
des tells us about companies and industries, and how they gained or lost advantage. And much of what he has to say is fascinating and insightful.

Yet in the end I felt as cheated by Landes as I did by *The Commanding Heights*. Surely readers of a book that promises in its very title to explain why some nations are rich while others are poor deserve more than Landes' concluding paragraph: "The one lesson that emerges is the need to keep trying. No miracles. No perfection. No millenium. No apocalypse. We must cultivate a skeptical faith, avoid dogma, listen and watch well, try to clarify and define ends, the better to choose means." For this we needed to read 500 pages?

In the end, what both books left me with was a sense of the inadequacy of narrative history as a guide to action. No matter how many interesting stories you may tell about the past, they are just that — stories — unless they are brought to bear on some hypothesis about how the world works. History is useful because it is a laboratory, in which time and chance have performed experiments that can confirm

or reject our ideas. But you can't learn anything from those experiments unless you are actually willing to state your ideas clearly in the first place.

So I ask myself: What do Yergin and Stanislaw and Landes actually believe? And the answer, which seems to me to be damning, is that I am not sure. I think Yergin and Stanislaw approve of the move to the market, but I have had to pick that up by osmosis — or as a colleague of mine puts it, the economic moral is conveyed by innuendo, rather than stated in any way that could be refuted. And for all the erudition in Landes' book, I am at a loss to tell you what economic policies he might prescribe for any particular country.

So I am still waiting for a book that helps me understand what really happened in this utterly perplexing century, when the world moved decisively away from the market, then equally decisively back. The one thing I know is that whoever writes that book will have to be a person unafraid of offering theories as well as facts, and therefore of saying things that might turn out to be wrong. ●

Middle America's Dirty Little Secret

Behind the rhetoric of extremes lurks a nation of moderates

Paul Glastris

BY READING THIS BOOK, YOU could have predicted the public's tolerant initial reaction to the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal. The book is about the moral views of the American middle class. In particular, the author, a prolific Boston University sociologist, tests the widely held assumption that there is a "culture war" going on out there among the general public (as opposed to among humanities professors and editorialists). As commonly understood, this cul-

**ONE NATION, AFTER ALL:
How the Middle Class
Think About God,
Country, and Family**
By Alan Wolfe
Viking Press, \$24.95

ture war pits conservatives against liberals — or, in the language of sociology, traditionalists against modernists — in a battle over whether American culture is in moral decline, and if so, how to reverse it. Traditionalists believe in old-fashioned families with stay-at-home moms; they resent multiculturalism; they oppose abortion; they are

highly patriotic in a my-country-right-or-wrong way; they believe in the absolute moral standards laid down by God in the Bible. Modernists have more flexible ideas about family structure; they defend the right of women to have abortions and work outside the home; they celebrate ethnic, racial, and religious diversity; they

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are made uncomfortable by unquestioning patriotism, and on moral issues tend to be secular and relativist.

To test this idea, Alan Wolfe and his research assistants conducted interviews with some 200 Americans in suburbs across the country. What they found was that while a certain fraction fall into one of these two categories, the majority do not. Instead, the battle between traditionalist and modernist positions is going on inside the hearts and minds of individual Americans. Most of those interviewed generally agree with the conservative critique of America — that softness toward criminals, easy divorce and abortion, permissive parenting, welfare programs that encourage illegitimacy, and the secular ideology of elites, have conspired to erode our moral sense. But these same people also see the benefits that come with the liberal-modernist stress on personal freedom and moral autonomy. They may think children are better off with Mom at home, but they see how happy their wives are working, and they like the extra income. They may have moral qualms about divorce and abortion, but they also have loved ones who've had them, and aren't altogether sure they made the wrong decision. "Americans do feel that they have lost the distinction between right and wrong and desperately want it back," writes Wolfe. But they part company with conservatives in that they "no longer believe that right and wrong provide unerring guidelines for informing them about how to lead their lives."

Partly as a result of their own personal moral quandaries, the American middle class has become profoundly nonjudgmental, observes Wolfe. They see contemporary life as so complex, demanding, and in flux that they, and only they — not their church, not their neighbors, and certainly not a bunch of politicians — can be trusted to figure out what the right thing to do is in any given situation. They want others to give them the benefit of the doubt on how they conduct their private lives, and hence are willing to give the same to others — including, apparently, the president of the United States.

By this analysis, conservatives are off the mark when they interpret the public's reaction to the Lewinsky scandal as an example of America's moral decline — and as evidence that Clinton is accelerating that decline. By (so far) withholding judgment, the public is not condoning adultery but asserting the right of individuals, when it comes to their personal lives, to make their own choices, and their own mistakes. Americans have not become moral relativists, says Wolfe, but "moral libertarians" who believe individuals should be their own moral guides. This may seem crazy to conservatives. But, as Wolfe observes,

it is an inevitable outgrowth of the economic libertarianism conservatives admire: "Daniel Bell was right to point out two decades ago that culture is too integrated with economics for freedom in the one realm not to have spillover effects in the other." Middle-class Americans admire capitalism and believe in the idea that allowing individuals to pursue their own economic self interest will lead to general prosperity, even if that means having to tolerate excesses that Americans detest (such as exorbitant CEO salaries). Likewise, they have come to believe that a sort of Invisible Hand operates in the moral realm. Wolfe formulates this belief thusly: "Our freedoms make us special; taken to extremes, they cause us problems; but when we experience those problems, our very freedoms will help us find a way out."

Wolfe gained his insights in part because of the way he conducted his research. Rather than merely ask his subjects yes/no questions about their opinions on issues, as a pollster might do, he focused on how they qualified their answers. The resulting analysis rings true to my own experience. In the early '90s, I spent a lot of time on barstools in places like Akron and Green Bay, listening to "average Americans" vent about abortion, immigration, the government, or whatever issue my editors in Washington wanted to do a story about that week. Usually those stories were driven by some poll we'd done about "voter anger"; my job was to find people whose opinions illustrated the poll results. (We called this reporting "outside the beltway.") It was always possible to find one or two individuals who fit the profile. But to get to them I'd have to listen to a dozen others who would deliver their opinions with so much on-the-one-hand-on-the-other nuance as to make it almost impossible to convey their views fairly in a small amount of space. "Fools!" I'd think, "you're blowing your chance to get quoted in a national magazine!"

Often people would begin with the "right" answer, briskly delivered, but then add so many qualifiers as seemingly to contradict the position they started out with. They'd say they were definitely "against" abortion — but perhaps not in cases of rape and incest, or if the fetus were horribly deformed, or if it meant putting women who have abortions in jail. Bit by bit they'd reveal themselves to be, in a hedging, unenthusiastic way, pro-choice. Or they'd say, "Yes, absolutely, too many immigrants are being let into the country." But then they'd make it clear that they weren't against all immigrants, only the ones who come here illegally, commit crimes, take undue advantage of welfare, don't work hard, and don't become citizens. The rest are fine, they'd say, better than fine;

why, I know this guy, came here from Pakistan without a dime, now he owns four taxis, works like a dog. I'll tell you, we could use a lot more like him.

Conservatives famously misread the "voter anger" they were picking up in their polling, interpreting it (and their electoral success in 1994) as evidence that voters wanted them to ban abortion, restrict immigration, and dismantle the federal government. But when they tried to do just that, they sparked a public backlash from which they have yet to recover. Driven by their own ideological certitudes, they failed to listen to the nuances of what voters were saying: that abortion should be better regulated, not banned; that we should keep out the "bad" immigrants, not the "good" ones; that the government should be fixed, not dismantled. The Clinton agenda comes much closer to matching these demands than the GOP's. For all his faults, the president does have an ear for nuance.

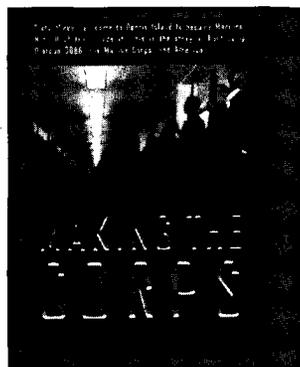
None of which is to say that the voters will forever withhold judgment from Clinton. What he is alleged to have done is not within the bounds of what even today's tolerant middle class considers acceptable. We're on uncharted ground here, but in other contexts it's clear that middle-class Americans do not tolerate

repeated irresponsibility. One of the most common and vehemently held beliefs among Wolfe's respondents was that there is a difference between the deserving and undeserving poor. The former category includes those who have made moral blunders — an unwed teenager who gets pregnant, for instance. But should that teenage mother go on to have another child out of wedlock, and another and another, she enters the ranks of the undeserving, and middle-class people lose patience. "I really don't like Newt Gingrich," a Brookline, Mass., dentist says to Wolfe, but when it comes to welfare for unwed mothers "there have to be limits." Here's how Wolfe sums up the distinction between deserving and undeserving poor:

You become undeserving, not because of who you are, and certainly not because you did the wrong thing, but because something is amiss in the way you think. In particular, you think you can get away with behavior that taxes the generosity of the middle class over and over again and you believe that the person paying for your irresponsibility is not going to object.

Should the allegations about Clinton's irresponsibility eventually prove true, the voters may decide that he's undeserving, too. ●

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