The U.S. was not sure they could trust him since he was elected on promises to divert some of Haiti’s wealth to pay for services to the poor. Immediately after his election as president, he was overthrown in a coup backed by the CIA. The coup installed an extremely brutal dictatorship for four years. During that time (1991-1994), the situation in Haiti went from bad to worse. The coup government began to pillage the economy and expand the production and trade of drugs. It was obvious their policies were destabilizing the country, pushing the population towards further social unrest.

In 1994, Clinton met with Aristide and negotiated a deal to re-install him as the president. Aristide had to agree to cooperate with the U.S. to control the Haitian economy. In the poorest nation in the western hemisphere, this meant diverting Haiti’s wealth into the bank accounts of U.S. corporations, and away from the masses living in destitute poverty.

### **Palestine/Israel**

Clinton initiated a negotiation between Israel’s Prime Minister, Ehud Barak, and Palestinian Authority Chairman, Yasir Arafat. The myth is that Israel, once again, offered the Palestinians a generous peace agreement that would include over 90 percent of their original land. And for encouraging such a generous offer, Clinton

was portrayed as a powerful leader, accomplishing what many thought was impossible. The reality, however, was the offer made to the Palestinians was nothing more than a Palestinian state in name. The offer would have carved up Palestine into four disconnected pieces, still separated by Israeli roadblocks and checkpoints. The major Israeli settlements, housing over 300,000 Israeli settlers on Palestinian land, were to remain in place. And the 300 miles of roads connecting the settlements would stay put as well. The Palestinians who were kicked out of their homes for the construction of these settlements still had no right to return. The so-called generous offer was, once again, nothing more than a way to get Palestine to formally accept being reduced to a permanent colony of Israel.

## Rwanda

Following decades of colonial occupation by Belgium, the population of Rwanda lived in extreme poverty. Typical of colonial and imperialist occupation, various ethnic rivalries in Rwanda were pitted against each other as a means to keep the population divided. In the early 1990s, this conflict broke out into open civil war. In 1994, the civil war intensified and reached genocidal levels. Over the course of 100 days, somewhere between 500,000 to over one million Rwandans were murdered by extremist militia groups. This massacre was far worse than the so-called “ethnic cleansing” going on in Yugoslavia or the warlord war in Somalia. The Clinton administration did nothing to defend against the genocidal slaughter, firmly showing their claims of humanitarian motives in foreign policy were based on U.S. economic interests and not concerns over human life.

## A Continued Destruction of the Environment

It is no secret that the United States is the world’s largest emitter of carbon into the atmosphere from the burning of fossil fuels. When fossil fuels are burned, carbon bonds with oxygen to form carbon dioxide, which is the most significant gas responsible for global warming.

Part of the false Clinton legacy is his administration’s supposedly pro-environment agenda. This myth has gained support ever since Clinton’s Vice President Al Gore released a film called “An Inconvenient Truth.” In this film, Gore exposes some of the economic causes of



*Barak (Israel), Clinton, and Arafat (Palestinian Authority)*

global warming, and in the process paints himself as a committed environmentalist.

However, the actual record of the Clinton administration on the environment is horrendous. First, one minor motivation behind the trade agreements the Clinton administration supported was to allow U.S. corporations to avoid environmental restrictions. When U.S. corporations gained improved access to developing countries around the world, an additional benefit was the avoidance of environmental laws governing production. Once they established production in developing countries, U.S. corporations could usually operate with complete disregard for the environmental impact on those countries. Some of the consequences of this freedom include polluted rivers, destroyed forests and grasslands, flooded cities, and the wiping out of endangered species.

The Clinton administration is also remembered as being a supporter of the Kyoto Protocol, which was an international agreement placing limited restrictions on pollution in countries around the world. Under the Clinton administration, the U.S. did sign the agreement. But the Clinton administration never even submitted the Protocol to the Senate to be ratified, so the signature was meaningless.

So, ultimately, Clinton’s policy towards the environment was one of environmental destruction, not preservation.

In his two terms as president, on all fronts – social services, foreign-policy, the environment and even civil liberties – Clinton ruthlessly defended the interests of the ruling elite of the United States.

---

# The Democrats under George W. Bush

Throughout the eight years of George W. Bush's presidency, the Democrats tried to distance themselves from his administration by criticizing some of its policies. Despite their criticisms, on the whole, the Democrats supported and helped approve many of the policies they pretended to oppose.

## September 11th, 2001: The PATRIOT Act

Shortly after September 11th, Congress passed the USA PATRIOT Act by a nearly unanimous vote (only one Senator voted against it). Once it was signed into law, the Patriot Act laid the foundation to expand the powers of law enforcement and greatly restrict people's civil liberties. The Patriot Act was an extension of the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act passed under Bill Clinton in 1996. It virtually eliminated habeas corpus for anyone the U.S. government deemed a terrorism suspect. Habeas corpus requires the government to physically bring the prisoner before a judge and provide enough evidence to justify the person's imprisonment. Its purpose is to prevent the government from imprisoning people indefinitely, without sufficient evidence or a trial. However, under the Patriot Act, the government was allowed to hold people as terrorist suspects indefinitely without any trial, and often without any access to a lawyer, or even their families. Suspected terrorists could also be deported, often to a country the U.S. chose. The Patriot Act also made it easier for law enforcement to set up wiretaps, search houses, and read emails, personal mail, and banking records. Under the Patriot Act, law enforcement was granted permission to arrest, detain, interrogate, spy on, and search practically any person they deemed a terrorist suspect, or any person they thought could be useful to a terrorism investigation, without the need to demonstrate probable cause.

The term "terrorist" was intentionally defined very loosely to include broad groups of people, allowing the U.S. government to pin the charge of terrorist suspect on nearly anyone they wished. The definition included such vague statements as any person who "intends to intimidate or coerce a civilian population"; "influence the policy of the government by intimidation or coercion"; or "the use of a dangerous device with the intent to

endanger, directly or indirectly, the safety of one or more individuals or to cause substantial damage to property." These descriptions might just as easily apply to a well-organized strike of workers outside their workplace, or to a mass demonstration of people against a war.

By 2003, human rights groups estimated that approximately 15,000 people had been arrested and detained by the U.S. government under the Patriot Act. At least 3,208 of them were deported. Since then the numbers have approximately doubled. In a majority of these cases, no evidence was presented against the individuals. People were often detained for months while their families had no idea what happened to them, and those who were deported sometimes saw their families only hours before they were sent away on a plane.

The Patriot Act was initially passed in October 2001 and was supposed to expire in 2006. Instead, Congress introduced a bill in March 2006 to make the Patriot Act permanent. This passed with virtual unanimous support from both Democrats and Republicans. In 2007, the Democratic-controlled Congress also passed HR 1955 (Violent Radicalization and Homegrown Terrorism Prevention Act) by a landslide. This bill extended the ability of the U.S. government to label groups of U.S. citizens as terrorists and imprison them.

## The Invasion of Afghanistan: "Operation Enduring Freedom"

Less than a month after the September 11th attacks, on October 7, 2001, the U.S. military began its invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. Only one member of Congress opposed the war against Afghanistan. The day the bombing began, Congress issued a bipartisan statement declaring that they "strongly support the operation President Bush ordered our military forces to carry out today."

The pretext for the invasion was that Osama Bin Laden, one of the key planners of the September 11th attacks, and his terrorist organization, Al Qaeda, were in Afghanistan. The brutal Taliban regime, which ruled Afghanistan at that time, was accused by the U.S. of protecting Al Qaeda. The U.S. military issued the Taliban



*US troops in Afghanistan, 2004*

an ultimatum that they either surrender Osama Bin Laden or face a U.S. attack. The Taliban responded to the ultimatum by requesting negotiations and actual evidence that Osama Bin Laden was responsible for the September 11th attacks. The U.S. began its bombing anyway.

The impact of the bombing and the occupation that followed has been horrendous. Within one year of the invasion, the estimated death toll of Afghan civilians was over 3,700 people. The U.S. repeatedly bombed villages, killing entire families. At least twice the U.S. bombed Red Cross food distribution centers.

Soon after the invasion, the Taliban lost power and many of its militants retreated to Pakistan. In its place, Afghanistan was ruled by the U.S. military and a puppet government headed by Hamid Karzai, a former Unocal oil company consultant. Karzai assisted the U.S. in its negotiation with the Taliban in 1999 to construct an oil pipeline to the Caspian Sea.

The alleged reasons for this war were to capture Osama Bin Laden, remove the Taliban regime, and build a better life for the people of Afghanistan. Ten years after the war began, Bin Laden was not captured, but had been killed. The Taliban had been removed from power, but continued to fight the U.S. and its allies. Life for most Afghans had only gotten worse. “Operation Enduring Freedom” lasted thirteen years, and at its peak, over 100,000 NATO troops (most from the U.S.) occupied Afghanistan. Though most U.S. troops were withdrawn by 2014, the U.S. military in fact has never left and the war continues. By 2016, the death toll from the war was over 150,000, including over 30,000 civilians – far more than had been killed under the rule of the Taliban.

In 2018 – seventeen years after the U.S./NATO invasion – the government of Hamid Karzai’s successor,

Ashraf Ghani, retained very limited control over the country. Rival groups of brutal warlords, including the reorganized Taliban, still controlled most of the country.

Throughout the Bush administration, Democrats and Republicans gave overwhelming support for war funding and troop increases for the occupation of Afghanistan, claiming it was a crucial battle in the so-called “war on terror.” But the real interests of the U.S. in Afghanistan had nothing to do with the war on terror. The occupation of Afghanistan, along with U.S. military bases in countries to the north, positioned the U.S. in a key region in Central Asia. This area, formerly controlled by the Soviet Union, was expected to become a major producer of oil and natural gas.

## **The Invasion of Iraq**

The Bush administration tried to build support for a war against Iraq based on three main ideas:

- That Saddam Hussein was linked to the attacks of September 11th;
- That Saddam Hussein had to be removed from power because his regime possessed weapons of mass destruction, which posed a severe threat to the U.S.; and
- To establish a democratic society in Iraq.

The connection between Saddam Hussein and the attacks on September 11th was exposed as a complete lie. For decades, Saddam Hussein and his ruling secular Ba’ath party brutally repressed Islamic militants inside Iraq. Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin Laden’s only relationship was an antagonistic one.

The claims of weapons of mass destruction were not only false, but were based on evidence fabricated by the Bush administration. No such weapons were ever found in Iraq. UN chief weapons inspectors testified that all such weapons Iraq were destroyed during the 1990s. Many of the documents the Bush administration used to build its case for war were proven to be forgeries. Several Pentagon employees and Bush administration insiders later spoke out about how the case for war was built upon made-up evidence and outright lies.

And the claim about building democracy in Iraq proved to be completely false from the day the occupation began.

Despite powerful arguments against the Bush administration's case for war, as well as massive opposition in the U.S. and around the world, Congress still voted to authorize President Bush to invade Iraq in 2003. Eighty-six Democrats voted in favor of the resolution and 126 voted against it. Many of those who voted against the resolution were not against a military attack, but wanted to pursue more diplomacy first. The Democrats' strong support for the war was shown most clearly through their continual approval of funding for the war and for troop increases in Iraq throughout Bush's presidency.

The invasion completely devastated the lives of most people in Iraq. Five years after the invasion, unemployment was as high as 70 percent. The average wage was \$150 per month. Consumer goods doubled in price after the occupation began. Only 37 percent of Iraqi homes were connected to sewer systems. One quarter of Iraqi children suffered from chronic malnutrition. Seventy percent of all childhood deaths resulted from simple diarrhea and respiratory illness. Ninety percent of hospitals lacked essential resources. Estimates of the Iraqi death toll during the U.S. invasion and subsequent occupation from 2003-2011 range from 600,000 to over a million people. The 2003-2011 war resulted in an estimated 2 million refugees fleeing Iraq and an additional 2.5 million refugees displaced within the country. Throughout the period of the U.S. occupation, death squads and militias carried out regular suicide-bombings, creating an estimated daily death toll of 100 Iraqis.

U.S. troops were later withdrawn and then sent back under Obama, but through it all, the U.S. never completely left Iraq. Under Bush, the U.S. built a 740

million dollar embassy for 17,000 personnel, comprised of 21 buildings, its own water source and purification plant, a power plant, and its own bus system. In addition, the Bush administration spent years trying to get the Iraqi parliament to pass a law to hand over Iraq's oil to U.S. corporations for future decades. This was finally accomplished during Obama's first term in office.

### **2006 Midterm Congressional Elections**

Voters did not elect a Democrat for President in the 2004 presidential election. John Kerry was the Democratic Party candidate, but the differences between him and Bush were difficult for people to identify. Kerry voted in favor of the Patriot Act and the invasion of Iraq. He was a firm supporter of the war in Afghanistan. Throughout Kerry's campaign he made a point to appear to have an equally if not more aggressive foreign policy approach than George Bush.

However, in the election for Congress in 2006, the Democratic Party candidates tried a different strategy. Many candidates campaigned as being harshly anti-Bush and anti-war. Overwhelmingly the public voted in favor of electing Democrats to Congress. The Democrats took 29 seats in the House of Representatives, six seats in the Senate, and six governorships that had been held by Republicans. The election gave the Democrats a majority in both houses of Congress, with 51 Democrats to 49 Republicans in the Senate, and 233 Democrats to 202 Republicans in the House. Many people voted for a Democrat because they viewed their vote as a way to stop the war and possibly impeach Bush. Some important Democrats argued strongly for impeachment before the elections. Once the Democrats were seated as the majority in Congress, however, their aggressive anti-war rally calls disappeared. Very quickly, Nancy Pelosi, the newly-elected Speaker of the House, announced that impeachment was off the table.

For the last two years of Bush's presidency, every chance the Democrats got to vote, they actually voted to continue the war. Every war appropriations bill proposed by the Bush administration was passed by the Democratic-controlled Congress. Every new Bush administration appointment was approved by Congress. Just four months after gaining control of Congress, the Democrats voted for an additional \$150 billion for war costs in Iraq and Afghanistan.



*The invasion of Iraq, 2003*

## 2008 Elections: A Closer Look at Obama's Presidential Campaign

It was no surprise that many workers were excited to vote for Barack Obama. For many, it was a way to express their outrage at the government's policies and never-ending wars. Some saw it as a way to vote against the Bush administration and the Republican Party, represented in 2008 by Senator John McCain. Additionally, an African American president was seen by many as the symbol of an end to the racist barriers that limited the opportunities of African Americans throughout U.S. history. Many also became attracted to Obama's message of change. He often spoke about bringing change to Washington and standing up to corporate fat cats. For most working people struggling just to make ends meet, change was what was needed – but Obama did not change the interests that the government defended.

Obama's record in politics as a senator showed his priorities far better than any of his campaign speeches. Like his future Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Senator Obama voted to support the Patriot Act at every opportunity, and voted to approve hundreds of billions of dollars for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. He also voted for legislation which made it more difficult for working people to file lawsuits against corporations. In 2005, he voted to pass the Class Action Fairness Act, taking away the right to file class action lawsuits in state courts. Now they can only be filed in federal courts, which hear far fewer of them, and rule in favor of corporations far more often. Obama voted against legislation that would have put a limit to the interest rates credit card companies can charge customers. He voted in favor of legislation which allowed healthcare companies to issue apologies instead of payments in cases of malpractice. He supported legislation that allowed mining companies to buy up public land for extremely reduced rates and avoid paying back the cities and states they mine in. As a Senator from Illinois, Obama passed legislation restricting pollution by large corporations, winning the support of environmentalists. He claimed to support alternatives to oil, suggesting corn-based ethanol as a clean energy source. However, the process of converting corn into ethanol, combined with the increased amounts of ethanol needed to power engines, actually makes this fuel a greater polluter than gasoline. The agriculture industry also contributed more than one million dollars to Obama's



*Barack Obama's 2008 campaign*

campaigns. As a leader in the ethanol industry, Illinois-based agriculture company Archer Daniels Midland was a major contributor to Obama's campaigns.

To run a traditional campaign requires the backing of big corporations and banks. The greatest contributions to Obama's campaigns came from multinational banks, powerful corporate law firms, polluting energy companies, and huge media conglomerates. At the top of this list was Goldman Sachs, one of the largest investment banks in the world, which provided over a million dollars. Federal Election Commission Chairman Michael Toner estimated that to be taken seriously, a candidate needed to raise at least \$100 million by the end of 2007. Ultimately, Obama and his opponent John McCain spent a total of over a billion dollars on the 2008 election.

Obama selected Joe Biden as his Vice Presidential running mate. Biden was a longtime Washington insider, with over 35 years of experience as a defender of this country's ruling elite. Biden, unlike Obama, was in the Senate when the vote to authorize the war on Iraq took place. He voted in favor of it, arguing at the time that a war on Iraq would be a "march to peace and security." Biden also voted to approve every bill to fund the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. He even outdid the Bush administration when he introduced legislation to increase the war appropriations by \$13 billion, most of this money going to weapons manufacturers. Biden supported the plan of sending more soldiers to Afghanistan. He was also a strong supporter of Israel's brutal occupation of Palestine, accepting tens of thousands of dollars in campaign contributions from various Israeli lobbying groups. He also voted to pass and renew the Patriot Act.

In 2005, Biden helped pass the so-called “Bankruptcy Abuse Prevention and Consumer Protection Act,” which severely reduced the ability of workers to file for bankruptcy protection. It was a clear attack on workers and a gift to credit card companies. It made it easier for landlords to evict a bankrupt tenant and allowed creditors to take child-support payments away from parents to repay debts. It protected the rich by allowing them to safeguard an unlimited amount of funds as equity in their homes. It even permitted creditors to give misleading information about credit card contracts. The credit card companies had been trying to pass this legislation for years. When it finally succeeded in 2005, these companies had spent the previous nine years and \$34 million on lobbying efforts and campaign contributions. The credit company MBNA, which contributed tens of thousands

of dollars to Biden’s senatorial campaign, came from his state of Delaware. They were even involved in a scandal in which an executive from MBNA paid top dollar to buy the senator’s house, which looked like nothing more than a strategy to funnel more money into Biden’s pockets.

Biden also played a major role in attacking the poor and working class in the ’90s. He helped pass legislation introduced by the Clinton administration to kick millions of people off welfare. The legislation reduced food stamps, medical assistance, and all-around assistance to those who needed it most.

With wages down, prices up, corporations getting richer, and life for most working people getting more difficult, workers were right to want a change in 2008. So what kind of change did the Obama/Biden administration bring about?

---

## The Obama Presidency – False Hopes and Little Change

Barack Obama, more than any presidential candidate in decades, represented himself as a hope for something different. Obama made his slogans “Hope” and “Change.” These vague slogans were designed so that people could see whatever they wanted in his candidacy.

In contrast to the Republicans, Obama seemed intelligent and humane. He expressed concern about the real conditions of people’s lives. The impression Obama made was the exact opposite of the arrogant, uncaring and aggressive attitude George W. Bush had presented.

In addition, the symbolism of the election of the first African American president was enormous. His election was seen as a realization of African Americans’ hopes and struggles for a racially just society.

The Obama campaign received a major boost in August of 2008, when there was a massive stock market crash. Investors sold off their assets and bought currency, cashing in before their bad investments evaporated. This event caused a major disruption in the economy, and put the economic crisis at the center of both parties’ election campaigns. Obama won a good deal of support by blaming the Republicans and George W. Bush for this crisis.

In the campaign of 2008, Obama promised to put an end to the economic decline that was ruining people’s

lives. He promised healthcare reform for those who lack insurance or were struggling to pay for it. He said that he would end the wars and occupations begun under the Bush administration. He promised to reform immigration policy. He promised to defend the rights of women and extend legal rights for gay people. He promised to restore the civil liberties that had been under attack since 2001. He promised to be a part of “the generation that finally frees America from the tyranny of oil.” He promised to work to improve the education system. During the election of 2008, Obama had a promise for everyone.



*Obama and Biden*

## **The Democrats in Control**

In November 2008, Obama was elected with 52.9% of the popular vote. Other Democrats were swept into office with hope for a real change. They maintained control of the House of Representatives with a 79-seat majority. And in the Senate, the Democrats won eight more seats, giving the Democratic Party a 16-seat majority. With control of the presidency and Congress, the Democrats had the chance to make good on every one of their promises. But once in office, the Democrats once again revealed their true colors.

### **The Financial Crisis:**

#### **A Symptom of the Crisis of Capitalism**

The 2008 crisis in the stock market was a symptom of a more general crisis in the world economy. Capitalism requires corporations and investors to constantly reinvest their profits in new or expanding markets to generate even greater profits. If they are unable to find such markets to invest in, then the whole system begins to unravel.

Capitalism's need for expanding markets hit a limit in the 1970s. American industry had been dominant for 25 years since the end of World War II. Advances in technology and the increasing productivity of workers allowed corporations to make extremely high profits. Industrial workers were organized and able to win higher wages and benefits while corporations maintained their profits. But American capitalism faced new competitors in the 1970s. New, more efficient industrial infrastructure in countries such as Germany and Japan provided sharp competition for American companies on the international market.

In response, American companies did the one thing that guarantees an increase in profits – they attacked the workers in order to cut the overall cost of labor. They decreased wages and increased working hours and the intensity of work. And where possible, they closed factories and other workplaces and transferred the work to other countries. As wages fell in the United States, consumption was kept afloat by the extension of credit. From credit cards to bank loans, personal debt became a fact of life for the average American and the corporations maintained their profits.

Buying on credit assumes that the borrowers will be able to pay back the loans eventually. But if enough people can't pay back their loans, businesses start to shut

down, people are laid off, and once more the system goes into crisis.

## **The Sub-Prime Mortgage Scandal**

The crash of the stock markets in 2008 was linked to this overall crisis of capitalism. In 2008, it was revealed that the major banks and corporations had engineered a massively complicated scam, now known as the sub-prime mortgage scandal.

Beginning in the 1990s, the banks and corporations pushed for a deregulation of financial markets. This culminated in 1999 with legislation signed into law by Bill Clinton to repeal the Glass-Steagall Act. The Glass-Steagall Act, passed in the 1930s, prohibited commercial banks from selling and trading in the loans and assets of their customers.

The repeal of Glass-Steagall allowed banks to trade using the mortgages they held, which enabled them to pull off a major scam. The banks made mortgage loans (known as sub-prime loans) to people who could not afford the homes they were buying. The banks would take those mortgages and combine them with other loans and trade these bundled assets on the financial markets, as if they were really worth something. This was all based on the belief that the value of housing would continue to increase, guaranteeing a profit on every mortgage folded into this phony bundle of debt.

To the amazement of many, this went on for years. And it worked! The hedge fund traders and banks were making billions of dollars. Most of the big investment houses and banks were involved in buying and selling home loans like this. In 2006, twenty percent of their mortgage-related assets were based on sub-prime loans that were based on total speculation.

Why would they take this risk? The banks and corporations were desperate for new markets to invest in. With the deregulation of financial markets, the bankers and investors believed they had created an unlimited arena for investment – lending money to people to buy homes. The problem is that this plan assumed that real estate prices would constantly increase.

But they didn't. And in October of 2007, the house of cards began to collapse as housing prices fell. Immediately people began to default on their mortgages. The horrible result of this scam is that twenty million people lost their



*Foreclosed houses after 2007-2008 crash*

homes in the years following the financial crash, while the bankers themselves suffered no real consequences.

The collapse of the housing markets was just the tip of the iceberg. The capitalist economy of the world had reached a tipping point, and a downward spiral began, causing enormous suffering.

### **Whose President?**

The first order of business for the Obama administration was to tackle the economic crisis. But from the beginning, Obama was clear that he would put the banks first. That was his job – to defend the moneyed interests. It is why the top five banks – Citigroup, Bank of America, JP Morgan Chase, Goldman Sachs, and Morgan Stanley – donated \$3.5 million to Obama in 2008. All we need to do is look at some of the names in Obama’s administration to see that the Obama administration was designed to represent these banks’ interests.

#### **National Economic Council: Larry Summers**

Larry Summers was appointed head of the National Economic Council. Summers was tasked with setting economic policy for the Obama administration in the face of economic collapse, as the facts started to emerge about the banks’ manipulation of loans and investments. But Summers himself was one of the architects of “financial de-regulation.” During the 1990s, Summers served as Undersecretary and then Secretary of the Treasury under Bill Clinton. Along with Federal Reserve chairman Alan Greenspan and Treasury official Robert Rubin, Summers was instrumental in the repealing of the Glass-Steagall Act in 1999.

#### **Treasury Secretary: Timothy Geithner**

The Obama administration appointed Tim Geithner as Treasury Secretary. Geithner had been an economic advisor under the Clinton administration, and then was appointed by President Bush as President of the Federal Reserve. Once again, in the case of Geithner, Obama chose one of the officials who helped deregulate investment laws under Clinton, and someone who had played a key role in the economic policies of the Bush administration.

#### **President’s Economic Recovery Advisory Board: Paul Volcker**

A special board of advisors was set up to shape Obama’s economic policy. The president of this board, Paul Volcker, was a long-time investment banker. Volcker was also President of the Federal Reserve Board under Democratic President Jimmy Carter, and continued under Republican President Ronald Reagan. He was instrumental in designing Reagan’s economic policies, which included tax cuts to the wealthy and a massive assault on unions.

#### **Attorney General: Eric Holder**

Obama appointed Eric Holder as Attorney General. Holder was a corporate lawyer who served as deputy attorney general under Clinton, and then worked as a lawyer defending major companies against lawsuits during the years of Bush’s presidency. One of Holder’s main jobs during this time was the defense of Chiquita Brands International, whose executives funded armed gangs to murder union organizers and political activists in Colombia.

#### **Central Intelligence Agency Director: Leon Panetta**

Obama’s Director of the CIA, Leon Panetta, was Clinton’s White House Chief of Staff. Under Clinton, Panetta’s main act was to design policies to eliminate federal welfare programs, such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children.

#### **Secretary of Education: Arne Duncan**

The Obama administration chose Arne Duncan, the Chicago public schools’ Chief Executive Officer, as Secretary of Education. Duncan made his name in Chicago applying budget cuts to education by blaming

teachers for the failure of schools. Arne Duncan's key initiative in Chicago was something called "Renaissance 2010," which allowed the government to fire teachers and staff and turn public schools into privately-run charter schools. Obama's appointment of Duncan was a signal that Obama intended to carry out these sorts of policies on a national level.

### **White House Chief of Staff: Rahm Emanuel**

Obama appointed Rahm Emanuel as his administration's Chief of Staff. Emanuel had been one of Bill Clinton's domestic policy advisers during Clinton's assault on welfare programs. During the Bush years, Emanuel made a fortune as a highly paid executive at the investment bank Dresden, Kleinwort and Wasserstein. Then he was elected as a representative for Illinois in the House of Representatives. As a representative, Emmanuel was instrumental in supporting policies to bail out the banks. In 2011, Emanuel left this position to become Mayor of Chicago, where he made attacks on teachers and schools one of his main policies.

Emanuel was also a former civilian volunteer in the Israeli Defense force. He was a strong supporter of Israel's brutal policies of occupation and oppression of the Palestinian people.

When these key players in the corporate and finance worlds were appointed to high powered posts within the Obama administration, it ensured that the continued profits of the banks would be protected, even in the midst of the economic collapse.

### **Who Got Bailed Out?**

One of the first things that the federal government did immediately after the market panic of 2008 was to begin making up for the lost profits of the banks and corporations by direct injection of public funds. Bush and Obama's administrations promised a combined total of \$13 trillion in federal funds to bail out the banks and investors, arguing that they were "too big to fail."

The bail-outs began with a \$700 billion expenditure of public funds called the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP). In late September 2008, George W. Bush put forward the proposal for this first round of bail-outs to pay the banks. Public outrage was so strong that people flooded Congress with emails and phone calls, and the servers handling Congressional email crashed. Fearing for



their images, 45 Democrats and six Republicans voted against the proposal the first time it was put forward. Obama was not one of them. By the second round of voting, TARP passed. \$350 billion immediately disappeared into the hands of the banks and investment firms to offset their falling profits.

The bail-outs continued under Obama. As Treasury Secretary, Timothy Geithner introduced the Public-Private Investment Program for Legacy Assets. This program bought up two trillion dollars in so-called "troubled assets." In other words, the government spent federal money to pay the banks for the worthless assets they had created.

Then in March of 2009, the Obama administration gave General Motors and Chrysler \$25 billion in loans while allowing them to go bankrupt and re-structure their workforce, shredding previous union contracts. This meant slashing wages and benefits for auto workers and re-structuring so that new workers made \$14 an hour, half of what workers made under the old contract. The heads of the United Auto Workers union accepted this agreement as necessary to "save the auto industry."

Over four trillion dollars in bail-outs were paid to corporations under the Bush and Obama administrations. This was the biggest transfer of wealth to the rich in the history of the world, and it had enormous consequences for the rest of the population.

### **The Economy under Obama**

While the federal government under both Bush and Obama moved swiftly to cushion the blows for the major banks and corporations who engineered the economic crisis, ordinary people were the ones who paid the price.



*City officials destroy a homeless encampment in Fresno, 2011*

Between 2007 and 2016, an estimated 20 million people lost their homes due to foreclosures and the inability to pay their mortgages.

During the eight years of Obama's presidency, more than half the real income growth in the country went to the richest one percent of the population. By 2016, the richest three percent owned more than half the nation's wealth. The top 400 Americans held as much wealth as the bottom 160 million Americans. Meanwhile, hourly wages barely kept up with inflation. And seven years after the end of the Great Recession, 32 million Americans were still unemployed or under-employed.

Healthcare costs continued to rise under Obama, with national spending reaching ten thousand dollars per person in 2016 (more than two and a half times what it was in 1996). And the prices of basic food products climbed over fifteen percent from 2008 to 2016. By 2016, 45 million U.S. citizens, and one out of every three children, were dependent on food stamps.

Meanwhile, the economic crash had drastic consequences for the infrastructure of the U.S. Thirteen cities declared bankruptcy between 2008 and 2013, including four of the five largest municipal bankruptcies in U.S. history. States from California to Illinois to Maine slashed social programs such as healthcare for the elderly and poor, day care for children, and food and housing programs for needy families.

### **So-Called Healthcare Reform**

One of Obama's main promises was to bring about healthcare reform. This was a very popular promise with ordinary people. When Obama entered office in 2009,

there were 50 million Americans without healthcare coverage. Medical bills were (and still are) the leading cause of personal bankruptcy in the U.S.

But healthcare costs were also a major problem for American companies. Healthcare corporations were making profits hand over fist off of the rising costs of insurance and healthcare. But other companies, who had contracts with their employees to provide healthcare, had to pay for part of the rising costs of healthcare.

While the immediate response of companies to the problem of rising healthcare costs has been to attack workers' benefits, many American companies have also supported some sort of healthcare reform – not out of any concern for their workers, but simply because they are losing too much of their profits to the high costs of healthcare.

In 2009, Obama and the Democrats made it their main goal to draft a healthcare reform law. But was the goal of Obama's healthcare policy to supply healthcare to the millions of people who need it? Not at all. The Obama administration's healthcare policies responded much more to the needs of American corporations to have some sort of regulation of healthcare costs, while still guaranteeing the profits of the healthcare companies.

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act was created by the Obama administration in collaboration with the heads of the Pharmaceutical Researchers and Manufacturers Association and the major healthcare companies. It was a compromise between the profits of healthcare companies and the costs to other American companies.

In March, 2010, Obama signed the act into law. So what did this so-called reform look like? The Affordable Care Act left the U.S. healthcare system intact. However, it begins to regulate this system in two ways. Before the Affordable Care Act, the healthcare companies in the U.S. were free to charge individuals higher premiums or even reject them for healthcare based on so-called "pre-existing conditions." In other words, the worse the health of a person who applied for health insurance, the more they paid for healthcare.

The Affordable Care Act changed this system by creating standards which companies had to meet. It made it illegal to deny healthcare to patients with pre-existing conditions. And it set the prices of monthly healthcare payments in order to make them more affordable. It

also raised the age under which children could be part of their parent's healthcare plan by two years, to the age of 26. Overall, the Affordable Care Act brought about 20 million uninsured Americans under some sort of healthcare plan between 2010 and 2016.

In return for these limitations on the healthcare companies' right to profit, the Affordable Care Act required individuals to buy healthcare. And there was no public option. In other words, it was illegal not to be a customer of one of the healthcare companies. Those who did not take out healthcare plans were subject to fines. This was the big pay-off for the healthcare companies. They surrendered themselves to some regulations, but they won a whole new set of customers who were forced to buy healthcare plans.

### **2010 Congressional and State Elections: The Rise of the Right**

In 2010, congressional and state elections took place. Obama and the Democrats had controlled Congress and the presidency for two years, but had completely failed to address people's basic problems. Anger against Obama and the Democrats started to grow. In the summer of 2010, some right-wing politicians and media personalities called for town hall meetings and rallies in opposition to Obama's healthcare plan. This outpouring of anger became collectively known as the Tea Party movement.

The main organizers and spokesmen for this right-wing sentiment were a number of television and radio personalities with links to the Republican Party. They blamed the economic and social problems that people had on the Obama administration's policies. Tea Party politicians and pundits called for massive budget cuts, and attacks on unions, environmental regulations, and social welfare programs. They made wild claims about the supposed socialist goals of the Obama administration. In addition, these claims were mixed with thinly veiled racist attacks on Obama himself.

Much of the funding for activities identified with the Tea Party, from demonstrations to electoral campaigns, came from billionaire corporate funders like the Koch brothers. Their aim was primarily to mobilize people to support the Republican Party in elections and launch further attacks on social programs.

In the 2010 Congressional elections, the Republicans fielded 138 state and federal candidates who were

identified with the so-called Tea Party movement. Of these candidates, 40 won seats in state and federal government. This was enough to shift the balance of power. In Congress, the Republican Party won a majority in the House of Representatives, though not in the Senate. On the state level, the Republican Party took eleven governorships away from the Democrats.

Throughout Obama's presidency following 2010, the Democratic Party blamed the Republican Party for blocking and sabotaging attempts to make fundamental changes. It is true that the Republican politicians, especially those associated with the Tea Party, were particularly outspoken in their attacks on the population. But no one should forget that for the first two years of Obama's presidency, the Democratic Party controlled the House, the Senate, and the White House.

### **The U.S. and the Arab Spring**

At the beginning of his term, Obama went to Cairo, Egypt and delivered a speech which promised a change in U.S. relations with the Middle East. The U.S. government maintains a network of military and diplomatic aid and influence in the Middle East. Since the 1970s, the power of the U.S. has extended across the region. The U.S. has used its influence to force the privatization of economic resources, and the cutting of social development programs. Obama's speech played upon the hopes of people in the Middle East that his presidency would signal a real shift away from these policies.

But what was the Democrats' reaction to the Arab Spring, a massive rebellion that swept the Middle East beginning in December 2010? Under Obama, the U.S.



*Protest in Tahrir Square during the Arab Spring*

government supported and tried to maintain those same governments in power. Hosni Mubarak, the thirty-year dictator of Egypt, was a U.S. ally and one of the U.S. arms industry's biggest clients. When the rebellion in Egypt began, Vice President Biden publicly defended Mubarak, even as Mubarak's security forces fired live ammunition into crowds of peaceful protesters, murdering hundreds. As the rebellions spread, Obama continued to publicly urge people to compromise with the dictators they were trying to overthrow.

The attitude of the Democrats towards the people of the Middle East is also clear when we look at the 2012 Democratic Party convention. The leadership of the Democratic Party forced through a resolution declaring Jerusalem, a city divided between Israelis and Palestinians, to be the capital of Israel. This resolution essentially meant a declaration of support for Israel's 60-year-long occupation of Palestinian territory. President Trump did the same thing in 2017, declaring Israel's capital to be Jerusalem and moving the U.S. embassy there in 2018. Democrats in Congress took the opportunity to grandstand and condemned him for this, but their own party's resolution from less than six years earlier plainly revealed their hypocrisy.

### **Ending the Wars?**

One of Obama's biggest campaign promises was to put an end to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. His administration made loud proclamations about withdrawing troops from both countries. But in fact, this policy had nothing to do with ending the wars. Under the Obama administration's plan, Iraqi and Afghan troops, trained and armed by the U.S. military, were to take over most of the fighting on the ground. However, U.S. forces were to remain in both countries carrying out targeted strikes with Army Special Forces, or using aerial bombardment with aircraft and military drones.

Obama promised to withdraw combat troops from Afghanistan by 2014. But before this he escalated U.S. commitment to the conflict to unprecedented levels, with nearly 100,000 troops in 2011. Obama's withdrawal plan called for a "support mission" of U.S. forces to remain in the country. In practice this meant that 8,400 troops and 9,400 U.S. military contractors were still in Afghanistan when Obama left office.

The U.S. withdrew most combat troops from Iraq by December 2011. However, 17,000 U.S. intelligence and State Department officials remained in the city-sized U.S. embassy in Baghdad. The U.S. also maintained consulates in Basra, Mosul, and Kirkuk, guarded by thousands of private defense contractors.

In January 2014, the terrorist organization known as the "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria" (ISIS) took over large parts of western and northern Iraq, beginning the Iraqi Civil War. The Obama administration responded by sending troops into Iraq yet again. At the end of Obama's term there were still 5,200 U.S. troops in Iraq.

For many Americans, this was justified by the numerous horrific atrocities carried out by ISIS. But ISIS would likely not have been so successful in Iraq had it not been for the repressive and divisive policies of Iraq's prime minister, Nouri Al-Maliki. When it suited his political purposes, Al-Maliki promoted sectarianism between violent Shia militias and the Sunni population, where ISIS tried to draw its support. The Obama administration had helped keep Al-Maliki in office back in 2010, despite his unpopularity and corruption, because they felt at the time that it was in the United States' interest to have a "strongman" in charge in Iraq.

### **Obama's Military Legacy**

The military budget under Obama reached 720 billion dollars in 2010 – the highest it had been since World War II. At the end of Obama's eight years in office, the military budget was still at 580 billion, more than double what it was before the U.S. "War on Terror" began.

The administration's commitment to military spending did not end there. Obama's administration spent more on the U.S. nuclear arsenal than all post-Cold War presidents combined, committing \$1.25 trillion over the next 30 years to make the arsenal more sophisticated and destructive. The project involved building new long-range missiles, new nuclear submarines, new planes, and new bombs, including the new 11-billion-dollar B61-12 nuclear bomb, by some measures the most expensive bomb ever built in human history.

Obama's military policy also included a dramatic increase in drone warfare, using unmanned military drones that fire rockets at human targets. Thousands of civilians were caught in the cross-hairs of these drones, and drone strikes repeatedly hit weddings and other social



*Mural in Yemen capital Sanaa*

gatherings. Under Bush, there were 11 drone strikes per year, but under Obama this number increased to 80. Drone strikes were carried out not only in Afghanistan but in Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen. U.S. drones flew regularly over many civilian areas in these countries, creating a widespread culture of trauma and fear among people who knew a strike could come at any moment.

Obama used the Authorization of Military Force Act to justify the assassination of anyone remotely suspected of association with terrorist activities in Yemen, including boys as young as thirteen years old. Under the CIA's drone program, gatherings of more than a handful of young men at certain times of day were considered sufficient evidence of terrorist activity to warrant a drone strike. Any "military-age" males who happened to be killed in a drone strike were automatically recorded as "enemy combatants."

In Yemen, however, the crimes of the U.S. military have gone beyond drone strikes against civilians. In 2015, Saudi Arabia invaded Yemen to fight its own "War on Terror" and began a heavy bombing campaign, destroying hospitals, schools, and basic infrastructure throughout the country. More than half of the 12,000 people killed in this war have been civilians. By 2017, more than 14 million people in Yemen (a majority of the population) lacked access to clean water as a result of the war. The Saudi invasion also caused the largest outbreak of cholera in history, which killed over a million people by 2018.

Saudi Arabia's war on Yemen would be impossible without U.S. support. The Obama administration continued the Clinton and Bush policy of being Saudi

Arabia's largest military supplier. Saudi Arabia's military budget expanded rapidly while Obama was president, resulting in considerable revenue expansions for the U.S. military. And the U.S. has not just been the arms dealer behind the Saudi war on Yemen. Most of the logistics for the war are carried out directly by the U.S. military, down to refueling the American-made Saudi jets between bombing runs.

During his campaign for the presidency, Obama had won admiration from people around the world when he pointed out the absurdity of the idea of a "global war on terror." The Obama administration abandoned this Bush-era phrase to describe their military policy. Many might have hoped that this marked a turn away from pursuing never-ending wars in countries all over the world, in which "the killing of each 'enemy combatant' creates ten new ones" hostile to the U.S. When Obama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009, many might have expected him to be a peace-loving president. But Obama's heavy investment in the military, his continuation of the "War on Terror," and his vital contribution to the horrific war in Yemen show us the complete opposite.

### **Civil Liberties and Mass Surveillance**

Under Obama, the assault on civil liberties only increased. As a candidate for the presidency, Obama had promised to revise, if not revoke, the Patriot Act. This set of laws, passed in 2001, dramatically impacted civil liberties, established the Department of Homeland Security, and gave intelligence services wide-ranging power to search, spy on, and even imprison U.S. citizens.

Obama refused to restore the right of habeas corpus – the right to be brought before a court of law if arrested. In other words, U.S. citizens whom the government suspected of being so-called "terrorists" could be held indefinitely. The Obama administration allowed the State Department and Defense Department to eavesdrop on tens of millions of U.S. citizens without a warrant.

Obama promised to close the military base at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. Since 2002, 780 people have been detained at Guantánamo. During their detention, scandals have erupted over psychological and physical torture, and these prisoners have not been allowed any due process. Obama promised that these practices would end and pledged to close the prison. No new detainees

were introduced, but the prison was never closed, and still held over 50 detainees when Obama left office.

In 2010, the website Wikileaks released to the public 250,000 diplomatic communications and 500,000 army reports. These secret documents exposed a number of U.S. operations in the world, from support of dictators such as Ben Ali of Tunisia, and Moammar Qaddafi of Libya, to the brutal violence of the U.S. military against civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The U.S. government alleged that the release of these documents endangered U.S. soldiers and officials, but this claim remains completely unproven. However, following the release of these documents, the Obama administration pursued Wikileaks founder Julian Assange and did whatever it could to pressure foreign governments to surrender Assange to the United States. Chelsea Manning, the soldier who was the source of the Wikileaks documents, was imprisoned for seven years, and spent the first year in solitary confinement awaiting trial by a military court.

Manning was not the only person to face prosecution as a whistle-blower under Obama. All told, the Obama administration used the 1917 Espionage Act to prosecute whistle-blowers more times than all previous presidents combined, using it eight times in eight years. Before Obama, it had only been used three times in the previous 91 years.

Another one of these whistle-blowers was Edward Snowden, a former CIA employee who released thousands of classified documents to journalists in 2013. Knowing he would face prosecution under the Espionage Act, Snowden fled the country before releasing the documents.

Among other things, these documents revealed that the U.S. National Security Agency (NSA) had obtained a secret court order forcing Verizon to hand over millions of phone records on a daily basis. The documents also revealed that the NSA was tapping into tens of millions of Yahoo and Google accounts around the world. With a budget of over 50 billion dollars, the NSA has been collecting millions of email contact lists, searching email contents, tracking millions of people's internet activity, and tracking people's movements through their cell phones. Targets of U.S. and British intelligence agencies have included ordinary U.S. and French citizens, national governments including Brazil and Germany,

U.S. corporations' foreign competitors, and even charity organizations like the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

Despite these revelations, Obama continued to defend all the activities of the NSA and the other spy agencies throughout his presidency.

## Immigration Reform

The rights of immigrants have become a major public issue in the United States. In response to the public focus on this issue, another of Obama's major promises was immigration reform.

Obama made only the most minimal gesture toward addressing the problems of immigrants. In June 2012, Obama passed DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals), a promise that his administration would not deport young people who were not American citizens, but were brought to the United States as children. This promise acknowledged a major issue: that children of immigrants can grow up in this country for all of their conscious life, and can then be deported to countries where they have no connection except the legal status of their parents.

But in fact, Obama's administration perpetuated the ongoing attacks on immigrants in this country. Obama's appointment of Janet Napolitano, the anti-immigrant governor of Arizona, as Secretary of Homeland Security, was a signal that the Obama administration would maintain and extend the attacks on immigrants that had taken place under the Bush administration. Under Obama, 2.5 million people were deported, far more than under any previous U.S. president. This extraordinary number of deportations was partly due to the introduction of a new policy which formally criminalized people who were apprehended at the border, allowing



them to be treated as felons if they ever sought re-entry. The sharp rise in deportations was also due to Obama investing considerable resources into ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) to carry out more raids, arresting hundreds of thousands of people guilty only of living in the U.S. without documentation. One notorious series of raids in early 2016 targeted refugees from Central America, mostly mothers and their children.

### Latin America

One factor pushing migration from Central America to the United States has been violent unrest in countries like Honduras. In 2009, the democratically elected president of Honduras, Manuel Zelaya, was overthrown in a coup that replaced his government with military rule. The leader of the coup was a Honduran general who had graduated from the School of the Americas, a U.S. military training program which has produced numerous Latin American coup leaders and war criminals over the years. Though the Obama administration was not directly involved in the coup, Obama's Secretary of State Hillary Clinton refused to acknowledge what happened as a coup, repeated the propaganda of the military regime, and continued providing the Honduran government with military aid. Despite the fact that military rule in Honduras has led to a higher murder rate and mass violence, Clinton and Obama refused to grant asylum status to those fleeing Honduras, instead supporting undocumented Hondurans' deportation from the United States.

This is not the only example of the fact that the U.S. imperialist tradition in Latin America remained alive and well under Obama. An earthquake that struck Haiti in January 2010 destroyed much of the country's fragile infrastructure and caused the deaths of over a hundred thousand people. The catastrophic results of this single earthquake were mainly due to Haiti's long history of poverty under economic domination by the U.S. and Europe. The U.S. federal government and the United Nations responded to the humanitarian crisis first by ensuring their complete control over the Haitian capital and enforcing martial law. U.S. authorities who had taken control over the airport showed where their priorities lay as they turned away flights carrying food, water, and medical supplies until the arrival of security troops.



*One of many mass graves of earthquake victims in Haiti*

Years after the earthquake, it was clear that the United States, whether under a Republican or Democratic government, could only have an exploitative relationship with Haiti. Despite all the outpouring of humanitarian aid from around the world, and despite the enormous amount of wealth in the U.S. and western Europe, in 2017 there were 2.5 million people in Haiti (a quarter of the entire population) who were still in need of humanitarian aid as a result of the earthquake. 150 million dollars that had been donated to the American Red Cross for earthquake relief mysteriously disappeared, and despite the organization claiming in 2015 to have built 130,000 homes, in reality it had only built six. Meanwhile, U.S. corporations continued to take advantage of Haiti's desperate poverty by employing people there in sweatshop labor.

Despite all this, Obama's administration is sometimes remembered as having a progressive policy in its relation to Latin America because Obama began the process of thawing U.S. relations with Cuba in 2015. But the motivation behind this policy is clear in the context of the ongoing U.S. economic exploitation of Latin American countries. More open relations with Cuba means U.S. corporations can finally set up shop there as they have throughout the Caribbean. Already, U.S. cell phone and hotel companies have taken advantage of the "Cuban thaw" to expand into the Cuban market and begin drawing wealth out of that country, just as they have done in Jamaica, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic. Though President Trump denounced Obama for this Cuba policy in his speeches, in fact Trump's administration

mainly continued the same policy, demonstrating some understanding of its service to U.S. corporate interests.

### **The Rights of Women**

Obama made promises to defend the civil, economic, and reproductive rights of women. Like many other prominent Democratic Party politicians, he paid lip-service to defending women's rights and opposing legislation that attacks women. But Obama and the Democrats presided over budget cuts, attacks on wages, and layoffs that impacted women – everything people hoped they would fight against. It is true that Obama's administration acted on some issues. The Affordable Care Act included provisions that insurers should give contraceptive services for free. The Obama administration also revoked the Bush administration's practice of denying funding to international aid organizations that provide birth control and abortion services to women. In 2009, Obama also signed the Lily Ledbetter Fair Pay Act into law. This bill extended the period of time women could file for sex discrimination or sexual harassment at work.

However, these changes have in no way made up for the attacks made by Democratic leadership against women during the Clinton years. Despite controlling the White House for eight years and Congress for two years, Obama and the Democrats never attempted to roll back the cuts to family planning and women's aid organizations. Nor did they ever attempt to replace the "Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996," the bipartisan attack on welfare recipients conducted under President Clinton. These attacks have been especially harsh on single mothers, pressuring women to stay married or else risk losing access to public assistance.

### **The Environment**

Global climate change poses a catastrophic threat to our planet. Natural disasters, from floods and hurricanes to firestorms and droughts, are becoming commonplace news headlines. While Obama and the Democrats acknowledged climate change as a major problem, they did nothing substantial to address it.

Obama, like Bush, refused to sign the Kyoto Accords and other international agreements that would limit greenhouse gas emissions. In addition, the Obama administration rewrote the Clean Air Act and the

Clean Water Act to permit offshore drilling and the use of fracking, a highly destructive form of natural gas extraction. Obama also authorized drilling in government-protected lands on the East Coast, in Alaska, and off the coast of Florida.

Democratic and Republican administrations alike have encouraged fossil fuel extraction in one form or another, and they have both protected the oil companies when that extraction goes catastrophically wrong. In 2010, an explosion on the oil rig Deepwater Horizon caused the largest oil spill in human history. Eleven workers were killed, and over the course of four months 200 million gallons of oil spilled into the Gulf of Mexico. The federal government gave complete authority over the clean-up effort to British Petroleum (BP), the private company that owned the rig, and prevented journalists from entering the area or filming the spill. BP used their authority over the clean-up effort to prioritize making the oil spill invisible as quickly as possible, dropping experimental chemical dispersants over the spill which dramatically increased the toxicity of the oil while spreading it out more beneath the water's surface.

In 2011, Obama faced the challenge posed by the construction of the Keystone XL pipeline, which would transport crude oil produced from tar sands in Canada to multiple destinations in the United States. Obama's approval was necessary after Congress approved the project to move forward. The plan was only delayed after facing major protests, as well as criticism from local, state, and federal politicians. This outpouring of opposition embarrassed Obama and the Democrats, who then delayed the final approval of the project. After years of facing this consistent opposition, Obama finally stated in 2015 that he would not support further construction of the pipeline, after he had already approved construction of the pipeline's southern portion.

Obama behaved similarly regarding the construction of another crude oil pipeline, the Dakota Access Pipeline, which ran through the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in North and South Dakota. The Obama administration continually denied appeals to halt or reroute construction. Only after eight months of mass protests, in which Standing Rock tribal leaders and their supporters faced violence from soldiers and militarized police, did the administration finally agree to delay further construction in December 2016. Obama voiced

his sympathies with the people of Standing Rock and tried to pose as a supporter of their cause. In the end, his administration's delays meant nothing, as Donald Trump ordered construction to resume as soon as he entered office the following month.

When he entered office, President Trump was also condemned by environmentalists when he promised to withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement, an international environmental document that Obama signed in 2016. In retrospect, this might make Obama appear as a defender of the environment. But in fact, the Paris Climate Agreement was a symbolic document. It set a target of limiting global warming to two degrees Celsius, which climate scientists are confident is not enough to save the planet. And participation by the nations that signed it is completely voluntary. There is no enforcement mechanism. Across the board, the policies of Obama and the Democrats failed to even begin to address the problem of climate change. Obama was no defender of the environment, but he wanted to look like one for photo ops.

## Education

George W. Bush's "No Child Left Behind" education policy, which had been co-authored by Democrats Ted Kennedy in the Senate and George Miller in the House, had faced substantial criticism. Its excessive use of standardized tests forced teachers to "teach to the test" rather than engage students meaningfully. It punished students, families, administrators, and teachers for failures that were beyond their control in underfunded schools. This resulted in demoralized students and educators and angry parents.

The Obama administration, whose Secretary of Education was Arne Duncan, former superintendent of the Chicago public school system, vowed to do better. But Duncan was a supporter of high-stakes testing and charter schools in Chicago that took resources away from regular public schools.

The Obama-Duncan education policy forced schools and school districts to compete with each other for scarce federal education funds. Their School Improvement Grants (SIG) program was a continuation of a similar Bush program. Schools that were considered "low-performing" and typically were in low-income communities and disproportionately in communities

of color, could compete for grants of up to \$2 million apiece from a total of \$7 billion allocated during the Obama years. But to do so, they had to adopt one of four Obama-approved strategies: replace the principal and at least half the teachers, convert into a charter school, close altogether, or undergo a "transformation," including hiring a new principal and adopting new instructional strategies, new teacher evaluations and a longer school day. This caused severe disruptions in the schools that participated. But a federally-funded study reported just before the end of the Obama administration that "Overall, across all grades, we found that implementing any SIG-funded model had no significant impacts on math or reading test scores, high school graduation, or college enrollment." The program was an expensive failure under Obama and Duncan.

The other Obama signature education program was the "Race to the Top" (RTTT) grant competition. This pushed state governments to link school funding and teachers' pay to standardized testing and student performance. But student performance is largely a result of deteriorating economic and social conditions and funding cuts, which teachers and school officials are in no position to control. The RTTT legislation used this seeming failure of the education system to make further cuts, attacking teachers' pay and benefits. RTTT allowed states to shut down public schools and reopen them as charter schools. These charter schools, many of which are owned by companies supported by corporate foundations, are not subject to the same rules as public schools. Charter schools are not required to allow union representation for teachers and other workers. As a result, they almost always pay lower salaries. In 2014, a charter school teacher earned an average of \$44,500, while a public school teacher earned \$53,400.

Obama's RTTT program received criticism from, among others, a coalition of civil rights organizations that said that, "Such an approach reinstates the antiquated and highly politicized frame for distributing federal support to states that civil rights organizations fought to remove in 1965."

What about overall education funding under Obama? The vast majority of public education funding comes from state and local government. In 2015, only eight percent of such funding came from the federal government. But the Great Recession slashed state and local tax bases for

education just as the Obama administration was coming to power. And state and local education budgets across the country generally followed suit. In most states, education funding in 2015 was lower than it had been in 2008. What was the response of the federal government under Obama? Was there an effort to make up at least some of the state and local losses? No. In fact, federal spending for Title I – the major federal assistance program for high-poverty schools – dropped over six percent during the Obama administration, after adjusting for inflation.

### **Attacks on Unions**

Obama enlisted the support of the unions during his election campaigns. Union officials hoped that Obama's election would make it possible to pass a Congressional act called the Employee Free Choice Act. This law would allow workers to join a union after a simple vote rather than going through a lengthy process during which employers can block and undermine union campaigns. Nothing guaranteed that workers who joined unions with a simple vote would gain a decent contract, or be organized to fight against concessions and attacks, but at the least this legislation would make it easier for workers to obtain union representation.

Even this legislation was too much for the Democrats and Obama. In spite of all of the money and effort that the unions had spent supporting the Democratic Party, the Democrats in Congress did not use their majority to pass it. In fact, since 2008, every promise to workers and their unions was thrown overboard. And every attack on workers by the bosses during the Obama administration was met by silence or hostility from the Democratic Party.

The year 2011 saw a massive wave of anti-union legislation. The most important attack was led by Governor Scott Walker in Wisconsin. Walker, a governor elected with the support of the Tea Party, put forward legislation to remove the right of public sector unions to collectively bargain contracts. In other words, public sector unions were to be dismantled. This attack led to a mass movement against the legislation. Thousands of people occupied the state capital building and demanded an end to the legislation. What did Obama do to support people's attempts to defend themselves against this attack? Nothing. Obama and his administration did not set foot in Wisconsin or speak up to defend workers' rights.

This is not surprising. In fact, at the same time that Scott Walker was attacking unions in Wisconsin, Democratic Party governors in California, Connecticut, Hawaii, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New York, Oregon, and Washington were forcing massive concessions on state workers.

The Democrats' attitude toward workers' union protections was again put to the test in September 2012. Teachers in Chicago began fighting back against the policies which had begun under Arne Duncan's "Renaissance 2010" reforms, and his federal-level "Race to The Top" initiative. Chicago teachers faced an effort by Mayor Rahm Emanuel to restructure their pay-scale. Instead of teachers being paid for their years of work, and for their education, teachers' pay would be tied to the test scores and performance of students. Teachers went on strike for over a week against these policies.

What was Obama's response? Once again Obama had nothing to say. And how could he? Arne Duncan – former CEO of the Chicago schools – was Obama's Secretary of Education. And Rahm Emanuel – Mayor of Chicago – was a former member of Obama's cabinet. When Chicago teachers were fighting back, they were fighting back against Obama's policies.

### **The Black Lives Matter Movement**

Many people hoped and believed that Obama's presidency would mean policy changes to benefit African Americans. But, as we've seen with public education policy and workers' rights, those hopes were frustrated. The Obama years were a time when police violence, and particularly the routine murders of African Americans by police and vigilantes, resurfaced as a prominent political issue. Of course, the central role that police fill in the violent subjugation of African Americans is nothing new. It has a history in this country that stretches from the slave patrols, to the brutal terror that ended Reconstruction, to Jim Crow, to the present day. But one thing that has changed recently is that it has become easier for people to document police brutality as it takes place. In 1992, the beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles police provoked such a huge response partly because it was videotaped by a witness. Since then, smart phones and social media have only made it easier to document police violence and to share it publicly. This has also taken some of the power away from mainstream media to confuse and distort the

story by attaching blame or suspicion to the victim, as they often do.

Police in the U.S. shot and killed an average of 982 people each year between 2015 and 2017. A quarter of these people were African American, despite African Americans representing only 12 percent of the population. According to some studies, African American men between the ages of 15 and 34 are sixteen times more likely to be shot by police than are young white men. Of the 963 people who were shot and killed by police in 2016, 121 were running away when they were shot. 152 were unarmed. A total of 36 unarmed African American men were killed by police in 2015.

In response, Black Lives Matter became a national movement in the streets and on social media in 2013. It was sparked by the acquittal of George Zimmerman for murder. Zimmerman was a police-sanctioned “neighborhood watch” participant in a gated community in Florida, who shot and killed Trayvon Martin, an unarmed African American teenager who was walking back to his family’s home. The ongoing and growing wave of cases of police violence against African American men and youths drove the widespread adoption of “Black Lives Matter” as a rallying cry across the country.

Though the Movement for Black Lives has seen all sorts of people active in many ways, two cities serve as particular examples where there were major clashes between African American communities and the police

during the Obama presidency: Ferguson, Missouri and Baltimore, Maryland.

In August 2014, white police officer Darren Wilson fatally shot Michael Brown, an unarmed African American teenager, in Ferguson, Missouri. Wilson shot Brown six times, killing him; witnesses said Brown was trying to surrender. Brown’s body was left in the street for four hours, and a crowd soon gathered. The night of Brown’s murder, one officer let his dog urinate on a memorial that people created to remember him, and then police cars ran over it and destroyed it. Outrage at the killing, the callous treatment of Michael Brown’s body, and the reality that African Americans were under constant attack from the state spurred the people of Ferguson to act, and thousands of them gathered in the streets to say, “No more!”

Peaceful demonstrations and civil unrest ensued. In a small town of 21,000 people, the police responded by calling in riot squads and setting a curfew. They deployed tanks, smoke bombs, flash grenades, tear gas, and rubber bullets against protesters. They arrested journalists and instituted a no-fly zone meant to bar media coverage of the uprising. CNN cameras even captured a police officer who invited the protesters to “Bring it, you fucking animals, bring it.”

Police officers were armed with rifles modeled on the military-grade M4 carbine; they also carried pistols, body armor, and up to six extra magazines of ammunition.



*Black Lives Matter demonstration in New York City, 2014*

They wore camouflage pants, drove mine-resistant MRAP vehicles, and looked like an occupying military regiment. A soldier who served in the Army's 82nd Airborne division noted that "We roll lighter than that in an actual war zone." Demonstrations continued for months and spread across the country, especially after the grand jury declined to indict Wilson.

The murder of Freddie Gray sparked another round of protests. Freddie Gray was a 25-year-old Baltimore man who was arrested by police in April 2015 on suspicion of carrying a knife. Gray died of injuries sustained while he was in police custody. Cops shackled him and place him in a van without a seatbelt. The resulting "rough ride" caused injuries that led to his death. Demonstrations for justice for Gray led to an aggressive police response. In particular, students leaving Frederick Douglass High School on the afternoon of Gray's funeral were met with a large formation of armed cops carrying shields. Buses that the students would normally take home were canceled. The resulting uprising, provoked by the police, spread over many blocks. Governor Larry Hogan sent the National Guard into Baltimore. During the following week, dozens of peaceful demonstrations ensued in Baltimore and many other places across the country.

All of this and more happened while Obama was president. In response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman, he said, "When Trayvon Martin was first shot, I said that this could've been my son. Another way of saying that is Trayvon Martin could've been me 35 years ago." Obama played to his base, saying that there was a "history of racial disparities in the application of our criminal laws." But he also noted that "African-American young men are disproportionately involved in the criminal justice system . . . that they're disproportionately both victims and perpetrators of violence." So he hedged on the question of responsibility for police violence and blamed the victims.

Addressing the protests in Ferguson following the refusal of the grand jury to indict Darren Wilson, Obama said he had "no sympathy at all for destroying your own communities." And, during the Baltimore uprising, he acknowledged racist and brutal practices by "some police who aren't doing the right thing," but said, "I can't federalize every police department in the country and force them to retrain." He also again said he had no sympathy for protesters' violence, and that "a handful of

people [were] taking advantage of the situation for their own purposes" and should "be treated as criminals."

So Obama's response to protesters was condescending and accusatory. He chastised protesters who were facing militarized police violence in their own neighborhoods. While people were out in the streets and building a social movement to confront police violence, Obama and other Democratic politicians could only patronize people being attacked by police with quips like "injustice won't be overcome by throwing bottles." They did everything they could to maintain people's faith in the existing judicial process – anything but to build faith in our own forces.

Attorney General Eric Holder later led an investigation into the Ferguson police department, which did conclude that that particular police department exhibited racist and unacceptably violent behavior. Among other things, Holder recommended that police need better training in the use of the military equipment which they had accumulated in recent years. Meanwhile, the Obama administration did nothing to curtail the billions of dollars that were funneled into the militarization of the police that began under Bush.

In sum, the Obama administration's response to the Black Lives Matter movement exemplified the politics of Democrats in power. They condescended to popular unrest against the system and discouraged people from mobilizing their communities against injustice, all while pretending that the politicians were the ones who would advocate for change and make it happen. The last thing these politicians wanted to see was working people and poor people of any race organizing to change the system.

### **Lessons from the Obama Presidency**

Obama's record shows what we can expect from the Democrats – attacks on workers, strengthening the repressive measures of the state, expanding imperialist war, and destroying the planet – all for the benefit of the capitalist class of this country. Politicians like Obama and Biden might seem more humane, more concerned with the welfare of workers, more concerned with the environment, and less warlike. And they may in fact be more inclined to defend the civil rights of women and gay people. But beyond that, they carry out the same economic policies, the same policies of violence around the world, and the same attacks on workers in the United States.

---

# The 2016 Presidential Election

Much of the U.S. population – including both Donald Trump supporters and opponents – was surprised by his election as president in 2016. In hindsight, there were clear reasons for his victory. Early in the primary campaign, there were 17 major candidates for the Republican nomination. As the primaries unfolded, those with apparently little chance to win dropped out. Trump’s demagoguery, representing himself as a political outsider despite his billionaire status, resonated with many voters outraged by both major political parties. Trump’s promise to “drain the swamp” of Washington, DC insider politics targeted both mainstream Democrats and Republicans. Trump was declared the Republican candidate two and a half months before the party’s convention in July.

Former senator from New York and secretary of state Hillary Clinton seemed to have the Democratic Party nomination locked in going into the primaries. Her major opponents were two former senators, a former governor, a Harvard law professor, and incumbent independent senator from Vermont, Bernie Sanders. Apart from Sanders, none of them stayed long in the primary campaign. Although Sanders, a self-described “democratic socialist,” was formally not a member of the Democratic Party, he caucused with the Democrats in the Senate and chose to run for president as a Democrat. Had he run as an independent, which some of his supporters preferred, he would not have had the exposure that the Democratic primaries provided. He would have had to run in the general election as an independent against both Trump and the Democratic nominee, presumably Clinton. In that scenario, he would likely be accused of splitting the Democratic vote and throwing the election to Trump.

So Sanders ran as a Democrat and gave Clinton formidable competition. He won 23 of 57 primaries with 43 percent of the vote. When Sanders endorsed Clinton in the general election, many of his supporters – especially young ones – were dismayed and did not back Clinton.

Then Clinton showed her disdain for many Trump voters and undecided voters when, two months before election day, she said that half of Trump supporters were “a basket of deplorables” for their presumed

racism, sexism, and xenophobia, reflective of what Trump represented. Trump understood that Clinton had trapped herself by stereotyping many voters rather than presenting a critique of those attitudes. Some analysts have argued that this swayed many undecided voters to support Trump in November and thereby cost Clinton the election. In addition, Clinton’s campaign seemed to take for granted working-class voters in states like Pennsylvania and Michigan by not campaigning as actively there as elsewhere.

Clinton lost presumed votes on both the left and the right sides of the Democratic Party. A clear demonstration of this was that Sanders defeated Clinton in all 55 counties of the West Virginia primary and then Trump defeated Clinton in all 55 counties in the general election. This was in a state where 45 percent of registered voters were Democrats, 31 percent were Republicans, and 24 percent were “other.” If nothing else, the 2016 presidential election showed that the Wall Street centrist leadership of the Democratic Party had lost much of its base – from coal miners to college students.

## Hillary Clinton

What led to Clinton’s poor performance in the election? When people looked at her they saw that Clinton has defended the policies of her husband, who cut millions of people off welfare and intensified the war on drugs that imprisoned hundreds of thousands of people. Bill Clinton’s administration, supported by both Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders, pushed through two “anti-crime” laws in the 1990s, which contributed to the shocking 800% increase in the number of people locked away since 1980 – the vast majority for crimes that harmed no one, destroyed nothing and took nothing. Meanwhile, the Clinton administration dismantled much of the welfare system and threw millions into deeper poverty.

Hillary Clinton said that the policies of the Obama administration were fine. But Obama deported more immigrants looking for a better life than any other president. Clinton supported the Bush and Obama wars against the people of the Middle East. Under the

Obama administration, with Clinton as secretary of state, the U.S. engaged in perpetual warfare all across the globe, justified assassinations via drone strikes, and openly struck hospitals, weddings, funerals, and crowded city streets. Under Obama we saw high levels of long-term unemployment, attacks to education, increases in healthcare costs, and billions of dollars handed out to banks and corporations – not to mention the largest surveillance operation in human history. While Clinton spoke about the need for jobs and programs to support poor and working people, her role in the government went in the opposite direction. Clinton and the Democratic Party said that climate change was a reality and that something had to be done about it. But, as Secretary of State, she supported the XL Pipeline that would have brought toxic tar sands oil from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico.

Hillary Clinton, out of all the Democratic and Republican candidates, had the most experience representing the interests of the one percent and was handsomely rewarded. Clinton made millions for herself and her foundation from Wall Street speaking fees. In 2015 the Clintons made \$10.6 million, putting them in the top 0.02 percent of U.S. families. Her campaign by no means represented a break from the past, and most people saw that clearly. The vocal or passive support of billionaires Michael Bloomberg, Warren Buffet, and Charles Koch only reinforced this fact.

### **Bernie Sanders**

During the Democratic Party primary elections, Sanders tapped into a growing desire for major social change, reminiscent of the way Obama's candidacy did in 2008. Tens of thousands of people came out to hear him, showing their discontent with the usual Democratic Party candidates. He said, "We need a political revolution in this country involving millions of people who are prepared to stand up and say enough is enough, and I want to lead that." These are not the usual claims we hear from politicians running in the Democratic Party. Sanders calls himself a "democratic socialist." However, what he means by socialism is not a society that is run democratically by the majority, in the interests of working people rather than the profits of a small elite. He has made it clear that he is talking about what he calls "Scandinavian-style socialism" – which is capitalism with



*Bernie Sanders rallies 10,000 supporters in Austin, 2016*

some reforms that provide more funding for things like healthcare, education, social security, and unemployment compensation.

The Sanders primary campaign addressed the fears and anger of working people by talking about economic inequality and the wealth of the "one percent." He focused on the greed of Wall Street banks and proposed more taxes on the rich to finance public works programs, universal health coverage, ending student debt, free college education for all, protecting the environment, a living wage for workers, and getting corporate money out of politics. But he fed the illusion that we could get such things by voting for him and other Democrats who might support such policies. There is no way the ruling class would ever allow these sorts of changes to be carried out through their government. A massive social movement might be able to win some of these things for a time – but not through the ballot box.

The widespread popularity of socialism seemed impossible in the U.S. for the last several decades due to the anti-communist fears promoted by Democrats and Republicans alike. However, there has been a growing interest in socialism following the 2008 economic crisis, the Arab Spring, and Occupy Wall Street. Sanders' campaign further increased the popularity of the word "socialism" even though he did not actually stand for an end to capitalism. Sanders sidestepped a range of problems with his proposals. His solution to the deep racism and other systemic problems of this society was to push for new legislation. He has generally avoided addressing foreign policy, especially the role of the U.S. in the Middle East. He repeatedly supported Israel's claim to

the right of “self-defense,” even as it continues to slaughter thousands of Palestinians.

Throughout his Senate career, Sanders has acted like a Democrat, voting with them 98% of the time. While many people responded positively to his rhetoric during the 2016 campaign, his voting record showed the reality of his career as a politician.

### **Trump and the Democrats**

What Trump started during his campaign, he built on as President. He talked about making America great again. But “great” for whom – billionaires like him? Trump tried to sucker people, especially white working-class and middle-class people, into believing that the decline in their standard of living, the loss of jobs, gentrification of their neighborhoods, and the lack of healthcare were the fault of other workers, instead of the one percent.

Trump has done all he can to build walls – literally and figuratively – between U.S. workers and those in other countries. He called Mexicans rapists and murderers and said that Mexico would pay for his wall to keep undocumented people out of the U.S. He has broken up thousands of families as they sought refuge in the U.S. He has attacked Muslims and said that they should not be allowed to come to the US. He has insulted women and joined the attack on the right of women to choose whether they want to have children. His Supreme Court appointments support attacks on workers, women, and people of color.

He has continued to support the military-industrial complex by expanding military spending and continuing Obama’s efforts to “modernize” the U.S. nuclear arsenal and delivery systems. He has expressed support for water boarding and other forms of torture and the killings of members of the families of people the U.S. government claims are terrorists. He has cozied up to murderous dictators like Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong-un.

Trump is a real enemy of all working-class people. This billionaire tycoon has attacked immigrant workers while businesses have hired them and paid them low wages. He ripped off students at Trump University and has generally exploited everyone he has had contact with for his own greed. As president, he has told thousands of lies to the American people and the world.

Trump, like Sanders, tapped into the massive discontent that underlies our society. By acknowledging

unemployment, veterans’ issues, and the heartless political and economic establishment that continues to destroy peoples’ lives, he spoke to many working-class white people. But he never linked the problems they faced to capitalism. Instead, he has tried to divide the population and blame other workers: immigrants, Blacks, Muslims and others.

How has the Democratic Party responded? Trump’s daily tweeted lies, scandals in his administration, attacks on immigrant families, and rapid reversals on many policies have given them plenty of fodder to exploit. But their long-term betrayals of working people whose votes they sought, their continuation of horrendous wars, their failure when they are in power locally and nationally to address problems of unemployment, low wages, inadequate healthcare and education systems, out-of-control cops, the obvious close relationships of leaders like Obama and Clinton to Wall Street... all of these have weakened the Democrats’ ability to convince workers, people of color, women, and other oppressed groups to support them.

The Democrats have attempted to point their fingers at Trump for all of these problems, and in 2018 have called on people to give them majorities in Congress again. Do they really think that the Democrats in power in Congress with Trump in the White House will be any better for us than when Obama was President and the Democrats controlled both the House of Representatives and the Senate? But they hope to exploit Trump’s weaknesses and funnel people’s outrage into votes for the Democratic Party.

### **What Should We Do?**

It’s true that working people and all oppressed groups face tremendous challenges. And everyone faces the threats of environmental and nuclear apocalypse. But the Democrats have gotten us into this position just as much as the Republicans have. Victories won in 1930s against economic exploitation and in the 1960s against American apartheid were won by ordinary people organizing at work and in their communities, not by voting for one of the bosses’ parties over the other.

We must be clear that the Democratic Party has been used by the ruling class repeatedly in the past to co-opt social movements and to convince people to put their faith in the capitalist system. Given this history, we

cannot allow ourselves, or others, to be fooled again by the Democratic Party. Election campaigns can be a useful tool for the working class to run our own candidates and gain an experience in putting forward a program that addresses our needs, but such campaigns need to rest on real workers' organizations, not just an individual candidate. What we do today needs to be based on what will increase the confidence of the working class in itself and its considerable potential power.

Trump's and Sanders' appeal reflected a massive popular discontent. But their allure also showed the lack of a visible and viable left-wing alternative, which could attract some of the newly energized activists, providing them a different organizational perspective, political program, and a real sustained activity in the working class.

The real failure of an economic recovery for the majority turned voters towards Trump, or away from the system completely, as almost half of all eligible voters chose not to vote. The capitalists' election system gave us the choice between a billionaire bigot and a corporate politician – that was no real choice at all.

In the Midwest swing states, nearly one third of the 700 counties that voted for Obama in 2008 voted for Trump. Why the change? The vote for Trump was in big part a reflection of economic despair and disgust with the policies of Washington.

After the 2016 general election, under the tag #RiseAndOrganize, the Democratic Party said it wanted to “galvanize protestors and get them working on achievable political wins.” In other words, work to elect Democrats in 2018. And the Democrats' hand – and money – has been seen in almost every major protest event since Trump took office, starting with the Women's March in Washington the day after the inauguration, all the way up to the student protests against gun violence in the spring of 2018.

But our future does not rest with electoral choices. By examining the history of the Democratic Party, we see that the Democrats are masters of trickery and deceit. Our hope for change is co-opted when it is placed in the passive act of voting for one of two major capitalist

parties, and their pre-approved, pre-selected candidates, packaged by the media for our consumption as if we were shopping at the mall.

The future will be determined by what the masses of people in the U.S. decide to do today and in the future. It will be decided in the workplaces, neighborhoods and the streets of this country. It will depend on how strongly people mobilize themselves and depend on their own forces, and respond to the realities of their own struggles. It is a question of choosing our own leaders, based on seeing what they do, so that we know whom we can trust and who is not trustworthy.

The U.S. ruling class has the two main parties of this country at its complete disposal and service. To have a real alternative means to have organizations that really serve and represent the working class and the oppressed layers of the population, the vast majority.

The objective of Speak Out Now is to build a working class revolutionary party. We know, of course, that we are not going to do this by ourselves. It is in the interest of the majority of the population that there are many activists and groups who share this objective, and that there are even more who might support it. It's why we invite all those interested in that goal to join us in order to help organize workers, students, and youth – all who are ready to fight against this capitalist society, including the capitalist parties and politicians, whether they present themselves as liberals or conservatives, Republicans or Democrats.

We know that the Democratic Party is just recycling the same old strategy. We need a real alternative, an alternative based on our own interests, our own forces, our own energy and our own efforts.

Those who don't learn from history are destined to repeat the mistakes of the past. Those who study history at least have a chance to learn from previous struggles and to see the traps that have been laid for us. Our choice is clear: we must struggle together for a new future, and fight for a world that is run in the interests of all of humanity and our planet, not the profits of the one percent.



# **Speak Out Now**

## **Revolutionary Workers Group**

---

### **Where We Stand**

The world we live in today has enormous possibilities: the potential to open up the most challenging epoch of humanity's existence. We have the prospect of living in a conscious fashion, using all the advances of human knowledge and engaging the creative potential of each person on the planet. Instead we see the world moving in the opposite direction – increasingly ruled by prejudice and fear, a world of widespread violence and war, where exploitation and oppression are the rule, with the many dominated by the few.

#### **The Force For Change Exists Today**

Everywhere, working people's labor makes society run. The exploitation of labor is what generates profits, which are at the heart of capitalism. Working people have the power to bring this system to a halt and bring about the changes needed to transform our lives. Like slavery, feudalism and other systems that enriched the minority at the expense of the majority, capitalism's removal is long overdue. The time for socialism has come.

#### **We Stand For Socialism**

A world based on peaceful collaboration and international cooperation of working class people – not the exploiters who rule today.

- The common ownership and sharing of the world's resources and productive capacity under the democratic control of the world's peoples.
- An egalitarian and democratic government, organized and controlled from the bottom up, which facilitates people's active participation in making decisions about how society is run.

- Protection of the world's ecological systems, putting science to work to sustain life, not destroy it.
- A society where human relations are based on respect, equality and dignity of all peoples, not racism, sexism or homophobia.

#### **Our Political Heritage**

We base ourselves on the ideas and actions of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky, on the model of the Russian Revolution of 1917 when the working class showed its capacity to take over and exert its power, and on the revolutionary ideas of the Fourth International in its struggles against Stalinism.

#### **We Must Go Beyond Reforms**

We support the struggles of those who are fighting against the oppression of capitalism, even if the goals of those struggles are not aimed at replacing the capitalist order. We support the right of people to determine how they will live and to throw off the forces of imperialism – be it the domination of the corporations, the World Bank, the IMF, military forces or other agents of imperialism. We support the fight against racial and sexual discrimination. We fight against attacks on the standard of living of working people – wage and benefit cuts, attacks on healthcare, education, housing and other basic rights.

Socialism cannot come through a modification of the existing system. It is not replacing corrupt politicians or union officials with those who are more honest or who are willing to see more of society's resources shared with the poor. It is not getting better contracts or laws. These systems based on privilege and exploitation must

be removed and replaced by one that can guarantee the reorganization of society for the benefit of all.

### **What Is Needed To Bring This Change About?**

It will take a massive social struggle, a revolution, by the majority, the workers and poor of the world, with the working class at its head, taking power in its name and reorganizing society.

It will take the construction of an international revolutionary leadership actively engaged in these struggles.

It will take the development of a party, based in the working class, in the U.S., the richest country of the world, as part of this international leadership. The fate of the world depends on building such an organization, though today it is represented only by individuals or small groups, scattered and marginalized, who share those goals.

The decisions made by a few individuals today, who are ready to start acting on these ideas and who are willing to collaborate with other groups who agree with this program and who are ready to work to implement it, could play a role in determining the future of the world.

### **Who We Are**

Speak Out Now/Revolutionary Workers Group is a revolutionary group. We believe that a socialist world is possible and can be brought into being by the active

struggles of the majority of the people of the world. We believe the international working class is the social force that can transform society and create a new world. But to do so, revolutionary organizations must be built in the working class. For this reason our group aims its activity primarily at large workplaces. Our newsletters are distributed at several workplaces every two weeks.

We think it is important to both analyze the current world situation as well as to know and understand the history of past struggles. We have forums on current events and political topics and a yearly weekend called the Revolutionary University. We organize Marxist discussions and classes. We have pamphlets on past working class struggles, the revolutionary movements around the world and the current problems we face. We organize with others around many issues – racism, immigrant rights, climate change, police brutality, and more.

### **Contact us**

#### **San Francisco Bay Area**

speakout@revolutionaryworkers.org

#### **Baltimore**

baltimore@revolutionaryworkers.org

#### **New York/New Jersey Area**

ny.nj@revolutionaryworkers.org

**This pamphlet and other publications are available online:**

**[www.revolutionaryworkers.org](http://www.revolutionaryworkers.org)**