

F-USA

By Michael Ventura

September 28, 2007

Date: 2107

Subject: The decline and fall of the former United States of America (F-USA)

[Note: Though originated by scholars as a useful abbreviation, "F-USA" has accrued an unfortunate slang nuance exploited by tasteless comedians. In this brief summary monograph, at the risk of wordiness, we will instead refer to "the former United States" or "the former U.S."]

We must begin by stating without equivocation that the former United States deserves to be honored as a crucial experiment in human history and surely the most creative society the world has yet seen. Save for religion, spirituality, and the theatre – in which it could be argued that the former U.S. was at best derivative and at worst backward – one cannot name a human endeavor in which that society failed to create fundamentally new forms. Music, literature, sports, cinema, education, dance, war, psychology, architecture, visual and plastic art, governance, transportation, engineering, agriculture, commerce, communications, medicine, and every science – for better and for worse, all these and more were forever revolutionized by that society's innovations. From the cotton gin to the Internet, its inventions were envied and copied the world over by cultures as different from the former U.S. as China and the Muslim nations.

Why the former United States was so inexhaustibly creative is a subject that will long be debated. Among many reasons are that it was the first large polity in which royalty was permanently abolished and all government made elective, the first in which many could rise above the societal level at which they were born, and the first where common folk could own their own land. At its founding, its citizens enjoyed more freedom and autonomy than any citizenry in history. Its constitutional system, the most original political system devised up to that time, enabled many who were at first excluded (slaves, women, etc.) to gain rights. And the former United States was the first nation in which all the world's races, ethnicities, nationalities, and religions interacted and intermarried in relative peace – relative, that is, when one considers how elsewhere those same races, ethnicities, nationalities, and religions had murdered one another for centuries. These factors released tremendous and still-undefined energies in the human psyche (energies blocked by the strictures of previous cultures), resulting in a cultural atmosphere in which anything seemed possible.

Of course, it has also been argued that a country situated like the former United States could not help but bountifully prosper. Here was a nation with no strong rivals on its borders; a nation protected from invasion not only by vast oceans but by the vastness of its territory (impossible for an enemy to overrun); a nation with so many varieties of climate and topography that it was gifted with abundant natural resources of every description, more so than any in history. So, in fairness, history must ask: How could such a nation fail to be bountiful?

By contrast, consider its neighbors. Canada was (until recently) too cold for widespread settlement. In the Latin American countries, the native populations were too numerous to nullify, much of the land was topographically inhospitable, and the climate was too tropical to exploit with the technology of the 16th through 19th centuries. The settlers of the former United States, however, found a continent that was rather thinly populated, while its eastern topography and climate were not unlike what the colonizers were used to, so it was well-suited to their level of technology. Also, Latin America was conquered by cultures still under the influence of the Inquisition, while the former United States benefited from cultures of the Reformation and the Enlightenment, in which (relative to most human history) new ideas were encouraged.

In short, and to put it crudely: In its founding conditions, the former United States had a lot of luck – but hidden in that luck was the beginning of that society's fall. Early on, as a culture, the people of the former U.S. came to believe their luck was a kind of divine providence and that, being divine, the luck of their society would never run out. Also, a generally shared belief system held that the Creator would not so bless a nation that was not good – so it followed (in this belief system) that they deserved their luck. This, in turn, reinforced their assumption that their luck wouldn't run out. These beliefs, held almost reflexively and unconsciously by many, contributed to an arrogance that was one (but only one) engine of their undoing.

Oddly, every colonizer, settler, immigrant, and slave in the former U.S. came from cultures whose luck had run out not once but many times. Indeed, the vast majority would not have come if their culture of origin had not somehow failed them, and failed them mightily – for it was always a risky enterprise to begin anew in the former U.S. But this country was such a new phenomenon that it was believed – on all sides, by all factions, and in many ways – that the human condition itself could change. Indeed, in some ways it did. Eventually, all sorts of behavior that had never been openly tolerated anywhere blossomed in the former United States and spread to other cultures, until the entire world had to deal, in one way or another, not only with technologies but with public behaviors and assumptions unheard of before the founding and blossoming of the former U.S.

So it is mere historical petulance to deny (as many have) that the former United States was a great country. No country since the Greece of Alexander and the Rome of Augustus has catalyzed so much change. As with Alexander's Greece and Augustus' Rome, evil as well as good resulted. But if we measure greatness by influence, then the former United States was undeniably great, and the powers that have risen since – China, India, Brazil, Europea – have risen on its shoulders. (Some would say on its back.)

But every society makes mistakes for which it must pay. Luck always runs out – or so we must assume, since luck ran out even for this gifted and resourceful country.

It is one of the great ironies of history that the former United States finally failed at that which it had been best at: pragmatism and materialism. Throughout the 19th and much of the 20th centuries, other cultures accused the "American character," as it was called, of being pragmatic to a fault. Here was a society that could invent, fix, use, and build anything, but (so went the accusation) it had no depth. Until the 1920s, other cultures discounted U.S. arts, though those arts were formidable. Until the proliferation of radio and movies, other countries made fun of U.S. styles, though these media instantly

made U.S. styles infectious throughout the world. In sum, until well into the 20th century, the world's opinion was thus:

Here was a society that understood the mechanical as had no other – industrial mechanics, biological mechanics, quantum mechanics, the mechanics of economics – but (so went the accusation) it understood little else. Here was a society of ultimate materialists, in the highest sense. With materials, they united a more vast area than had ever been united, communicating instantaneously through telegraph by the mid-1800s and, by the late 1800s, transporting material and personnel across vast distances faster and in more directions than any society ever – a speed that steadily increased as their means of transport multiplied. Here was a society that understood, as had no other, the development and allocation of *resources*. By fair means or foul (and there were plenty of both), here was a society that put into action what others had merely dreamed. Flying. Workers living more luxuriously than medieval royalty. And so much more. All of which would have been considered miraculous in earlier times. Other societies might be great at thought, at concept, at grandeur, but here was a society that could invent and employ the electrical generator and (tragically, as it turned out) the internal combustion engine, making so much possible that had never before been within reach. By comparison to others, their manners were rough, their language often graceless, their expectations inflated and silly, but they could *do*. How they could *do*!

They even had a phrase for it: "good old American know-how." They knew how to do.

How did they lose that ability? How did such a country become, in the end, helpless and beyond saving? (*To be continued.*)

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F-USA [Continued]
MICHAEL VENTURA
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Subject: The decline and fall of the former United States of America (F-USA).

Subsection: The Wages of Delusion

The people of the former United States persistently saw themselves as idealists. (We will deal with the ironies of their idealism at a later date.) However, in their glory days, others revered, envied, and resented this people for another aspect of their character: relentless pragmatism. At their best, theirs was a principled pragmatism; at their worst, it was otherwise. Either way, their pragmatic “good old American know-how” prospered to an extent the world had never seen. In 1776, the former U.S. was a mere colony of farmers and merchants, confined to North America’s eastern seaboard; by 1914, it had spanned the continent to become the richest and most dominant industrial-agricultural power. Their belief-systems and idealisms may have been propulsive, goading them to achievement, but that achievement was the result of an unparalleled pragmatism.

How they lost their pragmatic gifts is, perhaps, a subject for psychologists. It’s enough for us to examine results of that loss, particularly in the area in which this country was once brilliant: money. In retrospect, it is incredible that so practical a people lost the ability to distinguish between something as basic as two separate economic practices: commerce and speculation.

In the interests of brevity, we’ll confine our examples to banks. Until well into the 20th Century, most banks in the former U.S. were locally owned and operated. A merchant, farmer, or skilled laborer, using measurable collateral (which might include the banker’s knowledge of his or her character), applied for a loan at reasonable interest, then spent that loan locally, benefiting the community. The bank, profiting from the interest, in turn loaned more money locally, also benefiting the community. This was, more or less, honest commerce, which is, in its essence, *trade* -- a means by which work was done and goods and services were made available. Mostly, these goods and services were not superfluous; they concerned the basics -- food, tools (in its most inclusive meaning), clothing, shelter. Quality was a value. Materials were durable, and objects of all kinds -- from typewriters, say, to houses -- were built to last. Work, too, was a value. To do even humble tasks well and responsibly was generally considered worthy of respect. If this portrayal sounds too rosy, we need only remember that every human system from time immemorial has been rife with excess, greed, pettiness, exploitation and cruelty; this one was no exception. Nevertheless, this form of commerce, at its heart, involved supplying what is necessary to an orderly society, and necessity makes for a kind of base-line of sanity.

Time passed, things changed. How they changed is all too well known; no need to go into detail here. Suffice it to say that, by the end of the 20th Century, the bank was no longer locally owned. It had become a “branch,” as it was called, of a much larger tree. The health of the community was no longer necessary to the health of the bank. (We are using banks only as a convenient example; the same became true of many enterprises.)

Commerce was still important, for life had to be sustained, but speculation became more profitable. A citizen applied for a loan, but it was no longer the same loan. The banks “packaged,” as the saying went, many loans, and sold those loans to larger entities; these entities, in turn, used the packaged loans as collateral for grander investments and speculations. In this system, banks (and other enterprises) profited from the debt of the community. It was in the interest of banks (etc.) to keep the community in debt. The more debt the community incurred, the more the banks (etc.) could package and sell that debt to larger entities, and the more the larger entities could prosper by speculation. Gradually, speculation replaced commerce as the central source of wealth.

For large-scale speculation to be possible, small-scale debt had to be enthusiastically encouraged. So-called “credit cards” became available, even to those of humble means. But when one buys on credit one is, in reality, taking out a loan. More accurately named, a credit card was a loan card. As such cards became common, people were borrowing from banks on everything from groceries to lawn mowers. After loan cards became the norm, their interest rates became usurious -- 18% was commonplace, 20-odd% was not unheard of. The citizens of the former United States became, in effect, little profit-engines for entities beyond their knowledge or control. Everyone was in debt. The so-called “stock market” became a world-wide system of speculation, which thrived on the average household working incessantly to manage its debt.

This was no longer commerce. This was no longer about necessity. This was, rather, a speculative system that fed upon individual desire to create collective helplessness -- a citizenry so mired in financial obligation that a base-note of sanity became a sentimental memory, and they knew only a base-note of anxiety. Anxious people stampede toward any illusion of safety. Thus the brave, resourceful people of the former United States gradually became an easily manipulated herd, always stampeding, fearful, suspicious. Commerce thrives on stability. Speculation thrives on instability -- not extreme instability, but a kind basic built-in instability, in which, for instance, the workforce (up to its highest levels) cannot count on job security, and even people with high salaries can suddenly be in danger of losing their homes.

To illustrate the difference between their economy of commerce and their economy of speculation, we have only to look at home ownership. When the former U.S. had an economy of commerce, a skilled laborer worked for one company most of his life and could buy and own a family-size home in a reasonable amount of time. This, in fact, was the prime embodiment of what was famously called (minus the derision attached to that phrase today) “the American dream.” As the economy became essentially speculative, home prices gradually rose out of the reach not only of skilled laborers but of many professionals, such as teachers. In this new system, even those with enough credit to buy a home could not pay off their mortgages for many decades; they were not really homeowners, they were home-renters, renting their home from the bank, and vulnerable -- for most of their lives! -- to losing it through any serious set-back. At the same time, they were buying many goods and services with their high-interest loan-cards. Which, again, makes our point: an economy of speculation is an economy of debt, through which the few profit hugely and the many live with daily, often intense, insecurity.

It is no wonder that the physical and mental health of this people sank to levels that were among the lowest in the developed world, in spite of living in what they sincerely believed was a “rich” country. In fact, it was anything but. Rather, it was a country in

which lofty business entities played with immense amounts of “paper” capital based largely on the ownership of others’ debts, while the life of the common citizen (even when outwardly affluent) revolved around the servicing of debt. In their economy of commerce, extreme debt had been considered shameful. In their economy of speculation, debt that any previous society would have considered extreme was (for most) inevitable. Incredibly, the greatest debtor in the world, the greatest debtor in history, was the government of the former United States! By the early 21st century, it borrowed and owed hundreds of billions, and, in fact, by then it functioned only through the financial largesse of other nations. To call such a country “rich” is delusional, yet this was the delusion shared by most of its citizens and leaders.

In possessions, they appeared wealthy. In fact, measured by the extent of their debt, their net worth was much less than zero.

When climate change became too disruptive to ignore, two consequences felled this country: its speculative economy lost much of its “paper” wealth and could not shift in time back to the commerce of necessities that the crisis required, while its lender nations needed all their resources just to cope -- leaving the former United States too broke to meet the crisis. Its central government became irrelevant, able only to decree, but unable to act. Gradually, region by region, people began to realize that they were on their own.

(To be continued, eventually...)

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F-USA (Concluded)

By Michael Ventura

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Subject: The decline and fall of the former United States of America [F-USA].

Subhead: Ironies of Idealism and Identity as Relates to the "Wiggins Aphorism."

In brief, the former United States failed because its people overvalued their ideals and undervalued their resources. By "ideals" we do not mean those inscribed in their Constitution, with its superb and original Bill of Rights – though these, too, were slighted in so many ways that historians wonder whether they ever were taken seriously. An example: By the year 2000, the Bill of Rights' 9th and 10th Amendments were institutionally ignored on a vast scale, by the left as well as the right; in fact, by then it was doubtful whether even the well-educated could recite or discuss amendments nine and ten without consulting reference materials.

Another example: Congress abdicated its sole right and power to declare war. The many wars fought by the former U.S. after 1941 were embarked upon unconstitutionally by the executive alone, often with little or no protest. Laws administered selectively, even arbitrarily, can hardly claim to be laws. This nation's once famous (though always exaggerated) "rule of law" became an ad hoc patchwork of those laws that were generally followed and those that were not. It was inevitable that gradually such a government would lose its moral authority.

But when we speak of "ironies of idealism," we do not speak of professed ideals, which are everywhere plentifully professed and just as plentifully violated. We speak of ideals by which a people live. In the former U.S. these were basically two: progress and freedom. In practice, what was really meant by "progress" was innovation, and what was really meant by "freedom" was individual gain. *These* ideals were believed in passionately across the political spectrum.

Innovation was thought to foster individual gain, and individual gain was thought to foster innovation. In tandem, both were believed to result in collective prosperity and security.

The former U.S. hadn't a value system by which to judge the worth of innovation selectively. Innovation was employed indiscriminately, as a value in itself – at no matter what cost to community. Political preference made no difference; right, center, and left employed the same innovations promiscuously – labor-saving technology, communications devices, the "progress" in transportation from rail to cars, etc. This promiscuity shattered their communities more drastically than hostile acts or moral permissiveness could possibly have done.

Let us take, as just one example, agriculture. By 2007, technological innovations in agriculture were so efficient that a Kansas farmer with 7,000 acres required only two

full-time year-round employees. For the farmer, this was profitable, as it was for the speculator in agricultural commodities; for the farmer's community, it was ruination. No permanent agricultural workforce meant no permanent support-structure – stores, services, etc. Gradually, farming towns across the country looked like ghost towns, or ghostly towns, with streets of boarded-up stores and crumbling infrastructures. "Profit" was defined simply as money, not as quality of life, and, in that definition, communities were no longer necessary to agricultural profit. In fact, cohesive community was no longer deemed necessary to any means of profit.

(Parenthetically, while on the subject of agriculture: It is remarkable that, after about 1900, the political and social thinkers of the former U.S. gave virtually no serious thought to agriculture, leaving it entirely to the mercies of the so-called "free market." We may justifiably question the realism, even the sanity, of any nation that forgets that agriculture is the foundation of civilization, especially of urban civilization, and that the fundamental issue of a nation's food supply should not be left to speculators. Not until climate change became too intrusive to ignore did this nation realize the massive consequences of that mistake.)

The great moral and intellectual failure of the former United States was that it never matured a vision, a living system of values, that balanced individual gain and innovation with the health of community. So individuals gained, amidst terrific innovation, while communities crumbled in varying ways – literally crumbling rurally, while cities and suburbs suffered a crumbling of cohesiveness, civic pride, and civic duty, all of which were unnecessary to profit and individual gain. Passionately engaged in their ideals of innovation and individual gain, this people was surprised to suffer the concurrent ills of living in noncommunities or uncommunities – ills that included the highest levels of crime and addictive behavior in the developed world, as well as confusions of morality and identity pathetic to behold.

Which brings us to the tricky issue of identity. The propellant ideals of the former United States were, as we have seen, innovation and individual gain. Community was given every variety of lip service across the political spectrum, but never did community compete as an ideal with innovation and individual gain. The highest rate of homeownership in the world was matched (and undermined) by the most insecure sense of community. One owned one's own home but owned it in isolation – which, for many, proved to be a terrifying experience. (What is more terrifying than isolation?) Without a true community, if you fall, nobody tries to catch you, and it's in no one's interest to help you up. Without a true community, you're not a part of anything; you are only your own quest for individual gain. That is not enough structure for a personal identity. Few can bear to look themselves in the mirror and say, "I am only my quest for my own gain." Yet that was the (unadmitted) existential situation of many citizens of the former United States – especially those of the middle class (by far, the majority). It is a given that, as individuals, we seek (perhaps crave) identification with a larger entity, a larger sense of purpose. Without coherent communities, how did this people seek their sense of purpose?

The major nations of Europe and Asia looked on in bafflement as the former United States became the only advanced nation in which religion revived as a major political force – to the point where a politician who did not profess a belief in God doomed his or her chance for higher office. But religion was merely the only fundamentalism called "fundamentalism." In fact, this people's fundamentalisms were

many and varied, though similar in their passionate, exclusionary insularity. Leftist, intellectual fundamentalists ghettoed themselves in universities and university towns, where, inventing constantly more complex jargons, they lost the ability to communicate with anyone unlike themselves, thus abdicating their societal function as intellectuals. Business became a fundamentalist activity in which the god of short-term profit trumped any other consideration. Work was done with fundamentalist fervor, such that, on all levels, this people worked harder, longer, and enjoyed far less leisure than any other developed nation. A kind of artsy fundamentalism gripped even so-called "high culture," much art became incomprehensible to those outside artsy circles, and rare was the writer, for example, whose social circle included anyone but writers and their hangers-on. Even sports and entertainment became fundamentalist subsets in which teams and participatory TV programs had massive, passionate followings. Politics, too, became fundamentalist; all factions – but especially the far right and far left – were fundamentalist to the point of absurdity, routinely undermining their stated goals to protect the purity of their beliefs. It was all a matter of identity – a rudderless people desperate to identify, as individuals, with something larger than their quest for the "freedom" of individual gain, while becoming more and more confused by their addiction to innovation.

These fundamentalisms focused intensely on issues of no structural importance (abortion, "family values," smoking, gender issues, the Super Bowl), while ignoring infrastructure instability, food supply, climate change, etc. Each fundamentalism blamed the other for how their society was disintegrating all around them. Each failed to see that their shared ideals of individual gain and promiscuous innovation were the real destroyers of their communities and sense of purpose.

Almost until their collapse, this nation (in general) continued to revel in unheard of individual gain – causing the Texas philosopher Ramsey Wiggins to speak the aphorism that would serve as the epitaph of the former United States, a sentence now known 'round the world:

"They got what they wanted, and it cost them everything they needed."

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