



BY EDWARD H. CRANE

## President's Message

# The Fallacy of a Cause Greater than Yourself

**T**he political class got slapped upside the head November 2, as well it should have. Those who are claiming a GOP victory miss the point. With some notable exceptions most voters cast their ballots awkwardly, while holding their nose. This was, for the most part, voters saying Enough! Enough with your power-mongering, enough with your arrogance, enough with your utter incompetence.

One of the more encouraging elements of the Tea Party movement has been its focus on the Constitution. It is a wonderful, if flawed, document. It grants very little power to the federal government, whose powers were to be few and well defined, to quote James Madison, who knew a thing or two about it. As my colleague Roger Pilon likes to point out, the key to understanding the Constitution is in understanding the Declaration of Independence. And the key to understanding what the Declaration is all about is the radical phrase, "Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness." It is to secure these rights that proper governments are instituted.

Alas, the political class is bemused by such naiveté, not to say disdainful of the concept that America is about *individual* liberty. They always have grand designs, and it annoys the hell out of them when we focus on our own goals, dreams, and ambitions. Or when we disagree with their grand designs. As President Obama points out, when the little people get scared, we don't "always think clearly." The political class, in a word, is patronizing.

My late friend and colleague, Roy Childs, described the battle between the political class and the rest of us as liberty against power. It is a clean, simple explanation of what all the brouhaha in Washington is about. There are people who enjoy having power over others and there are people who just want liberty and the right to pursue happiness. Ultimately, those who lust for power can gain it only by convincing others to give it up. A major means of doing that is to drum into our hardwired brains (to quote the noted community organizer, Barack Obama) that we, as individuals, are not all that important. We should, the political class keeps telling us, pursue not our self-interest, but a cause greater than ourselves. Usually a cause the political class has conjured up.

Here are but a few examples: Neoconservative intellectual David Brooks defines National Greatness as when "*individual ambition and willpower are channeled into the cause of national greatness. And by making the nation great, individuals are able to join their narrow concerns to a larger national project.*" Former Obama chief of staff Rahm Emanuel at a commencement address last spring said, "*The final lesson I want to leave you with today*

*is the importance of serving a cause greater than yourself.*"

Sen. John McCain, urging students to join the Peace Corps or AmeriCorps, likes to say, "*please remember there's nothing nobler than serving a cause greater than your own self-interest.*" That's an idea seconded by former President George W. Bush who told Larry King he hopes his daughters will "*someday understand what it means to serve a cause greater than self.*"

Journalist Andrew Ferguson searched the White House database and came up with 1,020 times W. used that phrase. The list of the political class making this point is long, indeed. But perhaps the most telling example comes from President Obama himself, who doesn't shy away from the implications of all this self-sacrifice he wants from his hardwired constituents.

In the May 16 issue of *Parade* magazine, the president offered a sample commencement address. *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.* [Bill Gates comes to mind, and he didn't even have a diploma—cool title and tons of money.] *But remember: You can choose to broaden your concerns to include your fellow citizens and country instead.* [See, here's where Gates went wrong. What did he ever do for the 320 million of us?] *By tying your ambitions to America's, you'll hitch your wagon to a cause larger than yourself.*"

The president then goes on to recommend public service over the private sector, even to suggest "*you may decide to make your mark in ways that may be smaller but are just as important—volunteering at a local shelter. . .*" Volunteering is certainly laudable, but the business of business—making money producing something society values—is what makes the luxury of volunteerism possible.

Look, by way of disclaimer, of course we all take pleasure in achieving goals while working with others—a volunteer group to fight illiteracy, a corporate task force to create a software breakthrough—but that's not what the political class is talking about. Those two examples are too close to pursuing your own values, which by definition is not selfless. No, they want you to look to them for the goals "greater than yourself." Hopefully, November 2 was a statement that Americans—across the political spectrum—are reasserting their rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Happiness as defined by each of us, not by the political class.

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