

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

**Question-and-Answer Session With Students at Wakefield High School in
Arlington, Virginia**

September 8, 2009

The President. Thank you. So this is the first day of high school, huh?

Students. Yes.

The President. Wow. I'm trying to remember back to my first day of high school. I can't remember that far back. [*Laughter*] But it is great to see all of you here. I'm really proud of my Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, who is just doing a great job trying to create an environment where all of you can learn. And I know it's a little intimidating with all these cameras around and all this——

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. Don't pay them any attention.

The President. ——so just pretend that they're not there.

Here's the main reason I wanted to come by. As Arne pointed out, when I was growing up, my dad wasn't in the house. We weren't poor, but we weren't rich. My mother had to work really hard, so sometimes my grandparents had to fill in. And my wife, Michelle, who all of you have seen—the First Lady—her dad worked in a—as a—basically in a blue-collar job, an hourly worker. Her mom worked as a secretary. And they lived in a tiny—they didn't even live in a house; they lived upstairs above her aunt's house. And so neither of us really had a whole lot when we were growing up, but the one thing that we had was parents who insisted on getting a good education.

And I want you to all know that despite the good home training I was getting, that when I was in 9th and 10th grade, I was still kind of a goof-off, and I didn't study as hard as I could have. I was a lot more concerned about basketball. I made some mistakes when I was in high school, wasn't as focused as I should have been. But the fact that my parents—that my mother and my grandparents had emphasized education allowed me to make up for some of those mistakes and still get into a good college. And when I got to college, I was then able to really bear down and focus on education.

Michelle, she was a good student the whole time. She was sort of a goody-two-shoes. [*Laughter*] And she just did well in high school, and then she went to college, and then she went to law school, and she just was always really organized and together.

But the point is, is that both of us were able to succeed not because of who our parents were, not because we came from a lot of wealth or because we had a lot of connections, but it was mainly just because we ended up getting into good schools, and we worked hard, and we did well.

All of you are in that same position. And as I look out at this class, I say to myself, you guys remind me of me and Michelle. And you're in the same position that we were; we were no different. You have the same opportunities that we had. The key is for you to seize those opportunities.

And the reason I wanted to come by to talk to students—and then we're going to talk to students all across the country—Arne is working really hard to make sure that your schools are

well-equipped. We're trying to get more money in the budget for things like computers, and we want to make sure that we're getting the very best teachers and that they're getting all the training they need, and we're doing everything we can as adults to give you a good learning situation. But ultimately, we can't force you to learn. Not even your parents can force you to learn. Ultimately, you've got to want to learn. You've got to realize that education is your ticket, and that education's not going to happen just because you show up, although showing up helps, so I want to make sure everybody——

Secretary Duncan. We're glad you're here.

The President. We're glad you're here. You've got to be hungry to want to learn more, whether—whatever the subject is. And if you have that hunger and that drive and that passion, you're going to do well. And if you don't, you know, you're just going to do okay; you'll be mediocre. And I don't think that's what any of you want for your lives.

So that's the main message that I wanted to send, is take advantage of the opportunity. If you are hungry for learning, you will find teachers that want to help you. You will—your parents will be there for you; the community will be there. You will be able to finance college. You will be able to get a good job. You will be able to have a successful career. But you've got to want it. And that's the main message that we wanted to send.

So, with that, we've got about 20 minutes just to go back and forth. And I know, like I said, it's a little intimidating having these folks around. But it's not every day that you get a chance to talk to the President. So—[*laughter*—I'm not going to call on anybody. Just whoever has a question or a comment, a suggestion, an idea about what you think would make school better, things that you think make it tough for some kids, even if it's not you, but things that you've heard that you think we should know. Questions about Bo, my dog, that's okay too. [*Laughter*] Whatever comes to mind.

So who wants to start off? I know—there you go. That's what I'm talking about. Right here, we got a mike, so everybody can hear you. Introduce yourself.

Secretary Duncan. Stand up.

Life as President

Q. How has your life changed?

The President. What's your name?

Q. Jimmy.

The President. Jimmy. How has my life changed?

Secretary Duncan. That's a good question.

The President. Well, you know, when you announce that you're running for President—first of all, I was a U.S. Senator before I was a President, so people already sort of knew me, but just in Illinois, in my home State, in Chicago. And when you announce that you're running for President, suddenly a lot more people know you. And then slowly you get Secret Service. And then when you win the nomination, you get more Secret Service. And then when you become President, then everything just shuts down. And so one of the biggest changes in my life is that I can't just do things normally like I used to be able to do them, and that's hard sometimes. I mean, I can't just get in my car, go to the store, pick up some—whatever it is that

I feel like picking up. I can't go take a walk without shutting down a whole bunch of roads and really inconveniencing a lot of people. [*Laughter*]

And so in terms of my own personal life, I think the biggest change is that I'm inside what's called the bubble. I can't just do things on the spur of the moment. And that's actually the toughest thing about being President, because you want to just be able to interact with people normally, right? And these days either people are waving and really happy to see me, or they're booing me and saying—[*laughter*—you know. But nobody just kind of interacts with you in a normal way.

The good thing about being President is I've got this really nice home office called the Oval Office, and it means that I don't have a commute. Basically I walk downstairs, I'm in my office, I'm working, and then I can leave to get home in time to have dinner with my family. So I'm spending a lot more time with my kids now and my wife now and having dinner with them every night. That's a lot better than it was before, when I was traveling a lot and commuting back and forth between DC and Chicago. So that's really good.

Now, obviously, the other way my life has changed is just I have so much more responsibility. But that part of the job I really enjoy. I mean, I really like meeting smart people who are passionate about their work; trying to figure out how do we get the schools better, how do we provide health care for people who don't have it—the policy work of thinking through how can we make changes in the country that will give people more opportunity, better jobs, better education. That stuff is what I spend most of my day doing, and that's really interesting. I really enjoy it.

All right, who else? Right here.

President's Father/Single-Parent Upbringing

Q. Hi, my name's Brandon. I was wondering, you said that your father wasn't really in your life. That's kind of like me; my parents were divorced.

The President. Right.

Q. But how do you think your life would have been different if he would have been there for you? Like, if—how would your education have been and would you still be President?

The President. Yes, that's an interesting question. You know, you never know exactly how your life would turn out if there was a change in circumstances as big as your dad being around or—I think that—I actually wrote a book about this, called "Dreams from My Father," where I tried to figure out what was he like, who was he. He was a very, very smart man; he was sort of arrogant and kind of overbearing, and he had his own problems and his own issues. So my mother always used to say that if he had been around, I probably would have been having a lot of arguments with him all the time.

I think that I was lucky, though, that my mother always—she never spoke badly about him, which I think—since I was a boy, knowing that even if your dad wasn't around, that you still were hearing good things about him I think probably improved my own self-confidence.

When I look back on my life, I think that—Michelle's dad was around, and Arne, I think, knew him—was just a great guy, wonderful, wonderful man. And he actually had multiple sclerosis, so he had to walk with canes, but went to every basketball game that my brother-in-law played in, was there for every dance recital Michelle was in, was just a great family man.

And when I look at her dad, I say to myself, "Boy, that would be nice to have somebody like that that you could count on who was always there for you."

On the other hand, I think that not having a dad in some ways forced me to grow up faster. It meant that I made more mistakes because I didn't have somebody to tell me, here's how you do this or here's how you do that. But on the other hand, I had to, I think, raise myself a little bit more. I had to be more supportive of my mother because I knew how hard she was working. And so in some ways, maybe it made me stronger over time, just like it may be making you stronger over time.

Yes, let's get a young lady in here. Go ahead. Oh, go ahead.

President's Influences

Q. Hi. I'm Lilly. And if you could have dinner with anyone, dead or alive, who would it be? [Laughter]

The President. Dinner with anyone dead or alive? Well, you know, dead or alive, that's a pretty big list. [Laughter] You know, I think that it might be Gandhi, who is a real hero of mine. Now, it would probably be a really small meal because—[laughter]—he didn't eat a lot. But he's somebody who I find a lot of inspiration in. He inspired Dr. King, so if it hadn't been for the nonviolent movement in India, you might not have seen the same nonviolent movement for civil rights here in the United States. He inspired Cesar Chavez, and he—and what was interesting was that he ended up doing so much and changing the world just by the power of his ethics, by his ability to change how people saw each other and saw themselves, and help people who thought they had no power realize that they had power, and then help people who had a lot of power realize that if all they're doing is oppressing people, then that's not a really good exercise of power.

So I'm always interested in people who are able to bring about change, not through violence, not through money, but through the force of their personality and their ethical and moral stances. And I—that's somebody that I'd love to sit down and talk to.

Yes. Go ahead.

President's Goals Prior to Presidency

Q. Hi, my name's Alexa. And I was just wondering, what were your main goals before you won—before you graduated college, what you wanted to achieve in life?

The President. You know, as I said, when I was your age, I've got to say that I was a little bit of a goof-off, so my main goal was to get on the varsity basketball team, to have fun. And when I was younger, my aspirations were to be an architect, maybe to be a judge. And then I went through this phase where I was kind of rebelling—this was part of not having a dad around. I think I sort of was trying to work through my issues. But by the time I got to college, A, I realized I was never going to be a pro basketball player. Arne never realized that. [Laughter] He still doesn't. [Laughter]

Secretary Duncan. Still trying.

The President. We played this weekend. But so I realized I wasn't going to be a world-class athlete. I realized that I was good with writing. I was good in sort of analyzing how the world worked, whether it was politics or economics or—that those were my strengths. I was pretty good at math, but wasn't great at it. And the problem was the 4 years in high school that I let my math skills kind of go, it's hard to catch up with math once you've—which is why, by the

way, we need more scientists, we need more engineers, and if you're good at math, stay with it and really focus on it. That's something that I regret, is having let some of that go, because I was good at when I was young.

So I think I figured out at that point that I wanted to be in some sort of job where I was helping people, that—I was never that interested in just being rich. That wasn't my—that wasn't really my goal. My goal was more to do something that I thought was meaningful. And so in college, I became interested in public policy and urban policy. And I started doing some stuff off campus around different issues, which is something—and doing community service type of work.

And I don't know what the opportunities here are at Wakefield, but one of the things that is a really great learning opportunity is to—if there's a community service program here, or if you want to do it through your church or your synagogue or your mosque or some other community group, you can really learn a lot about the world not just in the classroom, but also outside of the classroom.

Now, you've got to focus on doing what—your top priority has to be your classroom work. But I found in college that some of the work I did in the community actually opened my eyes and gave me a sense of how I might be able to help people. And that was really important. Okay?

President's Visit to Wakefield High School

Q. Why did you decide to come to Wakefield instead of, like, Yorktown or Washington?

The President. You know, Wakefield has a wonderful reputation; this is a good school. I think when I look around the room, I really like the fact that it's a diverse school, that there are just people from all different walks of life here. I think that's part of the strength of America. And this is basically what America increasingly looks like, people from all different walks of life, different backgrounds, different religions, different ethnic backgrounds. And so we thought that this would be a good representative sample of students. And your questions have proven me right.

President's Motivation

Q. Hi, I'm Sam. And I was just wondering how you motivate yourself to do all the work that goes along with your job.

The President. That's a great question. You know, some of it—I'm just going to be honest with you—some of it is just you don't want to fail, right? A lot of people are counting on me. And so even when I'm really tired, or things aren't going exactly the way I thought they would be going, or there's just a lot of problems that are landing on my desk, I think about all the struggles that a lot of people are going through around the country, and I say to myself, it's such an honor to be in this job; I can't afford to get tired; I just want to make sure that I'm doing the best that I can do for those folks.

And one of the things that we started doing as soon as I came in—we get thousands of letters—I mean, I think it's 40,000 letters a day, letters or e-mails a day from people all across the country, on all different subjects. And one of the things we started doing was trying to get 10 letters every day, sort of a sample of letters that I read personally. So at the end of my day, along with my big briefing book of things I have to read to prepare for the next day, education policy or health care or what's happening in Afghanistan, I have these 10 letters from ordinary folks.

And you read these letters, and some of them are really inspiring. People talk about how they're the first in their family to go to college, and they're having to work full time, but they're sure that they are going to get a better job and a better career, and so they're sticking with it even though it's hard.

Some of the stories are really depressing. You hear about people who are sick but don't have health care, and suddenly they get a bill for \$100,000, and there's no way they can pay for it, and they're about to lose their house.

And you're just reminded that the country is full of really good people who sometimes are going through a hard time. They just need a break; they need a little bit of help. Maybe the way things are set up right now isn't always fair for people, and that motivates you, because you say, "Well, I can't make everything perfect. I can't prevent somebody from getting sick, but maybe I can make sure that they've got insurance so that when they do get sick, they're going to get some help." I can't make everybody in an inner-city school suddenly not have problems with drugs on the street corner, or maybe parents who aren't really parenting well, but I can at least make sure that if they do show up at school, that they've got a teacher who's well-trained. So that really, really motivates you a lot. That's what gets you up in the morning.

Secretary Duncan. Last one. You got the last question.

The President. Who's got the mike? Well, he already had the mike, so we'll give two last questions. These two right here. Go ahead, and then we'll end up with you.

President's Advice for Future Success

Q. Hi, Mr. President, my name's Jessie. When I grow up, I would like to have your job.

The President. Okay.

Q. Is there any advice you can give me, or career paths that I—things I need to know?

The President. Well, let me give you some very practical tips. [*Laughter*] First of all, I want everybody here to be careful about what you post on Facebook—[*laughter*]—because in the YouTube age, whatever you do, it will be pulled up again later somewhere in your life. And when you're young, you make mistakes, and you do some stupid stuff. And I've been hearing a lot about young people who, you know, they're posting stuff on Facebook, and then suddenly they go apply for a job, and somebody has done a search and—so that's some practical political advice for you right there. [*Laughter*] That's number one.

Number two, look, obviously, doing well in school is hugely important, especially if you don't come from some political family where they've got you all hooked up. If you're going to succeed, it's because people are going to think that—they have confidence that you can do the job. So really excelling in education is important.

Number three, find something that you're passionate about and do that well. There are a lot of people who decide to go into politics just because they want to be important or they like the idea of having their name up in lights or what have you. The truth is, is that I think the people who are the best elected officials are the people who they found something they're good at; they get really—whether it's they're a really good lawyer, they're a really good teacher, they're a good businessperson—they've built a career and learned something about how to organize people and how to motivate people. And then they go into politics because they think that they can take those skills to do some more good, as opposed to just wanting to get elected just for the sake of getting elected.

And we have a lot of—I'll be honest with you, I mean, there are a lot of politicians like that who, all they're thinking about is just, "How do I get reelected?" And so they never actually get anything done.

But that's not just true in politics; that's true in life. I think even if you didn't want to be President, if you wanted to be a successful—successful in business, most of the most successful businesspeople I know are people who—they were passionate about some idea, about a product or a service, and they really got into that. And then the money was a byproduct; the money came because you really did something good, as opposed to you just thinking about how do I make money.

You talk to somebody like a Bill Gates. That guy was just fascinated with computers, and that's everything he was thinking about. Now, he got so good at it that he then ended up being a very good businessman as well. But his focus was on, "How do I create something that actually helps people or is useful to them?" And I think you should have that same attitude, whatever it is that you decide to do. All right?

Okay, last question.

Health Care Reform

Q. Hi, my name is Sean. And my question is, currently 36 countries have universal health coverage, including Iraq and Afghanistan, which have it paid for by the United States. Why can't the United States have universal health coverage?

The President. Well, I think that's the question I've been asking Congress, because I think we need it. I think we can do it. And I'm going to be making a speech tomorrow night talking about my plan to make sure that everybody has access to affordable health care.

Part of what happened is that back in the 1940s and fifties, a lot of—most of the wealthy countries around the world decided to set up health care systems that covered everybody. The United States, for a number of different reasons, organized their health care around employer-based health insurance. So what happened was, is that you basically got your health insurance through your job. And you can see some problems with that. Number one is, if you lose your job, then you don't have health insurance. The other thing is, some employers may not want to do right by their employees by giving them health insurance, and then they're kind of out of luck.

And so what happened was, is that the majority of Americans still have health insurance through their job, and it's—most of them are happy with it, but a lot of people fall through the cracks. If you're self-employed, if you start your own business, if you are working in a job that doesn't offer health insurance, then you're—you have real problems.

So what we're trying to do is set up a system where people who have health insurance on the jobs, they can keep it, but if you don't have health insurance for the job, if you're self-employed, if you're unemployed, that you're able to get health insurance through another way. And we can afford to do it, and it will actually, I think, over time save us money if we set that up. So all right?

Well, listen, guys, these have been terrific questions. I can tell you guys are going to excel in high school. You guys are going to do great. And your teachers are lucky to have you. And just remember that—my only other piece of advice is, stay focused, do well, apply yourself in school, but also understand you're going to make some mistakes during your teenage years, and

you can recover from them. Just make sure that if you do make a mistake that you learn from it, and you'll be fine.

All right. Thank you guys for taking the time.

Secretary Duncan. Thanks, guys. Have a great school year.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:01 a.m. In his remarks, he referred to William H. "Bill" Gates III, chairman, Microsoft Corporation. He also referred to his mother-in-law Marian Robinson; and his brother-in-law Craig M. Robinson.

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