

# THE PURITAN HERITAGE AND CURRENT ECONOMIC ATTITUDES IN AMERICA

A Herança Puritana e as Atitudes Econômicas na América

Puritanisches Erbe und Wirtschaftliche Gepflogenheiten in Amerika

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## SUMMARY

This essay sustains that the contemporary economic yearnings of American society are deeply rooted in seventeenth century Puritan Massachusetts — a cultural heritage which the people are unwilling and perhaps unable to abandon.

The author identifies five of the most firmly-held assumptions as a beginning for the study of cultural values and economics in the United States today:

1. The assumption that America has a special, divinely ordained role as a world leader — exemplar of democratic ideals;
2. An assumption that those in power and authority should be willing to sacrifice something for the common good;
3. A sense of pride in the product itself and identity with the institution;
4. A sense of certain independence from the employer based on the integrity of the individual;
5. The assumption that individuals and institutions adhere to a set of shared moral principles.

The essay concludes that the strengths of the Protestant ethic which have become part of the national ideology have begun to produce more barriers than benefits to progress and that what is urgently needed in the United States today is creative and imaginative leadership.

## RESUMO

Este artigo sustenta que os anseios econômicos contemporâneos da sociedade americana estão profundamente arraigados na Massachusetts puritana do século dezessete — herança cultural da qual o povo não quer e talvez não consiga se libertar.

O autor apresenta cinco das pressuposições mais enraizadas, como ponto de partida para o estudo dos valores culturais e econômicos dos Estados Unidos de hoje:

1. A suposição de que os Estados Unidos representam um papel conferido por Deus, como líder mundial — modelo dos ideais democráticos;
2. Uma suposição de que os detentores do poder e as autoridades deveriam estar dispostos ao sacrifício pelo bem comum;
3. Um sentimento de orgulho por aquilo que produzem e identificação com a instituição;
4. Um sentido de certa independência do empregador, baseado na integridade do indivíduo;
5. A suposição de que os indivíduos e as instituições são fiéis a um conjunto geral de princípios morais.

O artigo conclui que a força da ética protestante, que é parte da ideologia americana, passou a gerar mais obstáculos do que benefícios para o progresso, e que os Estados Unidos de hoje precisam urgentemente de liderança imaginativa e criadora.

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In the United States this year a surprising book won a Pulitzer Prize, a National Book Award, and climbed to the top of the best seller lists. While the subject of the book is business, this fact alone should not surprise anyone. The non-fiction best seller list has been packed for the last few years with books on the economy, the coming apocalypse, investment, and the rise and fall of American business. But this book is different. *The soul of a new machine* by Tracy Kidder is an account of how a group of Data General engineers worked at breakneck speed for over fifteen months to produce a new microcomputer.<sup>1</sup> Although the book is filled with technical details, plans are being made to turn the tale into a major motion picture. What, we might well then ask, is the appeal of this non-fiction narrative?

For the student of American culture, this book's appeal is an important signal of yearnings that lie much deeper in the society. Through his journalistic account of an actual project, Kidder has subtly linked his story of the experiences of living human beings and the problems of contemporary economic realities to deeply held beliefs about American life and national character which have their roots in seventeenth century Puritan Massachusetts. Kidder achieves this remarkable effect through frequent allusions to works of American literature, by writers such as Melville, Twain, and Cotton Mather, through vibrant associations drawn between the people at Data General and heroes of American history and fiction from Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Edison to Horatio Alger, Captain Ahab, the Lone Ranger, and other mythic giants. Repeatedly Kidder invokes the most cherished values of the American heritage: rugged individualism, philosophical idealism, anti-materialism, a romantic yearning for freedom, and a nearly religious commitment to hard work and self-sacrifice.

The underground level of the Massachusetts-based headquarters of Data General is transformed into a ship on which a freewheeling and inscrutable captain, symbolically named Tom West, inspires pure-hearted young geniuses to give the best of themselves, regardless of pay and hours. Under West's charismatic leadership (reminiscent also of Twain's Connecticut Yankee), these young heroes in jeans create a machine that will express their indomitable faith in the democratic-capitalist mission and their pride in their good old American know-how. Mixing images from the Puritan heritage of austerity, purity, and zeal; the nineteenth-century impulse for expansion, inventiveness, and independence; and the twentieth century drive to lead the world through teamwork, industrial power, and technology, Kidder discovers in the Data General experience an expression of the enduring American dream. His story exposes not only the soul of a new machine, but the soul of American culture as well.

The popularity of this book in the 1980's is significant, therefore, because it reveals how profoundly Americans desire to find a basis for a

restoration of national pride. More important, perhaps, is that it also demonstrates the need to understand present struggles of American businesses in the context of the attitudes, assumptions, and values that are so deeply ingrained in the consciousness of the people that they are part of what cultural anthropologists call the deep structure upon which public policy and corporate decisions are founded. At its conclusion Kidder's book presents Data General as a microcosm of the larger state of affairs for American industry in the last third of the present century. After the company allowed the young engineers to develop the feelings of western free-spiritedness, Calvinistic purity of motive and dedication, and even iconoclastic defiance of the corporate authority needed to produce their extraordinary commitment, Data General then took the product of these astounding labors, changed its name from the symbolic "Eagle" to MV/8000, and systematically disbanded the production team. One member expressed a general feeling of betrayal in saying, "It was a group that was formed and achieved this remarkable thing for the company, and the company had deemed to reward that group by blowing it up. It's really sad" (286).

Instead of concluding with an expression of hope that the accomplishment of the team may prophesy what is still possible for American industry, Kidder presents the episode at Data General to be a last gasp of those tenets that brought America success in the past. In the final chapter, entitled "Dinosaurs," the still youthful members of the group become representatives of a dying spirit of corporate inventiveness, imagination, and vitality that is sinking under a massive wrong-minded business technique that leaves the best and the brightest cynical, restless, and bored. Tom West, a hero from an earlier era, sums up the book's bitter-sweet conclusion. He observes that the ingredients for American achievement still exist in the Protestant ethic and the Romantic spirit of adventure, but that in the case of the Eagle computer, these cultural resources were tapped for only a brief interlude: "Yeah, it's all blown apart, but the ethic's still in place," he said, "in some sense spreading that around may be beneficial." West added: "It was a summer romance. But that's all right. Summer romances are some of the best things that ever happen" (287).

For observers of economic affairs in the United States even the temporary warmth and rejuvenation of a summer romance does little to relieve the growing chill of uncertainty and fear. In its optimism and faith in American inventiveness and achievement, *The soul of a new machine* is a notable exception among the books that Americans are presently buying and reading in order to understand the present economy. More typical of the present mood is Antony Jay's *Management and Machiavelli: an inquiry into the policies of corporate life*, or Christopher Lasch's *The culture of narcissism: American life in an age of diminishing expectations*, and Richard Curtis's *How to prosper in the coming apocalypse*.<sup>2</sup> Such works loudly proclaim the current

widespread opinion that individuals and corporations have become completely ruthless, self-interested, and short-sighted. Like an early Puritan minister chastising his congregation for backsliding from its sacred corporate mission to seek forbidden pleasures, Lasch exhorts his readers: "Have we bargained away our future for self-gratification now?"

Yet in spite of frequent analyses of what is currently wrong with the American economy and repeated calls for national reform, frustration and pessimism about the future has increased. In electing Ronald Reagan to the White House, many Americans felt that a radical break with the economic policies of the past — which his policies seemed to offer — would reduce waste in government and industry, instill business to invest in research and new facilities, and thereby restore life to the construction and manufacturing arms of the society and revive the economy. What the voters heard in Reagan's "New Federalism" message of reduced bureaucratic controls over business, lower taxes, stimulation of capital investment, and less government was a return to an earlier way of governing America that would allow on a large scale for the kind of adventure, self-sacrifice, dedication, loyalty, and personal pride that Tracy Kidder depicts as occurring for a brief span in the basement of Data General. The slogans of Reagan's platform touched deep-seated yearnings in the American nation for the restoration of a cultural heritage which the people are unwilling, and perhaps unable, to abandon. When they think of growth, prosperity, and national pride, many Americans, including some of its brightest engineers and best educated leaders, recall a set of inherited principles which they feel should form the ground rules for business activity and set the course for American economic progress.

When average Americans try to understand the causes of the present situation, they are inclined to view the period of the great depression and World War II as marking the beginning of a story that now draws toward an ending. The plot can be summarized briefly: The years of growth and prosperity that followed the war led the expansion of American industry in the 1950's, the growth of the middle class, the expansion of the cities and suburbs, and a general rise in the standard of living. While a recession in the late fifties slowed this growth temporarily, conditions remained favorable for increases in productive research and development into the 1960's. But then something went wrong. The period of turmoil marked by political strife and the Vietnam war masked a shift of fiscal policies in Washington and in major corporations that has had a profound effect on the economy of the 1970's and early 80's. Rampant inflation, diminished resources, the decline of the American automobile industry and productivity in general, and the economic supremacy of other nations such as Germany and Japan over the United States — to the common people these miseries are somehow the result of self-serving human decisions made

behind closed doors during the late 1960's or early 70's. Among older Americans there is a grave suspicion that gains achieved through victories on the battlefield in World War II have been bartered away to other nations, even old enemies, in secret deals of the last decade.

To diagnose this pervasive malaise in the society, though, an observer must understand the shared assumptions and cultural values that lie beneath the surface of the society like an underground stream whose source may be traced back to the religious beliefs of the early settlers. It is because many people feel that these national values have been betrayed, abused, and rejected by those in power, that there has been a pervasive loss of hope at restoring the faith and optimism of earlier times. But because people do not articulate these deeply held values, the intellectuals, businessmen, and leaders of government are not often aware of how such attitudes shape opinion and inspire actions. The impressive achievement of the book on the Data General group is that Kidder captures through casual remarks and private conversations a sense of how these shared values affect the drive, cooperation, loyalty, and persistence of even some of the most highly-educated workers. There is a widely-shared conviction that since the late 1960's Americans have repeatedly betrayed certain religiously-grounded national ideals and that lapse has had a devastating result in American business and economic life.

A careful study of current books and articles on the American economy and a close examination of the cultural heritage of the nation reveal several of these commonly held values which those who will guide the United States to an economic recovery would do well to ponder. For the purpose of this brief overview on the present mood of Americans, I want to identify five of the most firmly held assumptions as a beginning for the study of cultural values and economics in the United States today:

1. *The assumption that America has a special, divinely-ordained role as world leader - exemplar of democratic ideals.*

During the early decades of the seventeenth century Puritans who came to New England formulated through their sermons and writings a set of doctrines about the role of the colonists in history that eventually became transformed into a myth or dream of America's mission in the world. By the time of the Revolution the colonists had come to believe that the new chosen people of America had a sacred mission to lead the world toward political freedom and an enlightened social order. Repeated in Fourth of July orations, political rhetoric and sermons, these deeply accepted and internalized beliefs became codified into the American middle-class ideology. To be an American meant that one accepted these shared assumptions. To reject these notions was un-American.<sup>3</sup>

As elaborated and extended by the political orators and the leaders of government and business

in the nineteenth century, this religious-political vision, or ideology, took on important economic elements: every American (actually every white male) had an equal opportunity under the law to achieve his potential through talent and hard work. As a result of such faith, those in power were assumed to be the best people in the society who deserved their positions because they had achieved their status through intelligence and energy; they were in Huck Finn's term, "the quality." Because of cultural expansion, it was held that a man with "pluck" who found he could not achieve his desired level of success in one place need only pack up and move on to a spot where his work would be valued and rewarded. Another belief was tied to property. With an abundance of land, it was believed, every hard working American could expect one day to own his own farm or home — even though it may be humble, it would be his castle.<sup>4</sup>

So strong was the myth of equal opportunity that Americans continued to cherish the notion even as millions of workers languished in tortuous jobs in textile mills, on railroads, in lettuce fields, and in coal mines. The conviction that the system of economic and political freedom provided a chance for everyone to rise to the top was so strong that in the face of realities of hardship and exploitation, the people simply shifted their hopes and promises to the next generation. If a first generation parent could not rise out of the coal mines, then he could expect that his children, educated in the U.S. and prepared for the opportunities of the future, would attain a new plateau from which his own children could ascend. In the course of three generations an ambitious family would be able to rise from nothing to a level of wealth and prominence. In their study *Schooling in capitalist America: educational reforms and the contradictions of economic life*, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis have effectively described the shift from faith in the frontier to education as a basis for the dream of unlimited possibilities for Americans:

"Go West, young man!" advised Horace Greeley in 1851. A century later, he might have said: "Go to college!" The Western frontier was the nineteenth-century land of opportunity. . . . throughout the nineteenth century, the image of the frontier sustained the vision of economic opportunity and unfettered personal freedom in an emerging industrial system offering little of either. With the closing of the frontier in the latter part of the nineteenth-century . . . , a new ideology of opportunity became the order of the day. The folklore of capitalism was revitalized: Education became the new frontier.<sup>5</sup>

Such conceptions stemmed from the fundamentally religious conviction that the American economic system was a new stage in some providential design. Throughout most of the twentieth century these attitudes persisted among business leaders and workers alike. Indeed, much of the optimism and energy behind the formation of the supercorporations during this century arose from

this faith in the unique role of America, and thereby American business, in the world. But in recent years doubts about this special errand have arisen.

2. *An assumption that those in power and authority should be willing to sacrifice something for the common good.*

Perhaps the first American businessman to find that his neighbors expected more of him than he had been prepared to give was the Puritan merchant Robert Keayne. In the 1650's Keayne, who had considered himself a generous donor to his church and a productive member of his community, found himself hauled before the magistrates and ministers of his town of Boston for overcharging. So excruciating was the experience for Keayne that he poured out his feelings of shame and regret into his Will and set aside sums for restitution of individuals and for public improvements.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the tenets of American Protestantism helped to establish the notion that those who became rich in America should share their good fortune and exhibit public spirit and generosity. The contrary pull of the religious doctrine of Christian charity and the economic doctrine of emerging capitalism created tensions for merchants like Robert Keayne. As public opinion became a potent force, this tension had to be resolved through rhetoric or action. During and after the Revolution this tradition was temporarily undermined by the economic and social chaos of the period and by the decline of the authority of the American churches. In their efforts to reestablish their own base of influence in the society, however, the clergy formulated in the early nineteenth century a new argument for what came to be American philanthropy. This modification to capitalist competitiveness and acquisitiveness provided a new basis for justifying the wealth of the very rich through a system of voluntary "give-backs."<sup>7</sup> Even during the period of the late 1800's when the public fervor against the new business magnates, known as the "robber barons," grew into outrage and riot, the touted generosity of the rich, evidenced in museums, college buildings, hospitals, public parks, and fountains served to soften the public images of the wealthy and legitimize the laissez-faire economic system.<sup>8</sup>

On a smaller scale in the twentieth century this same pattern was reflected and reinforced through a style of management that stressed personal contact and recognition. Such devices as Christmas bonuses, company parties and picnics, and personal gifts of hams or turkeys to workers at holidays served to demonstrate an employer's sense of his public duty. Such acts as assistance money to individual workers during times of special needs, such as a family crisis, built company loyalty and identity as well. Again, as organized labor became stronger in recent decades and methods of management changed, these symbols of the employer's appreciation of a worker's value and efforts have disappeared in favor of increased health benefit plans, shorter working hours, longer vacations and

the like. While workers voted for such changes because they recognized the advantages of guaranteed financial benefits over informal gifts and uncontracted supports in times of need, all of these negotiated benefits are formal, impersonal, and seem to result from worker "demands" rather than the supposed "generosity" of the employer. While a cold realistic look at both systems of reward makes it clear that in either case business is business, the fact is that these changes have altered relationship between workers and management. The present system does not encourage impulses toward sacrifice by either side and fosters constant resentment for a lack of encouragement rather than gratitude for unexpected returns.

Of course, a few exceptions have endured, and in a recent study of management techniques, *Corporate cultures: the rites and rituals of corporate life*, Terrence E. Deal and Allan A. Kennedy point out that some of the most successful American companies, including General Electric, Procter and Gamble, and Mary Kay Cosmetics, have been able to maintain a strong sense of corporate mission by eschewing the science of "management systems" and retaining the old emphasis upon human relations between workers and bosses.<sup>9</sup> Ironically, too, on the employee side, now that an economic crisis has threatened the jobs of large numbers of workers in industry, some are offering to "give back" certain fringe benefits if such sacrifices result in saving jobs. Again to invoke Kidder's account of Data General, those who labored for months of overtime did not want financial or fringe benefits for their achievement, but wanted only to be recognized by name for having done well and given a chance to perform again in similar projects to realize their full potential. The opportunity to excel, to take a risk, to do original work and the recognition due to an individual for his contributions — these were the rewards that the engineers wanted, and in return they gave all they could to their company.

### 3. *A sense of pride in the product itself and identity with the institution.*

Of course, it has been a long-established truth, going back to Ruskin and Marx, that the methods of modern industrialism would separate the worker from the fruits of his labors in such a way as to destroy the sense of personal relationship between worker and product that once fostered the notion of craftsmanship. From the time of the Revolution to the present there has been in the United States a strong sense of the connection between national identity and national product. When the leaders of the rebellion against England in the 1770's wanted to express their protest, they encouraged the wearing of homespun garments, and throughout the nineteenth century America took pride in the inventions and technological advances from the steamboat to the telephone as expressions of the national character. Even today in the telephone industry Western Electric takes fierce pride in the

durability and operating consistency of American-made telephones. What is surprising, in fact, is that, in spite of the prophecies of Marx and Ruskin, the desire by workers to be identified with their products and company still remains intense.

John Kenneth Galbraith sums up this inclination well with an example. Although writing of the situation in the mid-1960's and looking ahead to the decline of such pride that has taken place since, Galbraith emphasized the importance of the worker's identification with his company:

... the prestige of business organizations may well be declining, the large corporation continues to be a symbol of success and achievement in the culture. It endows its members with this prestige; (...). The question automatically asked when two men meet on a plane or in Florida is, "Who are you with?" Until this is known, the individual is a cipher. (...) If, however, he is with a large, well-known corporation — a good outfit — he immediately counts.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, the great technological achievements of the American space industry of the 1960's carried with them profound national and company pride.

With rare exceptions today, however, as again in Kidder's depiction and Galbraith's prophecy, workers do not identify their own talents and skills with the quality of their company's product. Two decades ago the urge to "buy American" was common among factory workers, and a purchaser of a foreign car could expect to meet a certain number of cold glances and vocal objections to his implied rejection of American-made goods. This nationalistic fervor regarding goods has virtually disappeared and the personal identification of self with product that characterized American business in the past has all but disappeared with it.

### 4. *A sense of certain independence from the employer based on the integrity of the individual.*

Whether it is the freedom of a research scientist or engineer to work on an independent project, the freedom of assembly workers to make private jokes about the boss, the chance to go to the restroom and even grab a quick cigarette without being clocked, or the opportunity to tell off the boss through a suggestion box, American workers need to feel that they are respected as unique individuals and that management recognizes that there are gains in creativity, loyalty, and productivity when workers are allowed to have a degree of freedom.

There is widespread opinion that sometime in the 1960's, with the introduction of scientific methods of management and the proliferation of efficiency experts, employers became too repressive.<sup>11</sup> Time limits placed upon trips to the restroom, increased formality of attire, imposed codes of behavior in plants, and greater pressures upon high level workers to meet ever-increasing performance levels seemed to combine with an increased impersonality of managers and executives to make

working conditions more repressive. Increased "legalism" and formality resulted in a deepening cynicism on the part of workers — a feeling that the "company" was out for all it could get and the worker should do the same — began to pervade the work place. In this context notions that workers would put in extra hours without pay, care more about the product they were making than their own private gains, or sacrifice personal pleasure for the good of others have nearly disappeared. Similarly, employers do not concern themselves with the personal lives of their employees, nor do they concern themselves with increasing the personal satisfaction of workers. Such attitudes and concerns would now be perceived as "unbusinesslike," rather archaic and foolish ways of conducting business. One of the most startling things in *The soul of a new machine* is Kidder's depiction of young engineers who cared more about being allowed to create something new than they did about pay or hours. Routinely they put in uncompensated overtime hours, and emphatically they declared with pride that they did not do this job for money. In his book Kidder returns repeatedly to this attitude because it has become so rare today.

5. *The assumption that individuals and institutions adhere to a set of shared moral principles.*

From the time of the Puritan founders Americans have believed that all members of the community, from the most humble to the most prominent, would adhere to a shared code of religious or moral principles. In the early decades of the New England settlements, of course, ministers and magistrates worked closely with the wealthiest men of the Massachusetts community to assure that all did indeed live by the same standards. During the eighteenth century itinerant preachers spread this Puritan ethic through the south and the west. Still, in spite of theological differences among the many sects that grew up after the Revolution, the great religious revivals reestablished the belief that all Americans were God-fearing people who lived according to a minimum set of religious convictions that encouraged honesty, sobriety, fair play and Christian charity toward neighbors.<sup>12</sup>

In spite of the later diversity that allowed Jews and Catholics, and even atheists, to live, in principle at least, without persecution, there remained through the early 1960's an unspoken assumption that people, and especially leaders, aspired to certain moral standards in their public and private lives. Thus, there existed until quite recently certain expectations of such moral conformity: to be trusted in business or in the professions, a man should be a churchgoer, he should be happily married to his first wife (even as late as 1959 Nelson Rockefeller's divorce made him unfit in the eyes of many for the presidency), and he should be willing to sacrifice, when needed, his own personal comfort for the good of others. Leaders of business were expected to be community leaders through participation in lodges or community associations, and wives of very successful men would be expected to perform

volunteer work either through a club or community organization.

During the last twenty years this set of convictions has all but disappeared. The moral standards of the society have become blurred.

With little or no sense of moral or ethical standards being imposed from above or demanded from below, people seem to feel absolutely at sea in their efforts to formulate a new understanding of the relationship between private values and public performance. From the time of the Vietnam war and the Watergate scandal, great numbers of Americans have become so cynical about the lack of moral leadership in business and government that they seem to have become blasé about such misconduct.

The effect of such pessimism upon the long-range planning of Americans and their attitudes in the work place has been very destructive. Most people work only for immediate rewards and with little faith that genuine achievement will be rewarded. "Learning the game," "playing the game," "getting one's own," "ripping off the organization," making the "big score" or a lucky hit are phrases that now seem a part of the common vocabulary. While the older generation complains that the young do not understand the value of hard work and are not willing to labor for and plan for their rewards, the young argue that those who are successful in today's society are those few shrewd ones who figure a way to strike it rich quick on some scheme that exploits the system or others in some new way. The Protestant ethic of hard work and moral purity seems almost entirely to have been replaced today by a gambling ethic.

*Present conditions*

At the level of the individual worker or junior executive, this short-term gambling mentality leads to a sense of instability and transience. Instability and uncertainty in personal and corporate life lead to the feeling that one had better move up quickly in the organization or move on to another opportunity elsewhere where the chances for quick advancement may be better.

Considering management itself as a separate entity, such hit or miss thinking has created another set of problems that is now resulting in the most profound corporate soul-searching ever experienced in American business. In an earthshaking article in the *Harvard business review* in 1980 Professors Robert Hayes and William J. Abernathy argued most persuasively that short term thinking has made American business its own worst enemy.<sup>13</sup> By neglecting the human needs of the worker — front-line essentials such as clean working conditions and well-maintained machinery — and by focusing upon short-term profits instead of building a solid reputation for quality products, American business, they argue, has ransomed future economic well-being for immediate profits. As a result, managers have become overly concerned with

financial analysis rather than line operations and have been making decisions based upon the present rate of return on a particular segment of a business instead of considering what that might mean for the whole company down the road. In other words, instead of taking the long-range human chances that create corporate reputations, employee pride, and consumer respect and loyalty, corporations have been playing with a roulette wheel of short term profits: as soon as a computer print-out indicates that a number could come up a loser within the next quarter's roll of the dice, they pull their money off the number. One observer summarized the effect of such policies upon the attitudes of junior executives and workers this way:

These days corporate managers are taught ... that big corporations ... should be managed like an investment portfolio. ... If a business falters, it becomes an immediate candidate for abandonment, in favor of some pursuit with a greater short-term profit. ... It is a seductive doctrine that promises the bright student a quick path to the top and that piles its rewards on executives who force through impressive short-term performance, at indeterminate cost to long-term health.<sup>14</sup>

It is interesting that Hayes and Abernathy began their investigation of American productivity with the assumptions shared by most analysts today and that they found the current wisdom faulty because of its lack of cultural perspective. Mr. Hayes says that the new insight came to him when he was teaching a seminar to European businessmen: "I began to list all the standard reasons for the decline in American productivity — organized labor, government regulations, the baby boom — and they all looked at me with polite amusement. They said I was totally off the mark since all the same factors applied to Europe and more, and their productivity was increasing."<sup>15</sup> This experience led Hayes to a comparison of modern American and Japanese business that brought him to his conclusion that the real trouble with America is that companies are afraid to invest in their futures. He says that an obsession with the expected impact of continued inflation and high interest has paralyzed business investment. Rather than order new machinery which may take years to build and install, they opt for patch work on old inefficient models. Rather than remodeling a wing of a plant so that better working conditions may lead to increased productivity two years from now, companies simply close that part of the operation and buy out some other business. Hayes says, "Present value calculations support a decision to operate on the goose and remove some of the golden eggs prematurely even though doing so impairs its future egg-laying ability."<sup>16</sup>

Although these authors have gone deeper into the cultural sources of the problems plaguing the American economy today, what is wanting here is the depth of understanding that would recognize the decline of the work ethic and the avarice of

workers and executives as expressions of the same deep-seated cultural shifts that have produced corporate fears about long-term investment in technology and human resources. The same lack of faith in the future that has eroded ethical standards and moral values also underlines the financial decisions of corporate policy makers. The leaders and followers share the same cultural milieu.

What is apparent in these analyses of America's current situation is a failure to perceive the recurring cycles of optimism and pessimism — assurance and guilt — that have characterized the emotional life of the people from the early decades of the seventeenth century. Whether raised to be formally religious or not, most Americans bred in this country have unconsciously accepted the ideology of national mission which has its roots in the Puritan religious heritage. As part of this cultural background is a psychological pattern grounded in what scholars have called the jeremiad tradition. The jeremiad is that name given to the ritualistic sermons of the early Puritan ministers who chastised the people of the new Zion for their backsliding and failure in order to generate a sense of individual and corporate guilt severe enough to result in personal reform and a community recommitment to its original covenant.

After the military and political traumas of the late 60's and early 70's, the last decade has involved a period of soul-searching and guilt in the United States. The sense of national guilt has been so strong that people have tried to repress and ignore it. The indulgence in materialism and pleasure-seeking may seem to spring from a failure of values, but actually on a deeper level it is the result of a bitter sense of failure. The national realities drifted so far from the articulated ideals that even individuals feel that they share the guilt and shame for this disgrace. Without a process for purging this sense of guilt and redirecting the energy it drains from real productivity and social development, people can only try to distract themselves from the uneasiness. Without a focus upon the long-range future of the society, few can do more than think of immediate personal gains and gratification. Given this situation, everyone's impulse is to "lie low," "play it safe," and "look out for number one" — phrases currently to the fore in the national idiom.

During the 1970's both Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan used their political rhetoric to win elections by tapping into the pattern of failure-guilt-reform. Carter appealed to the yearnings of those who wished to be "born again." Through his quasi-religious message he touched the desire of many to be reconverted to their lost faith in the national mission. In his call for a return to the values of the founding fathers, Reagan offered hope of a new beginning that would return the nation to an earlier innocence and resolve. Even though Reagan proposed a period of sacrifice, austerity, and pain, people voted for him because he seemed to offer absolution from the sins of the past through a covenant renewal that would restore the original American dream of self-reliance, freedom from

controls, and equal opportunity for all who live a clean life and work hard. Reagan's image as a western hero, both in film and in reality, who seemed to uphold America's founding principles aroused in many the deep cultural attachments to the dual heritage of the Puritan ethic and the frontier romanticism that Tracy Kidder discovered in the souls of the Data General engineers. In one way the elections of '76 and '80 support Lasch's faith in the reforming spirit of the people: the people were ready to believe again. But each time their leaders fail to fulfill these promises of covenant renewal, the needed cycle of purgation and reform is short-circuited, leaving everyone trapped in a continuing phase of great fear and its accompanying short-term thinking and cautious policies.

One other aspect of this psycho-social configuration that has always been present and must be understood in cultural context is the dangerous potential for directing such powerful emotional energies toward others. During the seventeenth century Puritan ministers did not need modern sociologists to tell them that besides the call to reform another effective way of breaking the cycle of guilt and despair was to direct the inner turmoil of the people upon some external enemy — whether the Indians in the forest, foreign persecutors, the "Whore of Babylon" in Rome, or Satan and his devious army.<sup>17</sup> It may be a comforting logic that leads to the view that a people who feel guilty over the mistakes in Vietnam will therefore be alert to avoid "future Vietnams." But cultural predispositions and logic do not always coincide. Unification of the in-group through an attack on an out-group has often served to shake the American people from their own inner turmoil and lost direction. But this is a tragic and ultimately self-destructive method of reform.

Where the present leadership has failed is precisely in that area in which the American people had placed faith for its success — in its ability to strengthen the ties between business and government. Ironically, after candidate Reagan had convinced the electorate that the principles of the New Deal and Old Left had failed and that concessions to big business involving sacrifices on the part of labor would be necessary, President Reagan faced a business community resistant to his call for corporate reinvestment of saved tax dollars into research and development and for more aggressive approaches to developing new products and increased sales abroad. Corporate executives who once complained that their companies were shackled by government regulations, taxes, and liberal federal policies have not responded creatively to the challenge and opportunities offered by the "new federalism."

A reflection upon American cultural history reveals some of the fundamental attitudes of the people and their leaders that need to be changed before there can be creative solutions to recurring economic patterns. The American either/or logic, inherited from the Puritan fathers, combined with a sense of cultural inferiority bred on the frontier

have led to a destructive adversary mentality. The price that is being paid for the luxury of sustaining these old habits has become too high. An overvalued American dollar may boast of American power, but it is drastically affecting the balance of trade of the United States with its world neighbors. Instead, world economic leaders, those of the United States among them, must come to the international negotiating table and establish sane valuations that will stem the present slide toward increasing international antagonism. Raising the familiar specter of the red dragon in the wilderness may win votes and encourage national unity among the American people, but such political tactics only deter the formulation of sensible trade agreements. Instead, leaders must strengthen lines of communication and strike financial bargains with adversaries as well as friends to devise policies of international cooperation that may generate broader approaches to the problems of unemployment and recession that threaten not just one nation but all nations together. Pitting business against labor and using the old Protestant psychic burdens of blame and shame in order to arouse a sense of national guilt may serve to shift the focus of public attention away from the failures of government policies, but instead, national leaders should encourage a more rational approach to financial disputes and attempt to diffuse and defuse tensions between labor and business in order to create an atmosphere for reasonable solutions. The time has come that the strengths of the Protestant ethic — the fierce competitiveness, the spirit of independence, the self-righteousness and national pride that have become part of the national ideology and that have led in earlier times to growth and achievement — have begun to produce more barriers than benefits to progress. At the moment on every level of the economic structure what is needed is cooperation and a spirit of unity to guide decisions.

Perhaps, as some have suggested, the only plan to produce more than a temporary pause in the downward spiral of national confidence and expectations would involve a major shift away from the capitalist ideology that has been dominant in the nation since the mid-nineteenth century. Such a development would require that leaders and their people break outside of the narrow vision of the role of America in the world that produced a great era of expansion and leadership but may now be obsolete. On the other hand, such a sweeping change may yet be beyond the imaginations of all but a few and thereby impossible to achieve during the present or next generation. In this case, what is urgently needed today is creative and imaginative leadership in business and government that can establish monetary and foreign exchange policies that will form the basis for a sounder integration of the world economy. America must overcome its cultural predispositions toward isolation in times of crisis so that it can join other nations in the formulation of a plan for the coordinated growth of world markets of which the United States is a cooperative and fair partner.



## NOTES

- 1 Tracy Kidder, *The soul of a new machine* (New York, 1982).
- 2 This trend is also reflected in the many books comparing the successful business methods of Japanese companies with those of failing American concerns. For example, see William G. Ouchi's *Theory Z: how American business can meet the Japanese challenge* (New York, 1981), and Boye DeMente, *The Japanese way of doing business: the psychology of management in Japan* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1981).
- 3 For the best summary of formation of these aspects of American ideology in the early national period see Sacvan Bercovitch's study of American intellectual and cultural history, *The American jeremiad* (Madison, Wis., 1978).
- 4 For a useful summation of the foundation of these accepted beliefs see, for example, Lawrence J. Friedman, *Inventors of the promised land* (New York, 1975).
- 5 (New York, 1976), p. 3.
- 6 See «The apologia of Robert Keayne,» ed. Bernard Bailyn, in *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts, Transactions*, 42 (1954), 233-41, and for commentary see Bailyn's study of the emergence of capitalist attitudes in Puritan New England, *The New England merchants in the seventeenth century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1955).
- 7 I have discussed this point with full references in a different context in *Revolutionary writers: literature and authority in the New Republic* (New York, 1982), p. 41-5.
- 8 See such studies as Marion R. Fremont-Smith, *Philanthropy and the business corporation* (New York, 1972), and Arnaud C. Marts, *Philanthropy's role in civilization: its contribution to human freedom* (New York, 1953).
- 9 (Reading, Mass., 1982). A very recent article connects an increasing concern with loneliness and yearning for community to the failure of most corporations, except for the «best run» like «I.B.M., Hewlett-Packard or Procter & Gamble.» The author, who cites cultural historians for proof, sees this corporate and personal crisis as rooted in the American ideals of «personal freedom, autonomy and independence,» and notes that «the Japanese are so much better at making workers feel a part of the community at work.» See Louise Bernikow, «Alone: yearning for companionship in America,» *The New York Times magazine*, August 15, 1982, Section 6, p. 24ff.
- 10 *The new industrial state* (New York, 1967), p. 141.
- 11 For a summary of these attitudes see Deal and Kennedy, *Corporate cultures*.
- 12 For a useful summary of these changes and a guide to the relevant literature, see Paul F. Johnson, *A shopkeeper's millennium: society and revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York, 1978).
- 13 See, for example, Hayes & Abernathy, «Managing our way to an economic decline,» *Harvard business review*, July-August 1980, p. 67-77.
- 14 Leslie Wayne, «Management gospel gone wrong,» *The New York Times*, May 30, 1982, Section 3, p. 1.
- 15 As quoted in Wayne, «Management,» p. 21.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 For discussion of this pattern and appropriate references see my study of society and sermon language, *Power and the pulpit in Puritan New England* (Princeton, 1975), Chapter 5.