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## Audacity of the 'Obama effect'

Clarence Page

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After decades of criticizing public schools as places where hardly anybody learns anything, suddenly conservatives are upset that a 15-to-20-minute live Webcast might teach kids too much.

That's because the Webcast is by President Barack Obama. His critics fear he might teach something that they'd rather not have our schoolchildren hear. Seldom has so much power been imagined for a short video presentation that does not carry an X-rating.

The quarrel began after Education Secretary Arne Duncan e-mailed principals that the president would speak on Tuesday over the Internet, on C-SPAN and via satellite, "directly to the nation's schoolchildren about persisting and succeeding in school."

Somehow that useful message, coming amid the heat of an unrelated health-care debate, was immediately interpreted by Obama's conservative critics as a sneaky way to enlist children into promoting his political agenda.

Or, as Jim Greer, chairman of the Florida Republican Party, put it, "As the father of four children, I am absolutely appalled that taxpayer dollars are being used to spread President Obama's socialist ideology."

Mercy. It takes a different planet from the one on which I live to find "persisting and succeeding in school" to be socialist ideology. But conservative pundits were just getting warmed up to the biggest political panic since former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin accused the House health-care bill of mandating "death panels."

Blogger Michelle Malkin accused schools and teacher unions of using students as "little lobbyists." David Boaz, executive vice president of the libertarian Cato Institute, blogged that the Obama administration is "trying to push its president-worship onto 50 million captive schoolchildren." American Values President Gary Bauer declared, "Tuesday may be a good day to sit in on your child's classes."

The Education Department didn't help matters with the darkly suggestive wording that someone, dare I say stupidly, included in a set of classroom activities posted on the department's Web site to accompany the speech.

It suggested that students "write letters to themselves about what they can do to help the president." A White House spokesman acknowledged that the suggestion was "inartfully worded." Translation from

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governmentese: Somebody messed up.

Out went the old wording. The updated version asks students to "write letters to themselves about how they can achieve their short-term and long-term education goals." Good. Ask not what you can do for the president, children; ask what you can do to help your own futures.

Despite the rewrite, the panic took on a life of its own, fanned like a California forest fire in the hot winds of bloggers and talk-show commentators. Some schools pulled the plug on the speech. They cited parents' complaints about what it might say. Some parents said they would pull their kids out of school.

Though some observers suspect bias in this backlash against the nation's first black president, I don't think race has much to do with it. Presidents Ronald Reagan in 1988 and George H.W. Bush in 1991 gave similar televised addresses, amid some criticism from Democrats about propagandizing on the taxpayers' dime. That's politics.

Besides, values do matter. If conservatives thought Bill Cosby, for example, was delivering the address, I think they'd be delighted. I cannot guarantee that all of his political views would please conservative stalwarts. But his five-year-old crusade for self-help and personal responsibility has given voice to values on which both political sides can find rare agreement: the importance of good parenting.

Here I speak from hard-earned experience. Politics may come and go, but the day-to-day job of raising kids brings out the conservatism in us all.

That's why a lot of parents welcome Obama's messages to kids. Many hope for what some educators have called an "Obama effect," the role modeling that might help our offspring expand their definition of "cool" to include academic excellence, family obligations, parental responsibilities and, heaven help us, pulling their pants up to full mast.

And for African-American children, in particular, there's another important message in Obama's famous unflap- pability: Don't let racism or suspicions of racism dim your determination to succeed.

Obama received a huge political boost last year when he espoused the Cosby-esque values that Americans tend to share across racial and party lines. Maybe that's what his conservative rivals are really worried about.

*Clarence Page is a member of the Tribune's editorial board and blogs at [chicago.tribune.com/pagespage](http://chicago.tribune.com/pagespage)*

[cpage@tribune.com](mailto:cpage@tribune.com)

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