

Book: The Crisis of Success

Another voice, this time in the biting tones of a harshly realistic historian, has been added to the doomsayers. Forrest McDonald, professor at Wayne State University, delineates the stultification that will result from our long alternation between antibusiness bias and desire for wealth.

The Jeffersonian doctrine the professor defines as an "anticommercial trinity" which approved the farm and farmers, disapproved of the city and merchants and other capitalists, believed only gold is money and debt inherently bad.

The third element, he says, accounted for its popularity: "The vast majority of Americans were nonslaveholding farmers, and though virtually all were commercial farmers, hungry for wealth — the sturdy, self-sufficient subsistence farmer existed mainly in myth, and never was a matter of choice — few expected that they would get rich solely from wielding the ax and the plow. But the Virginia republi-

cans offered an alternative route to wealth, namely land speculation. Acquiring large tracts of unoccupied land and selling it at a huge profit to hordes of newcomers . . . was the dream in the eighteenth century, and it became the common farmers' dream in the nineteenth. (In the twentieth, the game went urban; the heirs of this aspect of the Jefferson tradition bear such names as Babbitt, Zeckendorf and Levitt. They pay homage to the agrarian ideal by removing the masses from crowded cities and selling them 'Big Big Quarter-acre-Lots' — 90 feet by 120 feet — in the greenery of suburbia.)"

To this unorthodox approach, the author contrasts the American commitment to the pursuit of wealth. Antibusiness bias, he says, made it impossible for us to live with the corporation, but "they also found it impossible . . . to live without this social invention that could generate wealth so readily. What they did was

entirely in keeping with the American character: accept the inevitability of history (what's done is done), avoid fundamental problems, ignore contradictions, and go on from there . . ."

So we developed the partnership of big business, big government and big labor that has spawned a bureaucracy both ineffectual and inefficient. As a result "prices are going to increase, taxes are going to increase, waste is going to increase, and unemployment is going to increase. Any effort to prevent the increases in any one of these four areas will, to the extent it is effective, produce a corresponding acceleration in the increase in one or more of the others."

The analysis is not along what can be termed Georgist lines, but professor McDonald does present a fascinating and useful analysis backdrop to set the land question against.

"The Phaeton Ride, The Crisis of American Success" (Doubleday, 1974).