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Opinion

Calls to boycott Obama's speech to kids offer a disturbing lesson in paranoia

Those who are whipping up hysteria over the president's address are playing a dangerous game with an unhinged segment of public opinion.

Tim Rutten

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While it long ago crossed the borders of reason and civility, the hysteria over healthcare reform is -- at some level -- understandable, because wellness and infirmity are really just stand-ins for those most terrifying of issues, life and death.

But there is no similar way to rationalize the bizarre controversy now raging over President Obama's plan to deliver a brief televised address on Tuesday to the nation's grammar school children.

According to Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, Obama will "challenge students to work hard, set educational goals and take responsibility for their learning. He will also call for a shared responsibility and commitment on the part of students, parents and educators to ensure that every child in every school receives the best education possible so they can compete in the global economy for good jobs and live rewarding and productive lives as American citizens."

Sounds innocuous. Who, after all, could be against good study habits, personal responsibility and productive lives? As it turns out, quite a number of people who seem to believe that Obama intends to induct their children into -- well, it's not quite clear what they're afraid of. The Web and talk radio are abuzz with various attempts to organize a boycott of Tuesday's speech. One group is urging parents to demand that their children be excused from watching the president and be sent instead to the school library to read the Founding Fathers. (The theory, one supposes, is that a good dose of the Federalist Papers will inoculate the young against Obama's attempts to subvert the republic through good grades.)

On Wednesday, Fox News devoted a substantial portion of one of its prime-time newscasts to a discussion of whether Obama is, in fact, trying to seduce schoolchildren to some darkly obscure personal agenda. The sole guest, a spokesman for the libertarian Cato Institute, reported that "we've gotten a lot of calls from people asking, 'How do I keep my child from being indoctrinated?'"

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On Thursday, Jim Greer, chairman of the Florida Republican Party, accused the president of attempting to "indoctrinate America's children to his socialist agenda." According to Greer, "the idea that schoolchildren across our nation will be forced to watch the president justify his plans for government-run healthcare, banks and automobile companies, increasing taxes on those who create jobs, and racking up more debt than any other president, is not only infuriating but goes against the beliefs of the majority of Americans, while bypassing American parents through an invasive abuse of power."

Anxiety over the speech seems particularly high in Texas, where many districts are offering parents involved in the boycott movement the option of taking their children out of class. (Whoever thought we'd see Texas treat advocacy of personal responsibility like sex education?)

The irony wasn't lost on everybody in the state. Puzzled Texas education officials told the Houston Chronicle that students often watch presidential speeches broadcast during school hours and that, in 1989, President George H.W. Bush specifically spoke to students about drug abuse. "It's hard to imagine anything more ridiculous than attacking the president of the United States for talking to students about the importance of getting a good education and being a good citizen," said Kathy Miller, president of a statewide school monitoring group. "I wish our elected leaders were responsible enough to denounce this kind of wild-eyed paranoia. But the problem is too many of them are actually feeding this kind of nonsense -- like when the governor flirts with secessionists and state Board of Education members say the president sympathizes with terrorists."

Miller has identified precisely the process at work in the healthcare hysteria and, increasingly, elsewhere where the GOP thinks it can shove the Obama administration into a ditch. Republican officials such as the Florida state chairman are playing a dangerous game with an unhinged segment of public opinion that regards Obama not as an elected official with whom they disagree, but as an illegitimate usurper of the presidency.

That paranoid fantasy is what's really behind the "birther" movement and the allegations that the president is -- take your pick -- a secret Marxist or a secret Muslim.

It's the kind of fanciful anxiety that produces comments like this, posted on a conservative website this week: "Barack Obama and his left-wing Chicago machine regime are putting into place laws and institutions which will insure that there will never again be free elections in America."

These are the people who are stockpiling ammunition and keeping their children at home next Tuesday.

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