On Campus

McCain, Obama Share Views on Public Service at Columbia

By
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The attack ads were yanked for the day. Partisan jabs among campaigners were toned down. And on the evening of September 11, Senators John McCain and Barack Obama ’83CC arrived at Columbia University with a shared message: Public service is a cornerstone of American democracy.

Obama and McCain came to the Morningside Heights Campus for a presidential forum organized by Service-Nation, a nonprofit coalition that promotes volunteerism. They appeared separately in front of an audience of about 1000 community leaders, military veterans, and family members of 9/11 victims in Alfred Lerner Hall, where *Time* managing editor Richard Stengel and PBS senior correspondent Judy Woodruff interviewed the candidates about how they would promote public service if elected president. Some 125 Columbia students got inside Lerner for the event, which wasn’t sponsored by the University, and nearly 7500 students watched the program on a JumboTron at Low Plaza and took part in a variety of daylong activities promoting civic engagement.

“The student body saw this as a historic opportunity to be part of the most important political campaign that any of us have ever seen,” said journalism student Greg Bocquet ’09JRN. “We realize that this is a turning point for our country.” By sundown, traffic on Broadway near 116th Street was blocked off and pedestrians were required to have a University ID to get inside Columbia’s gates. Television news crews jockeyed for precious parking spaces on either side of College Walk, while inside the quad, College Democrats and College Republicans held a voter registration drive together. “This isn’t about taking sides,” said Jonathan Kaiser ’10CC, a member of the College Republicans. “Our campus is a national stage.

People are just so happy that the candidates came.”

At around 7 p.m., a cool breeze was blowing in off the Hudson River after a muggy day. Students were opening blankets on the grass and steps in front of Low. Undergraduate leaders took turns speaking at an outdoor lectern about student volunteer opportunities throughout the city, in keeping with the day’s theme of public service.

President Lee Bollinger delivered opening remarks inside Lerner Hall, where guest speakers included New York governor David Paterson ’77CC and the Hollywood actor Tobey Maguire. Bollinger remarked that a forum on public service is an ideal way to mark 9/11 “because it helps us make this a day of reflection and enlightenment — to learn once again that the simple act of caring for others contains within it all the satisfactions one can hope for in life.” He pointed out that Columbia has stressed civic education dating at least as far back as World War I, when the University created the Core Curriculum in part to nurture “the responsibilities of citizenship” in undergraduates. Bollinger highlighted several of the University’s service programs, such as Double Discovery Center, which brings first-generation, college-bound public school students onto campus for mentoring, and Columbia Community Impact, which sends nearly a thousand student volunteers to serve in New York neighborhoods each year.

A coin toss had determined that McCain would speak first, and the military veteran of 26 years laid out the following vision: Faith-based organizations and the private sector should form the bedrock of public service in the United States. McCain said he would consider boosting government funding for civilian organizations such as the Peace Corps and AmeriCorps but that government-supported programs can’t meet most of our service needs. “The essence of volunteerism starts at the grassroots level, not necessarily at the federal government level,” he said. “Let’s not in any way stifle what already is very, very successful in America.” McCain also said that he would make it easier for foreign nationals to study and ultimately to work in the United States.

Obama took the stage to uproarious applause from the Columbia students watching him outside on the campus JumboTron. After shaking hands with McCain, with whom he’d visited Ground Zero earlier in the day, Obama smiled widely at the audience, observing: “I’ve got a slight home-court advantage here. This is my alma mater.” In

contrast to McCain, Obama, the former community organizer, stressed the importance of government programs. He touted his national service plan, a $3.5 billion proposal that would offer college students tuition breaks in exchange for their volunteer efforts, double the size of the Peace Corps, and triple the size of AmeriCorps. Obama also said he would create a new corps focused on promoting alternative energy in local communities. “That is going to cost money,” said Obama, “but mostly it’s going to require government to provide the opportunities and a president who is willing to inspire people to get involved and get outside of themselves.”

McCain and Obama agreed on some things. They both said the U.S. needs to expand its armed forces to ease their overburdened ranks. And they both criticized higher education institutions, such as Columbia and many others, that don’t host Reserve Officers’ Training Corps on their campuses. (Columbia students participate in ROTC by commuting to the military’s regional officer training courses at Fordham University. In 2005, the University Senate, comprising student and faculty leaders, voted not to formally invite ROTC back onto campus because the military’s policy banning openly gay service members was seen to violate the University’s nondiscrimination practices.)

Said McCain: “Shouldn’t the students here be exposed to the attractiveness of serving in the military?”

After the event, journalism students were sitting on the steps of Low and on benches in the quad, blogging and filing stories for their courses on laptops. The journalism student Bocquet interviewed Governor Paterson, former senator Harris Wofford (D-Pa.), Queen Noor of Jordan, and others during breaks in the program. “This is one of the reasons why I decided to come to Columbia,” said Bocquet, “to be part of something larger.”

At 10:30 p.m., a large crowd of students had gathered near Lerner Hall, hoping to catch a glimpse of the candidates. But by then McCain’s and Obama’s motorcades, with their elaborate police escorts and multiple SUVs with dark-tinted windows, had already left campus, driving very quickly toward downtown Manhattan, drawing curious stares from New Yorkers standing in crosswalks and at bus stops near 110th Street.

Barnard College freshman Sinead Redmond said she was buoyed by the experience. “It’s what, our third week of school and we saw the next president of the United States,” she said. “I feel like we’re part of it.”

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