



CHAPTER II

FAITH IN HARD WORK AND ITS PRACTICAL EFFECTS

I ~~A~~ Second American Characteristic, The Work Ethic

Puritanism, which dominated the intellectual life of colonial New England for nearly a century after its founding, has been a major force in shaping the development of the American mind. Not only did it influence the New England colonics, leaving a complex heritage of customs and ideas, but it also advanced with those pioneers who left New England to blaze a frontier to the West. Thus it became incorporated into the mainstream of American thought.... without an understanding of Puritanism there can be no understanding of America.¹

Certain American characteristics can be traced to the ideas of the Puritans. One outstanding example is the Puritan religious belief in hard work. From the Puritans came

... the dynamic idea of the dignity of labor and the virtue of diligent application to one's job.... In colonial America this 'gospel of work' was a part of the fundamental social doctrine of the Puritans, Quakers, and other groups which brought with them the ideology of the rising

¹Gerald N.Grob and Robert N.Beck (ed.), American Ideas: Source Readings in the Intellectual History of the United States (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), p. 2.

commercial classes of England.... The significant factor was the chronic shortage of labor, which provided opportunities for men to rise from a lower to a higher economic and social status.... The prudential virtues emphasized by various Protestant sects, with their repeated injunctions against waste, idleness, extravagance, and ostentatious vanities, were conducive to material prosperity and to the development of a capitalistic frame of reference. The glorification of these virtues induced men to apply themselves to their earthly occupations with diligence, sobriety, and thrift. Above all, the individual was admonished not to waste God's precious time lest idle hands find work for the devil. Careful observance of this doctrine made success almost inevitable in a country like America. If a young man followed the injunctions to work hard, to avoid extravagance, and to use his savings thriftily, he would prosper. Economic success would accrue to those of pious diligence as a blessing of God. These Puritan virtues fostered a capitalistic atmosphere for material prosperity in a land where opportunity was great, labor scarce, land plentiful and the rewards ample.²

To the Puritan God was the center of everything. One would not dare to break God's commandments without the risk of severe punishment from god himself or his "ministers" in New England pulpits and state houses.

²Maurico Boyd and Donald Worcester, American Civilization - An Introduction to the Social Sciences (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1968), p.87.

He was sure that the universe centered not on man, but on God, and that all man's energies must be devoted to God's service. God absolutely controlled all creation. Man was his creature, inherently sinful, and could be freed from evil only by the arbitrary gift of divine grace.³

Because

... man was by nature corrupt to the core... {and had} inherited a seed of sin from which nothing he could do would save him {and because} his mind, said Calvin, 'is so utterly alienated from the righteousness of God that he cannot conceive, desire, or design anything but what is wicked, distorted, foul, impure, and iniquitous...' {his} only hope of escape from eternal condemnation lay in the extension to him of God's grace.⁴

So according to the Puritans,

Religion should permeate every phase of living. Man belonged to God alone: his only purpose in life was to enhance God's glory and do God's will, and every variety of human activity,

³Robert E.Spiller, Williard Thorp, Thomas H.Johnson, Henry Seidel Candy and Richard M.Ludwig (ed.), Literary History of the United States: History (3rd ed. rev.; New York: The Macmillan Company, 1969), p.55.

⁴Roger Burlingame, The American Conscience (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960), p.25. The quotation inside is from John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion (Westminster:Refl. Association Press, 1960), Chapter 5, Sec. 19.

every sort of human conduct, presumably unpleasing to God, must be discouraged if not suppressed.⁵

All the quotations above demonstrate man's position in the Puritans' mind. As a result of their religious beliefs, the Puritans took everything in life seriously. Opposed to drinking, entertainment and social activities, they tried to purify themselves and their religion:

The Puritans belonged to the English middle class. Most of them were free tillers of the soil, settled in small communities.... In their religion they were members of the English state church whose doctrines they tried to 'purify' and apply to all phases of private and public life.... and it left a permanent imprint upon the cultural life of New England...⁶



One way of purifying themselves was to concentrate on working hard: "Notably from John Calvin did Protestantism derive the ethical justification of work and thrift."⁷ The American dream had its root in "... the Protestant, or Puritan, Ethic with its pursuit of individual salvation

⁵Samuel Eliot Morison, The Intellectual Life of Colonial New England (New York: Cornell University Press, 1960), p.8.

⁶Werkmeister, op. cit., p.9.

⁷Hacker and Zahler, op. cit., p.5.

through hard work, thrift, competitive struggle."⁸

Bradford Smith confirmed this: "There was the Puritan belief in the virtue of work, both for its own sake and because the rewards it brought were regarded as signs of God's love."⁹ In her article, "Competition and Individualism," Dr. Margaret Mead suggested that

... the essence of puritanism... was a belief that there was a relationship here on earth between good behavior and good deserts. God prospered the good man and withdrew from the evil man, and success could be taken as an immediate outward and visible sign that one had so lived as to find favor in the sight of God.¹⁰



The Puritan praised hard work as "a virtue," and considered idleness as "a vice." Moreover, according to Henry Steele Commager,

Puritanism lingered on, not so much as a search for individual salvation or as a celebration of the virtues of thrift and

⁸Maurice Boyd and Donald Worcester (ed.), Contemporary America: Issues and Problems (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1969), p.7.

⁹Smith, op. cit., p.78.

¹⁰Kingsley Davis, Harry C. Bredemeier and Marion J. Levy, Modern American Society - Readings in the Problems of Order and Change (New York: Rinehart and Company, Inc., 1951), p.40.

industry but as a recognition of the dignity of the individual and of his duty to achieve both spiritual and material prosperity.¹¹

Paul K. Conkin agreed:

God commanded work. [Man's] tasks had to be done.... Man was a servant in God's vineyard, responsible for the full and joyful use of his talents. Every required and socially significant task was a dignifying vocation, an important calling. Each man had to find his appropriate task in order to achieve manliness, dignity, and community respect.¹²

So it is no mistake to say that, "... an emphasis upon success and hard work had long been a part of the Protestant [particularly the Puritan] ethic."¹³ As Vernon Louis Parrington said, "From the Puritan conception of the stewardship of talents came a new ethic of work that provided a sanction for middle-class exploitation..."¹⁴

¹¹Commager, op. cit., p.422, 410.

¹²Paul K. Conkin, Puritans and Pragmatists (New York, Toronto: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1968), p.28.

¹³Seymour Martin Lipset, The First New Nation (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1963), p.101.

¹⁴Vernon Louis Parrington, Main Currents in American Thought - An Interpretation of American Literature from the Beginnings to 1920 (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1958), p.7.

Not only did the Puritans believe in working hard, but also it was inevitable for them when they first settled in the frontier environment: "Life for [the frontiersmen] was a compound of struggle against nature, contacts with... animals, and personal relationships with ... family and neighbours."¹⁵ "They quickly learned that they would fend off the dangers from the enemies of the forest and from among themselves only if they would labor together."¹⁶ Thus they were completely engaged in a struggle to subdue the forest with their skill and their willingness to work hard in order to survive in the New World:

... the Pilgrim Fathers, who had settled at Plymouth in 1620, were representatives of the lower strata of English society-peasants, artisans, and laborers - and did not control great wealth. Hard work and frugal living alone enabled them to survive the hardships of their pioneering venture.¹⁷

Those who came from countries with advanced political and economic institutions brought with them faith in those institutions and experience in making them work.¹⁸

¹⁵Ralph Henry Gabriel, The Course of American Democratic Thought - An Intellectual History Since 1815 (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1956), p.6.

¹⁶Handlin, The Americans, p.28.

¹⁷Werkmeister, loc. cit.

¹⁸Kennedy, op. cit., p.8.

Bradford Smith asserts that

... the average American respects work and is quite willing to work with his own hands...

There was the richness of opportunity in a land waiting to be settled. There was the lack of a settled society with fixed ranks and classes, so that a man was certain to rise through achievement. There was the determination of the immigrant to gain in the new world what had been denied to him in the old...¹⁹

According to Michel-Guillaume,

There is room for everybody in America: has he any particular talent, or industry? he exerts it in order to procure a livelihood, and it succeeds. Is he a merchant? the avenues of trade are infinite... he will be employed.... Instead of starving, he will be fed; instead of being idle, he will have employment, and these are riches enough for such men as come over here.²⁰

During the early and middle eighteenth century a steadily growing influx of dispossessed and the disinherited from various European countries provided new contacts and brought new and, at times, restless elements into the

¹⁹Smith, op. cit., p.87,78.

²⁰Henry Steele Commager, America in Perspective: The United States Through Foreign Eyes (New York; Mentor Books, 1948), pp. 28-29.

colonies.... From England, Scotland, Ireland, and Germany they came - Catholics, and Protestants of different denominations - in search of new opportunities for economic betterment. For the most part they were peasants and tradesmen, artisans and unskilled laborers... although occasionally a professional man was among them. Most of them were desperately poor; but all were willing to work hard and untiringly and to suffer the uncountable hardships which were inevitable in the 'buffer settlements of civilization.'²¹

With plenty of natural resources as well as the original religious belief in hard work, the settlers, specifically the Puritans, were encouraged to work very hard, and this influenced later generations. A belief in hard work became one basic characteristic of the American people. The immigrants became hard workers because "the prospect of abounding opportunity that characterized the America of the latter decades of the eighteenth century stimulated the trend toward making the idea of progress a national principle."²² The more they succeeded, the more they came. America gave them wealth and achievement in return for their hard work. As Nelson Kloose said, "In America hard work in exploiting the

²¹Werkmeister, op. cit., p.24.

²²Nye, op. cit., p.3.

resources of the land brought rich rewards and respect for those who worked and accumulated wealth; America made a religion of work."²³

II Its Practical Effects

In the first part of this chapter, it was mentioned that the Americans (especially the Puritans) successfully created a religion of hard work from the time they first landed. The discipline of working hard came from Puritan doctrine and was a part of the "Puritan heritage." Undoubtedly, it brought them wealth and achievement. Thus it played an influential part in American civilization. The Americans believed that man must work in order to make a living and that, "Work, which is a fundamental necessity of [their] existence, is not an end in itself. [They] work in order to improve human life."²⁴

The Puritan, who recognized the inherent defectiveness of human nature, never hesitated to accept a picture of an economic society constructed out of a balanced conflict of self-interests. They believed, also, of course ...

²³Nelson Kloze, A Concise Study Guide to the American Frontier (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), p.14.

²⁴Maritain, op. cit., p. 158.

that each man had the responsibility so to use his talents as to make himself a successful and good life in this existence as well as in the next, placing great emphasis on the virtues of hard work and application to one's worldly task.²⁵

As has been said before, the Puritans devoted themselves to the things they thought God might be pleased with, and hard work in relation to progress was one.

Belief in progress ran through the early years of the United States as a consistent theme.²⁶

As a result of the Puritans' belief, as well as of their practical hard work in exploiting natural resources successfully, the American people became conscious of progress.

This belief in progress derives from the conviction that man, through his natural faculties and merits, can always achieve conditions of existence more satisfying to him, and can always subdue nature and himself to serve his ends.²⁷

In return for their hard work, they achieved what they planned. H.S. Commager gave another view of progress since the immigration:

²⁵Nye, op. cit., p.110.

²⁶Ibid., p.7.

²⁷Ibid., p.1.

Progress was not to (the American), a philosophical idea but a commonplace of experience: he saw it daily in the transformation of wilderness into farm land, in the growth of villages into cities, in the steady rise of community and nation to wealth and power The American had always met hardship with fortitude, partly because he was sure that fortitude, together with industry, shrewdness, and a little luck, was bound to be rewarded in the end.²⁸



Russel B. Nye explained that American people accepted the idea of progress in two different ways. On one hand, the idea was believed to be purposive, active, and on the other hand, passive and dependent on natural law. The one was based on the assumption that if the obstacles to man's achievement were removed, and the flaws in his institutions corrected, progress would be swift. The other assumed "... progress to be inevitable, slowed perhaps by man's follies and the defects of his institutions, but so deeply imbedded in the nature of things that it will continue to operate regardless of man's efforts."²⁹

Inevitably, a man who believed in progress became a practical man. When the immigrants first came to the new land, their first occupation was to be farmers; for America provided them with natural resources and opportunity.

²⁸Commager, The American Mind, pp. 5-6.

²⁹Nye, op. cit., pp. 1-2.

They came with the notion to possess the land and to make progress: "The freedom to own... was the magnet that drew the majority of them across oceans."³⁰ Success was their ultimate goal. They struggled very hard and put a high value on the success they acquired through their own practical efforts. Not only the hardships they met but also the compulsion to be self-made persons required the settlers to be practical. As John G. Cawelti defined the phrase, "self-made man" traditionally "... placed its major emphasis on the individual's getting ahead." The individual might start from "a humble origin" but he could obtain an elevated position or acquire a large amount of wealth. There were

No exclusive privileges of birth,
no entailment of estates, no civil
or political disqualifications.
[Chance was equally given to them;
whether or not they succeeded
depended on their]... talents,
prudence, personal excitions,
[and practical hard work.]³¹

So "The cult of the self-made man had its American beginnings in the colonies, where success was measured in terms of material prosperity."³²

³⁰Smith, op. cit., p.82.

³¹John G. Cawelti, Apostles of the Self-Made Man (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 5, 39.

³²Boyd and Worcester, American Civilization, loc. cit.

At the time when the Americans developed their belief in progress, individual competition was simultaneously practised. Dr. Margaret Mead, in her article, "Competition and Individualism," defined the word "individualism" in relation to competition:

... the individual should be successful in competition with other individuals under quite rigid rules of the game (including the ethical judgement that everyone should start with 'equal opportunity'), and in certain materialistic, or secular, directions. Not only... does the individual have a right to compete for 'success'; he must compete. If he succeeds, he is virtuous; if he is virtuous, he will succeed. If he is not virtuous, he will not succeed; if he fails, the fault is his own.³³

According to Andrew Carnegie, 'A man's first duty ... is to make a competence and be independent.... It is his duty to contribute to the general good of the community in which he lives.'³⁴

So, individually, the immigrants came with competitive spirits. The struggle of the frontiersman against hardships, the need for advancement and betterment, the economic system of free enterprise roused the individual to be competitive, as Russel B. Nye noted:

³³Davis, Bredemeier and Levy, op. cit., p.43.

³⁴Nye, op. cit., p.229.

Competitiveness has long been a key principle in the American credo, implanted there by the facts of history. The battle of settler with frontier began it; the desire for betterment that brought forty million immigrants into the country over a century and a half encouraged it; an open, fluid society which consistently offered rewards to those who competed for them, placed a premium on it.³⁵

Naturally, the free enterprise ideology affected the individual competitive spirits. As free land existed, the opportunity to compete for it existed as well. So with their original belief in competition, as well as with the geographical background, the settlers were tempted to practise their competitive skills:

... the cornerstone of the free enterprise ideology is competition which... is 'truly the life of trade and the breeding ground of progress.' Competition functions as a regulator and reducer of prices, as an incentive to improved production efficiency, as a guarantee that we shall get what we want, and as a protector of the freedom of opportunity. The competitive principle... has long served as an important emotional symbol in the American cultural heritage... the American tradition involves a strong commitment to the concept of 'may the better man win.'³⁶

³⁵Ibid., p.245.

³⁶Ibid., p.107.

Since the American people had strong convictions about the idea of progress and since they developed their individual competitive spirits, ultimately materialism came to American civilization. Actually, the conditions in America promoted materialistic traits.

Material tasks were essential on the frontier; the pioneer must clear his land, plant his crops, build his home, and enlarge his farm as a duty to society as well as to his own family. These tasks consumed all of his time and energy for years on end, leaving little opportunity for cultural pursuits. {This made the frontiersman materialistic in his own philosophy.} 'There is,' wrote one pioneer, 'so much work to be done, and so few people to do it, that the idea of labor is apt to absorb the entire area of the mind.' This attitude has persisted, and Americans today are more materialistic, more inclined to venerate the Almighty Dollar, and more neglectful of cultural goals, than their European neighbors.³⁷

As Turner recognized, however, "... the frontiersman... was an idealist as well as materialist. He admired material objects not only as symbols of advancing civilization but as the substance of his hopes for a better future."³⁸

³⁷Woodward, op. cit., p.83.

³⁸Fine and Brown, loc. cit.