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A Sadly Historic Joint Session for Congress

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President Obama's address to a joint session of Congress tonight is going to be unique in the history of our nation. It's not because it was the first time a President's request to address a joint session was initially refused by the Speaker of the House, nor is it that the President's speech is in and of itself is going to be extraordinary (although we all hope that it will be).

It is historic because there will be no young House pages in attendance when the President takes the podium. The program was cancelled last month. So tonight, there will be no sea of young men and women in blue blazers with bright faces intent on shaking the President's hand and drinking in the ceremony and significance of a joint session of Congress.

This is sad on many levels, especially as a symbol of why Congress is held in such low esteem. Many in Washington understand the cost of a program but fail to understand its value. The dedicated staff of the page program was dismissed without notice, in a decision that was announced via press release without a chance for the people who care passionately about the program to argue for its future or help pay for it. It may save a few million dollars, but we lose the opportunity to enrich thousands of lives whose influence and contributions have spread across the decades and across America while strengthening and uplifting this institution.

This is part of a disturbing trend here in Congress: devaluing youth and civic education. Also scheduled for elimination is the Classroom Law Project's "We the People" program, which sponsors the Constitution competition that takes place every year at high schools all across the country. This is at a time when our friend, the esteemed documentary producer, Ken Burns, points out that the average teenager can name eight kinds of blue jeans but can't name eight American presidents. Yet, federal support through civic education is not on the radar screen here in Washington. This is not really any different than the other basic infrastructure and investment in our future that today is falling victim to reckless budget knives and Congressional indifference.

The bright young people who have participated in the page program and the Constitution competition could easily construct a path forward for this Congress and the President. They would craft a path that featured a balanced and fair revenue system that would raise revenue and reduce the deficit. I suspect they would accelerate healthcare reform, not put sand in the gears. They would "right size" and redirect our military investments. And they would reform agricultural programs to help more family farms and ranchers while saving money. These alumni could figure it all out.

While those who control the levers of power in the House pursue an extreme agenda that is not what America needs or what