Why Is It So Hard to Be a City on a Hill?

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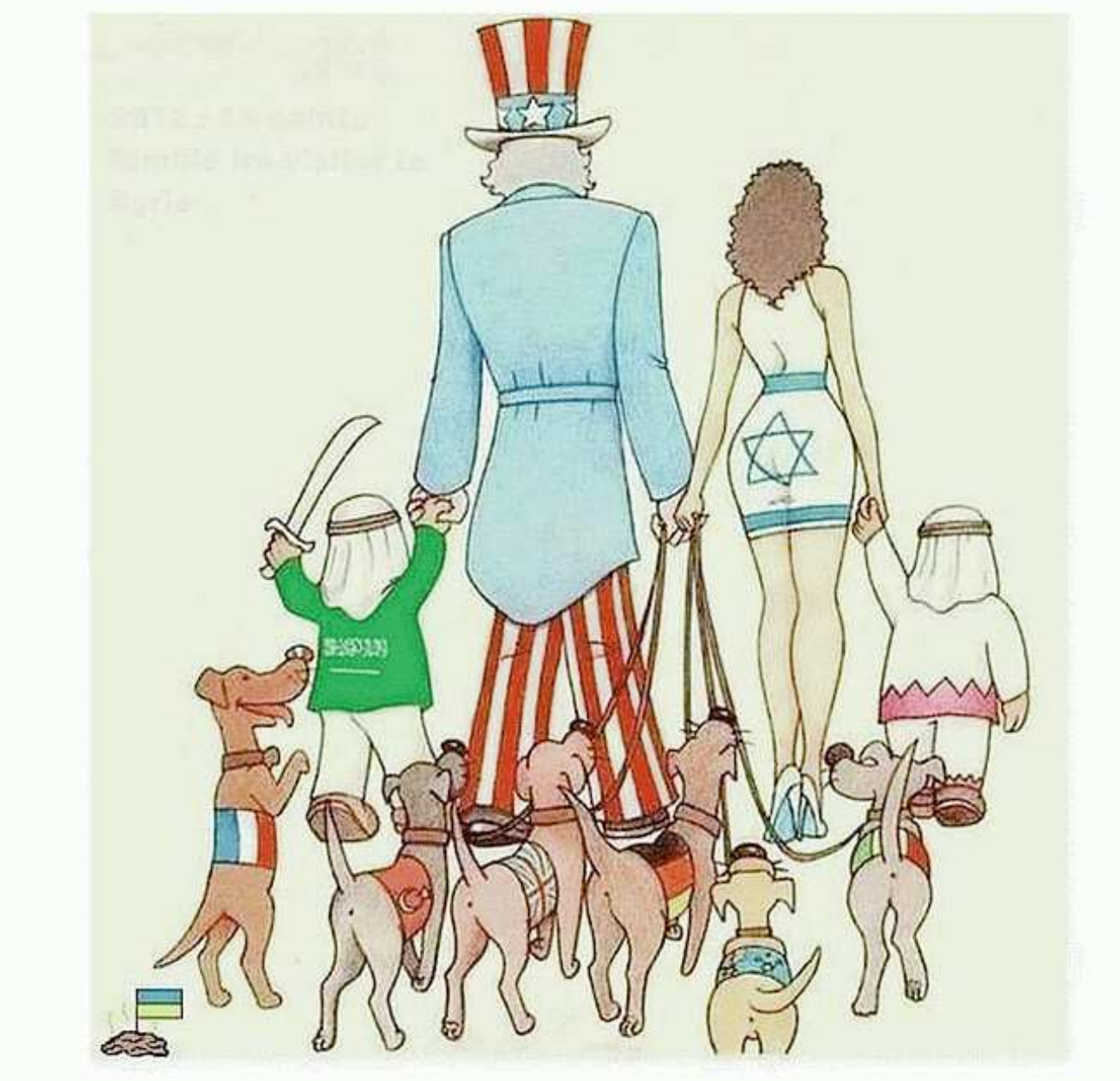
by Jeffrey Race



This humorous image is one take on America's role in the world.

This next displays the words from John Winthrop's sermon "On Christian Charity" on the Beacon Street plaque a few steps down from the State House, commemorating the 300th Anniversary of Boston's founding.

"We shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us"

and from William Bradford's famous history *Of Plimouth Plantation*

"As one small candle may light a thousand, so the light here kindled hath shown to many, yea in some sort to our whole nation."

What transmuted the 1630 reality into the 2022 reality?

The Englishmen who settled here four centuries ago became, in the words of Harvard's own Professor Samuel Eliot Morison, the "spiritual ancestors of all Americans."

What did they believe, why, why did it change — and what lies ahead?

Oddly the word Puritan has become a term of opprobrium.

In fact they had a vision of a new way of life, based on personal responsibility and caring for one another in a hard-working community. The Puritans invented public education, without which today's America is unimaginable. They founded Harvard. Without them you and I would not be here today. They were the far-ahead advanced thinkers of their time.

From their thinking came many other firsts Boston gave to America: the first public school, the first public library, the first public beach and the first subway.

Fearing God they believed in a life of virtue and purity — personal, theological and liturgical. That's the first point I want you to remember.

The behaviors they saw as comprising virtue are not what led to their, and America's, distinctiveness, but rather their insistence on living them. The elements of a virtuous life are much the same among ethical and faith traditions so not the differentiator for us here.

As remains the case onto the present day, moral rigor made them enemies, including their king. They had to give up their property, their families, their monarch and their country.

The second point I want you to remember is that **t**hese people knew that being exceptional demands abnegation.

So, lives of purity and abnegation: that's tough because these principles conflict with human nature.

Our species evolved through competition for resources. To become humans as we have, dominating the globe, demanded vigorous self-aggrandizement over millions of years, putting down competing organisms. That's not the only way to survive, but it's the way we survived. It's possible to live cooperatively in a borderless community, protecting and supporting each other. Such communities have existed since the earth cooled. Had that path been chosen for us, we wouldn't be human; we'd be bioslime living under a rock somewhere. But cooperative communities like this do exist, right now, right inside you: the calculus on your teeth.

Maintaining a community on principles contrary to human nature demands strong leaders as well as limiting the flow of conflicting messages. That's why Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams were invited to depart. Strong peer pressures are essential.

Winthrop's central message to his shipmates was that they were covenanting to live in a new way which would be a model for others. But the community was to be nothing *more* than a light onto others. Winthrop said plainly, repeating the Prophet Micah: "walk humbly."

Ultimately moral entropy prevailed and Puritan values were overthrown,

which we'll get to in a moment. But with sufficiently stringent limits on communication, and sufficiently strong barriers at its social borders, a divergent community can last thousands of years -- say 4,000 years in the case of the Hebrews and the Samaritans. Their historical experience exemplifies the adaptive value of in-group favoritism. The dietary and other rules laid down in the Book of Deuteronomy, and Talmudic teaching forbidding exogamy, are the principal factors in their survival over the millennia. The Zoroastrians, another group forbidding exogamy, have survived even longer than the Hebrews and the Samaritans. Everyone else from their epoch is gone.

It worked for the Hebrews, the Samaritans and the Zoroastrians, but not for the early Americans. Why not?

For centuries American foreign policy derived from this model of virtue and abnegation. Think of General Washington turning down the offer of kingship of our new nation, or of his Farewell Address, or of John Quincy Adams' July 4 address to the Congress as Secretary of State in 1821. He says of America:

"She has abstained from interference in the concerns of others."

"Wherever the standard of freedom and Independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will be her heart, her benedictions and her prayers. But she goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy."

This focus on perfecting oneself was one among the several elements which made the United States the towering power it is today. Others were the rule of law and vigorous immigrant communities.

It certainly wasn't resources — think of Argentina.

Winthrop gave no leave to his community to merit exceptional power or benefits; instead he tells those on the Arbella that they bear an exceptional burden: to "walk humbly" and to be a model of mercy and kindness in a world of sin.

How did political discourse today come to exploit Winthrop's image of a place of exceptional moral virtue as legitimating enforcement of America's vision, even a license to benefit from the exceptional and extraordinary power given us by the character of our people and of our institutions?

We can see the change pick up energy after our Civil War, in the gradual shift in elite precepts from non-intervention to quasi-imperial expansion. Think of Teddy Roosevelt, the Spanish-American War, and our succession to the Spanish colonies.

Why?

Because the California Model overthrew the Puritan Model.

Self-gratification replaced precepts of purity and virtue.

Self-advancement and preferment replaced the precept of self-abnegation.

Hubris cast humility aside.

We can summarize this California Model as

"If it feels good when you are doing it, don't think twice and don't stop!"

These are the precepts that rule America today.

And we at Harvard are privileged to know the change is real, *and really good*, because in 2017 our own university administration removed the words

"til the stock of the Puritans die"

from "Fair Harvard," the ancient anthem we shall sing together at the end of this day. *Avant la lettre*, Harvard cancelled the very people who made it possible for Americans to be great. *This is it* for us. Americans rejoice in being Nietzsche's Last Man, seeking only warmth and comfort, content to pass away unnoticed, leaving nothing behind.

Now in public discourse we hear only of GDP, growth, more and more cars, bigger and bigger houses. No one talks of virtue, or if you hear someone prattling on about it you call 911, EMS comes, and they get him back on his meds.

Why did this happen? Because the Puritan Model restrains human nature,

as do all religious and ethical systems. It takes effort and concentration, and a lot of social and peer pressure, to go against nature. With the reduction in the cost of transportation and of communication, and the incorporation of new groups with persistently different ideas, the onset of moral entropy was inevitable. A large body of sociological and anthropological literature explains how behavior changes when a closed community opens up.

Humans as social animals require support, validation and approval as much as can be from superiors, peers and subordinates. They reciprocate in kind, social exchanges that are the metaphorical glue holding groups together. The bonds and the behaviors expected are more powerful than legal obligations.

In small isolated communities the support can come only from those physically nearby, so a *modus vivendi* develops in which all cooperate and necessarily share values or at least coordinate behaviors, because there is no physical alternative. Gangs and other deviant groups don't exist.

As communities open due to increasing opportunities for communication with outsiders, social approval can come from others than those physically present. The possibility of diversity and deviancy then arises. Gangs don't exist in closed village communities, but they thrive in Los Angeles. Social divisions are manageable in a society with only three television channels, in which everyone in America watches the same news at 6 p.m. sitting in front of his television, TV dinner on lap (as I did with my family in the early 1950s).

As just one documented example, a Princeton study showed that development of 3G cellular technology increased levels of political polarization over its ten-year period of introduction. The same principle applies to the growth of television and social media: social cohesiveness becomes social disintegration and then social collapse, with hundreds of millions of youtube, twitter and facebook feeds, each giving requisite social support and approval to its (possibly very few) consumers. No longer any need to care for the sensitivities of others or the good of the community. And Mr. Zuckerberg has even more damaging plans for us. Technology will continue to cut communication costs, so if other things stay the same, divisiveness will continue to rise and anomie and resulting stress will increase further.

We were lucky civic virtue lasted centuries. Normally decay is much faster, as the scripture writers tell us in the Book of Exodus. Not 40 days after

Moses ascended Mount Sinai the Hebrews had already recreated the Golden Calf. It took centuries for the Puritan Model to degenerate into the California Model.

What next?

At a personal level, it is possible to recreate a community of virtue and abnegation, but only by isolating from the larger society. That's what the Puritans did then, and what many do now, repudiating all social media activity, abstaining from television, and blocking from themselves and their children the pathologies of American society. It works, but the children find it hard to converse with their peers — or at least that's what my daughter Jasmine tells me.

What might turn America itself back to become a humble model of virtue and good governance? We are talking about a major change in beliefs and behavior of a large society.

Does this ever happen? Sure! History reveals three ways to achieve durable behavioral change.

First a change in external circumstances forcing a change in behavior as an adaptive response. Think of the depression of the 1930s, moving people from the superfluities of the '20s to frugal attention in the '30s to the important things in life. Even greater and more spectacular changes lie immediately ahead of us as Americans will soon be forced to consume only what they personally produce, rather than living on capital by drawing down energy stored up in the earth over eons, or spending paper claims empty of economic substance created by the Federal Reserve System. People may draw constructive conclusions from these ineluctable changes — or they may fall to quarreling and to heeding demagogues offering quick and painless solutions. Our children, and their children, will never experience the physical and mental comforts we did, able as we were effortlessly and quickly to draw down our savings in the Bank of Mother Nature, and to exhaust our nation's credit as the world reserve currency made possible by President Nixon's severing the dollar from gold. The stresses resulting from having to live on what you produce will add to the divisiveness from technological change.

A second way is through the influence of a charismatic leader who even without resources can (if other things go right) create new behavior in a large

community. Think of Lycurgus creating from layabout Laconians the Spartans we still remember millenia later. Or Mohammed creating the foundation of an Islamic empire out of dissolute and quarrelsome Arab tribes. Or Lee Kuan Yew transforming Singapore into what it is today from the dirty and corrupt city I well remember from the 1960s.

The third way historically is the influence of high-status individuals. Think of the role of doctors, political leaders and movie stars changing smoking from universally expected into something disgusting. Or in the opposite direction, 1960s movie stars renorming childbirth outside marriage from a disgrace to a triviality, unthinkable as I grew up in the 1950s but now 40 percent of births in America.

Nowadays great men no longer aspire to public office, for well-known and excellent reasons. But the Puritans and the Founding Fathers *were* such Great Men, immensely wise and knowledgeable of the ways of the world.

John Winthrop himself foresaw what might happen to his great experiment. When political figures speak of the city on a hill, you never hear them go on to quote Winthrop's prediction were the formula to be broken:

> "if we shall fall to embrace this present world, and prosecute our carnal intentions, seeking great things for ourselves and our posterity, the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us, and be revenged of such a people . . . ."

Some see the millions dead in America's failed wars as the Lord's wrath.

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Digging Deeper

"Cambridge, The Focal Point of Puritan Life" (four-part series)
<https://historycambridge.org>

Charles Francis Adams' 1930 oration at the emplacement ceremony of the Founders' Memorial at the Boston Common
<https://boston400.blog/1930-usa-founders-memorial/>

The gold-standard analysis of the Puritans and their influence down the centuries remains William Perry's two volumes titled *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* and *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province*.

Frank Capra's "Why We Fight": an eight part documentary commissioned by the War Department in 1942 to explain to American soldiers how World War II began in 1931, showing how American leaders gradually transitioned public thinking toward supporting the European war effort as a necessity to protect America and its cultural values (starting with the Puritans whom it portrays at the very beginning of the series). For a documentary targeted at enlisted ranks it is quite profound, including even Mackinder's Heartland Theory. (Start with the last segment on Disk 2 followed in order by Disk 1 and the rest of Disk 2.) Hitler's brazen and unopposed actions in Austria, the Sudetenland and Czechoslovakia itself, dramatically presented in maps and contemporary news footage, powerfully prefigure Putin's actions in the Donbas and the Crimea.
<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0035209>

A Face in the Crowd (1957): Andy Griffith and Patricia Neal dramatize the beginnings of TV's destructive effect on the polity.
<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0050371>

Nikita Melnikov, "Mobile Internet and Political Polarization"
<https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3937760>

Richard D. Brown, "Where Have All the Great Men Gone?"
American Heritage 1984 Vol. 35, issue 2
<https://www.americanheritage.com/where-have-all-great-men-gone>

title.qxd + final.qxd -> hardtobe.pdf v1.4
May 24, 2022 minor edit
July 4, 2022 minor edit and add clarifying paragraph "The behaviors . . . ."
June 11, 2026 add William Perry note

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