I

The Pursuit of Affluence

As one digs deeper into the national character of the Americans, one sees that they have sought the value of everything in this world only in the answer to this single question: how much money will it bring in?

—Alexis de Tocqueville,
letter to Ernest de Chabrol, June 9, 1831

Let us then take a closer look at the argument of Walter McDougall, that at the center of the American character lies a "penchant for hustling." Indeed, he says, American English contains more than two hundred nouns and verbs referring to a swindle. Whereas Joseph Schumpeter saw the cycles of capitalism as being driven by "creative destruction," McDougall believes that American history is characterized by "creative corruption." We have, he maintains, always been scramblers and speculators, and nearly everyone in early America was concerned not with what might be good for the colonies or the nation but with "What's in it for me?" Americans take it for granted, he writes, that "everyone's got an angle," and ours is a society "devoted by general consensus to fleeing as quickly as possible into the future." A hustler, after all, is always in a hurry; to what end is not clear. We can (and McDougall does) put a positive spin on much of this (it's ambition, it's "energy," etc.); but in the end it contains a sordid reality, a "ubiquitous sleaze" that won't go away. This is a way of life with very high costs.[1]

Self-interest and the pursuit of wealth, however, did not constitute the only ideological strain in the colonial outlook. Ideals of enlightened material restraint and public service were certainly present in the hearts and minds of our Puritan forefathers, and the colonists were attracted to the New World for both idealistic and materialistic reasons. New England Puritanism was opposed to avarice, not to prosperity per se.

In the 1630s, for example, the Reverend John Cotton of Massachusetts emphasized that a Christian was honor-bound to work for the public good—hardly a radical notion at the time. For much of the seventeenth century, in fact, some type of balance did exist between economic pursuit and the communal order, and Puritans saw no necessary conflict between the two.[2]

The origins of this way of thinking go back to classical civilization, and feudal Europe was imbued with it as well. In both, virtue was defined as the ability to put the public good above your own private interest. On the classical view, this is what made republics possible: free men realized their human potential in service to the commonwealth.[3] It was an ideal central to organic, hierarchical society, the tradition of noblesse oblige. Born out of social inequality, it was nevertheless seen by Christian civilization in general as the cornerstone of both human fulfillment and good government alike.

That there is something higher than individual achievement is, of course, a notion central to all traditional societies. Their way of life is characterized by stability rather than progress, and by nonlinear time. It is unhurried. Communication is face-to-face; labor, leisure, religion, family, and community are all woven together, and there is very little aspiration toward "improvement." The public welfare comes first. This includes feudal societies, as already noted; and in postclassical times feudalism was the template upon which a communitarian ethos rested. This ethos, including the classical republican notion of virtue, was handed down to American colonists via their British ancestry. Prior to the Puritan Revolution, for example (1642–49), which marks the beginning of the bourgeois era in political terms, English Puritans believed that individual calling was subordinate to the general welfare and that poverty was not a personal sin but a function of the economic system (and hence the responsibility of the state). Needless to say, this was a very different sort of world than the one that was to follow.[4]

Of course, one of the great ironies of the American Revolution was that the colonists took the ideals of republicanism and used them against the mother country, which they viewed as corrupt, tyrannical, and in violation of its own ideals. But what *was* republicanism, really? Oddly enough, nobody seemed to know—a curious situation that persists down to the present day. Let's look at this a bit more closely.

The one characteristic of republicanism that everyone did seem to agree on was its opposition to inherited political power—in particular, monarchy—in favor of a government that is "by and for the people." The Constitution refers to a republican form of government, but leaves the exact meaning of this up in the air. John Adams famously referred to the word as meaning "anything, everything, or nothing," adding (in 1807), "There is not a more unintelligible word in the English language." The key terms associated with it, such as "virtue," "republic," and "commonweal," were quite slippery; their meanings changed over time.[5]

Virtue was probably the crux of the matter. As already noted, the classical definition meant subordination of private interest to the public good. Historian Gordon Wood sees it as a near-utopian force in the 1770s, an ideology that made the Revolution possible. The "sacrifice of individual interests to the greater good of the whole," he writes, "formed the essence of republicanism and comprehended for Americans the idealistic goal of their Revolution." Conversely, corruption—identified strongly with Great Britain during this time—was not simply venality or fraud; it also was the absence of civic virtue. In the classical tradition, a corrupt man was preoccupied with his own career and oblivious to the public good. And this way of life, framed by the industrial "takeoff" of about 1760, was ubiquitous in England during the latter part of the eighteenth century, and seemingly sanctioned by the writings of John Locke. In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke specifically

linked commercial activity to "uneasiness," which he regarded as its motivating factor. Once motivated, he wrote, men had a never-ending "itch after honour, power, and riches," which then triggered further uneasiness, and so on. If that wasn't bad enough, Locke actually saw this pattern as virtuous. The new notion of virtue not only rejected the classic republican definition; it also turned it on its head. "The moral and virtuous man was no longer defined by his civic activity but by his economic activity," says historian Isaac Kramnick. Anticipating Adam Smith and the concept of the "invisible hand" of the market, the idea here was that you contributed to the public good by means of your own individual economic activity, which was actually aimed at private gain. This outlook came to be known as liberalism.[6]

Meanwhile, what was happening on the other side of the Atlantic? To historians such as Wood, who choose to emphasize the (republican) ideological fervor of the Revolution, Joyce Appleby poses an obvious dilemma:

> If the Revolution was fought in a frenzy over corruption, out of fear of tyranny, and with hopes for redemption through civic virtue, where and when are scholars to find the sources for the aggressive individualism, the optimistic materialism, and the pragmatic interest-group politics that became so salient so early in the life of the new nation?

The point is that these "unvirtuous" qualities were there all along, as William McDougall tells us, and as Louis Hartz (*The Liberal Tradition in America*) argued decades ago. American society, said Hartz, was essentially Lockean: individualistic, ambitious, and protocapitalistic ("liberal"). Put succinctly, materialistic values ruled. Appleby has argued that the 1790s saw the definition of virtue change from the republican conception

to the liberal one, undergoing a complete inversion (following the British pattern) by the time of Jefferson's election in 1800. A corrupt system, for Jefferson, was one not based on merit, and an unvirtuous person was a lazy one. For Thomas Cooper, a British industrialist who eventually settled in America, only those with "insatiable ambition" could be virtuous. In his pamphlet *Political Arithmetic*, Cooper baldly declared that "The consumers form the nation," and Jefferson wasted no time distributing this text as election campaign material.[7]

Hartz's book, published in 1955, was followed two years later by another classic work, *The American Political Tradition*, by Richard Hofstadter. Hofstadter argued that all major American statesmen from Jefferson to Herbert Hoover were committed to an ideology of economic individualism and competitive capitalism; and that the absence of a hereditary aristocracy to reject or disdain these values had rendered the American mentality one-dimensional. America, he said, was a "democracy of cupidity," not one of fraternity or community.

In fact, a good case (à la McDougall) can be made for rapidly shifting sensibilities occurring much earlier than the late eighteenth century. In 1616, for example, Captain John Smith expressed the concern that most of his countrymen were motivated to colonize the New World purely for material gain. "I am not so simple to think," he wrote, "that ever any other motive than wealth will erect there a Commonweal." As historian Eric Foner tells us, "during the whole of the colonial era promotional literature that sought to lure settlers to America publicized the image of the New World as a place of exceptional opportunity for social mobility and the acquisition of property." And as David Shi notes in *The Simple Life*, the number of settlers who fell into this category increased as the years went by. Boston merchants and artisans began to prioritize hard work and individual success over the communal ideal. Popular resentment led to the repeal of wage and price regulations in

1635, and an increased interest in luxury goods was visible by 1637. By midcentury it was reported that throughout the Massachusetts Bay Colony, "men were generally failing in their duty to the community, seeking their own aggrandizement in the rich opportunities afforded by land, commerce, crafts, and speculators, to the detriment of the community." Preachers railed against this, legislation was passed to curb or arrest it, but all of this, observes Shi, "did little to stem the tide of social upheaval and personal ambition." Indeed, he goes on, the "pristine vision of the colony's founders continued to be dashed upon the rock of selfish individualism." Already by 1700, he concludes, medieval communalism had given way to Lockean individualism.[8]

A detailed map of the process for the period 1690 to 1765 in Connecticut has been provided by Richard Bushman in his aptly titled book *From Puritan to Yankee*. Town settlements, he writes, were fairly stable and traditional for most of the seventeenth century. Land grants bound inhabitants to the towns, and the farmer depended on the town to buy his surplus. In other words, the town sold land, roads, pasture, and common fencing, and an owner was thereby part of the community. After 1690, however, this began to change. "Outlivers" began to migrate from town settlements to stake out new ones; their focus was property and independence from community life. They "make the Gains of the World their main Aim, End, and Design," complained a pamphlet of 1739. A speculative spirit thus began to undermine the communal order; transactions were increasingly about cash value, nothing more. By 1765, Lockean theories were very much in vogue: men formed the state in pursuit of naked self-interest. Indeed, that was just about the only glue left to the social order, says Bushman—if naked self-interest can indeed be regarded as any type of social glue.[9]

Many preachers by then also had changed their tune, again anticipating the ideas of Adam Smith. Self-interest, they argued,

would work to promote the common good, and should be made the foundation of civil society. By the 1760s it became popular to insist that government existed to serve private interests. Throughout New England hard work, more specifically the gains thereby derived, became its own ethic, devoid of any spiritual content. The pursuit of wealth, according to Bushman, was so avid in the eighteenth century that it managed to rupture traditional bonds and boundaries. In the process, transcendent values were left behind in the dust.[10]

How idealistic was the American Revolution, really? In many ways, it only served to push things further in a liberal direction. "Time is Money," Benjamin Franklin had written in 1748; by 1776, colonial society had become a great deal speedier. The American iron industry, by that date, was producing a seventh of the world's total output of crude iron. The care and leisure of the craft tradition began to have less appeal, as machines were now built for rapid use rather than durability. The new was what counted now, and mass-produced goods, especially guns, clocks, and textiles, soon would be in great demand. Another popular phrase of the time was "the pursuit of happiness," by which was really meant the pursuit of property; in particular, of land. The Revolution shined a light on the possibility of upward mobility, individual financial success. It served as a catalyst for a new dynamism—a quantum leap in the level of hustling, one might say. At about this time Samuel Adams observed that the "Rage for Profit and Commerce" had become the American norm. George Washington himself, during the war years, referred to the "insatiable thirst for riches" that had seized American society, adding that he had never seen such a "dearth of public spirit and want of virtue." By 1820 the country had more banks (307, to be exact) and insurance companies than any other country in the world, and by the 1830s, more than 2,000 banks nationwide—statistics that give us some idea of how dramatically the nation was transforming itself.[11]

Republicanism or liberalism, then? Perhaps the real question is, Rhetoric or reality? It has been said of the French, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, that they voted with their hearts on the left and their wallets on the right; and something similar might be said of Americans from about 1770 to 1840. How to classify Thomas Paine, for example, an obvious proponent of the republican ideal, and yet a man keen on the attractions of laissez-faire economics? In *The Elusive Republic*, Drew McCoy describes a "hybrid republican vision," quite visible by the 1770s, in which the moral dimensions of classical republicanism were adapted to modern commercial ends. Thus the maxims of Poor Richard, as given to us by Benjamin Franklin, were an obvious effort to blend the classical notion of virtue with its opposite, the new "virtue" of commerce and self-aggrandizement. As historian Lance Banning points out, while it is true that liberalism and republicanism are logically derived from irreconcilable philosophies, in practice many colonists subscribed to both.[12]

Three things need to be kept in mind in trying to sort this question out. The first is that for the most part, the Founding Fathers were quite unusual men, very different from the average citizen. They constituted a galaxy of talent, as brilliant and idealistic a group as has ever existed. There is no doubt that they were serious about their republican convictions, at least initially. Second—as the cases of Paine and Franklin make clear, and which was common enough among the gentry—they often had conflicts of interest regarding their commitment to that ideology (although they themselves may not have seen it that way). And third, the idealism of the Revolution was a brief moment in time. Yet even during the Revolution, as we have seen, the liberal tradition was the basic American outlook—as Hartz and Hofstadter convincingly argued. Americans may have occasionally or frequently used the language of republicanism, says historian John Diggins in *The Lost Soul of American Politics*, but it was never a doctrine on which they based their real lives.[13]

In a word, once the dust settled on the Revolution, it began to look as though the Founding Fathers had had one type of society in mind, and the general citizenry another. The latter was interested in profit, competition, and new consumer goods, whereas the former believed that these things were important, but by themselves could not constitute the stuff of commonwealth. John Adams and James Madison even began to wonder if monarchy was all that bad, for at least it organized a nation around a higher purpose than getting and spending, as Wordsworth would put it just a few years later. Adams claimed that the United States had proven to be "more Avaricious than any other Nation that ever existed." "Bedollared," Benjamin Rush called the place, adding that without a civilizing influence, this not-so-enlightened citizenry would start "devouring each other like beasts of prey." (One wonders what these men, if they were alive today, would think of Goldman Sachs and AIG.) Forrest McDonald, in *Novus Ordo Seclorum*, says of the passing of this generation: "After that, the *Populares* took over, and a race of pygmies came to infest the public councils."[14]

As for conflicts of interest: these were philosophical as well as material. Diggins argues that republicanism was in large part language and symbol for the Founding Fathers, and that while Madison, Hamilton, and Adams did believe in the classical ideal, they nevertheless

> created a government with no need for men committed to civic humanism. The constitution they created represented the eclipse of political and moral authority and the legitimation of pluralism, individualism, and materialism, the very forces the humanist tradition identified with corruption and loss of virtue. The Founders created a weak government whose center had no compelling moral ballast.

"Virtue" had been useful as a protest against (British) corruption, but it could not serve as a source of authority for a population largely engaged in a commercial free-for-all. The problem, says Diggins, was that "the [classical] idea of virtue had no determinative content, no transcendent quality that stood over and against the objective world of power and interests, no moral vision that inspired the individual to identify with values higher than his own interests." It couldn't compel anything, when all was said and done.[15]

Thus republicanism never really took hold in America, despite its persistent allure. It survived as rhetoric through the Jackson presidency, began to fade thereafter, and was pretty much killed off by the Civil War. Historian Robert Shalhope writes:

> There simply is no doubt that the majority of Americans did, indeed, behave in a materialistic, individualistic manner. At the same time, though, it is equally clear that most of those same Americans continued to perceive themselves and their society in republican terms. That is, republicanism—a familiar ideology permeating all walks of life—shaped Americans' minds; it offered them a self-image that provided meaning and identity to their lives. Thus, while rapidly transforming their society in an open, competitive, modern direction, Americans idealized communal harmony and virtuous social order. In this sense, then, republicanism formalized or ritualized a mode of thought that ran counter to the flow of history; it idealized the traditional values of a world rapidly fading, rather than the market conditions and liberal capitalistic mentality swiftly emerging in the late eighteenth century.

When John Kennedy posed the republican vs. liberal choice in his inaugural address ("Ask not what your country can do for

you . . ."), Americans may have felt a vague kind of idealistic stirring; but it is also very likely that the vast majority heard it as a kind of poetry. The Peace Corps notwithstanding, it is unlikely that more than a handful acted on the call, gave up the life of getting and spending, and dedicated themselves to public service.[16]

As many observers of the American scene have pointed out over the centuries, there is a tragic side to all of this. To take just the Jacksonian period (1830s): In *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville repeatedly describes the anxious, driven quality of American life. It is a worried life, he writes, in which people pursue a success that forever eludes them. Their goal is an undefined material success, to be provided by the largest returns in the shortest amount of time. These are unquiet souls, he adds; their way of life is unrelenting. James Fenimore Cooper portrayed this in his novels, seeing the country drifting toward "a world without moral foundations." Author Francis Grund, who immigrated to the United States in 1826, wrote that "Business is the very soul of an American: he pursues it, not as a means of procuring for himself and his family the necessary comforts of life, but as the fountain of all human felicity." One English traveler similarly noted that he had never "overheard Americans conversing without the word DOLLAR being pronounced," and added that it didn't matter whether the conversation took place "in the street, on the road, or in the field, at the theatre, the coffee-house or at home." One of his compatriots, Charles Dickens, also saw us as a nation of grubs, endlessly chasing the "almighty dollar" (a phrase actually coined by Washington Irving a few years earlier), while journalist Thomas Low Nichols, in *Forty Years of American Life*, observed that "In no country are the faces of the people furrowed with harder lines of care. . . . Everyone is tugging, trying, scheming to advance." The German-American jurist Francis (Franz) Lieber commented on the "diseased anxiety to be equal to the wealthiest," which resulted in an "appalling frequency of alienation of mind." "There is little of what is called *fun* in

America," he added, and the American publisher Freeman Hunt agreed: "Youth robbed of its sunshine." And this is only a partial list, and from a relatively short period. Emerson and Thoreau and Melville and Poe and later Henry Adams all were to write brilliantly about a society that had no sacred center, no soul, and the toll that that was taking on the nation; but this was just "literature," after all—nothing really changed as a result.[17]

Facilitating the pursuit of economic expansion, writes William Appleman Williams (*The Contours of American History*), was the factor of geographic expansion—the frontier. It began domestically, as Manifest Destiny (which included swallowing up half of Mexico in 1848); by the end of the nineteenth century it had turned into imperialism. Adams and Madison were strong advocates of it; so were workers, farmers, and members of the middle class. The idea behind it, says Williams, was that it would act as a safety valve, reconciling the scramble for private property with the ideal of a Christian commonwealth. Empire, he wrote, "was the only way to honor [both] avarice and morality." But ultimately, depending on your point of view, it failed, because unlimited expansion proved to be a poor substitute for actually having a commonwealth, or even having a vision of one. Basically it amounted to more hustling, a "gate of escape" (in the words of Frederick Jackson Turner) that enabled Americans to put off the question of the public good indefinitely. Problems at home? Just pull up stakes and go West. It thus weakened the sense of community, for it made it difficult to impose any restraints on private interests that undercut the general welfare. Tocqueville wrote, "Focused on the single goal of making his fortune, the settler ends up creating a completely individual existence. . . . He holds that man comes into the world only to become well-off and to enjoy the conveniences of life." And, of course, once the frontier was officially declared closed in 1890, there was always the technological frontier, the next "new thing" for Americans to chase.

Williams points out that the dependence of the United States on this mechanism became so fierce that anything or anybody that stood in the way of expansion—Native Americans, the Confederacy, the Soviet Union, and finally the Third World—was regarded as unalloyed evil, beyond redemption. We hardly wound up in Iraq by accident.[18]

But this is to get ahead of ourselves. If the early to mid-nineteenth century saw an avid pursuit of affluence, it also witnessed a spiritual rejection of this way of life as well, as the writings of Emerson and others would indicate. Yet this rejection, which put great emphasis on economic self-restraint, often had a particularly American twist to it: it conceived of the non-hustling life in purely individual terms. It was *self*-reliance, not the commonweal, that the romantics and Transcendentalists were interested in—the quality of the individual soul. As one might expect, this narrow type of focus undercut the possibility of having any widespread impact, and it left the movement open to co-optation, to being pressed into the service of the dominant culture. Leaving the period of the Civil War aside for the moment (I shall address that at length in chapter 4), this dynamic of spiritual resistance and eventual assimilation was a familiar one during the Progressive Era and the Gilded Age, as Jackson Lears documents in painstaking detail. His conclusions are two: first, that the various expressions of "antimodernism" were quite genuine, being rooted in a religious longing for meaning that the hustling life was not able to provide; and second, that the ultimately aesthetic and individualistic nature of these attempts at changing the culture actually wound up facilitating the transition from entrepreneurial to corporate capitalism. Given the legacy of these two aspects of this period in American history, it might be worth our while to sketch these events in greater detail.[19]

The first thing that stands out for 1890–1930 is that these years witnessed the most accelerated commercialization of American

life up to that point. Not that the previous era had been slow. During 1800–50 the GNP increased sevenfold, and by 1860 the basic outlines of the modern American economy were already visible: mass consumption, mass production, and capital-intensive agriculture. By the mid-1880s the United States had the world's largest economy—25 percent of the whole. In the few short decades following that, corporations, banks, department stores, chain stores, mail-order houses, hotels, and amusement parks literally swept across the American landscape. Advertising, brokering, and mass production reconfigured the country in a dramatic way so that it became, in the words of William Leach in *Land of Desire*, "the world's most powerful culture of consumption." This was the age of Du Pont, U.S. Steel, Standard Oil, and of Marshall Field and Macy's. Between 1897 and 1903 more than three hundred corporate consolidations took place in the United States, and the greed and ruthlessness of the robber barons are legendary. Speaking of John D. Rockefeller Sr., Lears writes: "Anyone who blocked his implacable will to profit was overwhelmed through secrecy, deception, and the brutal exercise of market power." Thorstein Veblen coined the phrase "conspicuous consumption" in 1899, and as he pointed out, it was hardly restricted to the leisure class. Status-seeking was in full swing long before Vance Packard ever arrived on the scene; upward mobility was the theme of the hour. A race for success alternated with periodic nervous breakdowns, and by 1907 Henry James, in *The American Scene*, was telling his readers that the so-called liberty of the laissez-faire economy was a sham. It produced an inability to face solitude, he wrote, and was unable to create a society based on a sense of community. What it did provide, he concluded, was the "freedom to grow up blighted." In the context of the contemporary financial hurricane, however, not too many Americans were listening. Solitude? Community? What are *they*? Andrew Carnegie's dicta that we must always

be changing and improving, and that life was a race to be won by the swiftest, were much more attuned to the spirit of the age, and they were accepted by labor leaders, socialists, and farmers alike.[20]

But the period saw numerous critiques of this Darwinian struggle for existence, in addition to those of Henry James and Thorstein Veblen. Mental illness was so rife during this era that George Miller Beard, a New York neurologist, was moved to document it in *American Nervousness* (1880). America, he asserted, was the most nervous country in the world because it was at the cutting edge of modernization. Other doctors and writers joined Beard in attesting to epidemics of depression and anxiety that were engulfing the nation, pointing to factors such as time pressure and work compulsion. By the early twentieth century, nervous exhaustion was a popular topic of conversation in the daily newspapers.[21]

"The truth," said Woodrow Wilson in 1912, "is [that] we are all caught in a great economic system which is heartless." Ten years later, Sinclair Lewis attacked that system in *Babbitt*, but of course to little effect. William James decried the American worship of success, stating, "That—with the squalid cash interpretation put on the word success—is our national disease." A host of writers and intellectuals recoiled against the culture of unrelenting commerce and argued for a life of greater depth (or simply depth)—Charles Eliot Norton, Henry Adams, and Henry Demarest Lloyd, to name but a few—but it was like swimming upstream in molasses. In one form or another, their argument was that you could not have any sort of commonwealth in a situation where human survival was based on competitive success. But obviously, three hundred years of hustling were not going to be reversed by a few books, and in any case most Americans were more likely to be reading tales of self-made millionaires than something like Lloyd's *Wealth Versus Commonwealth* or Lewis' *Babbitt*. Frazzled or not, the typical

American wanted not to smirk at George Babbitt but to *be* him, and to swim in an ocean of consumer goods.[22]

As Lears shows, the antimodernist pitch for authenticity and simplicity was easily commodified, made to serve the dominant culture—much as what happened to the counterculture of the sixties a few decades later. His best example is probably that of the Arts and Crafts movement, originally inspired by the writings of John Ruskin and William Morris in England. Both of these men saw the Middle Ages as a period of craft integrity, in contrast to the tawdry products of subsequent mass production. Medieval artisanry, they held, was not alienated labor, not a job one simply endured for the sake of a paycheck, or so that one could relax on Sunday after six days of mind-numbing work. Morris extolled the guild tradition; factories, on his view, were degrading to labor and to human life. He was a socialist, but his major point was that work had to be enjoyable, above all.[23]

The writings of Ruskin and Morris had a great impact on certain circles in the United States, notably the educated and the well-off. The figure of the premodern artisan seemed to shine with authentic selfhood. His or her work was real, physical, and rooted in the community—a model of wholeness. The crafts movement in the United States emphasized the simple life, and leaders such as Charles Eliot Norton (a professor at Harvard and a friend of Ruskin's) believed that obsession with private gain had led to the destruction of community in the post–Civil War era. The crafts revival sponsored manual training in public schools, and founded Arts and Crafts societies in various cities. The Boston society published a magazine, *Handicraft*, which lasted for many years. Crafts colonies sprang up in Pennsylvania and Massachusetts; Gustav Stickley opened a United Crafts furniture workshop in Syracuse in 1898, and published the *Craftsman* between 1901 and 1916. The movement was quite broad and attracted a large following.

In terms of social change, however, the Arts and Crafts movement proved to be a failure. For one thing, the leaders, not wanting to alienate potential recruits, emphasized the moral and aesthetic qualities of handicrafts and dropped all references to William Morris' socialism or hatred of the factory system in their writings. The focus was on good taste, not on the downside of the affluent life. In fact, handicrafts clients tended to be rich; Veblen saw the whole thing as chic. As for the working class, its interest was in a higher hourly wage, not in good taste and the supposed pleasures of labor. In addition, as Lears indicates, American crafts leaders were ultimately not interested in community renewal, but in individual wholeness; not in social justice, but in feeling good. They also believed in the inevitability of technological "progress," which couldn't have been more opposite to the ideas of Ruskin and Morris, and which basically undercut their own ideology. As a result, they "transformed what might have been an alternative to alienated labor into a revivifying hobby for the affluent."

Yet it wasn't a total waste. The American crafts movement did, according to Lears, contain a genuine protest against the commercial life. It was part of a tradition that stretched backward to antebellum utopians and forward to the agrarian communities of the New Deal and the 1960s. The movement also had an influence on intellectuals who would subsequently emphasize the importance of small-scale decentralized institutions for genuine democracy—Paul Goodman, Lewis Mumford, and E. F. Schumacher, to name the most illustrious of the group. Indeed, if we take the antimodernist tradition as a whole, says Lears, the central, powerful insight that it hammered home, despite the unwillingness of most Americans to hear the message, is that when all is said and done, "the modern secular utopia was . . . a fraud."

The pattern of great expectations and subsequent deflation, in any case, got repeated during the years of the Great

Depression. As in the past, this period didn't lack for critics of the hustling life. Uppermost in their minds was the question of national purpose, especially in the wake of the Roaring Twenties and a decade of I-own-therefore-I-am psychology. What they hoped for was that necessity might become a virtue; that Americans would embrace the simple life—"permanently curtailed consumption," in the words of historian Daniel Horowitz—because they had no other choice. Typical of this chastened outlook was Robert Lynd, co-author, with his wife, Helen, of the classic study *Middletown* (1929). Writing in *Parents' Magazine* in 1934, Lynd predicted that the lives of the next generation would "probably be [defined] less in terms of whopping accumulations of material things and more in terms of more inconspicuous, hard-won personal satisfactions." This new generation, he went on, would be "relieved from a part of our irrelevant strain of endless competitive acquisition for its own sake" and from the pressure of "trying to excel and get ahead." Of course, it was precisely this generation that spent its eyeballs out as soon as World War II ended and that took hustling to new and unprecedented heights.[24]

The most formidable critic of the acquisitive life during this time and the decades following was Lewis Mumford, one of the greatest writers and thinkers America has ever produced. His active career spans nearly sixty years, from the 1920s to the early eighties. Since the major focus of his criticism was technology and misguided notions of "progress," I shall leave part of my discussion of his ideas for chapter 3. But so committed was Mumford to the notion that hustling was deeply destructive of America, and of human life in general, that we need to take just a moment to look at his general role as the nation's conscience, as some writers have labeled him.

In the 1920s, the work that most influenced Mumford was Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*. Spengler believed that every civilization was defined by an essential Idea, in the

Platonic sense, which expressed itself in every aspect of its culture. In addition, each civilization went through the phases of birth, efflorescence, and decay, during which time there was a shift from the organic and the creative to the mechanical and the bureaucratic. The "Faustian" culture of northern Europe, according to Spengler, had become embodied in world cities, which displaced older, regionally based centers that were rooted in traditional ways of life. This northern urban culture was characterized by bigness and rationality; in its final phase, it was dominated by the soldier, the engineer, and the businessman (sound familiar?). All that is left to it now, he concluded, was fossilization and death.[25]

Mumford repeated this schema in his book *The Golden Day* (1926), but with a twist: he was optimistic. He envisioned a post-Faustian world, one based on a revival of regional and organic life. Regionalism, Mumford argued, could shorten the period of "fossilization" and move the West toward renewal and rebirth. With this in mind, Mumford helped found the Regional Planning Association of America in New York in 1923. Its explicit goal was to promote regional culture. Central to this was the "garden city" concept, which emphasized limited-scale development in the form of communities that would combine home and work in one locale. These were not suburbs in any sense of the word, then; no commuting would be involved. They would be surrounded by a "greenbelt" of farmland and forests, and be owned by the community in general. The goal, in Mumford's mind, was to institutionalize the good life, which for him had nothing to do with consumer acquisition and economic competition. By the good life, said Mumford, "One means the birth and nurture of children, the preservation of human health and well-being, the culture of the human personality, and the perfection of the natural and civic environment as the theater of all of these activities." Life in these communities, adds David Shi, was to be "a richly integrated and cooperative

social experience in which people, regardless of their economic circumstances, would enjoy a sense of belonging with each other, with nature, and with their work."

For the most part, the garden city concept never got off the ground. For one thing, once the Depression struck there was no money available for projects of this nature. But prior to the crash of 1929, one such community was built, namely Sunnyside Gardens in Queens, designed for workers and the lower middle class. The houses are small, and many of them front inward, toward a common green area. Public courtyards and service roads also serve to give it a village atmosphere, down to the present time. It was a real break with the model of commercial real estate development; a humane, planned community. Today, it is privately owned and quite upscale, but it retains a very different ambience from that of your typical corporate-constructed "community."[26]

Mumford believed that a real change in America could only come about through a radical change in values. The problem with Marxism, he argued, was that it wasn't all that revolutionary. The country needed to slow down the pace of industrialization and "turn society from its feverish preoccupation with money-making inventions, goods, profits, salesmanship . . . to the deliberate promotion of the more human functions of life." Not a Red Republic, wrote Mumford, but a Green one. His vision, that of a morally disciplined, nonacquisitive life, is about as un-American as one could imagine.[27]

If Mumford was heir to Spengler, he also was in the lineage of Thoreau, and he pushed for this radical revisioning of mainstream American ideology during the years of the Depression and beyond. In *Technics and Civilization* (1934), notes Daniel Horowitz, Mumford "envisioned the replacement of an age overcommitted to technology, capitalism, materialism, and growth by the emergence of a humane, life-affirming economy based on the values of regionalism, community, and restraint."

One has to wonder what country Mumford thought he was living in; his writing is occasionally so out of touch with American reality that he sometimes sounds deranged (if wonderfully so). Thus in an article he did for the *New Republic* in 1939, he claimed that America was beginning to shift from an emphasis on individual consumer demands to a commitment to public well-being. Public services and facilities, he told his readers, would eventually displace capitalist ideology. The following year, he declared that democracy could only be reinvigorated by substituting spiritual pleasures for material ones, and that the true birthright of the American people was not "a life of material abundance" but one of "comradeship, art and love." (Clearly, the man had not spent a lot of time studying American history.) We must have an "economy of sacrifice," he went on, not an "economy of comfort." Mumford encouraged his fellow citizens to turn away from the American Dream, that of a "deceptive orgy of economic expansion." We must, he wrote, become creative individuals, committed to "human co-operation and communion." It's not entirely clear why he didn't also call for a reversal of the earth's gravitational field.[28]

Mumford did, however, strike a semirealistic note in *The Condition of Man* (1944), which was partly influenced by his study of the late Roman Empire. It didn't help Rome, he observed, that its rulers during this period refused to believe that the empire was falling apart. It was precisely the unwillingness of the Roman people to look at their way of life, one founded on "pillage and pilfer," and to revamp it, that led to the fall of Rome.[29] But Mumford apparently believed that sounding the alarm would wake his countrymen up from the American Dream, and, of course, nothing of the sort happened. As with the Romans, the last thing Americans have been interested in is serious introspection and national redirection. Mumford began to understand this as the years wore on. His writing became increasingly pessimistic, and with good reason: literally no one

was paying any attention to his prescriptions for health. The doctor counseled diet and exercise, but the couch potato chose to glut himself on pie and cake. Mumford was able to stop Robert Moses, New York City's controversial urban planner, from destroying Greenwich Village in the sixties, but beyond that, his calls for an end to hustling and for a redefinition of the idea of "progress" (see chapter 3) went completely unheeded. He never really grasped the addictive nature of material acquisition and technological innovation, it seems to me; he didn't understand that these things were druglike substitutes for a commonwealth, a truly human way of life, that Americans had largely rejected from very early on. Today his writings come off as both inspiring and wistful: they are finally about a different country, not the United States.

(Just by way of comparison, a contemporary of Mumford's who *was* writing about and for the United States was Dale Carnegie, who probably outsold Mumford at a ratio of ten thousand to one, if not more. *How to Win Friends and Influence People* is possibly the ultimate guide to hustling, a manual for "how to make more money by false geniality," as one historian characterized it. Indeed, it was an instant best seller since its first appearance in 1936, and it remains popular today. The peak achievement described in the book, says Barbara Ehrenreich, "is to learn how to fake sincerity" so as to get ahead in your career.[30])

Where was the New Deal during all of this? It started off well enough, I suppose: in his first inaugural, FDR said that the true mission of the United States was to embody social values that were "more noble than mere monetary profit." To put this into effect, Roosevelt hoped to create a nationwide back-to-the-land movement, which he believed would encourage a simpler life. Thus the Civilian Conservation Corps, launched in 1933, had half a million young Americans enrolled by 1935, planting trees and carrying out soil reclamation projects. The Tennessee

Valley Authority, also started in 1933, built dams and undertook programs for soil conservation and reforestation. Arthur Morgan, the TVA's first director, believed that work of this nature would generate a community ethic capable of displacing laissez-faire capitalism, and a "spirit of cooperation" that would overshadow the "aberration" of rugged individualism. Under his tutelage, for example, the TVA organized handicrafts industries and other cooperatives.[31]

Very little of this withstood the test of time. Rugged individualism is no "aberration" in the United States; rather, the "spirit of cooperation" is. Morgan, in short, was as out of touch with the mainstream American ethos as Lewis Mumford was. His own project for a garden city, Norris, Tennessee, which was designed for TVA employees, was to exemplify the ideology of public good over private interest. But it didn't take long for the residents of Norris to reject this notion, to label it "socialism," and thus to recoil from it. In addition, other New Dealers didn't share Morgan's vision; they saw the TVA strictly in economic terms, not as a vehicle for the ethical redirection of American life. FDR finally fired Morgan in 1938.

The same fate befell the homestead program, also designed to create a new community life that would eschew competitive materialism. About a hundred New Deal communities were set up along these lines, but the residents, says David Shi, "found it impossible to shed their ingrained individualism." They were not the least bit interest in the communal ideal. Instead, they viewed the homestead communities as little more than housing projects; they spent very little time in the community centers, for example. Roosevelt himself, as the years went by, seemed to think that happiness would come not through a revaluation of values, but through increased industrial production and more jobs. Thus his administration made rural regions profitable for massive corporate investment, and it was through such regional development that corporate America expanded dramatically after

the Depression. New Deal thinking increasingly saw consumption as central to the nation's economy.[32] By moving in this direction, Roosevelt was only being realistic: no amount of legislation, or uplifting speeches, were going to remake the American psyche, as it were. For it was the American people who killed the New Deal; that seems clear enough. Social experiments of a cooperative nature could make no headway in a "society" of individual atoms, each of which had been raised to believe that "getting mine" was what life was all about. With the end of World War II, the American population, notes Shi, "exploded in a frenzy of indiscriminate buying." So much for the alternative tradition.

And yet, although the alternative tradition never manages to make a substantive difference for business as usual in the United States, it nevertheless seems to have an odd habit of refusing to go away, and of enlisting the best minds of each generation in its support. If the period 1945–65 witnessed an orgy of suburbanization and consumer spending, it also produced a number of devastating critiques of the acquisitive way of life (in addition to that of Lewis Mumford, who was still hard at it): Erich Fromm, C. Wright Mills, Vance Packard, John Kenneth Galbraith, Paul Goodman, David Riesman—America hardly lacked for sophisticated "alternative" talent during these years. All of these writers wanted Americans to have loftier goals, to have real meaning in their lives beyond the latest toaster or electric lawn mower. All of them wrote best-selling books; Packard's work was literally off the charts. Americans read, nodded in agreement, and then went out and bought a second car and a truckload of appliances.[33]

As a cultural phenomenon, Vance Packard remains a fascinating study. His three books of 1957–60 alone, which skewered the emptiness and destructiveness of American consumerism, sold five million copies. As a writer doing a kind of pop sociology, Packard's influence was enormous; and despite the fact

that professional sociologists dismissed the work as simplistic or sloppy, the truth is that he got the questions right: he intuitively understood that the core of America's problem was the hustling life. Subsequent social critics, such as Oscar Lewis or Michael Harrington, argued that the real issue was not suburban affluence but urban poverty, and of course they had a point.[34] But I believe that what Packard was pointing to (and Galbraith as well, in *The Affluent Society*), namely the basic worldview of the American people, is finally the crucial factor here. After all, capitalism by its very nature divides people into winners and losers. If a society is going to be governed by the pursuit of affluence as its highest value rather than the public good ("wealth is the chief end of man," said Calvin Coolidge), a large gap between rich and poor will be the inevitable result. Urban poverty, in other words, is not a separate issue from suburban wealth; they are a matched set, so to speak. And once we grasp how pervasive that worldview or value system is, it becomes obvious that the only difference between rich and poor is that the former have lots of money and the latter do not. Capitalism is above all a culture, a mind-set, as Joyce Appleby points out in her recent book *The Relentless Revolution*. With rare exceptions, as the labor leader Samuel Gompers once made perfectly clear, the poor in America have never wanted a fundamentally different type of society; they just wanted a larger cut of the pie. But a poor hustler is still a hustler; the social vision (if so it can be called) remains the same. As indicated earlier, Americans do not find George Babbitt pathetic, or see Bill Gates as an entrepreneurial vampire; far from it. Rather, they wish to *be* these people, and believe that what America fundamentally is and should be about is the encouragement and opportunity to do so. The hustling life is finally a type of cancer at the very center of the nation's soul, and it is this that Packard rightly denounced.

Packard took all this on in his "affluence trilogy"—*The Hidden Persuaders*, *The Status Seekers*, and *The Waste Makers*. He

showed how advertisers manipulated Americans into chasing ever-higher levels of consumption by means of "motivational research," which played on their fears of sexual inadequacy and low social status. These techniques, he said, had turned his fellow citizens "into voracious, wasteful, compulsive consumers." It also turned adults into emotionally needy children, and was fundamentally disrespectful of human beings, in his view. But neither did he regard these consumers as innocent victims; after all, he said, "we can choose not to be persuaded." For Packard, it came down to what type of society we wanted to have and what type of people we wanted to be. The "morality of a society that was built on happiness derived primarily from consumer goods," remarks Daniel Horowitz, was for Packard no morality at all. Packard argued that there was no real difference between the Roman masses going to the circuses and the American masses going to shopping malls or department stores. Instead of "the all-pervading smog of commercialism," wrote Packard, we could have a "mature citizenry" interested in "self-respect, serenity, and individual fulfillment." Americans, he went on, must come "to see that cherished values and integrity of the soul have more to do with a well-spent life than self-indulgence." As in the case of Mumford, we have to wonder what planet he was living on; but clearly, his heart was in the right place.[35]

Packard's solution to our national disease was thus voluntaristic. A "modern Isaiah crying out in the wilderness of tail fins" (as one minister in Pittsburgh called him), he appealed to individual effort, and possibly to the activity of nonprofit organizations, to precipitate a major shift in our fundamental sensibilities and way of life. He sought to reverse the American formula of private opulence/public poverty, and attacked the idea that an expanding GDP (or GNP, as it was then called) was the mark of national success. He was a bit ahead of his time in calling for limits on population growth, an end to planned obsolescence, and plans for recycling used materials. But he

conceded that all of this might not work; that there might be no alternative, in the United States, to a life of wasteful consumption. Packard was, in other words, a realist as well as a prophet.

And speaking of reality, what was the result of this lifelong jeremiad? One reviewer notes that although readers were enthusiastic about his work, they "seemed astoundingly resistant to its critical message." They actually wrote in to ask Packard how they might use motivational psychology to get ahead! Fans of *The Status Seekers* were extremely eager to learn how they might improve their social status. Apparently the book provided them with useful material in this regard, as it identified the most lucrative occupations and the cars/houses/colleges that were the best markers of elevated social status. Packard's writings also led to a demand for more motivational research by corporations and manufacturers, and advertisements for goods that Packard personally despised subsequently played on themes he introduced in his work. I very much doubt that the irony of these sorts of things was lost on him.

We get some idea, then, of the fate of all this. Horowitz notes that Packard's vision was that of "a better world, one characterized by honest work, simple living, and community cohesion. . . . Packard stood for a virtuous life based on civic responsibility. . . . He remained skeptical about the benefits of material progress, which he believed threatened to undermine a moral economy." This is, of course, quite admirable, but the responses of companies seeking to hone their advertising techniques, and of readers in search of "insider info" on how to better move up the social ladder, do tend to put a damper on the ultimate effectiveness of this modern Isaiah. And if we look at where the United States eventually wound up in the wake of all this—at ever more grotesque levels of conspicuous consumption, and an ever greater commitment to Reaganomics and the pursuit of wealth—it is hard to see Packard as anything more than a brilliant comet that momentarily streaked across the night

sky and then was gone. In the context of what America is, this may well be the best we can expect from the alternative tradition in general. And yet the members of this generation, including Mumford, Galbraith, Rachel Carson, Paul Goodman, and the beatniks of the fifties, did set the stage for an unusual period in American history, roughly that of 1965–80, when the alternative tradition did enlist relatively large numbers of people in its cause. It culminated in the "spiritual malaise" speech of President Carter in 1979, which I regard as the alternative tradition's last stand. After that, hustling and Reaganism took over in earnest, with a force that even the economic crash of 2008 has not been able to derail.[36] Over and over again, the message is clear: what we were in the late sixteenth century, we continue to be today. The alternative tradition, republicanism included, is finally nothing more than a gadfly in American history, or a kind of parenthesis, if you will.

The sixties, of course, were about a lot of things, most notably the opposition to the war in Vietnam. For our purposes—the critique of affluence and the rejection of the hustling life—this period did have great significance, at least for a time, in terms of ideology, symbolism, and values. If it, along with the seventies, can be called a parenthesis within the dominant tradition, it was nevertheless a dramatic one. Works such as *Life Against Death* (1959), by Norman O. Brown, *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), by Herbert Marcuse, and *The Pursuit of Loneliness* (1970), by Philip Slater, were milestones in psychology, political theory, and sociology. They shined a harsh and unsparing light on the destructive nature of the techno-commercial society, and the enormous human costs it extracts. Best-selling works such as *The Greening of America* (1970), by Charles Reich, and *The Making of a Counter Culture* (1969), by Theodore Roszak, said similar things, but in a much more popular (and often misguided and superficial) way. *The Graduate*, released in 1967, was memorable for its depiction of

the vapidity of affluence, and included the famous word of advice to Dustin Hoffman's character—"plastics"—that was as much a reference to the older generation's way of life as it was to new career and investment opportunities. The rejection of that way of life was everywhere in evidence, as huge numbers of young people had sex, took drugs, dropped out of "the system," formed or joined communes, read Eastern philosophy, and wound up at Woodstock. Shortly after that, they had a good laugh at Janis Joplin's ridicule of the middle-class prayer for a Mercedes-Benz. From the viewpoint of the dominant culture, it was as though American society had gone completely loco; but since the alternative tradition, now unexpectedly "overground," regarded the dominant culture as the insane one, it was largely a matter of which end of the telescope one was looking through.

The movement, as it turned out, had several huge drawbacks. For one thing, it wasn't a movement. It was generally unfocused, a scattershot kind of protest aimed at "the establishment." Its politics were largely that of an alternate lifestyle, emphasizing things such as music and dress, and heavily based on the idea of a change in consciousness as the crucial factor. Protesters tended to come from middle-class and well-off families, and their focus was (in typical American style) primarily on individual rather than social change, especially as the sixties mutated into the seventies. As has been said many times, the whole thing was easily co-opted by Madison Avenue, as the alternative lifestyle became chic and lent itself to a vast array of trendy products and advertising. The superficiality and self-centeredness of this era, ironically enough, eventually transitioned into Thatcherism and Reaganism; and the "me" decade of the seventies saw a plethora of aggressive, hustling-type books such as the Ayn Randish texts of Robert J. Ringer (*Winning Through Intimidation*, *Looking Out for Number One*, and *Restoring the American Dream*). As someone famously observed, the "summer

of love" lasted about two months. Woodstock and Wall Street were never really that far apart anyway.[37]

That being said, I confess I am not as cynical about this era as are many other writers and historians, although the channeling of countercultural energy into big business was real enough. But it seems to me that the sixties served as an important bridge between the social analysis mounted by thinkers such as Galbraith and Packard in the fifties, and the subsequent concern about the environment. It also sent shock waves around the world: no matter how superficial much of it was, it provided a clear demonstration that potentially millions of people did not want mindless nine-to-five jobs, bigger tail fins on their cars, and a life of unending competition and acquisition. The period was not all frivolity and co-optation, in short; it was also characterized by a major search for meaning, an asking of fundamental philosophical questions, publicly debated: What is a human being? What are we doing on this earth? What can we, and should we, hope for? What is the good society? The decade generated some very admirable leaders, such as Mario Savio and Tom Hayden, who stuck to their ideals after the bubble burst, as well as activists who later took up careers in pollution and poverty law, for example. Not everyone went the way of Jerry Rubin.

By and large it did, of course, morph into the "me" decade, as Tom Wolfe called it; but as noted, the 1970s also saw the rise of a serious environmental movement that was clearly connected to a critique of affluence and conspicuous consumption. The connection between automobiles and pollution was the most obvious example, but it went far beyond this, for it was becoming obvious that the earth did not have the carrying capacity to tolerate a population increase of several billion more people (*The Population Bomb*, by Paul Ehrlich in 1968, was a runaway best seller), nor the endlessly expanding economic growth model epitomized by the United States. The first Earth

Day celebration took place on April 22, 1970; the remainder of the decade saw the publication of *The Closing Circle* (1971), by Barry Commoner; *The Limits to Growth* (1972), by the Club of Rome; *Small Is Beautiful* (1973), by E. F. Schumacher; *Turtle Island* (1975), by Gary Snyder (which won him a Pulitzer, and which contained his famous 1969 ecological essay "Four Changes"); Laurance Rockefeller's 1976 *Reader's Digest* article "The Case for the Simple Life-Style"; and James Lovelock's *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (1979), which argued that the earth was a single living organism. Environmental activists and readers were additionally inundated by the work of William Ophuls, Herman Daly, Amory Lovins, and Wendell Berry, as well as publications such as *The Whole Earth Catalog* and *Mother Earth News*.[38]

There were many components to the environmental message, but at the top of the list was the notion that the earth was running out of resources and that only the practice of a simpler lifestyle and chastened consumption could save us and it. "Plain living and high thinking," along with "voluntary simplicity," were definitely de rigueur in those days, along with the idea of a steady-state economy. Growth for growth's sake was regarded as gross; organic gardening, recycling, "appropriate (or soft) technology," and "human scale" were the new buzzwords and activities. Much of this was fueled (no pun intended) by the Arab oil embargo of 1973–74, which also led to bicycle riding and car pooling. Various polls taken during the decade revealed that a substantial fraction of the American population was attracted to simple living and to a lifestyle of self-restraint. Indeed, the value of an economic crunch for austerity and asceticism (now seen as positive) was a popular theme during this era. *New York Times* editor James Reston thought shortages a good thing in this regard, leading him to encourage his fellow Americans "to cut down, slow up, stay at home, run around the block, eat vegetable soup, call up old friends and read a book

once in a while." And meditate, of course: Buddhism was very much in vogue during this time as well.

Considering how virtually all of this blew away like dandelion spores in the wind in the wake of Reagan's inauguration and the reassertion of the dominant tradition, it is interesting to peer back into that decade and recapture the sense of permanence with which many of its participants viewed all these changes. In 1979, for example, the historian Ray Allen Billington wrote that we had reached the limits of the acquisitive lifestyle and that future historians would regard the seventies as the turning point in American civilization. Another historian, Richard Brown, argued that modernization was not the same thing as improvement and that the direction in which it pointed—illustrated by *1984* and *Brave New World*—was hardly better than the traditional societies of premodern peoples (shades of Claude Lévi-Strauss). The epilogue to Brown's book on the subject (published in 1976) made it clear that he believed the new change in outlook was here to stay. In this, Brown was merely echoing a belief held by many at the time, that the American way of life was finally at an end and that the world of "small is beautiful" and "limits to growth" was, in effect, America's new social and economic regime. Confidence in modernization is waning, he wrote; once it was a bright hope, now a source of anxiety. Americans have come to see it as destructive of their personal lives, their society, and the natural environment. Progress and the rational economic order have been called into question; we now realize that we have been on the wrong path. We no longer believe in unlimited economic expansion, he concluded, for we finally recognize that "dignity and human scale are essential if life is to have any meaning." Lewis Mumford couldn't have said it better.[39]

It was in this cultural climate—or so he thought—that Jimmy Carter was led to deliver his "spiritual malaise" speech of July 15, 1979. It was quite remarkable: to my knowledge, no

other president ever gave an address that rejected the hustling tradition in extended detail, and in no uncertain terms. But as I argue in *Dark Ages America*, Carter was an anomaly: given the history of America down to 1973, he never should have been nominated, let alone elected. The period of 1974–76, however, was an unusual one, and it enabled him to land in the White House almost by accident. There was the defeat in Vietnam, a venture that had the taint, by the early seventies, of appearing shabby and immoral. The year 1974 saw the disgraceful resignation of a Republican president who came off looking like a hood, a vulgar mafioso; and then came the Senate hearings of 1975–76 (the Church Committee) on the dirty tricks of the CIA, including its role in engineering the violent overthrow of the democratically elected president of Chile. The Arab oil embargo had pointedly demonstrated our dependence on foreign energy and hence the vulnerability of our economy, which in turn threw the ideology of unlimited economic expansion into question. That the country had seriously gone astray was a rather glaring fact of American political life. We not only looked weak, we actually looked squalid, even in our own eyes. And then along comes a dark horse, a relative political unknown, who says all of this up front and who insists (using Christian rhetoric) that the nation needed to do some serious soul-searching, put its *own* house in order, and stop blaming everybody else (notably the Soviet Union) for all its problems. Selling weapons systems to developing countries and propping up dictators and torture regimes, said Mr. Carter, are not what America is supposed to be about. Decency, dignity, human rights, self-determination—*these* are the things with which America should concern itself. For a brief moment in time, lasting about two years or so into his presidency, the message struck a resonant chord.[40]

In his inaugural address, Mr. Carter threw down the gauntlet: more was not necessarily better; and this, along with the

closely related question of energy consumption, became a major theme of his administration. Like one of his heroes, E. F. Schumacher, whom he invited to the White House in 1977, the new president deliberately cultivated a "plain style." After his inauguration, he walked from the Capitol to the White House. He sold off the presidential yacht, eliminated other official trappings of wealth, and subsequently installed solar panels (removed by Ronald Reagan in 1986) on top of the presidential residence. The message he was sending to the American people was clear; and given the temper of the times, and the apparently widespread appetite for a whole new way of life, it seemed like the right moment to try to turn the nation around.[41]

Americans, however, have a very short memory, and this did not work in Jimmy's favor. By 1979, they had managed to recover from the shame of Watergate and Vietnam, and wanted to return to a more muscular and military foreign policy. Increasingly, Carter was branded a "liberal" (in the American political sense), as if that were somehow a badge of shame. There was, by this time, a strong desire to get back to business as usual in every sphere of American life, and it was in this context that he addressed the nation on what he felt was ailing it. Whether the president understood it or not, by 1979 he was definitely swimming against the tide. Given his conviction that the root of the problem was a major error in value systems, it was hard to avoid coming off like an Old Testament prophet. Mr. Carter never actually used the world "malaise" in his speech, but that was what he was talking about. "In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities, and our faith in God," he told his listeners,

> too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns. But we've discovered that owning things and consuming

> things does not satisfy our longing for meaning. We've learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose.

We can, he went on, choose "the path that leads to fragmentation and self-interest. Down that road lies a mistaken idea of freedom, the right to grasp for ourselves some advantage over others." The other path, the one we should be on, is that of "common purpose and the restoration of American values"—republicanism, in a word.[42]

Where was the president coming from? One thing that stands out is his roots in the American South. The speech sounded like something the South might have said to the North, or about the North (and in fact did say, in so many words) on the eve of the Civil War. As will be seen in chapter 4, the South saw itself as the traditional representative of American values, of virtue in the classical sense of the term, and regarded the North as hustling, greedy, and acquisitive. Like a white southerner, Carter emphasized integrity and simplicity. But in addition, he had recently taken three prominent intellectuals as his advisers—Daniel Bell, Christopher Lasch, and Robert Bellah—all of whom had written with concern and even anger about the hedonism and self-indulgence of the American way of life. Bell, in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976), castigated "the temptation of private enrichment at the expense of the public weal," and declared that America was essentially nihilistic in its orientation. Bellah, in *The Broken Covenant* (1975), wrote that "this society is a cruel and bitter one" and that there was little motive in the United States to do anything beyond the self. Hence, he predicted, what lay ahead for the nation was not revival but decline. Lasch, in his best-selling *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), argued that the ethic of consumption and competitive individualism had led to a war of all against all

and was finishing us off as a civilization. He subsequently described our way of life in incandescent phrases that captured the attitude of the Southern Agrarians of the 1930s (see chapter 4) perfectly: "rootless existence," "craving for novelty and contempt for the past," "'other-directed' round of life," etc.[43]

There were many problems with the speech, which was, of course, picked apart and debated in the press. But the major one was that it was out of touch with what the American people actually wanted. All that environmental activism to the contrary, most Americans wanted to go on consuming; they had no interest in changing their lives in any substantial way, and that was what the president was asking them to do. (This was not the "poetry" of JFK's inaugural address, in other words.) When Carter called for the "restoration of American values" as opposed to "the right to grasp for ourselves some advantage over others," he failed to understand that this latter mode of existence *was* the American value system, historically speaking, and not some recent kind of "deviant" behavior. Did Carter seriously think that America could pick up the republican thread of our Revolutionary days? What restoration did he possibly have in mind? Thoreau? Mumford? The antebellum South (minus the slavery)? As the saying goes, give me a break. It should not surprise us to learn that in the wake of that speech, some members of Congress took to the floor to question his mental health. And this probably wasn't rhetorical: in the United States, private interest *is* "virtue," and genuine dedication to the commonweal is, if not actually regarded as demented, then viewed as softheaded in the extreme. What Carter was attempting was nothing less than a reversal of nearly four hundred years of American history. It wasn't well received.[44]

The following year, during the presidential campaign, Ronald Reagan charged that Carter "mistook the malaise among his own advisers, and in the Washington liberal establishment in

general, for a malady afflicting the nation as a whole." He had a point. As one critic has remarked, "best sellers do not constitute a political movement any more than they reveal much in depth about public opinion." If this was true of *The Status Seekers*, it was equally true of *The Whole Earth Catalog* and *Small Is Beautiful*. Much of the environmental movement had been froth; the ideas had not penetrated any deeper than the intellectual level, or that of cocktail-party chatter, and few of the changes that took place during the seventies were really widespread or enduring. What the movement amounted to, at least up to that point, was a kind of "ascetic chic." The notion of a purported shift in values from consumerism to the simple life had been very much overstated. The American public, it turned out, was not interested in some sermon or jeremiad about the limits to growth or the joys of solar power. Rather, they wanted to spend their eyeballs out once again, and it is no surprise that Mr. Reagan, who told them that they could and should do it, won by a landslide (489 to 49 electoral votes). No use blaming the Iran hostage crisis; given the dominant tradition in American history, Reagan's victory over Carter was like shooting fish in a barrel.[45]

After his inauguration, Mr. Carter walked down Pennsylvania Avenue. As for Mr. Reagan: bring on the limos, Jeeves; that man wasn't walking anywhere. The Reagan inauguration ran up a tab of $11 million. Nancy Reagan's wardrobe cost $25,000, and she subsequently bought a new set of china for the White House to the tune of $200,000. The lineup of private jets, jeweled boots, and fur coats led one columnist for the *Washington Post* to comment that "the absolutely appalling consumerism" made her sick. But it didn't make the American public sick, who had had it with Carter's cardigan sweaters and his boots from L. L. Bean, and who enjoyed participating in the new opulence—at least vicariously. This was what, in its mind, America was all about. A few months later, *U.S. News*

& World Report declared that a "flaunt-it-if-you-have-it lifestyle is rippling in concentric circles across the land." The president declared "America is back," by which he seemed to be saying, shop till you drop.[46]

Posing as the Marlboro Man (sans cigarettes) in his election campaign ads, Mr. Reagan knew what he was doing. America stood for the endless frontier, the world without limits, and as Reagan pursued that in government—tripling the national debt beyond the $3 trillion mark in very short order—so did he encourage the same among American citizens. He was, writes Andrew Bacevich, "the modern prophet of profligacy—the politician who gave moral sanction to the empire of consumption." His version of the American Dream included the belief that "credit has no limits, and the bills will never come due." The truth is that Reagan was a fiscal conservative in name only; he said one thing and did another. He didn't follow his own ideology, didn't once turn in a balanced budget to Congress. For Reagan "understood what made Americans tick: they wanted self-gratification, not self-denial." Personal savings, which had averaged 8 to 10 percent of disposable income during the post–World War II era, was almost down to zero by 1985.[47]

In retrospect, it is clear that Carter's "narrative" of American life—basically, that of the alternative tradition—could not possibly compete with Reagan's. Carter was calling for inner richness and outward simplicity; Reagan, for outward richness and inner vacuity, a combination that resonated extremely well with the American people. Indeed, the major appeal of the tried-and-true Reagan formula was that outward richness would serve as compensation for that vacuity; not much soul-searching was required. In so many ways, Reagan set the template for the next thirty years and beyond. The only Democratic president during that period was effectively a Republican, terminating the welfare system and subscribing to economic growth as the answer to America's ills. The dot-com crash of 2000 was

but a hiccup in this trajectory; even the massive crash of 2008 made little difference for Reaganomics, or for the Reaganesque worldview. There was a bit of talk about resurrecting Keynes, but President Obama made sure to appoint neoliberal economic advisers who held the very ideology that led to the crash, and to bail out the banks and the wealthy, much as Reagan did with the savings and loan failures of the eighties. And by January 2010, Americans were back to spending, as the month saw a $5 billion increase in consumer credit. The lavishness and huge indebtedness of American life during the Reagan years were certainly repeated and amplified in the decades following, and there is every reason to believe that short of a complete and total breakdown of the system, they will endure, for they represent the deepest aspirations of the American people—their true religion. This was the sad fact of American history, and American life, that Mr. Carter never understood (or perhaps didn't want to face). To this day, in survey after survey, Americans consistently rank Ronald Reagan high on their list of presidents whom they admire. He offered them a fairy tale, and given the choice, Americans will always opt for the Disney version.[48]

But despite what most Americans believe, the Disney version is not real life; and a commitment to fantasy can only result in disaster. We saw this in 2008. Yet even then, Americans have a remarkable ability, as Garrison Keillor once pointed out, "to look reality right in the eye and deny it." The result is what any intelligent person might expect. Unfortunately for America, it doesn't seem to have too many such people among its population. Conventional wisdom to the contrary, Wall Street and Main Street are not that far apart.