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OPINION

Our Collectivist Candidates

By **DAVID BOAZ**

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On Sunday Barack Obama urged graduates of Connecticut's Wesleyan University to devote themselves to "collective service." This is not an unusual theme for a commencement address. But it was interesting how long he went on discussing various kinds of nonprofit activism without ever mentioning the virtues of commerce or of individual achievement.

He also did not cite the military as an example of service to one's country. This is a surprising omission in a Memorial Day weekend speech to college-age students by a man seeking to be entrusted with the defense of the U.S.

Sen. Obama told the students that "our individual salvation depends on collective salvation." He disparaged students who want to "take your diploma, walk off this stage, and chase only after the big house and the nice suits and all the other things that our money culture says you should buy."


The people Mr. Obama is sneering at are the ones who built America – the traders and entrepreneurs and manufacturers who gave us railroads and airplanes, housing and appliances, steam engines, electricity, telephones, computers and Starbucks. Ignored here is the work most Americans do, the work that gives us food, clothing, shelter and increasing comfort. It's an attitude you would expect from a Democrat.

Or this year's Republican nominee. John McCain also denounces "self-indulgence" and insists that Americans serve "a national purpose that is greater than our individual interests." During a Republican debate at the Reagan Library on May 3, 2007, Sen. McCain derided Mitt Romney's leadership ability, saying, "I led . . . out of patriotism, not for profit." Challenged on his statement, Mr. McCain elaborated that Mr. Romney "managed companies, and he bought, and he sold, and sometimes people lost their jobs. That's the nature of that business." He could have been channeling Barack Obama.

"A greater cause," "community service" – to many of us, these gauzy phrases sound warm and comforting. But their purpose is to disparage and denigrate our own lives, to belittle our own pursuit of happiness. They're concepts better suited to a more collectivist country than to one founded in libertarian revolution – a revolution intended to defend our rights to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

One gets the sense that Mr. McCain would like to see us all in the armed forces. In a Washington Monthly essay published in October 2001, his vision of national service sounded militaristic. He

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wrote with enthusiasm for programs whose participants "not only wear uniforms and work in teams . . . but actually live together in barracks on former military bases, and are deployed to service projects far from their home base," and who would "gather together for daily calisthenics, often in highly public places such as in front of city hall."

Mr. Obama wouldn't send us into the military. All he wants is our souls. As his wife Michelle said at UCLA on February 3, two days before the California primary, "Barack Obama will require you to work. He is going to demand that you shed your cynicism. . . . That you push yourselves to be better. And that you engage. Barack will never allow you to go back to your lives as usual, uninvolved, uninformed."

There is a whiff of hypocrisy here. Mr. Obama, who made \$4.2 million last year and lives in a \$1.65 million house bought with the help of the indicted Tony Rezko – and whose "elegant suits" and "impeccable ties" made him one of Esquire's Best-Dressed Men in the World – disdains college students who might want to "chase after the big house and the nice suits." Mr. McCain, who with his wife earned more than \$6 million last year and who owns at least seven homes, ridicules Mr. Romney for having built businesses.

But hypocrisy is not the biggest issue. The real issue is that Messrs. Obama and McCain are telling us Americans that our normal lives are not good enough, that pursuing our own happiness is "self-indulgence," that building a business is "chasing after our money culture," that working to provide a better life for our families is a "narrow concern."

They're wrong. Every human life counts. Your life counts. You have a right to live it as you choose, to follow your bliss. You have a right to seek satisfaction in accomplishment. And if you chase after the almighty dollar, you just might find that you are led, as if by an invisible hand, to do things that improve the lives of others.

Mr. Boaz is executive vice president of the Cato Institute and author of "The Politics of Freedom" (Cato, 2008).

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