

# The Commercial Republic

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Over the centuries, the United States has been most conspicuous for one trait: manic energy. Americans work longer hours than any other people. We switch jobs more frequently, move more often, earn more and consume more.



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This energy was first aroused by abundance, by the tantalizing sense that dazzling wealth was available just over the next hill. But it has also been sustained by a popular culture that celebrates commercial ambition. From Benjamin Franklin and Alexander Hamilton, through Horatio Alger and Norman Vincent Peale, up until Donald Trump and Jim Cramer, popular figures have always emerged to champion the American gospel of success, encouraging middle-class people to strive, risk and make money.

This gospel gets dented during each of the nation's financial crises, but it always returns with a vengeance. The late 19th century was a time of economic turmoil. Yet it was also a time when this commercial creed was preached most fervently. Andrew Carnegie published "The Gospel of Wealth." Elbert Hubbard published "A Message to Garcia," which celebrated industriousness and ambition and sold nearly 40 million copies. The Baptist minister Russell Conwell traveled the country delivering his "Acres of Diamonds" sermon to rapturous audiences more than 6,000 times.

“I say that the opportunity to get rich, to attain unto great wealth, is here now within the reach of almost every man and woman who hears me speak tonight!” Conwell thundered to his audiences. “I say that you ought to get rich, and it is your duty to get rich ... Money is power, and you ought to be reasonably ambitious to have it. You ought, because you can do more good with it than you could without it.”

The Great Depression suppressed economic activity, but not the commercial spirit. In the middle of it, Dale Carnegie published “How to Win Friends and Influence People,” which promised imminent success and went on to sell more copies than any other book to that point but the Bible. The stagflation of the 1970s didn’t discredit capitalism. It gave rise to the supply-side movement and the apotheosis of the entrepreneur.

In short, the United States will never be Europe. It was born as a commercial republic. It’s addicted to the pace of commercial enterprise. After periodic pauses, the country inevitably returns to its elemental nature.

The U.S. is in one of those pauses today. It has been odd, over the past six months, not to have the gospel of success as part of the normal background music of life. You go about your day, taking in the news and the new movies, books and songs, and only gradually do you become aware that there is an absence. There are no aspirational stories of rags-to-riches success floating around. There are no new how-to-get-rich enthusiasms. There are few magazine covers breathlessly telling readers that some new possibility — biotechnology, nanotechnology — is about to change everything. That part of American culture that stokes ambition and encourages risk has gone silent.

We are now in an astonishingly noncommercial moment. Risk is out of favor. The financial world is abashed. Enterprise is suspended. The public culture is dominated by one downbeat story after another as members of the educated class explore and enjoy the humiliation of the capitalist vulgarians.

Washington is temporarily at the center of the nation’s economic gravity and a noncommercial administration holds sway. This is an administration that has many lawyers and academics but almost no businesspeople in it, let alone self-made entrepreneurs. The president speaks passionately about education and health care

reform, but he is strangely aloof from the banking crisis and displays no passion when speaking about commercial drive and success.

But if there is one thing we can be sure of, this pause will not last. The cultural DNA of the past 400 years will not be erased. The pendulum will swing hard. The gospel of success will recapture the imagination.

Somewhere right now there's probably a smart publisher searching for the most unabashed, ambitious, pro-wealth, pro-success manuscript she can find, and in about three months she'll pile it up in the nation's bookstores. Somewhere there's probably a TV producer thinking of hiring Jim Cramer to do a show to tell story after story of unapologetic business success. Somewhere there's a politician finding a way to ride the commercial renaissance that is bound to come, ready to explain how government can sometimes nurture entrepreneurial greatness and sometimes should get out of the way.

Walt Whitman got America right in his essay, "Democratic Vistas." He acknowledged the vulgarity of the American success drive. He toted up its moral failings. But in the end, he accepted his country's "extreme business energy," its "almost maniacal appetite for wealth." He knew that the country's dreams were all built upon that energy and drive, and eventually the spirit of commercial optimism would always prevail.