

The American Dream: “Talking Peace, Making War”

Review of Doug Dowd's "At the Cliff's Edge" (Part II)

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[Agenda](#)

Dowd's book is an essential text for students and adults. It's a critical review of 500 years of history that brought us to today's unprecedented dangers. Part I covered four and one-half centuries through WW II. Part II continues the story to the present.

Part III - Our World Today: Great Possibilities, Worsening Realities - 1950s - 1960s: Monopoly Capitalism, Cold War

Compared to what followed, the 1950s (post-Korean War period) were placid by comparison. Things changed:

- 1960 - black student sit-downs began at store counters; civil rights agitation revved up;
- 1961 - Eisenhower warned of a “military industrial complex;” it wasn't heeded, and Cuba foiled the Bay of Pigs invasion; it was the first of hundreds of attempts to remove Fidel Castro; most by assassination, and once it nearly succeeded;
- 1962 - the Cuban missile crisis; later evidence showed how close the world came to nuclear disaster;
- 1963 - Martin Luther King marches on Birmingham; his “I Have a Dream” speech in Washington; JFK assassinated in November; Vietnam hostilities escalate;
- 1964 - the Senate passes the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution “legitimizing” war on Vietnam; only two senators opposed it;
- 1965 - war intensifies; North Vietnam bombed; Malcolm X assassinated; riots erupt in Los Angeles Watts District;
- 1966 - US troop buildup escalates;
- 1967 - Martin Luther King's anti-Vietnam war speech one year to the day before his assassination; American street riots spread;
- 1968 - Tet turns the war; Martin Luther King assassinated; also Bobby Kennedy; Nixon elected; six and half more years of war;
- 1969 - Nixon announces “Vietnamization;” promises to end the war; intensifies it instead; secretly bombs Cambodia and Laos; North Vietnam as well; secret peace talks begun between Kissinger and Le Duc Tho; US duplicity highlights them; the Paris Peace Accords signed in January 1973; Saigon falls in 1975; remaining US civilian and military forces

withdraw; Vietnam is still recovering; no reparations paid or war criminals prosecuted; the Cold War spreads; capitalism solidifies.

Capitalism is both a social and economic system. Economists Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy called it “monopoly capitalism (monocap).” Its six power components are:

- giant corporations;
- partnered with friendly giant states;
- consumerism that Paul Baran defined as wanting things we don’t need, not ones we do;
- globalization at the center of the six; it exploits people, resources and markets worldwide in an endless quest for destructive growth;
- the military industrial complex; its fuel - enemies (mostly invented), wars, removal of “uncooperative” leaders, corruption, and disdain for the rule of law; ignored - homeland social costs and vast ecological devastation; and
- a supportive Big Media in an integrated world economy; democracy is disdained; so are people needs; society is uncaring; it characterizes America, and we’re exporting it everyone for a one-size fits all world run by made-in-Washington rules; rule No. One - we’re boss, and what we say goes.

The US Economy, 1970s - 2000: Its Crisis and Triumphs, Achievement and Disasters

Social and democratic advances occurred to some degree from the mid-1930s through the 1960s. Thereafter, they reversed and at an accelerating rate, especially post-1980 and even faster post-2000. For the past three and a half decades, there’s been a pronounced shift to the right. Business flourished. People suffer. That’s the plan with more of the same ahead.

Further, capitalism’s nature is problematic. As a system, it’s dysfunctional. It produces “periods of pervasive excess and productive capacities.” It’s essentially “destructive.” The 1970s reflect the problem. Dowd refers to the “defects of its virtues:”

- seemingly assured economic expansion yields higher costs and prices;
- global economy superstates become rife with inefficiency and corruption - in business and government;
- expansion yields excess productive capacities slowing economic growth;
- it also creates unprecedented debt - for business, government and consumers;
- in the 1970s, economic growth stagnated, but costs, prices and taxes rose; and
- unemployment rose; poverty and urban decay grew; social tensions built; politics shifted to the right, and its proposed solution was curb democracy and cut social expenditures.

Things began accelerating, and corporate giants became triumphant. Post-1980, successive friendly presidents supported them. Two parties effectively became one. Multinational corporations became transnational. Business was better than ever because of how

capitalism works - taking from the many for the few. It can't miss when governments back it.

Dowd reviewed its expansion through an unprecedented merger and acquisition (M & A) wave. In 1998 alone, there were 12,500 valued at \$1.6 trillion. In two sectors especially - financial services and telecommunications, including the media. It got Fortune magazine to remark that "the face of the Global 500 was dramatically altered." At 1998's end, their revenues were \$11.5 trillion, profits \$440 billion, assets \$39 trillion, and employees 40 million, after substantial downsizing "for greater efficiency." People are production inputs. The less needed, the lower the cost, the greater the profits. That's the idea behind setting down anywhere business operates cheapest regardless of people effects.

Sum it up - since the 1970s, average inflation-adjusted worker income and welfare declined, poverty rose, social benefits disappeared, and business got better than ever. Globalization flourished and with it the downsizing of a nation unmindful of homeland social costs. At the same time, the manufacturing base declined hugely, service industries grew, in financialization especially and with it speculative excess.

A scant 1% of the population sits at the top. Its rewards are outsized. Another one-fifth or so gained, while the remaining 80% have been weakened and cheated. Globalization is the driving force. Within it central banker demands take precedence. People and societal needs don't matter, and financialization and the State are "two sides of the same coin."

Borders are erased, capital is empowered, "externalities" are ignored, excess builds, so do profits, problems grow, the world gets more unlivable, but that's for others in the future to deal with.

Dowd wrote his book in 2006 before mid-2007 market turbulence erupted. It was brewing and predicable, and he asked "Is the United States Building a Debt Bomb?" He cited a 1999 Business Week essay referring to a tsunami of debt - household, corporate, financial sector and government. The data were alarming and much more so now. They reflected direct financial institution borrowing plus investors' securitized lending at \$7 trillion compared to one-third that amount a decade earlier.

Add to it US foreign debt in the many trillions plus the impossible to repay national indebtedness in the many tens of trillions with unfunded liabilities factored in. It's made US and world economies "more precariously situated today than ever before in history," and it's playing out in today's market turbulence with no one sure what's coming but most people worried or they should be.

Key to the problem is consumerism that Thorstein Veblen called "conspicuous" in his 1899 book "The Theory of the Leisure Class." F. Scott Fitzgerald explained that "the very rich....are different from you and me." Veblen wrote about their spending habits and coined the phrase "conspicuous consumption." Today, it's called "keeping up with the Jones" or consumerism - not for essentials but for outsized gratification, and not just by the rich.

Consumerism is virulent and destructive. It pays no heed to its consequences, and therein lies its problem - personal overindebtedness and rising bankruptcies; neglected health, education and other essential needs; ecological destruction; unhealthy and unsafe consumer products; militarism and foreign wars; and democratic decay in a corporate-empowered state.

Consumers have lost their senses, have become “bewitched,” and Dowd wonders what’s next. He’s not encouraged by what’s happened thus far with the world “at the cliff’s edge.”

1970s - 2000: Social Deterioration, Politics, and Society

Why so? Things never should have come to this, but they did. When the 19th century ended, “the time had come when, for the first time in history, the basic needs of the people of industrial societies (could) be met:”

- adequate nutrition and clean water;
- good education;
- health care;
- proper housing; and
- access to opportunity in a modern world that today is even easier to provide, but it’s not in a society addicted to militarism, wars, and the benefit of the few over the many.

Industrial nations have no excuse. “Long ago (they) became (able) to meet” basic needs. Take America. Our wealth is so great, resources abundant, ingenuity immense, and science and technology advanced that it’s unthinkable how poorly we performed. We’ve “long (been able) to meet all human and social needs at home and to cooperate” in lifting developing nations similarly.

Instead, we opted for the opposite, and look what’s happened. Everything’s commodified. Consumerism became religion and society warped. Values are corrupted, and people are sacrificed for profits. We rank shamefully low or lowest among industrial nations in most things mattering most – health care, education, adequate income and other essential human needs. We’re consumed by excess, greed, wealth, corruption, militarism, and the idea that markets work best so let them.

Even worse is the notion of unleashing business to accomplish it, and economist Milton Friedman taught how: privatize everything, eliminate social services and benefits, and every constraint on business like taxes, regulations, interest rate ceilings, and all consumer protections against waste, fraud, abuse and unsafe products. A paradise for business. Hell on earth for people. Hard to believe they buy this. Sadly most do, and today we’re consumed by it. Things aren’t improving. They’re worsening and to the point where the planet is endangered and young people have no future unless things radically change.

Further, inequalities are rising and essentials like health care are unaffordable for millions. Of the world’s 20 richest nations, America spends the most and provides the worst care to its citizens. World Health Organization rankings put us 37th behind developed countries like France and Italy plus others like Chile, Saudi Arabia and Colombia. Consider Cuba that’s viciously scorned as an outlier. It easily outclasses us in all health care categories because theirs is world-class, free, and accessible to everyone, including people in other countries where its doctors treat the needy. In America, that’s unimaginable except for providers doing it pro bono.

Dowd covers the topic broadly, and hits greedy drug companies, HMO’s and unneeded

insurers hard. They add nothing to good care but plenty to costs with their bureaucratic add-ons that make care less affordable for millions. He also cites illness as the main source personal bankruptcies, the destruction of Medicaid, and the erosion of Medicare coverage for retirees.

Social Security is just as threatened. Dowd reviews the record, notes its built-in flaws, and explains the outlandish privatization scheme that will effectively end the most effective poverty-reduction program ever for retirees, the disabled and other eligible recipients. In George Bush's "ownership society," people can have anything if they pay for it. If not, they're on their own, out of luck, and endangerment to life and welfare don't matter.

Things are as bleak for public education. Privatization threatens a 373 year tradition that once served people well. No longer, and as a noted educator, Dowd shudders about the future. Imagine a country able to provide the best, yet opts for commodifying education the way it treats health care, other essentials, and all consumer products and services people don't need but can't live without.

"Reform" is the pretext behind it. It defines the misnamed No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. It's long on testing, school choice, and market-based "reforms" but short on real achievement. It's built around rote learning, standardized tests, requiring teachers to "teach to the test," assessing results by Average Yearly Progress (AYP) scores, and punishing failure harshly - firing teachers and principals, closing schools and transforming them from public to charter or for-profit ones. That's the whole idea, of course, and it reflects current era thinking - that anything government does business does better, so let it, and the spirit behind it is bipartisan.

Dowd also laments about an educational system training students to obey authority, respect the status quo, and disenfranchise learning by adjusting classrooms to students instead of the reverse. From decades of teaching, he discovered that "when education is carried on as a learning process for the students, it is also one for the teacher." He and his students learned more by answering their questions than having them answer his. In other words, an open interchange between teacher and students for the betterment of all, and knowing that rote memory isn't learning, let alone understanding.

Education in America is mirror-opposite this. Students are cheated and likely manipulated the way they'll be short-changed and marginalized as adults - in an "ownership society" uncaring of people. Whether education, health care, proper nutrition, or housing, America disdains the needy and blames them for their misfortune. It's shocking, disturbing and undiscussed in the mainstream where images show all things people don't need and none of what's essential.

1970s - 2000: Savaging the American Dream: Inequality, Corruption in Politics, the Media

Ideologies justify the unjustifiable root of capitalism - inequality as "natural and normal" with victims responsible for their own misfortunes. On this score, America is "world champ" and then some.

Consider equality for starters. At birth our needs are equal. Our opportunities should be and be minimally met from cradle to grave. Not so under capitalism where "everything is always up for grabs." Worse still, and especially in America, race, gender and class play heavily into

defining our needs and possibilities, and those topping the power structure make the rules. It makes us world leader in racism, poverty and inequality extremes. It's no way to run a democracy. It's never been another way, but today it's worse and much more dangerous.

Wages don't keep pace with costs, poverty is rising, inequality growing, discriminatory practices extreme, and they show up in countless data rarely discussed:

- voter disenfranchisement; elections reduced to theater with half or more eligible opting out; why not when candidates are pre-selected, machines do our voting, losers are declared winners, and winners don't complain;

- constitutional protections erased in a post-9/11 world;

- a burgeoning prison population; now the largest in the world and mostly for blacks, hispanics and the poor for whom due process and equal justice are near impossible;

- a plague of two household earners of necessity and combined it's often not enough; young children, of course, suffer without an at-home caregiver, preferably a mother or father;

- an unprecedented wealth disparity between an elite few and most others; distinguishing between wealth from income with over half to the rich through inheritance; case in point – the current Bush generation with Bush I once described as being born on third base and thinking he hit a triple; Bush II bested his father plus his dark side as well; from his earliest days; pre-college as a boy; to his time as Texas governor when his aides described him as a man who enjoys killing – in reference to how many executions he presided over – more than in any other state after the Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976.

Many other examples are similar. They show inequality extremes and dismissiveness of human needs as “capitalism moved toward industrialization (and) workers became (wage-enslaved) laborers.” With globalization, it's everywhere to serve an insatiable desire to “accumulate.” It's ideologically ingrained in us. Schools teach it. Media and PR wizardry sell it. Big money creates it. Politicians are bought to back it. Even the clergy are on board.

Mind management is clever, manipulation now easy, infotainment passes for reality, disinformation for truth, and the American dream is pure illusion and more nightmare. Dowd cites the “deep-seated corruption of the media.” It's all-pervasive in commercial and political communication supporting big business, public harm, and erasing dwindling democratic remnants for plunder in disdain for human needs.

US Militarism, Past and Present: Talking Peace, Making War

All nations are culpable but none more than America – waging war for the sake of peace without cause so it's invented. The US today is omnipotent, mostly resource self-sufficient, and easily able to obtain all else it needs. In addition, it has no enemies and never did except during WW II. Even then, FDR provoked Japan into attacking, and Germany was obliged to its axis partner to declare war on us in support.

Nonetheless, America has been at war with one or more adversaries every year in our history without exception – abroad and/or internally. We're just as violent at home. We have the highest homicide rate in the West; a passion for owning guns; a craving for violent films, television and video games; and our society is called a “rape culture.” The human toll is

horrific, yet hardly discussed.

Dowd laments that “we haven’t learned to hate war enough,” and adds up “the arithmetic of slaughter.” For America alone:

- WW I - 110,000 dead (one-half from combat) and 200,000 wounded;
- WW II - 400,000 dead and 670,000 wounded;
- Korea - 36,000 dead and 103,000 wounded; and
- Vietnam - 58,000 dead and 153,000 wounded.

To these numbers add many hundreds of thousands more with deep emotional scars plus many others taking ill from exposure to toxic environments. Add also the bloodiest war in US history - the Civil War. Three million fought on both sides and 600,000 died at a time the population was 31 million, including 4 million slaves. In proportional WW II terms, it would have taken 2.5 million lives. Today - six million.

Our adversaries fared much worse - at least three million Koreans, another million Chinese, three to four million Southeast Asians, countless millions of noncombatants plus immeasurable amounts of destruction. Even these numbers pale compared to WWs I and II - over 20 million killed in the first and up to 60 million in the second plus countless millions wounded and displaced.

Today the toll rises daily in Iraq and Afghanistan in numbers far higher than reported. Official ones are fiction - for US combatants but far more so for Iraqis and Afghans. Some estimates since the Gulf War place sanctions-caused deaths at around 1.7 million, including 1.2 million children under age five. Add another 200,000 violent Gulf war deaths and up to two million 2003-2007 war deaths, including 800,000 children under age five according to UNICEF. For Afghanistan from 2001- 2007, estimates range up to 3.2 million deaths, including 700,000 children under age five.

Consider US casualties as well. Again, media-reported figures are fiction. One estimate totals combatant deaths plus Pentagon wounded count updates. It tops 85,000 from hostile and non-hostile causes plus many thousands later reported with brain traumas from explosions. It leaves out future illnesses and deaths from toxic substances exposure, most critically depleted uranium. In addition, the VA-reported 18 daily suicides and the greatest tolls of all from various studies - from 18.5% to 32% with post-traumatic stress (PTSD) disorders plus another 19% with concussions and/or head wounds-inflicted brain injuries. Before these wars end, many hundreds of thousands of Americans alone will be scared for life or dead.

For Iraqis and Afghans, it’s many times more hellish with no end of conflict and occupation in sight and worrisome signs of further war against Iran. Dowd is justifiably angry. He states that “come hell or high water, no matter what, those who rule the USA will never learn. But will we (in time to stop them).”

Part IV - Toward a Better World - Or the Worst Ever? - At the Cliff’s Edge

Dowd states what’s hard to dispute - that “we live in what must be seen as the most perilous times ever” with his finger pointing squarely at America as culprit. He cites an

“abyss” of:

- unending wars, possibly nuclear ones; each one begets the next;
- a fragile world economy; excess greed; unrepayable mountains of debt; America eating its seed corn;
- pervasive political, business and social corruption; stolen elections highlight it; so is an illusory democracy and the power of big money running everything; and
- potential environmental disasters.

These are multiple ticking time bombs. Any one of them can destroy us. Conditions aren't improving. They're worsening. The stakes keep getting greater, but most Americans are distracted and unmindful.

Dowd blames it on “demon growth” - on capitalism's toxic fallout. Its nature demands more by exploiting “nonhuman and human elements of nature - in a destructive and tragic interaction.” With unimaginable capacities for good, they're wasted on producing ills. Damage keeps mounting inexorably toward a harsh future fate.

Unless we change and live differently, we'll “go down with our planet as a species.” Knowing what to do is easy. Doing it another matter. We've so far not even tried.

A Democratic and Totalitarian or a Genuinely Democratic Society?

Dowd quotes Lincoln during the Civil War saying: “We must ‘disenthrall’ ourselves, and then we shall save our country.” He meant accepting reality and ending self-deception. It applies more today than ever, but does anyone notice. Some but too few.

We're afflicted with too many “isms,” negative ones - racism, sexism, consumerism, nationalism, militarism, imperialism and capitalism. Shorting of ending them, we're heading “toward degeneration and self-destruction.”

Solutions:

- change “ingrained habits of mind;”
- never lose hope; the impossible is possible; by effort, not wishing;
- future predictions are futile; they'll be what people make them; promising signs emerge; weakening US dominance is one;
- remember Antonio Gramsci's challenge - “Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will;” don't just think it; do it; become political, informed, active, disruptive; know the stakes; spread the word; do it now and keep doing it;
- we've done it; it works; it freed black slaves, empowered unions, produced civil rights and won impressive social gains; all too often then lost; movements lose their energy; people “rest on their oars;” elitists take advantage; they've never been more empowered; it's time to heed Arundhati Roy; “we are many, they are few.”

We're all in this together. It's “one world or none at all.” Unity is essential and plenty of it.

Otherwise, we're heading for "disarray, degeneration, and disaster." We alone control our fate. The goal - a world society based on cooperation, not competition. One without "isms," at least the above negative ones. Invent a new one or use none at all. What matters is what we produce - democracy, real, not illusory: "culturally, economically, politically, socially" with humans as part of nature, not its adversary. And fundamental is that wars won't be tolerated - never as a first or last resort. Each begets the next. Their dangers inevitably increase. They're now too horrific to contemplate. Ending them is the only choice or they'll end us.

"If not now, when? If not us, who?" If not soon, maybe never. If that's not incentive enough, what is?

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