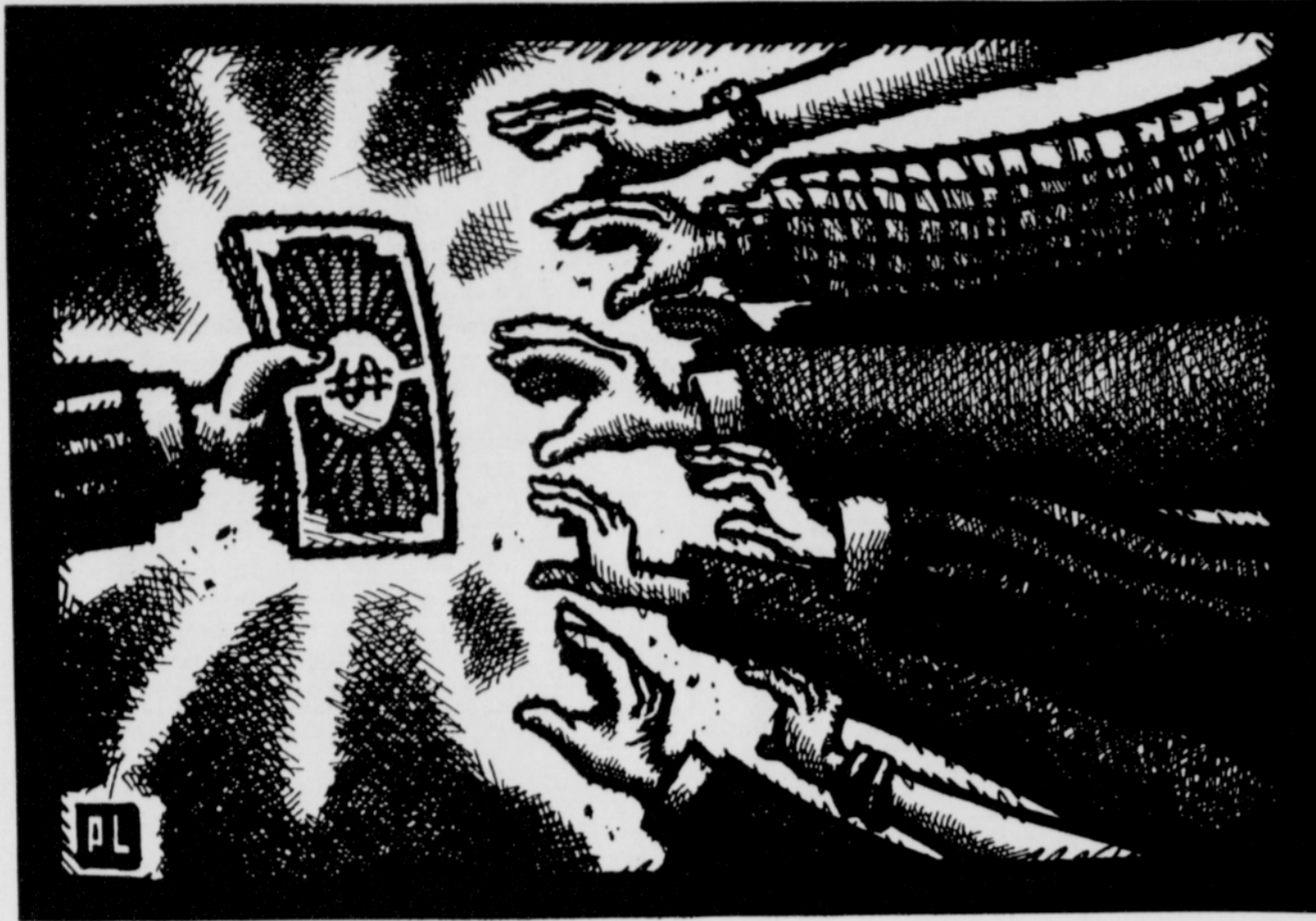


AMERICAN DREAM? FORGET IT!



PAUL LACHINE

BY ROBERT BRAKE

"Most Americans truly believe they are pre-rich."
~JUDITH GRIFFIS

He stood just 5 feet 2 inches, was honored on a 1982 postage stamp, and became a big favorite of Groucho Marx and Ernest Hemingway. Americans bought 200 million copies of his dime novels — with intriguing titles like *Raggedy Dick* and *Sink or Swim*.

His name was Horatio Alger, a 19th century writer who never became rich himself, but who believed that through honesty, thrift, determination, cheerfulness and hard work, anyone could achieve the "American Dream." More than anyone else in our history, Alger created and perpetuated that myth.

As children, we learned about Horatio Alger in the form of a fairy tale that can come true — characters from impover-

ished backgrounds that, through pluck, determination and hard work, were able to make huge successes of themselves in this land of boundless opportunity. The message was that anyone could make it in America — and make it big.

So literary characters like F. Scott Fitzgerald's "Jay Gatsby," Arthur Miller's "Willy Loman" and Mario Puzo's "Vito & Michael Corleone" emerged as seekers of the American Dream. Subsequently, the American Dream — the belief that anyone can become rich — became one of America's most powerful drugs.

Yes, we Americans are *addicted* to this rags-to-riches myth, though people in other industrialized countries seem content to make a good living, pay their bills, raise their families and take occasional vacations without any cutthroat desire to get rich.

Most people outside the U.S. don't live their lives based on fairy tales. They live in reality. They believe there will only be a few rich people. You're not going to be one of them — so get used to it.

Of course, there are greedy bastards in other countries, but they have some limits placed on them. British CEOs make just 24 times as much as their average workers. German CEOs make only 15 times more than their employees.

But here in the good old USA, our average CEO makes 411 times the salaries of their blue-collar workers. Yet we hate to punish our greedy or corrupt CEOs with prison terms and we seem happy to cut their taxes.

We have watched them fleece us and destroy the American Dream for most working people. But we didn't draw-and-quarter those "adventurous risk-taking capitalists" or hang them at the gates. No. We seemed giddy when Congress blew them a kiss and gave them some record tax breaks.

Why? Michael Moore said it best: "We drank the Kool-Aid." Since we bought into the lie that we, too, some day could be rich, we certainly don't want to do anything that could harm us on the day we become millionaires, do we?

The get-rich carrot is dangled in front of us all our lives and we believe we are almost within reach of it. We've seen it happen, haven't we? Look at all those millionaires out there, some of whom came from nothing to great wealth.

It's a seductive myth that prompts many Americans to play the stock market, buy gobs of lottery tickets, or speculate in other get-rich-quick schemes. Sucked into the Horatio Alger myth, many hard-working Americans cash their paychecks and — emulating the very rich — call their very own "personal" stock brokers, hoping to see their worth triple over-night. Easy Street, here I come!

But let's "get real" and face the truth. Most of us are never going to be rich. Not only aren't we going to be rich, we'll probably spend the rest of our lives busting our butts just to pay our bills. And if the Bush tax cut becomes permanent, what benefits we enjoy now will be whittled down to nothing.

Forget about pensions, Social Security, and kids taking care of us when we get old, because the kids are barely going to have enough money to take care of themselves.

What is happening to the American Dream? One recent survey revealed that only 21% of 18-29 year olds believe they have a very good chance of achieving the "good life." And only 23% of the rest of us think the American Dream is "very much alive."

Sure, that's bleak. Times are tough. Yet some continue to buy into the Horatio Alger fairy tale, imagining that they will be the ones that escape the madness and get their slice of the pie.

Forget it. Fairy tales are for children. Grow up and heed the late billionaire J. Paul Getty's advice about getting rich: (1) Get up early. (2) Work hard. (3) Find oil.

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IT'S TIME TO STOP BEING HIT

BY MEL GILES

Mel Giles, as described by her friend Michael Moore (of *Fahrenheit 9/11* fame), "has spent years working as an advocate for victims of domestic abuse and sees many parallels between her work and the reaction of many Democrats to November's election." Her essay is reprinted from Moore's on-line letter for *Common Dreams*.

Watch Dan Rather apologize for not getting his facts straight, humiliated before the eyes of America, voluntarily undermining his credibility and career of over thirty years. Observe Donna Brazille squirm as she is ridiculed by Ray Buchanan, and pronounced irrelevant and nearly non-existent. Listen as Donna, Nancy Pelosi and Senator Charles Schumer take to the airwaves saying that they have to go back to the drawing board and learn from their mistakes and try to be better, more likable, more appealing, have a stronger message, speak to morality. Watch them awkwardly quote the Bible, trying to speak the 'new' language of America. Surf the blogs and read the comments of dismayed, discombobulated, confused individuals trying to figure out what they did wrong. Hear the cacophony of voices crying out, "Why did they beat me?"

And then ask anyone who has worked in a domestic violence shelter if they have heard this before.

They will tell you: Every single day.

The answer is quite simple. They beat us because they are abusers. We can say it is unfair. But we are looped into the cycle of violence, and we need to start calling the dominating side what they are: abusive. And we need to recognize that we are the victims of verbal, mental, and even, in the case of Iraq, physical violence.

As victims we can't stop asking ourselves what we did wrong. We can't seem to grasp that they will keep hitting us and beating us as long as we keep sticking around and asking ourselves what we are doing to deserve the beating.

Listen to George Bush say that the will of God excuses his behavior. Listen as he refuses to take responsibility, or express remorse, or even once, admit a mistake. Watch him strut and tell us that he will only work with those who agree with him, and that each of us is only allowed one question (soon, it will be none at all; abusers hit hard when questioned; the press corps can tell you that). See him surround himself with only those who pledge oaths of allegiance. Hear him tell us that if we will only listen and do as he says and agree with his every utterance, all will go well for us (it won't; we will never be worthy).

And watch the Democratic Party leadership walk on eggshells, try to meet him, please him, wash the windows better, get out that spot, distance themselves from gays and civil rights. See the Democrats cry for the attention, affection and approval of the President and his followers. Watch us squirm. Watch us

descend into a world of crazy-making, where logic does not work and the other side tells us we are nuts when we rely on facts. A world where, worst of all, we begin to believe we are crazy.

How to break free? Again, the answer is quite simple.

First, you must admit you are a victim. Then you must declare the state of affairs unacceptable. Next you must promise to protect yourself and everyone around you being victimized. You don't do this by responding to their demands, or becoming more like them, or engaging in logical conversation, or trying to persuade them that you are right. You also don't do this by going catatonic and resigned, by closing up your ears and eyes and covering your head and submitting to the blows, figuring it's over faster and hurts less if you don't resist and fight back.

Instead, you walk away. You find other folks like yourself, 57 million of them, who are hurting, broken, and beating themselves up. You tell them what you've learned, and that you aren't going to take it anymore. You stand tall, with 57 million people at your side and behind you, and you look right into the eyes of the abuser and you tell him to go to hell. Then you walk out the door, taking the kids and gays and minorities with you, and you start a new life. The new life is hard. But it's better than the abuse.

We have a mandate to be as radical and liberal and steadfast as we need to be. The progressive beliefs and social justice we stand for, our core, must not be altered. We are 57 million strong. We are building from the bottom up. We are meeting, on the net, in church basements, at work, in small groups, and right now, we are crying, because we are trying to break free and we don't know how.

Any battered woman in America, any oppressed person around the globe who has defied her oppressor will tell you this: There is nothing wrong with you. You are in good company. You are safe. You are not alone. You are strong. You must change only one thing: Stop responding to the abuser.

Don't let him dictate the terms or frame the debate (he'll win, not because he's right, but because force works). Sure, we can build a better grassroots campaign, cultivate and raise up better leaders, reform the election system to make it fail-proof, stick to our message, learn from the strategy of the other side. But we absolutely must dispense with the notion that we are weak, godless, cowardly, disorganized, crazy, too liberal, naïve, amoral, "loose," irrelevant, outmoded, stupid and soon to be extinct. We have the mandate of the world to back us, and the legacy of oppressed people throughout history.

Even if you do everything right, they'll hit you anyway. Look at the poor souls who voted for this nonsense. They are working for \$6 an hour if they are working at all, their children are dying overseas and suffering from lack of health care and a depleted environment and a shoddy education.

And they don't even know they are being hit.