

William H. Peterson

KICK A BUSINESSMAN TODAY



THE BEAT GOES ON—i.e. the daily beat-up of the businessman on the Boob Tube. Not physically but psychically: in the perception of the businessman and the role he plays in our society.

Scheming oilman J. R. Ewing of "Dallas" is the prototype. Recently three George Washington University researchers—Linda Lichter, S. Robert Lichter and Stanley Rothman—spent eight weeks in front of the Tube and reported their findings in *Public Opinion*. They identified 226 fictionalized business men and women in Televisionland. A lopsided 60 per cent of them, they found, were Bad Guys—and of these, one out of three (or 21 per cent of the total) was an out-and-out criminal. Worse, this criminality stemmed not so much from character failings,

home background and the like but rather from the nature of the business environment itself.

Thus in "The Jeffersons" we witness a hotel executive get sadistic pleasure in firing employees and express ardent dislike for blacks. In "Three's Company" we observe a "lady" diner-owner fire her cook when he rejects her sexual advances. In "Lobo" we watch a bank manager plot the robbery of his own bank. In "BJ and the Bear" we see the owner of a corporate conglomerate deal in illegal explosives and try to sabotage a company ship in order to collect the insurance.

Rarely, if ever, does free enterprise get bouquets on television. But brickbats, yes. In one segment of "Taxi," for example, the drivers gripe about dangerous deterioration of their cabs and put it to management to make the needed repairs. Louie, the manager, proposes instead to fix the company records so manage-

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ment could not be blamed. Naturally, the drivers object to Louie's devious scheme. Louie, however, explains away his guilt by informing them, "Every great businessman has done it."

Similarly, in "Diff'rent Strokes," a couple of kids start up their own brownie business. When their business becomes too successful for them to handle alone, their sister asks to become their partner in exchange for her help. The two boys offer her instead a meager salary as their employee. They explain: "That's what business is all about. You do the work and we get the profits."

Concluded the Lichters and Rothman: "If American business has redeeming social values, they rarely turn up on prime-time television. Rather, businessmen are cast as evil and selfish social parasites whose efforts to secure 'more' are justly condemned and usually thwarted. Television has blurred the important distinction between selfish and self-interested behavior. According to television, what is good for business is not likely to be good for American society."

These conclusions tie in with Ben Stein's earlier study of TV's top sitcom and soap opera writers and producers. In his *The View from Sunset Boulevard*, Stein interviewed the creators of TV's hit series and found them condemning business as part of "a dangerous concentration of

power." Business people, he was variously told, are "lepers . . . dinosaurs . . . cannibals . . . sons of bitches." Douglas Benton, who has written or produced for "Police Woman," "Ironside," "Columbo" and many other shows, conceded that business is economic democracy at work. But he added: "It's the strong smart people who get all the money and the weak dumb people who suffer."

Stein recorded his similar revealing dialogue with Bob Weiskopf, a co-producer of "Maude," as follows:

Q. Why are people poor in America?

A. Because I don't think the system could function if everyone was well off.

Q. What do you mean?

A. I think you have to have poor people in a capitalist society.

Q. Why?

A. To exploit. The rich people can't exploit each other. Consequently they always exploit the poor.

Granted, business people, as in every other walk of life, have their share of scalawags and ne'er-do-wells. But TV's distorted perception of business people does a profound disservice to American democracy. This one-sided perception is, I submit, hardly calculated to aid our economy in its struggle to recover. Or to assist young people in high

school or college on choosing a career in business. Or to provide understanding to our legislators to fashion intelligent economic policy.

Moreover, the perception, which is furthered on network news programs, promotes the idea that not free enterprise but far-seeing humanitarians and political crusaders are responsible for America's well-being. It advances the idea that income essentially flows from Washington and only secondarily from Rural America, Main Street, Wall Street, and Factory, Laboratory and Office Row.

In addition, the perception squelches the highly strategic marketplace role of the entrepreneur who, aided by the saver and investor, competitively applies our limited resources to where they'll do society the most good—creating jobs and wealth, including our daily bread, and thereby boosting our living standards.

For, after all, it is the entrepreneur—no matter how denigrated—who continuously seeks out business opportunities and accordingly combines land, labor and capital into fresh and hopefully profit-making, wealth-creating and job-inducing situations in an ever risky, uncertain and dynamic world. And no matter if the entrepreneur is a farmer, undertaker, gas station owner, fast-food restaurant operator, construction contractor or head

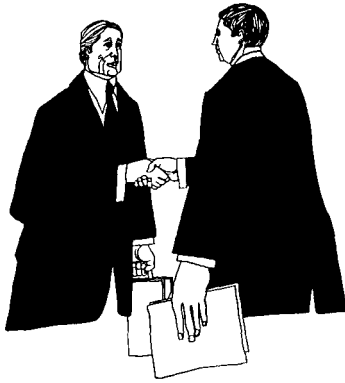
of a giant conglomerate, the message for our free enterprise system in this critical recovery phase of the business cycle is the same: No entrepreneurship means no economic growth. Worse, it ultimately means no jobs. No wealth. No freedom. Only decay and social breakdown. The entrepreneur, in other words, is the unsung and most unappreciated and much needed hero of our times.

But the Tube proclaims, in effect, that the public sector sustains the private sector instead of the other way around, that Congress or this or that President somehow crushed poverty by redistributing wealth and by regulating and planning (read "fine-tuning") the economy. Business—the fountainhead of our wealth, our tax revenues, the source of 80 per cent of our jobs—gets short shrift.

As black Stanford economist Thomas Sowell puts it in his new book, *Pink and Brown People*:

It was not our enlightened crusaders who brought light to the masses. It was Thomas Edison. It was not our intellectuals who ended the insularity of isolated communities. It was Henry Ford and the Wright Brothers. For the man in the street, Kodak did more to make him aware of pictures than Rembrandt and all the museums put together. More people hear Beethoven as a result of recording than ever heard him in his own time.

Sunset Boulevard, please copy. ☼



Business and Ethics

Mr. X manufactures gismos in a plant which uses the varied skills of a thousand employees. These people might cheerfully acknowledge that they'd rather be sailing, or fishing, or whatever; but when it comes to supporting themselves they have chosen to work with Mr. X in preference to any known alternative. They are free to leave whenever a better opportunity offers, and many have indeed "graduated" into other forms of employment, to be replaced by people who have chosen to work with Mr. X as the best opportunity available to them. A lot of people find gismos useful, and they are offered for sale at a price consumers can afford. So people buy, and Mr. X prospers.

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The relations between Mr. X and his employees are amicable; they are completely non-coercive and all arrangements are voluntary. Likewise all arrangements with customers. Mr. X is wholly dependent on willing customers, over whom he has no leverage except the appeal of his product, plus the persuasiveness of his advertising. Mr. X has a profitable business, and his customers profit too; owning a gismo makes life more pleasant. There is an overall upgrading of the level of human satisfactions on the part of everyone involved: Mr. X, his employees, and the users of his product. By any definition of the term, Mr. X is performing a public service; everybody profits, nobody is coerced.

Mr. Y manufactures thingamajigs. There was once a brisk market for this gadget, but times have changed and the item is no longer