



Obama's 'War on Cynicism'

By: Gene Healy – May 7, 2013

There's a specter haunting America's youth, President Obama warned in his commencement address to Ohio State University graduates Sunday -- the specter of "cynicism." In Obama's account, sinister (but unnamed) "voices" have been busily corrupting the once-idealistic Generation Y with a siren song of "creeping cynicism" toward ambitious new federal crusades. They'll even "warn that tyranny is always lurking just around the corner. You should reject these voices."

I couldn't help thinking that Obama and his speechwriters were responding to what they'd read in the New York Times a week before. In "For Millennials, a Tide of Cynicism," the Times reported new polling data from Harvard's Institute of Politics suggesting that Americans under the age of 30, "who turned out in droves to elect Mr. Obama in 2008, are increasingly turned off by politics. Experts fear their cynicism may become permanent." If so, that's pretty good news, because those mysterious "voices" are on to something.

The War on Cynicism has been a central theme in Obama's politics, from Michelle Obama's 2008 speech at a campus rally -- "Barack Obama will require you to work. He is going to demand that you shed your cynicism" -- to the president's first Inaugural, deriding "cynics" who "question the scale of our ambitions."

In 2007, candidate Obama even told a group of supporters: "One of the enemies we have to fight -- it's not just terrorists ... it's also cynicism." (Not the most comforting thing to hear from a man who now commands his own killer drone fleet.)

Nobody likes a cynic -- the kind of killjoy Oscar Wilde famously defined as "a man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing." But in a \$3.5 trillion dollar budget shot through with unfunded liabilities, maybe it's worth paying attention to what new proposals are going to cost.

It's a useful rhetorical trick, the president's decision to reframe skepticism toward overweening federal power as "cynicism." What's "really" cynical is how, in his Ohio State speech, Obama invokes "the Founders" to rebuke "voices that incessantly warn of government as nothing more than some separate sinister entity" that can degenerate into tyranny.

In the Ideological Origins of the American Revolution, Bernard Bailyn, the great historian of founding-era thought, writes that, for early Americans "what turned power into a malignant force was ... the nature of man -- his susceptibility to corruption and his lust for self-aggrandizement. On this, there was absolute agreement."

Historically, our heritage of healthy skepticism has been an ally of sound government. It makes ambitious federal programs much less likely to pass, decreases support for foreign-policy adventurism, and makes the public less likely to endorse restrictions on civil liberties. When we trust too much is when we get into trouble.

When I first wrote about millennials' political attitudes for *The Washington Examiner* in 2009, I worried that the "Greatest Generation" would give way to "the Statist Generation." That's what the polling data seemed to show; Among other things, the 2007 Pew Political Values survey revealed "a generation gap in cynicism": where 62 percent of Americans overall view the federal government as wasteful and inefficient, just 42 percent of young people agreed.

These days, millennials are growing less gullible. Majorities disagree that "government spending is an effective way to increase economic growth" and they're skeptical about preventive war, among other results of the Harvard poll. Perhaps most significantly, "Today, only 39 percent of young voters trust the president to do the right thing, as opposed to 44 percent in 2010."

You can see why the president's worried: Kids today may just be wising up. Don't kick them off your lawn just yet.