

In pursuit of happiness: sources of American discontent. *T.R. Martin.*

**Abstract:** The unequal distribution of wealth and income and the rise in social problems are two reasons that Americans feel a sense of malaise. An even more important cause of discontent is the greed and selfishness that motivate an obsession with pursuing wealth.

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With few exceptions, human beings want to improve their material welfare; to own more goods, live in more comfortable housing, eat well, work less laboriously, have good medical care, feel secure. Wanting a better life is a natural goal of our striving and, within limits, a legitimate one. On this score, how well is the United States doing? And how do Americans feel about it?

Though welfare economists use a number of indicia to measure material well-being, the single most important measure, as it subsumes so many others, is income. But, apart from the huge task of gathering reliable data, deriving meaningful real-income comparisons poses vexing questions. How, for example, does one compare the United States and Mozambique, with its reported annual per capita income of about \$30? Beyond indicating that the gap is wide indeed, comparing the numbers at the extremes is not very useful.

Another difficulty is the absence of a common standard of measurement. The starting point is the U.S. dollar, but other nations have their own currencies. Comparing gross national products by using dollar equivalents based on international exchange rates gives one set of answers. On this basis, the United States comes in about tenth in the world.

So we're not the richest? Ah, but what is more important is the purchasing power of each nation's monetary unit. So the experts convert the numbers to "purchasing power parity." After this adjustment, the World Bank reports that tiny Luxembourg is in first place (\$29,510 per capita, 1993), the United States second (\$24,750), Japan seventh (\$21,090), and Germany eighth (\$20,980).

Luxembourg aside, then, we are the richest people on earth, surely an enviable position. Are we also the happiest? Or, if not content, at least rather well satisfied? Without attempting statistical comparisons, it seems open to doubt. In a Time/CNN poll conducted in January of last year, 53 percent of respondents agreed that this country is in "deep and serious trouble." (Ten years ago, the figure was 40 percent.) Social observers - and not only Jimmy Carter - frequently use the word "malaise" to describe our collective state of mind.

How explain this seeming anomaly? Objectively, there are many contributing factors; subjectively, differing explanations reflect conflicting interests, ideologies, and values (the latter, as will be seen, a much-neglected element). But part of the answer no doubt lies in the figures.

Disposable personal income per capita (in constant dollars) increased 21.5 percent from 1970 to 1980,

but only 11.7 percent between 1980 and 1990, and, despite the overall growth, real median income per household grew only 1.7 percent between 1984 and 1992. The next two years showed some improvement, but over the past decade growth has been anemic, and this in an era of rising expectations.

Moreover, using per capita income as an indicator of citizen satisfaction is like aiming a blunderbuss at a bullseye. If we are the wealthiest of the major nations, we also have the most unequal distribution of income and wealth. A Twentieth Century Fund study estimates that the top 1 percent of families owns about 40 percent of U.S. wealth. According to New York University economist Edward Wolff (cited by Robert Kutner in the Washington Post), that same 1 percent, with average wealth of \$2.35 million each, holds 46.2 percent of all stocks and 54.2 percent of all bonds. And the next 9 percent own most of the rest; the bottom 90 percent hold just 10 percent of all this wealth. Since 1982, Kutner writes, the aggregate value of the New York Stock Exchange has risen more than 400 percent, while the average worker's real wage has declined about 15 percent. The maldistribution of income would be even worse were it not for transfer payments such as government pensions, Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, and other public assistance programs.

Statistics tend to make the eyes glaze over. But a seriously skewed distribution of income and wealth should not be discounted as a source of discontent. Americans are amply informed about (and fascinated by) the enormous incomes and profligate spending habits of top business executives, professional athletes, star entertainers, and others at the apex of the economic pyramid - a phenomenon often characterized as "obscene." Seeing (especially on TV) how the rich live, in fiction and in fact, hardly makes Mr. and Mrs. American ecstatic about their own situation, especially when they fear unemployment and/or loss of medical insurance, worry about paying college costs for their children, fret about retirement income, etc. Many couples feel locked into the two-income pattern to maintain a standard of living deemed essential. Among other things, according to health experts, many are chronically sleep-deprived.

Economic fears, envy, and insecurity are not the only sources of the malaise reflected in polls. Many are persuaded that something in our society is badly amiss. Again, there are figures to support that view. William J. Bennett's Index of Leading Cultural Indicators (1993) charts increases in negative social phenomena over a just-elapsed two-decade period. In 1970, for example, the juvenile violent crime arrest rate per 100,000 was 215.9; in 1991, 430.6. The percentage of children living in poverty in 1970 was 15.1; in 1990, 21.8. Some 669,000 cases of child abuse were reported in 1976; the estimated figure for 1991 was 2,694,000. There were 19.9 abortions for every 1,000 teen-age girls in 1970; an estimated 43.8 in 1990. The teen suicide rate per 100,000 went from 5.9 in 1970 to 11.3 in 1990. The percentage of children living only with their mothers doubled from 11 in 1970 to 22 in 1990. The number of violent crimes reported in 1960 was 288,460; in 1970, 738,820; in 1991, 1,911,770.

These and other data suggest very strongly that American society is in disarray, and, it surely seems, in decline. A great many Americans sense this; they are fairly familiar with the kind of information Bennett has gathered, from firsthand experience and from the media. But they find themselves mystified about the underlying causes. Hypotheses abound, clear answers are elusive. Without questioning any of the factors already listed, I want to offer an analogy that will suggest the relevance of another and, I think, significant component of our malaise.

Moviegoers will recall a riveting scene near the end of *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. The British officer, Colonel Nicholson (Alex Guinness) has retained authority over his men through long

imprisonment by the Japanese in Burma. He is driven by the goal of building a fine bridge over the river, and under his command the prisoners succeed magnificently. Nicholson's motive is puzzling. The bridge would serve the enemy very well indeed as a strategic link in the transportation system connecting Bangkok and Rangoon. Why would the colonel cooperate? Pierre Boule, author of the book on which the movie was based, explains it in terms of the "military mind" - "a sense of duty, observance of ritual, obsession with discipline, and love of the job well done."

In the unforgettable denouement, when three British commandos undertake to infiltrate the site and destroy the completed bridge, Nicholson discovers the scheme and tries to thwart it. A young commando leaps out of the bushes and plunges a knife into the back of the Japanese camp commander, standing right next to Nicholson. The Japanese soldiers lining the bridge, now alerted, bring down rifle fire on Nicholson and two commandos. In a moment of enlightenment, right after seeing the two commandos die almost in his arms, Nicholson's folly dawns on him. "What have I done?" he cries. Then, hit by mortar fire (ironically from the remaining commando's weapon), he lurches toward the plunger that will detonate the explosive charges on the bridge, falls on it as he loses consciousness - and destroys the bridge!

"What have I done?" What are we doing?

Too many of us, the evidence suggests, are chasing money with the same blind obsessiveness that held Colonel Nicholson captive and unaware. We pursue it either for its own sake or for what it will buy: a newer car, a second car (or a third), a bigger house, this gadget or that one, a more prestigious college for the children... whatever.

Too few recognize or question the compulsive character of this drive for more. It threatens the integrity of the professions, especially law and medicine. It serves as all-sufficient rationale for corporate policies (downsizing, union-busting, pension-raiding, the endless global search for cheaper labor) that destroy jobs and communities. It distorts our politics and suborns our politicians. Something is wrong when the world's richest nation is the least generous among developed countries in granting aid to poor lands and peoples, when wealthy individuals, communities, corporations resist all and any measures to equalize educational opportunities, access to medical care, and decent housing. It does not seem a far stretch to postulate a linkage between this all but universally accepted goal of living, on the one hand, and the social pathologies documented by William Bennett: violent crime, sex without commitment, abused and abandoned children, rising divorce rates. The ruling value is the same: Me first.

We began by saying that wanting to improve our lot is natural to us, and legitimate. But, as someone has said, if you love money you will never have enough of it. (Not money, but "the love of money is the root of all evil," Saint Paul wrote.) For whatever reasons - historians, sociologists, pundits will wrangle over the question - this society is suffused, to the point of sickness, with the desire for more, and then more.

This is a disease of the spirit, not readily addressed by government. Social policies such as realistically generous foreign aid, enlightened welfare programs, a genuinely progressive tax system will more likely follow upon rather than create a change of spirit. Will we, like Colonel Nicholson, experience a moment of enlightenment? Not likely. But let us pray that over time we can come to recognize the wisdom of Pope John Paul II in *Evangelium vitae*: "In a word, we can say that the cultural change which we are calling for demands from everyone the courage to adopt a new life-style, consisting in making practical choices - at the personal, family, social, and international level - on the basis of a correct scale of values: the primacy of being over having, of the person over things."