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Tuesday, September 08, 2009

President Obama, Inspire Thyself [Andrew J. Coulson]

President Obama will address schoolchildren around the nation today, exhorting them to have the courage and determination to achieve their educational goals, to seek out expert help when they need it, and to not allow their history to determine their destiny.

These are inspiring words that could indeed transform American education — if only the president himself would heed them.

Obama showed a glimmer of courage on education policy during the 2008 campaign. Asked if he supported private school-choice programs such as the one in Milwaukee, Obama responded, “If there was any argument for vouchers it was ‘Let’s see if the experiment works.’ And if it does, whatever my preconception, you do what’s best for kids.”

Just a few months after taking office, President Obama had the perfect opportunity to rediscover that courage in pursuit of his education goals and to seek out expert help and advice, as he counsels schoolchildren to do. This past spring, his fellow Democrats in Congress were seeking to kill the federally funded Opportunity Scholarships program, which pays private-school tuition for 1,700 low-income families in Washington, D.C. In the midst of that debate, his own Department of Education released a report saying that, after three years in the program, private-school students were reading two grade levels ahead of a randomized control group of their peers in public schools.

Did President Obama show the courage of his convictions? Did he listen to the expert advice of his Department of Education and stand up to his fellow party members, winning them over to his way of thinking? Or did he allow the preferences of the public-school unions to trump his own goals and ideals?

Alas, the president’s courage faltered, he ignored the expert findings of his own Department of Education, and he caved to pressure from the unions, killing the program as they demanded. Obama has decided that this successful, fantastically efficient initiative should accept no new students, and die when its last participant graduates from high school.

What does it say to American children, Mr. President, when you fail to follow your own advice?

— *Andrew J. Coulson is director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom and the author of [Comparing Public, Private, and Market Schools](#).*

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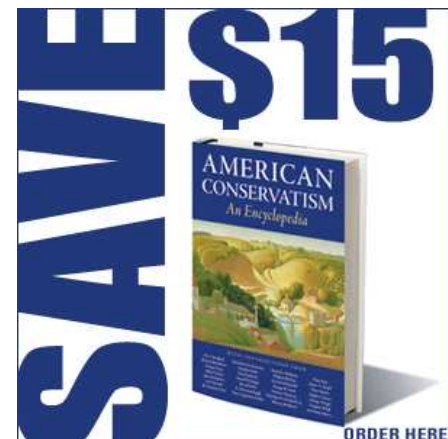
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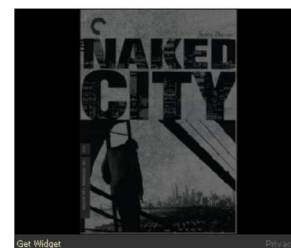
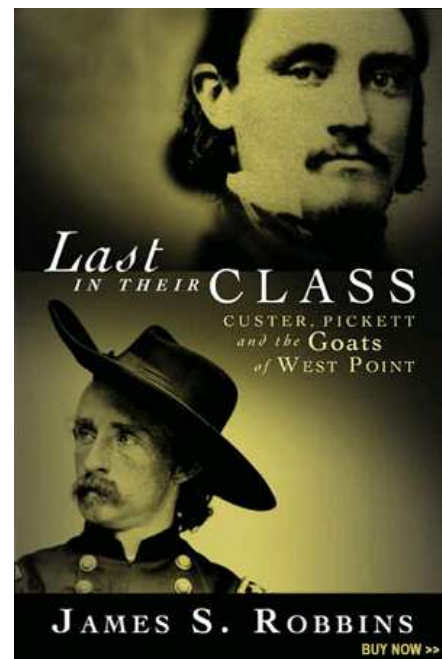
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