



Back to School with Obama: Educational Talking Points 101

At high noon today, EDT, Barack Obama issued a challenge to America's schoolchildren. In his much anticipated back-to-school speech, he appealed to students to stay in school, work hard, set goals, and not use personal crosses as an excuse to fail.

It was, by and large, a message so positive that critics could find it disarming; and casual, middle-of-the-road observers could wonder why there was so much fuss over the event in the first place.

Among other things, Obama said:



We can have the most dedicated teachers, the most supportive parents, and the best schools in the world — and none of it will matter unless all of you fulfill your responsibilities. Unless you show up to those schools; pay attention to those teachers; listen to your parents, grandparents, and other adults; and put in the hard work it takes to succeed.

... Maybe you could be a good writer — maybe even good enough to write a book or articles in a newspaper — but you might not know it until you write a paper for your English class. Maybe you could be an innovator or an inventor — maybe even good enough to come up with the next iPhone or a new medicine or vaccine — but you might not know it until you do a project for your science class.

... But at the end of the day, the circumstances of your life — what you look like, where you come from, how much money you have, what you've got going on at home — that's no excuse for neglecting your homework or having a bad attitude. That's no excuse for talking back to your teacher, or cutting class, or dropping out of school. That's no excuse for not trying.

Now, it could be mentioned that without discussing the matter of restoring discipline in schools by allowing teachers recourse to punishment with teeth and by purging our society of its destructive spirit of permissiveness, these nice words amount to a rather naïve idealism: that youth will somehow impose discipline on themselves. Perhaps a few will, but by and large, expecting kids to compensate for an unprecedented lack of external adult control with an unprecedented degree of internal motivation is like expecting the greater mass of five-year-olds to choose to eat broccoli over banana splits.

Yet to single Obama out for criticism on this point would be unfair. In reality, his sentiments could have passed any modern president's lips, and they certainly constitute well-crafted, unarguable advice. Nevertheless, there were defects in the speech. For example, when Obama was appealing to students to do their part, he said, "I'm working hard to fix up your classrooms and get you the books, equipment, and computers you need to learn." This seems innocuous enough; the problem is that it serves to cement a certain misconception about the federal government and its chief executive's role.



Written by [Selwyn Duke](#) on September 8, 2009

Under our Constitution, the president certainly has a right to use his bully pulpit to inspire the people, and localities certainly have a right to broadcast a presidential speech to their students. But the federal government simply has no legitimate role in providing equipment and supplies for schools.

Now, somebody sympathetic to Obama might aver that he was simply trying to appeal to kids by emphasizing that he is “doing his part.” But the point is that it is not his part — it’s the tearing apart of our nation’s governmental balance of power. Moreover, I tried to imagine such a sentiment being expressed by Ronald Reagan — it seemed completely preposterous (never mind it being uttered by the Founding Fathers). Why, it even seems incongruent when put in the mouth of thoroughly statist George W. Bush. It’s just a level of paternalism that, well, almost makes you think the man would do something like nationalizing auto companies, banks, or insurers. Call me crazy.

Obama also uttered the following inspirational line: “No one’s written your destiny for you. Here in America, you write your own destiny. You make your own future.” This sounds good, but it rings hollow coming from a man who would cap-and-trade us into economic oblivion, control our medical care, and offer cradle-to-grave entitlements. That is to say, no advocate of laws and big government as remedy can credibly speak of the common man choosing his own destiny. A law by definition is the removal of a freedom, as it states that there is something you must or must not do. Thus, generally speaking, with every new law, your capacity to write your own destiny without becoming an outlaw is diminished.

Yet I must again point out that there wasn’t too much in the speech with which to quibble. I also must point out that it was a speech. This is obvious, but so should be the fact that political speeches reflect what a politician wants to project and never what he wants to protect — from public scrutiny.

This isn’t to say that Obama doesn’t want kids to be responsible and tend to their academics. The question is, what else does he want? What is left unsaid?

To gain insight into this, we must look at the lesson plans originally meant to accompany the president’s speech. Although they have now been revised owing to the firestorm they created, their initial prescriptions were alarming. As I wrote [here](#), “Students were to write letters to themselves explaining how they could ‘help the president,’ and the materials asked questions such as, ‘What is the president trying to tell me?’ ‘What is the president asking me to do?’ and ‘What is President Obama inspiring you to do?’” The president this, the president that ... it smacks of the cult of personality that has metastasized around Obama and that troubles so many. After all, this is the man who campaigned while enjoying a messianic hold on millions of transfixed followers, the man dubbed “the One,” the man who had children venerate him in [song](#) the way North Korean children do “Dear Leader” Kim Jong-il. In fact, one gets the feeling that if Obama had a version of a certain famous John F. Kennedy line, it would be, “Ask not what your president can do for you; ask what you can do for your president.”

Such deification of a leader might have been the norm in the time of kings when in fact a nation was actually a “kingdom”; the monarch was the focus, and you might have taken an oath of loyalty to him. But we not only don’t have a king, we don’t even have a “presidentdom”; we have a constitutional republic. And because our whole system is predicated on the idea of having a balance of power and not an excessive amount of it vested in one man, we cherish oaths to uphold that which prescribes that balance of power: the Constitution. Thus, if children’s focus is to be directed toward anything in government, it should be toward that document (which they don’t even learn much about today), not a man who, like the rest of us, is supposed to be subject to it. And the less he is subject to it, the closer we become to being subjects.



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Of course, this doesn't seem to bother some people, such as the Hollywood types who made a certain [video](#) that was shown in at least one elementary school. In it they ask viewers to make a humanitarian pledge, and one of theirs is to "be a servant to Barack Obama." That's interesting, but mine is a bit different. I pledge to ever remind Americans that the president belongs in his box, constrained by the Constitution, Congress, and courts — and a public servant to the people.

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