



## Barack Obama: President of All Classrooms

“This isn’t a policy speech. It’s a speech designed to encourage kids to stay in school,” an Obama administration spokesman told the Cable News Network in response to the uproar over the president’s planned webcast and TV speech to the nation’s schoolchildren on September 8. “The goal of the speech and the lesson plans is to challenge students to work hard, stay in school and dramatically reduce the dropout rate.”



But many parents have denounced the planned speech as an exercise in propaganda and “brain washing” and some have said they will keep their children out of school that day. Conservative talk-show hosts have also weighed in with charges of “indoctrination.” School districts in some states have decided either not to air the speech at all or to schedule a time later in the day when students may view it on a voluntary basis. Leading Republicans have also joined the controversy. Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty, considered a potential candidate for the 2012 Republican presidential nomination, is among those objecting.

“At a minimum it’s disruptive, number two, it’s uninvited and number three, if people would like to hear his message they can, on a voluntary basis, go to YouTube or some other source and get it. I don’t think he needs to force it upon the nation’s school children,” Pawlenty said.

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The President will “challenge students to work hard, set education goals, and take responsibility for their learning,” according to the U.S. Department of Education website. Surely most parents would welcome that. So what is all the furor about?

“There’s nothing wrong with the president speaking with school kids,” said Kevin Sullivan, a White House communications director for George W. Bush. “The heat over this is all about the health care debate.” But Sullivan added that the suggested lesson plan and changes in curriculum sent out by the department of education was fuel for controversy. “The Department of Education is prohibited from doing anything with curriculum,” he said.

One of the exercises suggested in the department’s lesson plans was to have the students write letters to themselves about “what they can do to help the president.” The letters would be “collected and



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redistributed at a later date by the teacher to make students accountable to their goals.” Negative reaction prompted the department to rewrite that part of the plan, suggesting instead that the students write letters about how they can “achieve their short-term and long-term education goals.”

The original proposal, however, indicates there are more subtle ways to direct young minds than talk of policies or programs. The underlying assumption is that the students will be impressed by the fact that it is the president who will be speaking to them. They are expected to react favorably to what he says. They should assume that he is on their side and they should be on his. It apparently hadn’t occurred to anyone in the Department of Education that a great many students might feel rightly opposed or just downright indifferent to efforts to “help the president.”

Indeed the very tone of the “Menu of Activities” sent out from the department implies that the president is watching over every school child and that every child has a duty to live up to the president’s expectations. Here, for example, are a few suggested questions students in pre-kindergarten through grade 6 to ponder after hearing the president speak.

- “What is the president trying to tell me?”
- “What is the president asking me to do?”
- “What new ideas and actions is the president challenging me to think about?”

The fact that officials in the nation’s Department of Education wish to focus the minds of schoolchildren, beginning at “pre-kindergarten,” on the president and his expectations of them is more than a little disturbing. Why should five-year-olds or even 12-year-olds have at the forefront of their thoughts and concerns what the president is trying to tell them, what the president is asking of them, even what the president wants them to think about? That attributes to the president a power over the minds of youngsters more fitting of a national deity than an elected chief executive.

But if the education “czars” in Washington encourage an exalted view of the presidency that borders on the worshipful, so does much of the American public. Whether we are for or against whoever is in the White House at any given time, much of the nation looks to the president to solve every problem and set every goal. He can do all things and without him we can achieve nothing.

“The bottom line is we need the president of the United States of America to use his bully pulpit to talk to kids about the importance of education and to inspire kids,” said Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers. But do we? Or is that not a job better suited to parents and teachers? Otherwise, we might wonder how “The Greatest Generation” managed to overcome the hardships of the Depression and win World War II without having President Roosevelt’s fireside chats piped into their classrooms at school.

The duties of the president, as enumerated in the Constitution, are a good deal more modest than the expectations we have for presidents today. Reflecting on some of the claims made by candidates in the 2008 presidential race, Gene Healy, author of *The Cult of the Presidency*, made the following assessment:

The chief executive of the United States is no longer a mere constitutional officer charged with faithful execution of the laws. He is a soul nourisher, a hope giver, a living American talisman against hurricanes, terrorism, economic downturns, and spiritual malaise. He — or she — is the one who answers the phone at 3 a.m. to keep our children safe from harm. The modern president is America’s shrink, a social worker, our very own national talk show host. He’s also the Supreme



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Warlord of the Earth. This messianic campaign rhetoric merely reflects what the office has evolved into after decades of public clamoring.

For all of his powers, both real and imagined, the president of the United States cannot “rid the world of evildoers,” a goal proclaimed by George W. Bush. Nor does he have it in his power to “transform the world” as Obama told campaign crowds he and they could (“Yes, we can!”). No doubt he hopes to inspire the students to become engaged at some point in working for a cleaner, greener, more peaceful world with reduced carbon emissions and guaranteed healthcare for all. At least they should know what their president expects of them.

“And Barack Obama will require you to work,” Michelle Obama told thousands of cheering college students at a rally at UCLA in February of 2008. “He is going to demand that you come out of your isolation. That you move out of your comfort zones. That you push yourselves to be better. And that you engage. Barack will never allow you to go back to your lives as usual, uninvolved and uninformed.”

So if we didn’t know before, at least we know now why students should learn and why they must not drop out.

“Barack will never allow” it.

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