Why the Center Can't Hold: A Diagnosis of Puritanized America

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If I seem to be assembling what I’ve presented as grounds for dismissing the Christian right—or, for that matter, America—my intentions are read in a way that falls short of them. To twist the phrasing of Mark Antony: my purpose is not to bury America, but to unbury it. If I seem to be constantly repeating myself, it’s because I am. It’s because it is only by circulating around our topics over and over that these things, which seem so familiar they’ve become almost invisible, can be brought to light.

We’ve buried America too much. Let’s begin by further examination of connections between the ascendancy of the rich and our reliance on force.

When I’ve talked with students in history classes about the cruel treatment of Indians by our white predecessors, I’ve been dismayed at how quickly they’ve tried to bury the topic. “I didn’t do it!” they’ll say with predictable regularity. Those of a more social cast of mind will say: “We—the people of our generation didn’t do it” or “We—the subgroup to which I belong didn’t do it.” They say the same of other past cruelties I bring up. What I don’t think they understand is they and I are not only identifiable beneficiaries of injustice in the cases of which I speak, but that most of us—at a deeper level—are wounded and bent as a result of them. We are among the victims of our injustices. We seem doomed to replicate the injustice that we’ve celebrated and not repented.

And we replicate our replications. We’ve done injustice to Indians. To kidnapped Africans. To the children of deprived Indians and the children of kidnapped Africans. To Mexicans. To Filipinos and Vietnamese. To Iranians. To Chileans. To Panamanians
and other Central Americans. To Iraqis. To Afghans. And this is the short list.

We say Vietnam is the first war we ever lost. The statement seems less than accurate. Repeatedly, we’ve emerged from war battered, desensitized, and bitter. This was true of many veterans of the Mexican War. It was vividly true in the case of the Civil War. It was true again of our bloody effort to subdue the Filipinos. Later, the pain wasn’t novel but simply more obvious in many who returned from Vietnam. We’re seeing it again today in those who come back from the Middle East. We see it daily in the suicides of our soldiers.

Our character is coarsened by things we’ve done. Our conscience is bothered, and we cannot return to the persons we were. Were our society in general to recognize the extent to which we’ve inherited a pathology, we might reduce its hold on us. What impedes recognition is our improbable conviction that our way of doing things has always “worked.” In these matters, we speak of those who shrug and “bite the bullet” as the courageous ones; but we seem not brave enough to tell ourselves the truth. We seem not to recognize that “the good ole days” are a convenient legend. We shunt our veterans to the side lest they tell us what they’ve learned. Too many of the good ole days are bad ole days of unrecognized and unrepented recklessness—days of doing unto others that which in our wildest dreams we would not have them do unto us.

Our days have hollowed us out. The thousands of suicides give testimony. By episodes we’ve been drained of vision and aesthetic feeling—rendered sterile in spirit if not in body. After 9/11, there were young men who volunteered and went to Iraq to avenge that day. Some of them killed men and women and children. Some of them suffered a loss of limbs. When they returned, we thanked them for their service; but neither they nor we could articulate in what that service consisted. There is no logical path from the desecration of the Towers to the invasion of Iraq.

I’ve recounted a story in which an Anglican priest was directed to apologize for his unauthorized attempt to make Jesus more central to Christmas than Santa Claus. Though Santa Claus is nice, it’s been more demoralizing than we care to notice to substitute Santa Claus for Jesus. We’ve come to believe in extensions of commerce at any cost. I’ve mentioned our Black Fridays
in which adults wrestle with each other over Christmas presents. One reason we’re insensitive to curtailments on our liberty is because the companies with which we forge relations—relations seemingly intended by the companies to be more permanent than marriages—dazzle us with such variety and convenience. While we have here a new corporate mercantilism, addictive and manipulative and more extensive than anything Adam Smith sought to liberate us from, we seem disinclined to recognize it as such.

In the administration of John Quincy Adams, there had seemed a chance that the federal government could become a careful steward of westward real estate; and that it would sell land, not to speculators, but directly to the very people intending farms and homes. This was a part of the “American System” of Adams’ secretary of state, Henry Clay. According to the plan, a rich revenue would accrue to the federal government. Each land-sale would be moderately priced, but the total accrued by the government would be considerable. There would be no middlemen. Adams, the last Federalist, seems to have intended that the money from such sales would then be spent on infrastructure—roads, water ways, bridges, schools, hospitals, concert halls, museums—so that an orderly infra-structure and a vertical cultural development would be sponsored among the American people with monies garnered from its horizontal expansion westward. It was a thoughtful vision.

To the people of his time, though, Adams seemed elitist. His program may have had the scent of socialism though that term was not used at the time to discredit it. That it was paternalistic was clear. It would have been a kind of New Deal for the 1820s, a century and more before FDR’s. At the end of one term, unable to rally the people, Adams was replaced by Jackson. Jackson initiated what some have hailed as a grand democratic revolution, but what others see as a mere scramble to participate in ill-regulated land grabs in western real estate—with speculators collecting the high prices that actual settlers needed bank loans to afford.

Henry Clay, the pre-eminent Whig (“Whig” meant “anti-Jacksonian”), tried to keep his and Adams’ vision alive; but it never caught on. The idea of government as an active promoter of the common good seemed to many then, as to almost all Republicans today, un-American. Government’s function was to ward off foreign enemies and protect white people; beyond that,
it should leave people alone to do what they wanted. What the white majority wanted was to compete among themselves for the very overt and palpable signs of success: land, wealth, servants and slaves, conspicuous consumption—and to be able on public holidays to say we’re the greatest people on earth. Rugged Americans required no vertical development.

Perhaps Adams had earned this defeat. After all, it was he who had authored the Monroe Doctrine. It can be argued it was the crass spirit of expansion—for which his Doctrine was perverted to act as cheer leader and enabler—that doomed his pursuit of quality. Quality was for effete young men of northeastern schools. Horizontal development triumphed. (If the phrase has connotations of “rape,” that’s OK as a metaphor for what happened.) Regarding specifically the westward lands, the popular will seems to have been: “Let the free market decide who will sell what to whom—and at what price.” This was a get-rich-quick scheme for speculators, and it was the loan-burdened farmers who got the short end of the deal.

At the end of the same century, we had in the 1890s another opportunity to structure our society differently. The depression of 1893 sounded a clear warning of something amiss in the American design. We’d plunged head-first into exponential development of an increasing production of goods at the lowest production-cost achievable. Like the Sorcerer’s Apprentice, we were in danger of being swamped in what we’d conjured forth. Economic and political leaders feared we were about to drown in surplus product. In fact the fear was general. The relentless economic model to which we’d hitched our future required that the laborer and farmer be paid as little as possible. It seemed that soon there’d be no one around who could afford to buy the cornucopia we were ginning forth, and the whole economic system might come crashing down.

At this point we could have re-evaluated what Adams and Clay had proposed. We could have taken seriously what the preamble to the Constitution meant in stipulating we had a national goal “to promote the general welfare.” We could have redirected our energies to: (1) making equality-of-humans tangible in our society through a more equitable sharing of the rewards of prosperity; and (2) taking quality-of-life as the gage of American success. Had we been willing to share across the board the profits of
our productivity, we could presumably have maintained a robust market here at home for products then glutting our market. Giving flesh to our bushels of words about political equality (something Adams, after his presidency, worked tirelessly in Congress to extend to black Americans), we could in the midst of shared prosperity have attempted a quality-of-life unparalleled in previous history. A vision along these lines fueled the eloquent but insufficiently radical critique of William Jennings Bryan.

A vision of change is not as far-fetched as it may seem. We had eventually, through a civil war and three amendments, addressed emancipation of African-Americans. As a follow-up, a general white-and-black economic emancipation does not seem to have been beyond the realm of the possible. In the populist stirrings of the 1890s, there was popular momentum to achieve this more equitable distribution of rewards, and thereby raise the nation’s quality of life. We’ve all learned from the film Inherit the Wind that Bryan lost the respect of the public in his struggle against Darwinism. Far more important, but few seemed to notice, is that in the course of his career Bryan lost the struggle to save America from “Social Darwinism”—an ideology which Darwin himself rejected but for which Puritanism ran interference by sanctifying as divinely decreed the privileges of the powerful. We regarded as an eleventh commandment and sacrosanct: “And thou shalt pay the laborer as little as possible for his or her labor.”

Our decision to go along with this was not done by divine decree but by us. We had at the time a choice. In the age of robber barons, we could resolutely have worked to put a more generous share of America’s unparalleled wealth in the hands of farmers and our multitudes of laborers, whether white or people of color. But a majority of the white voters (and white male voters were the electorate) envied the robber barons and wanted to be like them.

The alternative—the decision we made—was to work toward “enlarging the pie.” Let us, we said, expand our markets. Let the Chinese soak up the surplus product of our fields and factories. Expansion abroad was viewed as the less painful approach. It was a step that moved to the cadences of our traditional westward march.

No matter that we sought expansion on a scale that would require war with Spain, and would, down the road, bring us into
collision with Japan. This expansion was presented as “win/win.” The robber barons could keep hold on their top-heavy share of the nation’s wealth, but there would be enough new wealth to effect incremental improvements in the lives of everyone. Expansion would leave the rich rich—no doubt richer in fact—but it would pacify the unrest of the farmer and the laborer by keeping them gainfully employed; it would allow our great commitment to America’s mission to continue its westward course.

That such expansion would require at least two world wars was not entered on the accounting sheet, although policy-makers of the 1890s had some sense of what they were getting into. War was an externality. War was, as Theodore Roosevelt explained, a natural part of the human condition; and a good war now and again was a necessity for maintaining the muscle tone of a nation emerging into manhood. The American people seemed to agree.

Had we attempted a reassignment of shares in wealth instead, while it would no doubt have required consumer boycotts, labor unions, and strikes to achieve the rearrangement, it would not have required some radical abandonment of private property. What it really required was a willingness to pay farmers something more commensurate with the value of their service to the rest of us, and a readiness to do the same for the miner and the industrial laborer.

We’re actually quite familiar with the line of thinking involved. In a barter arrangement with a neighbor, one attempts to give the neighbor the value of what one receives; one attempts to match value to value. This is done in the interest of honoring and nurturing a sense of community. One wants the neighbor to be a friend as well as a short-term opportunity. Beyond neighborhoods, in our larger society, fairness could have been presented as a sound investment in maintaining a wholesome domestic market for the indefinite future. As noted, that way, the farmer and laborer would have had purchasing power, would have been able to exercise “effective demand”—not merely aspiring to a comfortable share of the goods they were producing, but holding in hand the money to achieve it.

The logic for such an innovation was as valid for black workers as it was for white. (Booker T. Washington understood this well. So do advertisers today, who conscientiously feature representative images of black affluence in their commercials.) Worth
noting too is that such an innovation was compatible with “hard currency,” whereas the “soft currency” proposed by Bryan seemed ready to dodge the issue of inequity while inflating the currency.

The principle of “a fair wage” isn’t as elusive as some would claim. When, as a young inventor-entrepreneur—before success and greed had gotten to him—his accountants came to Henry Ford and told him he could hire labor at a lower rate than he was paying, Ford rebuffed them saying: “I want the people who make Fords to be able to buy Fords.” His logic was as wise as it was obvious. (Unfortunately, as time went on this the vision faded for Ford, as did the warmth of his relations with his workers, and even with his family.)

Contrary to almost all business schools in America today, there’s no need that private business run on Scrooge-like principles. Instead of the entrepreneur asking: “How little can I pay my workers and still maintain a labor force?” there’s no reason he or she can’t ask: “How much can I afford to pay my workers and still maintain, with them, an ongoing enterprise?” W. Edwards Deming frequently insisted this second question is more likely than the first to foster the kind of consistent excellence in goods and services which provides competitive advantage in any market-place genuinely responsive to consumers. Adam Smith had made the same argument. Even today in “family businesses”—business owned and staffed by family members—this ethos of equity seems the prevailing standard. In rejecting Deming and Smith in favor of bottom-line profit maximization, we’ve persisted on a path leading to a market subjected to pervasive manipulation, fraud, and exploitation. It’s a market where misrepresentation, cutting of corners, and outright lying are regarded as acts of virtue. It’s difficult to imagine anything more counterproductive to the human happiness of all concerned.

As mentioned here frequently, what was too little taken into account in the “larger-pie” scenario which we opted for in 1898 were the costs of war and other “externalities.” In addition to some routine and easily rationalized exploitation of workers and hoodwinking of consumers in the interest of larger profits, there had to be a shoving, pushing, and cool trampling-under of peoples and nations throughout the world if we were to have our larger pie. And there had to be a willingness to sacrifice the blood of the best and brightest among our young if our enterprise was to
prevail. These costs have been altogether real; in the accounting process however, they’ve been pushed to the margins—written off as collateral damage. This continues.

(If our soldiers are so unlucky and “improvident” as to get wounded, our actual inclination is to say let this be a matter of concern for their families and for private charities. Let our maimed veterans bootstrap their way out of whatever emotional and physical mess they find themselves in. We treat our wounded veterans not unlike the way we’ve tried to treat subdued Indians who have survived our agendas; we try to put them off someplace where we don’t have to think about them. We—our president and Congress and society—have more serious things to do than tend to their wounds till the day of our veterans’ deaths. True, every few years this matter of neglect intrudes onto our radar screen, and we make promises of reform. The promises are important. They salve our consciences.)

Further, recall that the example America gave at the end of the 1890s, in pushing unreflectingly forward with a project of expansion, was fresh stimulus for those in other countries to do the same. They too wanted special advantages in the guise of an “Open Door”—but Japanese style, or Russian style, or German style—copying us as we were copying the British. Mahan’s book, a handbook for the arms race, was a worldwide best seller.

These “externalities” are, as I say, part of the real cost of such commodities as we can obtain only with their help. Let me repeat that. These “externalities” are a part of the real cost of such commodities as we can obtain only with their help. We seem to have trouble taking that in. They’re the enabling circumstances without which we can’t achieve the kind of lifestyle of the elect we do. They’re a part of the real cost of our not-too-mysterious economic miracle. Not only do we pay the cost of gasoline at the gas pump; we pay for it too in funding our incalculably expensive wars and awkward political arrangements in the Middle East. And while the cost of our car and its fuel and its insurance and registration fees and its maintenance are a part of the cost of our driving, it’s true another significant cost of our driving is an increase in forest fires occasioned by climate change. Yet this last is so totally an externality that if you introduce it into an inventory of the costs of driving, the other parties to the accounting process are likely to be entirely at a loss and say they have no idea
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what you’re talking about. (The mindset of a student I had a few years ago was expressed more or less as follows: “When I came to this course I knew the difference between driving a car and starting a forest fire. If you’re trying to teach me the two are the same, I’m really not interested in taking this course.” He spoke sincerely, and would have dropped the course had he not needed the credits.)

With externalities, by definition the tendency is to say: “Those aren’t our problem.” American economists, as we saw in the case of Milton Friedman, are fond of listing all the things that “aren’t our problem.” But of course when problems aren’t owned by anyone, they grow. When they do, it’s our habit of mind to regard them as something dropping from the sky or coming from the hand of God. Consider some of the many evils that currently tend to demoralize us. Consider, for instance, the jostling about, shoving, and destruction of other peoples that’s going on around us, and the international turf wars, and the promotion of nuclear proliferation, and the thefts and the fraudulent evictions carried out by banks, and the inequities we see in law enforcement, and the increase in street crime, and the increasing violence in our schools, and the decay of our infrastructure, and the extinctions of species along with the pollution and degradation of habitat that that accompany the quickening tempo of climate change— with regard to this whole list, we wish fervently not to acknowledge these are evils that enter the world on two feet. In many cases on our two feet. 1

In those cases where we do acknowledge that evils come on two feet, we want them to be somebody else’s feet. We look for the splinters in the other guy’s eye and ignore the chunk of lumber lodged in our own. We blame the troubles of our lives on the savagery of Indians, the ineptitude of slaves, the communism of Russians, or the terrorism of Muslims. When a president proudly

1. Some have said Reinhold Niebuhr taught at the time of the Second World War that aggregates of people—societies—behave “of necessity” on principles “uncomplicated by morality.” If he did teach that, that may be why he was such a popular theologian at the time. Over and over, we reap the bitter harvest of such convenient thinking; and the pattern shows few signs of ending.
announces, “I will never apologize for the American people,” he speaks resolutely in our tradition, and we applaud him. (Later, we elect his son.)

Let us proceed carefully. One can’t deny that Indians, slaves, Russians, and Muslims have all, on occasion, caused us suffering—sometimes terrible suffering. What might help would be to attend more to how what’s happened seems often to have a retaliatory character. It would help were we ready to search closer to home for origins of things that trouble us. But this need to look to ourselves continues to be something one mentions at one’s hazard. An immediate and almost inevitable response is: “Oh—so you’re saying we’re the bad guy? You want to see America suffer?”

What’s lost in the anger of such a response is the chance to take charge of a disturbed situation. To the extent we own (own up to) whatever initiative has been ours in generating troubles that beset us, we can take in hand a process to reduce trouble. We can work toward some resolution of grievances. We can appropriate what seems Hegel’s distinction between an undialectical counter-thesis (i.e., “So’s your old man!”) and a creative response that seeks to incorporate the other’s grievance (“I recognize some of my behavior has insulted and angered you.”).

What makes it so hard for us to come to this is our Puritan heritage. We are the City on a Hill, the Great American Exception; in the language of our forebears, we’re the Elect. It’s nearly unimaginable to us that significant contributions to the world’s evil should have entered on our two feet.

Here then, in this review, we try to take stock of some of the interlocking aspects of the position we’ve adopted. We believe in acquisition. In our devotion to it, we’ve been willing to treat outsiders with brutality and—while we did so—we’ve been willing to suppress sources of grace and health at home. Things that promote a sense of value in our lives and a sense of the preciousness of others’ lives—and of lives outside our species—get lost in the shuffle. We economize on education; we question the need for national and state parklands; the preservation of “wastelands” we regard as waste indeed; “nature” we think of as “on its own.” We wonder whether we haven’t gone overboard in our willingness to fund remedies for the lives of the desperate—including our wounded veterans. We question the National Endowment for
the Arts and similar enterprises, saying: “Let those who care for such things finance them from their own pockets.” With happy blindness we say: “Let there be a thousand points of light!”

We feel we don’t have much money. For the power we so cherish as a nation requires, as Admiral Mahan made clear, that we seek out foreign markets and have foreign bases from which to supply and monitor those markets. Our efforts to achieve these, when pushed without concern for the aspirations of others, call forth both imitation of our behavior by others and resistance to such behavior by others—in short, bring us into ever-increasing tension with non-Americans and into bloody and lethal conflict with them. A culture of violence ensues, and the wars that mark that culture appear to us as a sort of unavoidable destiny. Granted the premises on which we act, they are.

These wars must be funded. Restrictions of funds for maintaining infrastructure and improving the quality of life at home must pay for crusades abroad. Moreover, the less educated the voting public is, the less likely it is to resist this sorry trade-off. The consequent lack of an educated workforce need not disturb us. As Americans become less educated, they’re less likely to demand high wages; and we can take up any slack in our workforce by employing hardworking, well educated people in other countries to work on our behalf in their homelands—or when desirable, to come work here in the United States, taking on tasks Americans seem either unwilling or unqualified to perform.

As Americans become less productive, and as the wars needed to maintain America as a superpower become more expensive, further “austerities” can be demanded. The people most closely associated with wars and with defense and with the control of precious planetary resources will become richer still—and they will flourish as convincing signs that America is still the land of opportunity. The rest of us will need to work longer hours for less pay. The young among us will be more easily recruitable for military service. Further, we who lead the free world in the imprisonment of our citizens, can progress further on that front too.

When it comes to exercising care for our habitat, if the trends sketched broadly above continue along present lines, environmentalism will come to have generally that character of a passing fad—a do-gooder hobby—that’s been a charge against it from the start. It will be nothing any serious-minded person can give
thought to amid mounting crises and increasing economic austerity. It won’t matter that the signs of environmental distress grow clearer; that very clarity will help solidify the case that protection of the environment is outside our reach.

If you are still with me, let me make belated acknowledgement this dreary scenario is in reality of course subject to an infinite variety of possible modifications and interruptions. We say: “The past is prelude.” But the past need not be prelude for those who understand and appropriate it. What I attempt to suggest here is how closely conjoined the factors of incoherence are. The desire for unmeasured accumulation occurs, for instance, where there’s lack of insight and education. This desire to quicken the pace of accumulation diverts funds from what education there is and dilutes the wisdom in our schools that might check the pace of greed. Unchecked, the pace leads to war; and war both further depresses investment in education and—let me say it again—flourishes best where education is lacking. Accumulation—acquisition of goods—is addictive; and war quickens that addictive and competitive impulse. Accumulation is the opiate of our people. The cost to habitat and to kindness and civility in our relations is pervasive. The coarsening of character can be expected to increase. Street crime can be expected to increase. Violence in schools can be expected to increase. Forest fires can be expected to increase. Only when dysfunction has become so dramatically manifest that there’s a general loss of confidence in traditional economics and politics is there likely to be a ground swell for radical change—and it’s difficult to say what form that will take and what possibilities at that future moment will still be on hand for us to organize around.

Had we opted for a more equitable sharing of wealth in the 1890s, our position in the world today would no doubt have less the character of a superpower than it has. Instead of that, we might be the nation with the most accomplished middle class in human history. By reason of extending purchasing power more generally throughout our society, we could be the best-housed people on the planet (with no foreclosures or homelessness); we might have the finest, most accessible health care found anywhere; we might be the best-educated people the world has seen. A realized fairness that affirms all of us in our diversity might mean we had become the most harmonious people God has yet
to see. We might be renowned as a people who had found the leisure to talk at length with our kids and celebrate in their company the most spectacular skill-sets of sports, and the heights of the fine-arts, producing among ourselves performances and masterpieces to rival ancient Greece and Renaissance Italy. (While parents are wonderfully engaged these days in efforts to provide activities for their children, it’s sad to reflect that the “family dinner table” seems to exist mostly in old sitcoms, and that the “older teenager”—someone seventeen, eighteen, nineteen—who lives under one roof with both parents is now a vanishing breed. The ability to create and maintain enduring lifestyles of cooperation in one’s home seems to be slipping away from us. Regarding our spouse as one more commodity, a great many of us seem interested in trading up. In place of commitments, many of us plan our marriages with careful designs for what should happen when the marriage ends.)

Living peacefully with other nations and enjoying at home the benefits conferred by education and natural abundance, had we chosen differently in 1898, our urgency about personal acquisition might be much tamped down. We might be at once a center for scientific research and a haven where a multitude of ideologies and religions could establish places of inquiry and worship. Tom Paine’s deism notwithstanding, we might be that refuge for truth tellers and searchers after righteousness which he’d hoped we would become. (The dreary secularism of our present day is, I suspect, less interested in freedom of religion than in freedom from its disturbing urge toward transcending secularism.)

Instead of choosing a rich and diverse society, we chose in 1898, consistent with our past, to continue the project begun by the Puritans of the 1600’s. A corrosive underside of this project is that it requires our respect for outsiders to be a provisional matter. We don’t enter relations with foreigners on a plane of mutual respect. We don’t regard them at the start as worthy of our respect. How can we? We know they are not Puritans. Rather we’ll respect them when they “learn to behave.” They must learn to behave as we do and must learn how to facilitate our purposes. As a startling line from Oscar Hammerstein says sarcastically in the middle of South Pacific, they’ve “got to be carefully taught.”

We who revolted against mercantilism turn out to believe in mercantilism after all. We believe it is our destiny to manipulate
and exploit. In this, we receive no endorsement from Adam Smith. Some cite us here for racial prejudice; for it seems we need to become racists in order to move forward our program with a good conscience. More fundamentally though, our malignancy toward others may seem to be derivative; our behavior seems it may be rooted simply in uncritically seeing our way of doing things as the norm. We are the norm. While we claim to separate church and state, our religious past has everything to do with our complacency in this matter.

An additional point that historian William Appleman Williams was at some pains to make (in discussing Cuba, for example) is that this program of ours hasn’t quite the consistency we might think it has. More recent commentary along the same lines has been offered by Howard Zinn, Noam Chomsky, Naomi Klein, Chalmers Johnson, Chris Hedges, and John Perkins. What Williams and these others point out is that even when outsiders have gone the extra mile to accommodate American expectations and demands, there’s no guarantee they’ll then be treated with respect. There seems among us a deep need to assert superiority such that, even when others conform to our sense of how things should be, we still feel impelled to undermine and exploit them. We have a curious habit of turning on those foreign leaders whom we befriend. And so the depths of malignancy remain hard to fathom, and my inclination is to refer them back to that space where strange things begin to happen when religion sunders its bonds with rationality.

And while I’d say our exploitations originated in a spirit of religious nationalism, this no longer guarantees they’re done today on behalf of the nation. As noted, the logic and internal functions of The Game have become so enthralling that its master players, the CEOs of multinational corporations, no longer feel constrained by national loyalties. As Joseph Sottile has pointed out, it would be wrong to call corporate rule in America today a form of fascism; it’s not that patriotic. Many American heads of corporations today no longer promote achievement of an American mission, but seem to have left even that degree of social allegiance behind, relocating their companies’ headquarters abroad and hiding their companies’ profits offshore to avoid American taxes, and relocating factories abroad so as to avoid what there still is here of environmental law and labor law. They entomb
themselves in pursuit of a kind of winning that has little reference to anything—even one might say much reference to yachts and vacation homes and family life: “Who has time for such things?”—outside the Game itself. They are our walking dead.

As I write, there’s much ranting against the Koch brothers. This is not mainly against Bill—who is sometimes in the forefront of those doing the criticizing. The anger is directed more especially against Charles and David. The hostility must surprise the two brothers. For in spite of what I’ve just said about executives forsaking patriotism, few people believe so strongly in the American Dream as these two do. They believe in strengthening the strong rather than the weak. They believe in busting the unions. For what do unions do except shore up the weak at the expense of the strong? They believe the land belongs to those who use it—a principle on which we fought and won the Mexican War and then went on to win the West. They want to diminish or abolish taxes. For what do most taxes do but take wealth from its originators and rightful possessors, the wealthy, and distribute it among losers? They believe a man should be able to do what he wants on his own property and in his own corporation, and no government bureaucrat should be able to tell him differently. Otherwise, do we not make fools of ourselves when we call this the land of the free and the home of the brave? As for pollution, what’s the fuss about? All pollution does is sicken and disable those too poor to live in decent neighborhoods; in fact it serves to alleviate the downward pull that undesirables exercise on the competent and successful. And to what purpose do we fund schools crowded with the offspring of our undesirables? Do we not often say we want to return to the good old days? Don’t we often say as a kind of mantra that we want to restore the American Dream? Who then is more engaged in preserving American tradition and advancing that dream than David and Charles? Think back to the golden days when Jefferson was at Monticello. Those were days when the rich ruled, minorities knew their place, and the only good Indian was a dead one.²

². To maintain, though, some degree of responsibility in my rhetoric here, I have to admit that Charles and David would much rather see a live Indian with oil rights than one of Sheridan’s dead ones.
Two great Enlightenment thinkers struggled specifically with how to avoid the emergence of economic power such as the Koch brothers hold. One was British, the other American. Adam Smith judged the mercantilist hold of the British government over the details of trade to be a source of abuse; and he advocated a replacement of such micromanaging by the free interaction of a vast number of individuals seeking a profit. He did not fully ponder nor foresee how the entry of corporations into this give-and-take could lead to a corporate mercantilism that reconfigured government as a powerful ally in a corporate quest for ever-increasing economic and political control. Smith intended to lead humans away from oligarchy, and didn’t anticipate how his words would be twisted to make it far stronger than ever.

The foremost American economic thinker struggling with how to discipline economic power was Alexander Hamilton, a younger contemporary of Smith, sharing in Scotch ancestry. His plan was to bind the business community and its companies to a strong central government with such enticements that business in America would readily enlist to serve our government as its agent to promote the common good. His goal—the general happiness—was not significantly different from Smith’s. The difference between the two was in the choice of means. Hamilton saw a strong central government as the solution rather than the problem. He has often been called a pessimist. To me it seems he might more rightly be faulted as an optimist; he saw government as a countervailing power that could protect the public from the greed and recklessness of American tendencies toward profit and acquisition. (He did not foresee the extent to which Black Friday could encroach on Thanksgiving.)

Both Smith’s and Hamilton’s programs have foundered on the shoals of corporate power. Corporate power was still a mere faintly visible star on the horizon in the time Smith was collecting data. That corporate power could prove to be a problem was not all that surprising to his American contemporary, born a quarter of a century later. What neither managed to provide against is the now-proven skill of corporations—like agile wrestlers—to shift the center-of-gravity and take control of the government that was supposedly controlling them. In Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission, the Supreme Court simply gives voice to what’s become a transparent fact in America:
the purpose of elections today is to give corporate power the opportunity to install politicians who will see to it that government works for corporations while it engages in only nominal efforts to regulate corporate interests and activity. In this matter, regard for instance the recent careers of Timothy Geithner, Eric Holder, and Ken Salazar, all appointed by Obama. In this new order, people are awarded with federal offices essentially on the basis of an unspoken understanding they will come to Washington and—at their worst—do nothing to impede corporate interests, and—at their best—do much to promote those interests. Democrats, as names above suggest, can often be more useful in this regard than Republicans, with Obama arguably proving to be one of the most useful ever. (If some regard him as a failure, they may be judging from the mistaken premise that he came to Washington to curb war and the excessive power of corporations.)

In view of this, today there’s a growing question whether any form of capitalism can long put up with traditions of democracy, even if democracy was originally a premise for the emergence of capitalism. It seems the two, which fit so well together in our slogans, have proven incompatible outside them. (To state the matter with greater refinement, capitalism has shown dazzling success at manipulating the judgment and aspirations of the people in our democracy, so that traditions and institutions which the people reliably support are often deeply subversive of their well-being. Whether this is to be seen as a triumph over democracy or simply as the predictable exercise of democracy in a Puritan nation is perhaps no more than a choice about nomenclature.)

As the determination to accumulate wealth, and to secure wealth which has been accumulated, continues, a need for ever more sophisticated and effective weaponry grows. As reliance on force and as our actual resort to violence become more routine and unobjectionable, there’s an increasing need for extraordinary resources and a need to recruit more people into the design, manufacture, and use of weaponry—and to recruit diplomats, informed by superior intelligence, who are ever more adroit

3. For a critique of the way *Citizens United* accords to corporations the status of human beings, see Justice Steven’s dissent (in which Justices Ginsberg, Breyer, and Sotomayor concur).
at deterring others from doing the same. We hope thereby to increase our power to intimidate potential rivals. As we succeed, however, the number and dedication of hostile rivals increases too. While Machiavelli shrewdly advised that it’s good if your enemy fears you, Hobbes was perhaps shrewder yet in suggesting what is nearly the opposite—that an enemy who genuinely and sincerely fears you is arguably the most dangerous thing on earth.

No doubt the point above has become déjà vu all over again by now, but what I’m engaging in here is one more effort to make real to our imagination the vicious, intertwining cycles of our times. I’ve belabored already the consequences for education. To foster critical thinking in such an environment as ours today would clearly be a subversive act. If one wishes to get ahead in our current mainstream media, one must demonstrate that one has accommodated to this. (Gary Webb clearly did not accommodate soon enough, and had to go. Robert Scheer acted like we still had a free press, and was fired from the L.A. Times as the price of his mistake. Dan Rather proved insufficiently subordinate and respectful to the powers that be [too much Edward R. Murrow circulating in his brainwaves], and CBS felt the need to cut him loose. Etc.)

Of course, the media need not kill or fire every noncompliant messenger who might spread news of what’s going on; it’s less messy to neutralize such messengers by other means. The benumbing function of the mainstream media is facilitated when the educational establishment has so dumbed down the body politic that it no longer exercises critical attention to realities-at-play. A public subdued by a pervading academic relativism, but plied with a ready supply of here-and-now distractions and gratifications, can find in our two-party system’s circus a comforting sense that there remains a wide scope for free choice in America, and that the people are still in charge.

What is striking is the increase in momentum downward in all of this. The synergy of it all! The war-making tendencies feed off the accumulative tendencies; the accumulative tendencies feed off the war-making tendencies. Both depress education. Amid the negative synergy, injury to habitat is consistently written off as unintended—therefore unimportant—collateral damage. Only an under-educated public would tolerate such recklessness.
(While wounds we inflict on habitat often still aren’t acknowledged, surely they’re felt. Perhaps it’s the rumblings in our house of life that quicken our unease and send us scurrying forth from home before the plum pudding is served. Is it not a uniquely American optimism that hopes Black Friday can save us all?)

Regarding war, as Hobbes warned (and Einstein seconded): if we max out our tendencies on this front, most all will die. Regarding our accumulative tendencies, there’s clearly a readiness, witting or unwitting, on the part of key players in the global economy to push our system to its point-of-failure. It’s as if NASCAR drivers were intent to achieve a climax in their flirtation with mayhem and wouldn’t feel they’d tested the limits of their sport till the whole track and stadium were consumed in fire. As we pleasure ourselves with our toys of nuclear-delivery systems and credit-default swaps, we neglect the natural order that spawned and supports us. That order, in turn, is simmering with maternal exasperation and shows a growing inclination to evict the lot of us as obnoxious children.

Perhaps something of Freud’s late-in-life perspective on the human predicament is proving true. Perhaps our special aesthetic enthrallment with ever-greater acquisition and consumption is becoming too much for us. Perhaps as we push forward our eros, an eros configured and stoked by our Puritan heritage, we have at some subterranean level decided to call a halt to all proceedings. Churchill once remarked on the sweet lure of the commuter train as it rushes towards one who stands waiting on the platform. A simple step forward and all problems are solved. Perhaps the death wish is becoming a shared principle of community life, and we—like lemmings—now worship Thanatos.

With all the factors mentioned—education, financial affairs, foreign policy, ecological relations—falling in a quickening spiral toward incoherence, our summary can perhaps more properly end, not with a final dismal speculation, but with two questions. Can we Americans recognize the anti-climatic and banal finale into which a Puritan heritage—often no longer tied explicitly to God or nation—is leading? And can we, who are children also of the Enlightenment, finally choose against our failed Puritanism and submit instead to the principles of equality and justice we have so often professed?