

Greed Versus the Common Good

Part One: How We Got Here

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The most famous line from John F. Kennedy's Inauguration Speech as President in 1960 was: *"Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."*

Given the overall tenor of 21st-century America, that sentiment would now be considered quaint at best, and, at worst, advice for suckers. The idea that we owe something to our society and bear at least some responsibility for the welfare of our fellow citizens has taken quite a beating since that day in 1960 when Kennedy appealed to the better angels of our nature.

America was founded on the ideal of individual freedom. The meaning of freedom was reiterated and enshrined in the 1941 State of the Union address (11 months before Pearl Harbor and America's entry into World War II) given by President Franklin Roosevelt that specified the "four freedoms" — *freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear.*

Over my lifetime — I'm a Baby Boomer born in 1949 — I've watched with concern, then anxiety, and now despair as the definition of freedom has been perverted in this country, to the point where freedom now means social irresponsibility — permission without any moral or ethical sanction to do whatever the hell one wants, regardless of the consequences to others, to the nation, and to the world. Freedom appears to have become a license to steal, loot, and pillage for personal gain.

What I'm referring to is the rise of greed — the insatiable desire to acquire or possess more than one needs, especially through money, status, or power. FDR's "freedom from want" now seems to be interpreted as freedom to pursue material wealth for oneself at any cost and by any means necessary. Like all the major paradoxes inherent in human nature, desire for personal gain through monetary wealth is naturally and necessarily juxtaposed against a contradictory demand, namely, a sense of at least some personal responsibility to enhance the greater social good through common and shared well-being for all.

I'd guess that a sizable percentage of Americans still feels deep personal responsibility toward the common good. If I had to put a number on that, I'd

think it's probably half the country or even more. Obviously, that's not cut-and-dried. Half the population aren't saints and the other half demons. Yes, there probably are both saints and demons among Americans, but I'm referring to an overall erosion of social responsibility that has seeped into the body politic and affects everyone to a greater or lesser degree.

I'm fairly certain that people haven't changed, at least not in terms of our biochemistry. We are still capable of damn near anything, from profound love to unspeakable cruelty. What has changed is our culture — what it permits, encourages, and rewards. Greed and selfishness are indeed seen as good in America now, and that means that people can act in a greedy and selfish manner, yet sleep perfectly soundly, without the slightest pangs of conscience or personal doubt. Culture tells them that it's OK.

Selfishness is now part of the set of cultural memes that are taken for granted. We may still praise sharing and shame selfishness for kindergarteners, but the degree to which selfishness is seen as a negative later in life has diminished significantly. People whose greed and self-aggrandizement would once have been minimized or held in check by social norms are now free to actively pursue selfish ends with little or no conscience. It's a kind of group-think where permission is granted to do whatever one wants, without concern for the repercussions in the collective.

How did this happen? No single cause can be pinpointed, and many factors coalesced to move society in that direction. One development that changed American culture was increased exposure to wealth and privilege. I've written in many previous essays my firm belief that the great triumph of western psychology over the 20th century was not in therapy, but in mass mind control through advertising. Beginning in the 1950s, America built a consumption-based economy based much more completely on advertising where, if a little was good, more was better. And boy, were we great at it!

Advertisers discovered that they could expand desires of the public (and even create them) just by dangling the carrots of consumerism in front of us. Show regular people in ads who had everything — all the material trappings of the "good life" — and suddenly the public too wanted everything. Advertisers learned very quickly to promote fantasies of wealth that were extremely seductive, especially among a pampered younger generation that. Business grew savvy in dismantling the earlier American culture of limited desires and saving money, replacing that frugality with infinite desires for products, desires that could be fulfilled immediately by spending money, often borrowed money. And that meant that people needed more money to stay ahead of the game.

Other changes occurred at the level of institutions and organizations. During the mid-20th century, large corporations and businesses in America understood that they were responsible not only to shareholders, but also to stakeholders — their

workers, the public, and the common good. Profits mattered, of course, but not as a singular, all-encompassing motive. Those days are long gone. Now corporations are obsessed with increasing their share prices, and LLCs (which far outnumber publicly-held corporations) angle to fill their coffers with every possible dollar. Money has won out over civic responsibility, and giving back to society has been reduced to public relations lip service.

This has been justified by the rise of neoliberalism and “free market ideology,” essentially a renewed brand of social darwinism. Ayn Rand — once the darling of college sophomores (mostly male) — didn’t live long enough to see her ersatz philosophy of selfishness embraced by the culture at large, but that’s what happened. Neoliberal constructs held that “the free market” in commerce was the best arbiter of the common or greater good. This meant that people could embrace greed without any messy pangs of conscience. They weren’t really selfish, they were simply honoring the way the universe was designed to work. In fact, according to neoliberalism, they were actually contributing to the greater good by pursuing their own self-interest, no matter how extreme.

That philosophy was embraced fervently in both business and politics. America exported its manufacturing base, replacing it with the FIRE economy (Finance, Real Estate, and Insurance), and damn near everything in America was gradually commodified, privatized, and financialized for profit. Health care morphed from a non-profit endeavor into a for-profit industry. Education, and especially higher education, stopped being considered an investment in our future and became another arena for mining profits. Not only have the costs of a college degree risen exponentially, but student loan debt has grown into an insanely profitable industry for colleges and banks, eventually growing so large that student loan debt now surpasses even credit card consumer debt.

In Oliver Stone’s 1987 movie *Wall Street*, Michael Douglas gave a career-defining performance as the slick corporate raider and Wall Street takeover artist Gordon Gecko, whose catchphrase was “*Greed is good.*” The movie was intended as a cautionary tale, an object lesson in the erosion of morality, but instead became a virtual icon for the times. The real Wall Street had already become as much a racket as the movie version, with much worse to come. A decade later, audio recordings of Enron employees joking sarcastically about how they were bilking little old ladies in California seemed shocking, but those attitudes have since been normalized by the entire culture of Wall Street finance. The collapse of the big investment banks in 2008 was a testament to rampant greed, and that game continues to this day. Anyone now on Wall Street who bucks the trend of unfettered self-aggrandizement is likely to fail or be fired.

The 21st century has seen the dramatic rise of the Internet, which was developed initially by the military, but which morphed into an amazing open source for information sharing and access. Not for long, though. The Internet was soon co-opted again, becoming the new commercial platform for selling

products and services. That's the Internet we have today, where everything is for sale.

Data-mining companies now track users' every mouse click on a PC or swipe on a smart phone. They know wherever we go online and whatever we buy, and increasingly sophisticated algorithms make sure that advertisers are able to target every potential customer. As a result, we are now captive consumers, bombarded daily with more ads for products. And this isn't just generic marketing — throwing spaghetti against the wall to see what sticks. No, it's personal and custom-tailored, targeted with astonishing precision to hit each of us in our particular desires and vulnerabilities.

In the 1950s and 1960s, news divisions of major media networks were considered a public service. They operated at a loss, with the entertainment divisions of their networks making up the deficit. Now news divisions are entirely profit-based. The factors that influence the reporting of news — which stories are chosen and how they are presented — are no longer based on what the public needs to know, but increasingly on the number of eyeballs they can capture to stoke the rates the networks charge advertisers.

"Infotainment" has replaced hard news. Anchors on 24/7 news channels are now more like game show hosts, relentlessly hawking the product. "*Stay with us after the break,*" they say, "*We have a story coming up you won't want to miss.*" So much for the legacy of Walter Cronkite. The result of all this is that journalism has devolved into a self-serving, corporate-run institution. Drama, conspiracy, and scandal are winners, while sober, thoughtful policy discussions are losers. The problem is not that mainstream news is "fake." But the stories that get reported are chosen to maximize profits, and that's the culture of greed working against the common good.

Many disaffected Americans now get their news primarily from the Internet, via YouTube and other sites, which doesn't imply that everything they watch and read is false, but rather that news has become a virtual crap shoot of opinions and perspectives. No trustworthy or dependable authority exists.

Self-interest reigns supreme in our country. Concern for the common good still exists, but the overriding belief is that it will take care of itself, without sacrifice or inconvenience on our part. Greed works, of course, but not to serve the common good. What greed truly supports is the inverted totalitarianism of the corporate state and the American Empire.

[In Part Two of this commentary, I'll discuss further the biological and social roots of greed, and then offer some emerging developments in civilization that could move us back in the other direction.]