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# An Interview with Neal Mc Cluskey: Thoughts on President Obama's Parade Diatribe

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Neal Mc Cluskey -

Cato's Center for Educational Freedom

**5.19.10 - Michael F. Shaughnessy - It is very clear what President Obama is telling graduates in his "address" to them in Parade: You can go into profit-making business if you are petty and selfish, but a much higher calling is to do nonprofit – especially government – work.**

**An Interview with Neal Mc Cluskey: Thoughts on President Obama's Parade Diatribe**

**Michael F. Shaughnessy**  
Eastern New Mexico University  
Portales, New Mexico

**1) Neal, President Obama recently provided Parade with his thoughts about graduation. In**

**your mind, what is he saying to the graduating class of 2010?**

It is very clear what President Obama is telling graduates in his "address" to them in Parade: You can go into profit-making business if you are petty and selfish, but a much higher calling is to do nonprofit – especially

government – work.

“Of course, each of you has the right to take your diploma and seek the quickest path to the biggest paycheck or the highest title possible,” he writes. “But remember: You can choose to broaden your concerns to include your fellow citizens and country instead. By tying your ambitions to America’s, you’ll hitch your wagon to a cause larger than yourself.”

**2) Now, where in the Constitution of the United States of America is there any reference to the President providing leadership in terms of teaching or pedagogy or curriculum issues?**

Nowhere. Check Article I, Section 8 – where the federal government’s specific, enumerated powers are found – and you’ll read not a word about education. That means the federal government and its chief executive has no authority to involve itself in education outside of prohibiting discrimination in provision of education by state and local governments (under the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment), and governing the District of Columbia.

**3) Some of his diatribe in the Parade article seems to indicate that America’s graduates should engage in volunteerism so as to help their community or society. What in your mind is wrong with this?**

There is nothing necessarily wrong with encouraging voluntarism and helping one’s community. The problem is having a government official – in this case the highest government official – essentially telling students it is more noble to work in government or do nonprofit work than go into business to make a profit. And this is not President Obama speaking as a private citizen. It is the president speaking in his official, taxpayer-funded capacity, meaning he is forcing taxpayers to pay for a message that denigrates many of them and is being delivered in an area in which he has no constitutional authority to be involved.

**4) It seems that the Democrats are always trying to get middle class America to volunteer. Is this a good thing or a bad thing in your mind?**

Volunteering, again, is not necessarily a bad thing. Indeed, Alexis de Tocqueville marveled at how readily early Americans would volunteer to help one another. The problem is government-incentivized voluntarism, whether it is voluntarism in pursuit of, say, federal student aid, or public schools having mandatory “service learning.” That is not meaningful voluntarism rooted in a concern for one’s community. It is taxpayer-funded surface voluntarism driven by often self-serving politicians and “volunteers.”

**5) If you were able to send an e-mail to all high school graduates, what would YOU say to them?**

That’s a toughie – I wouldn’t have one message for all graduates because all graduates are different. From a government and public policy standpoint, though, I would ask them not to look to government to solve their problems, but to themselves individually, and to each other. Free people typically address their problems much more efficiently and effectively than those who look to government.

**6) Maybe I should use my “bully pulpit” to address all of the graduating seniors of America – and tell them to be cautious about political propaganda- What do you think?**

I would advise them to look at anything they are told – political, “scientific,” whatever – with a critical eye. All people are self-interested, and all will tend to push things that they think are best for them, whether it’s trying to sell their products, convince you that global warming is dire because their research has said so, or to reform health care when they stand to make a lot of money off it. I’d even go so far as to advise grads to look at things that I have said with a critical eye.

**7) What did the President NOT address in his Parade article that perhaps he should have?**

He shouldn't have mentioned anything in his address because he shouldn't have been making the address in the first place – it is simply not his job. Unfortunately, he only made things worse by elevating public and nonprofit employment over work producing things that people want and will voluntarily pay for.

**8) I am somewhat concerned about a President attempting to indoctrinate our high school seniors or even our college graduates. What say you?**

That is not an unreasonable concern, and it was widely shared at the beginning of the now-ending academic year when the president not only delivered a televised address to students across the country, but one that was accompanied by U.S. Department of Education materials that talked about schools driving “social progress,” and getting students to discuss how they could “help” President Obama. After a big ruckus was raised in response to the very concerning ED materials, the speech ended up being fairly innocuous and the controversy died. The Parade address, however, suggests that concerned parents and taxpayers might very well have had good reason to fear that the speech would be loaded with controversial material. And no one knows what the address would have contained had there not been the huge response to the ED study guides.

Now, do I think the President's intent is to indoctrinate students? Probably not, if by indoctrinate we mean something along the lines of brainwash. But he clearly wants to impart a specific, controversial message – nonprofit work is more noble than for-profit – and parents have every right to object to both funding that message and having it foisted on their children. Moreover, constitutionally, the president should not be giving any address that could be construed as indoctrinating students because he should be leaving students alone.

**9) I think it was Pink Floyd who sang “Leave Those Kids Alone“. Should the President let our high school seniors come to some determination about what our politicians are doing right and what they are doing wrong?**

The president should not try to tell our students what to think on any issue. He should obey the Constitution and stay out of education.