



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on September 2, 2011

Did Ron Paul Force Obama to Reschedule a Speech?

Obama sent a letter to House Speaker John Boehner Wednesday morning requesting to speak before a joint session of Congress on September 7 at 8 p.m. Eastern. Shortly thereafter the White House announced the President's speech, which is to present his proposed jobs program. There was just one problem: A GOP presidential debate at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library is already scheduled to take place at that same time.



No one seriously believes the White House's denials that Obama's speech was timed to keep television viewers from seeing the opposition. NBC's [Chuck Todd](#), for instance, remarked that the timing was "hardly a coincidence." [The Hill](#) noted that "it's not the first time the president has moved to counter-program the Republican presidential field. After the influential Ames straw poll last month, Obama's bus tour rolled into Iowa the following Monday, leading to complaints from Republicans about the political overtones of the taxpayer-funded trip."

White House Press Secretary Jay Carney's response to questions about the timing of the speech didn't exactly win sympathy for the President's cause, either. Carney [suggested](#) that the sponsors of the debate and the candidates "adjust the timing of the debate" to avoid the conflict with Obama's speech. In other words, eight people who have been planning for weeks to attend this debate ought to give way to one man who gave only seven days' notice of his intentions — and that to a Congress that was in recess until the very day on which Obama desired to speak to it.

Enter Ron Paul. Recognizing Obama's move for the "raw display of political gamesmanship" (in the words of McClatchy Newspapers' [Steven Thomma](#)) that it was, Paul dispatched spokesman [Jesse Benton](#) to inform the press that the Congressman was "weighing his options" with regard to blocking Obama's speech. Both houses of Congress have to adopt a concurrent resolution to call a joint session, a procedure normally done by voice vote, called unanimous consent. Any legislator, however, can object to that approach and force a recorded vote; and clearly Paul had that in mind. With Congress only returning to session September 7, the vote would almost certainly have taken place after Obama's requested time, thus preventing him from stealing the Republican candidates' thunder.

Sen. Jim DeMint (R-S.C.) also indicated he would block the President's speech, and it's likely that Rep. Michele Bachmann (R-Minn.), who is also scheduled to participate in the debate, would have done



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likewise.

By 4 p.m. Boehner had rejected Obama's request, citing the fact that even with unanimous consent the concurrent resolution would at best have been adopted a mere 90 minutes prior to Obama's requested time (since the first vote of the session is scheduled for 6:30 p.m.), which would not allow the necessary three hours for the security sweep of the Capitol prior to the President's appearance. The Speaker instead offered Obama a time of his choosing the following day. The White House backed down, opting to postpone Obama's speech by 24 hours, putting the President in the unenviable position of trying to attract an audience opposite the first game of the National Football League season. Football fans needn't worry, though: Obama's communications director, Dan Pfeiffer, assured viewers of MSNBC's *Morning Joe* on Thursday that the speech will be [over before kickoff](#).

The Obama administration was, naturally, unhappy with the outcome, though there was little it could do about it. "Senior White House officials" told [Politico](#) that Boehner "had essentially signed off on the 8 p.m., Sept. 7 slot before they went public." Carney repeated that assertion in a statement Wednesday night: "We consulted with the Speaker about that date before the letter was released, but he determined Thursday would work better."

The Speaker's office, however, denies having agreed to Obama's request in advance. "No one in the Speaker's office — not the Speaker, not any staff — signed off on the date the White House announced today," Boehner's press secretary, Brandon Buck, said.

Whichever side is telling the truth, it is definitely true that publicly refusing a President's request to speak before Congress is rare, if not unprecedented. Then again, as Thomma observed, so was the President's "publicly inviting himself for a specific date and time." Normally these things are worked out in advance behind the scenes, with a subsequent presidential request to Congress mostly a formality.

Moreover, it cannot be denied that Paul's public musings about standing in the way of Obama's speech played into Boehner's decision. The Paul campaign certainly took credit for it, saying Paul had "initiated talk about objecting to the President's plan calling a joint session at this time" and praising Boehner for "seiz[ing] the initiative." From Boehner's perspective, while it might look bad for the House to reject Obama's request the day he submitted it, it would look far worse to end up having to postpone the speech at the last minute because of an objection from a Congressman. Could the Speaker afford to take that chance?

Paul's former chief of staff, [Lew Rockwell](#), thinks not. "Both parties were scared of Ron Paul," he asserts. "They knew he had never hesitated to be the one vote against evil or nonsense in the past, and he would block unanimous consent. And with Ron as the leader against Obama, what Republican would dare take the establishment side?"

Whether or not Paul's potential objection was the deciding factor, one thing is for sure: If Obama thought he was a shoo-in for reelection, he wouldn't waste his time trying to divert attention from those who seek to challenge him.

Photo of Ron Paul: AP Images



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