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An independent weekly internet magazine
dedicated to the movement for economic justice,
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Barack Can't Speak to School Children? Why?

African American Leadership

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BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board

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President Barack Obama wanted to do what he and his staff probably thought was an innocuous and very positive gesture – send a message to school kids at their institutions that it was a good thing for them to study hard and stay in school because their future and the future of the nation depended on it. The uproar that this has caused has also shocked and embarrassed many people who not understand why the President of the United States cannot even deliver such a positive message to children without the hard politicization of the event. This is telling because it again reflects the politicized environment in which he wants to attempt to bring the country together, which poisons not only simple projects like this, but larger one such as his health care plan. Why?

I wrote some time ago, that blacks would have some difficulty determining when the opposition to Barack Obama was based on his policies and when it was based on his race. When some of those officials, who have opposed him delivering a message to their schools, attempt to justify it, they do not say that it is because he is a black man, but because it would be an inopportune day, since it falls on the opening day of school. Others have said that they received many messages from parents complaining that they do not want their children subject to "Socialist message" from this president.

I think that what some of it amounts to is that culture often trumps politics. I will never forget that when Ronald Reagan came into the White House, he was able to get away with proposing measures in opposition to the existing Civil Rights culture and for that he was regarded as a "Teflon" president. Things didn't stick to him both because he was perceived to be on the right side of the issues by the public and the media, but also because he was perceived culturally as a father figure. He was not only the man in charge of the political system, he was in charge of the political culture as well.

It is normal for many in the majority to conceive of it as natural that the head of state should represent them politically and culturally and when he doesn't – on either account – they push back. The cultural question here is that Obama is obviously a black president in a white majority country and as such, somewhat out of synch culturally with their origins and their group social processes. That complicates for them the extent to which he is perceived as someone who has cultural authority over their lives. It was different when he chided black males to be morally responsible and to take care of their families, because whites perceive of him acting in a natural role as the top political figure in the black community and delivering a cultural message of which they approved. But when he tries to deliver messages relating to white culture it is rejected by many, witness the firestorm over his view that economic resentment often pushes people to move closer to God and their guns.

Schools are uniquely cultural institutions and many whites left schools that were open to blacks because they did not want to associate with them culturally and socially. They attempt to control much of the social and cultural context within which their schools seek to educate their children. They attempt to control the content of text books and the leadership structure of the schools. This, is the source of the segregated academies, home schooling, and now the charter schools and private schools which foster a brand of social segregation.

To the extent that race is a cornerstone of the segregation of black children from whites, it is most surely a staple of the judgment of white parents who oppose not only what they think may be the message of Barack's speech, but a voice they do not consider culturally legitimate delivering it.

Indeed, much of the subterranean conflict over the proposals of the Obama administration does not derive from their objective substance, but from the question of whether he has the legitimacy to make them. Authority is a source of legitimacy and insofar as Obama's authority comes from his election as the President, it has given him some political legitimacy. But the sources of legitimacy are often more complex, sometimes buried deep in the culture.

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