

## "Which Vision for America Will Our New College Graduates Embrace?"

Written by George Nickolas  
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By Burton Folsom  
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Students all over the country are graduating from college this month. Two commencement addresses at these graduations are worth noting because they illustrate the two major but very different visions for our country: first is the constitutional vision of limited government, and second is the statist vision that looks to government to solve problems.

Senator Ted Cruz presented the constitutional vision at Hillsdale College last Saturday. Cruz began by noting that most people in history have had very little freedom because they have lived under monarchies. The Founders broke that tradition. They declared independence from England and wrote a Constitution that enshrined the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. These rights, the Founders argued, came from God, not government. Government was instituted to protect those natural rights that God has given every human being.

Cruz argued that the story of America is the story of liberty and prosperity that have flourished under the constitutional protection of limited government. The free market is, Cruz said, that "engine of prosperity." He noted that the U.S. has 4.5% of the world's population but produces 22% of the world's output. And the American influence is even greater in entertainment, science, and the internet.

The freedom given to Americans has meant that many Americans have started poor and ended up rich; and other Americans were born into wealth, but have lost much of it during their lives. Freedom produces a churning effect. But Cruz likes what he called "opportunity conservatism," the notion that public policy should look to ensuring that poor people always have the chance in a free society to work hard and improve their lives. Government often gets in the way of this. Therefore, government needs to be limited to keep it from harming those in society who are most vulnerable.

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At Ohio State University, President Obama argued something quite different. He contended that government needs to be large and has done good things when it has been increased in size. To some extent he did a sleight of hand. He often mixed individual achievement and government achievement as though they were the same thing. What is accomplished under "self-government" is not at all the same as what is accomplished under "government." "The Founders left us," the president said, "the power to adapt to changing times. They left us the key to a system of self-government—the tool to do big and important things together that we could not possibly do alone." That included, among other things, the president said, "To stretch railroads and electricity and a highway system across a sprawling continent. To educate our people. . . ."

The Constitution did not provide for government to do "important things together," like building schools, railroads, electricity networks, or highways (except to deliver mail). Government, the Founders believed, should only be in the business of protecting liberty through national defense, the enforcement of contracts, and free elections. Private citizens invented and built railroads and discovered how to use electricity. Schools and highways were private or state functions. The federal government was given the power of protection, not the power of action within the economy.

In President Obama's example of railroads stretching across the country, many people in the 1850s wanted those railroads to be entirely private. It was not a group effort of doing "important things together." When some politicians proposed a federally built railroad across the country, southern states strongly opposed the idea. Only when they left the Union could Congress find the votes to build the road. The resulting Union Pacific Railroad proved to be an expensive disaster, and then it went broke. However, James J. Hill built the privately-constructed Great Northern Railroad with no federal subsidies; it never went broke and was built exceptionally well.

The president also used the example of education as an achievement of government. A key point here is that many politicians early in our history wanted to fund a national university, another "let's do important things together" moment, but Congress would not pass the bill to set up the university because the Constitution did not allow it. "Self-government" never meant an intrusive government. Also, when we look at public or "government" education today, we often see the wisdom of our Founders in keeping it private.

If the United States is to continue as a beacon of liberty and a fount of prosperity, Senator Cruz argued the U.S. must have limited government. People inventing, creating, and helping other people is a better recipe for success than exchanging our freedom for bigger government, and then asking that bigger government "do big and important things together" that the Founders never intended it to do.

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*Burton Folsom is Charles Kline professor of history and management at Hillsdale College. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Pittsburgh, and he is the author of seven books, including The Myth of the Robber Barons, and New Deal or Raw Deal? His most recent book is FDR Goes to War, which he co-authored with his wife Anita.*

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