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The Obama School Speech Controversy — What to Think?

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The controversy over President Barack Obama's speech to America's school children scheduled for Tuesday morning continues to incite controversy. On the surface, this seems incredible. Why would a speech calling for students to remain in school and set personal goals for themselves incite any controversy at all? Is this just another eruption of the Culture War?



At first glance, that seems to be exactly what this fracas is all about. Much of the controversy is reckless, baseless, and plainly irrational. Some have called the speech an effort to recruit America's children into socialism. Others have argued that any presidential speech piped into classrooms is illegitimate. But a presidential speech to students is hardly unprecedented. This speech by this president has led to an unprecedented uproar.

At this level, the controversy is a national embarrassment. Conservatives must avoid jumping on every conspiracy theory and labeling every action by the Obama administration as sinister or socialist. Our civic culture is debased when opposing parties and political alignments read every proposal by the other side as suspect on its face.

Furthermore, this controversy smacks of disrespect for the President and, by extension, disrespect for the presidency itself. Both fly in the face of Christian responsibility to pray for those in authority. Respect for our government, though never as an end in itself, is part of our Christian responsibility. This controversy threatens to sow seeds of permanent distrust and suspicion in the hearts of the young. In an age of rampant cynicism, this is inexcusable.

And what will the President say? The [entire speech](#) is now available online. The main thrust of the President's address is a call for students to remain in school, set personal goals, and make a difference in society and a future for themselves.

As the President will say:

I've talked a lot about your government's responsibility for setting high standards, supporting teachers and principals, and turning around schools that aren't working where students aren't getting the opportunities they deserve. But at the end of the day, 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.

And that's what I want to focus on today: the responsibility each of you has for your education. I want to start with the responsibility you have to yourself.

In reading through the remainder of the prepared remarks, they follow similar lines of encouragement. Some sections are quite personal:

I get it. I know what that's like. My father left my family when I was two years old, and I was raised by a single mother who struggled at times to pay the bills and wasn't always able to give us things the other kids had. There were times when I missed having a father in my life. There were times when I was lonely and felt like I didn't fit in.

So I wasn't always as focused as I should have been. I did some things I'm not proud of, and got in more trouble than I should have. And my life could have easily taken a turn for the worse.

Let's be honest here. Most middle-class white kids get plenty of these messages, starting at home. But might this message be particularly helpful for a child struggling for a role model or looking for justification for his studiousness? America's cities and schools are filled with students who need such a word of encouragement. Will a presidential address change a life? Probably on its own, this is not likely. But can an address like this help? We must hope and indeed pray that it can. President Obama actually bears a particular stewardship at this point, and he acknowledges this in his speech. As he says, "But I was fortunate. I got a lot of second chances and had the opportunity to go to college, and law school, and follow my dreams."

This President did indeed enjoy rare opportunities. In his speech he acknowledges that not all children have what he did have — a mother who encouraged him and opportunities that he was able to seize. He offers encouragement and calls for what most parents would want children to hear: Work hard, stay in school, develop your interests, and take responsibility. This message should be welcomed by America's parents, both Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives. So why the controversy?

Well, things are rarely so clear-cut as they seem. When President Obama wonders who he should blame for this controversy, he should look directly to his own administration. Put plainly, his own Department of Education released suggested lesson plans that appeared to be more about the cult of Obama than about the President's message. The lesson plans (changed after the controversy erupted) suggested: "Teachers can extend learning by having students write letters to themselves about what they can do to help the president. These would be collected and redistributed at an appropriate date by the teacher to make students accountable to their goals."

Needless to say, helping the President achieve *his* goals is a big departure from encouraging students to set and attain their own goals. Add to this that the President's speech to students, timed reasonably enough to be the first day virtually all of the nation's public school students are in classrooms, comes a day before the President also scheduled a speech to a joint session of Congress to defend his health care reform proposals. Though there is no reason to assume any sinister timing here, and there is every reason to see these scheduled events as separate, the public effect is hardly a surprise.

Children are to be asked to help the President meet his goals the day before the President puts his administration on the line for his controversial health-care reform effort? Conspiracy? No. Horrible timing? Yes. Administration slow to get it? Obviously.

And there is more. At least some school districts have shown a video known as "I Pledge" that features Hollywood and pop music celebrities calling for students to make a pledge to do something great. But the things pledged by the celebrities include everything from advancing stem cell research to refusing to use plastic bags at the supermarket. Near the end, the video makes this appeal: "I pledge to be of service to Barack Obama."

Of service to Barack Obama? This is a strange admixture of the politics of celebrity and the purpose of government. Some of the goals listed on the "I Pledge" video are praiseworthy, such as ending the modern slave trade. Others are right off the platform of the Democratic Party. According to press reports, some school districts intended to show the video with the President's speech.

Thus, it is easy to see how the motives of the President and his Administration became suspect. The White House, the President, and his administration share the blame here. An earlier release of the President's remarks and the absence of the original lesson plans would have greatly lessened the controversy and might have avoided it completely.

The politics of celebrity is a dangerous business. President Obama is a cult figure and a pop icon. That cuts both ways. The Obama campaign capitalized on it, and the Obama Administration attempts to do the same. But the President's constitutional role is that of the nation's Chief Executive, not its icon. This is not the Soviet Union or North Korea. We do not need a cult of personality around this White House, and the President is ill-served by those who would present him as a pop icon. The President should call all citizens to serve the nation — not to serve him and help him meet his goals. It was inevitable that the nation's first African-American President would face such challenges. Given the force of his personality, President Obama's greatest strengths can easily become his besetting weaknesses. And yet, this entire nation should hope and pray that more Americans would follow this president's example of family dedication, commitment to marriage, and love for his children.

The nation — and the Obama Administration — should learn from this controversy and be determined not to repeat this fracas. The White House should shut down the cult of personality, and the nation's conservatives should discipline themselves to discern the real issues from the conspiracy myths. There is plenty to deal with on the plane of reality. Barack Obama is President of the United States. Christians must be the first to pray for this president and to model respect for the presidency, even when we must disagree with the President's policies and proposals. Given what this president intends to say tomorrow to America's students, count me as one who hopes many are listening. If even a few young hearts are encouraged, those moments will be worth all the controversy.

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow me on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler.
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