



Written by [Selwyn Duke](#) on September 6, 2009

Obama's Speech to the Children of America

Whether or not President Barack Obama's September 8 back-to-school speech will be "historic" as his Department of Education (DOE) states, it certainly is headline grabbing. His talk is currently the talk of the nation, but thus far the only historic aspect of it is the opposition it has inspired.

People are divided as to whether the presidential message should be broadcast in school, and some school districts have already opted not to air it.

Writes [The Wall Street Journal](#):



The reaction against the speech has caused most schools to make viewing of the speech optional. In Mr. Obama's home state of Illinois, more than a dozen school districts won't air the speech. Chicago public school officials are offering alternate activities for children who don't watch the speech, after getting a mixed reaction from parents.

Lonny Lemon, superintendent of predominantly Republican Quincy Public School District 172 in Quincy, Ill., said dozens of callers were roughly split. "They were very passionate, pro or con," Mr. Lemon said. "There was no middle ground. I heard, 'This is socialistic,' 'It's going to be Hitler.'" Mr. Lemon's district schools will not air the speech.

Additionally, school districts in northern Texas won't devote class time to the speech, either.

The stated goal of the talk is to encourage students to achieve their educational goals, which certainly sounds innocuous enough. But the lesson plans initially meant to accompany the speech raised eyebrows and alarm. 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?" Clearly, the answer to the last question is not expected to be "nothing."

I must emphasize that the DOE has now revised the lesson plan. For instance, students will no longer be asked to explain how they could help the president; instead, they will be told to "Write letters to themselves about how they can achieve their short-term and long-term education goals." Yet there is an obvious question: if the aim was to inspire students to build a culture of academics, why was there so much focus on Obama until there was public outcry? John F. Kennedy's famous challenge was, "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country." He did not say, "Ask not what your president can do for you. Ask what you can do for your president." Do we want to inspire children



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to serve their fellow man — or just a certain man?

Yet it cannot be understood why the specifics of this event are so unsettling without discussing the general flavor of today's events. Many will point out that Obama's speech is not unprecedented, as many presidents have spoken to the young. But this is a harder sell when it was his own DOE that called the event "historic." And while such terminology can be chalked up to the hyperbole of salesmanship, the speech actually is unprecedented in a very real way.

When Ronald Reagan addressed students in 1986, he was charming but also a distant figure. And I don't mean in terms of personality. He was simply the kindly old man who gave your son a gentle smile, a pat on the back, said a few nice words and then went on his way. He wasn't that guy in the park who just seemed so, so interested in your kids that, well, you knew there was an ulterior motive. That is to say, Reagan was a figure firmly identified with small government and local control; heck, in 1980 he had actually promised to *eliminate* the DOE as a cabinet post. Hardly anyone suspected him of trying to micromanage education and make it a tool of the federal government — never mind of trying to indoctrinate children.

But whether you like Obama or not, there is no denying that he represents quite the opposite. He believes in centralized control, in top-down management; he would increase the DOE's scope, power and influence over school curricula (which means influencing the values students are taught). You may agree with this goal, but understand the perspective of the millions of Americans who do not. When they hear that a federal government chief executive who advocates greatly increased federal power plans to speak to schoolchildren, it seems more machination than inspiration. They have watched Obama give us stimulus after stimulus and partially nationalize auto companies, insurers and banks. Now they fear that he next wants to nationalize their children's minds.

Moreover, Obama isn't just another politician. He is the first cool, youthful, post-WWII generation president, and he had connected with the young like no other leader in memory. All during the 2008 campaign, the buzz was about the "youth vote," about how the young were excited and would finally swarm the polls and vault Obama into office.

We also know how impressionable youth are. An endearing quality of children is that they can easily be made to believe anything; they are a beautiful swath of humanity unstained by cynicism and characterized by trust. And they are this way because it makes them easy to mold, and molded they must be. Yet it's dangerous when this wet clay falls into the wrong hands, those of a potter who would create broken vessels. A case in point was presented in a very good Fox News program Friday night about political correctness, entitled "Do You Know What Textbooks Your Children are Really Reading?" The case concerned one classroom in which young children were asked to judge whether Christopher Columbus deserved a holiday. They then were assailed with a litany of his sins to the exclusion of his triumphs. The result? *Every single* child said Columbus did not deserve a holiday.

For these reasons — Obama's appeal to youth and seeming desire to place the focus on himself, children's naiveté and malleability, and the president's centralization doctrine and belief in big government — it's easy to see why parents are uneasy about letting this stranger bounce their children on his lap. Many Americans still want a government that's going to leave them alone, and Obama just seems too interested. Too interested in our businesses, tax money, CO₂ emissions, medical care and now, many fear, too interested in our kids.



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