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Graduates, Your Ambition Is the Problem

Obama's commencement speech at Ohio State on Sunday would have perplexed the Founders.

By: Roger Pilon – May 8, 2013

Civic education in America took a hit on Sunday when President Obama, giving the commencement address at The Ohio State University, chose citizenship as his theme. The country's Founders trusted citizens with "awesome authority," he told the assembled graduates. Really?

Actually, the Founders distrusted us, at least in our collective capacity. That's why they wrote a Constitution that set clear limits on what we, as citizens, could do through government.

Mr. Obama seems never to appreciate that essential point about the American political order. As with his countless speeches that lead ultimately to an expression of the president's belief in the unbounded power of government to do good, he began in Columbus with an insight that we can all pretty much embrace, at least in the abstract. Citizenship, Mr. Obama said, is "the idea at the heart of our founding—that as Americans, we are blessed with God-given and inalienable rights, but with those rights come responsibilities—to ourselves, to one another, and to future generations."

Well enough. But then he took that insight to lengths the Founders would never have imagined. Reading "citizenship" as standing for the many ways we can selflessly "serve our country," the president said that "sometimes, we see it as a virtue from another time—one that's slipping from a society that celebrates individual ambition." And "we sometimes forget the larger bonds we share, as one American family."

Not for nothing did he invoke the family, that elemental social unit in which we truly are responsible to one another and to future generations—by law, by custom, and, ideally, in our hearts. But only metaphorically is America a family, its members bound by tendrils of intimacy and affection. Realistically, the country is a community of individuals and private institutions, including the family, with their own interests, bound not by mutual love but by the political principles that are set forth in the Constitution, a document that secures and celebrates the freedom to pursue those interests, varied as they might be.

Alas, that is not Mr. Obama's vision. "The Founders left us the keys to a system of self-government," he went on, "the tool to do big and important things together that we could not possibly do alone." And what "big and important things" cannot be done except through government? On the president's list are railroads, the electrical grid, highways, education, health care, charity and more. One imagines a historical vision reaching as far back as the New Deal. Americans "chose to do these things together," he added, "because we know this country cannot accomplish great things if we pursue nothing greater than our own individual ambition."

Notice that twice now Mr. Obama has invoked "individual ambition," and not as a virtue. For other targets, he next counseled the graduates against the "voices that incessantly warn of government as nothing more than some separate, sinister entity that's the root of all our problems, even as they do their best to gum up the works."

The irony here should not go unnoticed: The opponents that the president disparages are the same folks who tried to save the country from one of the biggest pieces of gum now in the works: Mr. Obama's own health-care insurance program, which today is filling many of its backers with dread as it moves toward full implementation in a matter of months.

None of that darkens Mr. Obama's sunny view of collective effort. What does upset him, still, is the run-up to the 2008 financial crisis: "Too many on Wall Street," he said, "forgot that their obligations don't end with their shareholders." No mention of the Federal Reserve, or Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac, the Community Reinvestment Act, or the many other "big and important things" government undertook before the crisis hit, things that explain the disaster far better than any Wall Street greed. None of that fits in Mr. Obama's morality play. For that matter, neither do the Constitution's checks and balances. When the president laments that "democracy isn't working as well as we know it can," he is not talking about those big, misbegotten public projects but about the Washington gridlock that has frustrated his grander plans.

From George Washington to Calvin Coolidge, presidents sought mostly to administer the laws that enabled citizens to live their own lives, ambitiously or not. It would have been thought impertinent for a president to tell a graduating class that what the country needs is the political will "to harness the ingenuity of your generation, and encourage and inspire the hard work of dedicated citizens . . . to repair the middle class; to give more families a fair shake; to reject a country in which only a lucky few prosper."

A more inspiring message might have urged graduates *not* to reject their own country, where for two centuries far more than a lucky few have prospered under limited constitutional government—and even more would today if that form of government were restored.