


TALK RADIO AND THE AMERICAN DREAM



Murray B. Levin

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by

MURRAY B. LEVIN



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Introduction

THE assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy in 1963 was the first of several shocks that precipitated a crisis of confidence in American society, an explosion of mistrust, a skepticism about fundamental values that continued into the early 1980s. For two decades public opinion pollsters reported that Americans were experiencing a profound loss of faith in politicians and parties, big business, labor leaders, the professions, and the judiciary. Millions of Americans believe that this crisis of confidence was precipitated by the baneful effects of self-interest and a corrosive and all-consuming materialism. The confidence gap extended to the core beliefs of the liberal tradition. The political alienation and anomie of the 1960s and 1970s were so pervasive that the American Dream, the mythic bedrock of the republic, was losing its magic. Some leading social scientists were concerned that a crisis of authority was a serious possibility.

This crisis of confidence was rooted in reality. The precipitous decline of national felicity was a response not merely to the president's assassination but also to the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, the Watts riots, student protests, the women's rights movement, the gay rights movement, the black rights movement, the emergence of new lifestyles and new sexual codes, the integration of public schools, affirmative action, and a proliferation of social welfare programs. These dislocations, threats, and annoyances were exacerbated by recurrent inflation, recession, and rising unemployment.

The 1960s and 1970s were turbulent decades, during which mistrusting America became a national pastime for rich and poor, black and white, educated and uneducated, Protestant, Catholic, Jew, Democrat, and Republican. The loss of confidence was bipartisan, multiracial, and ecumenical. This was a confidence gap of historic

proportions in a nation where confidence and patriotism are the first assumptions of public life.

The United States is a culture of confidence, a nation whose self-esteem and aggressiveness were nourished by the conviction that it had discovered the self-evident truths of political economy—those natural and beneficent laws that produce social harmony and prosperity. Confidence in the republic was reinforced by a profound consciousness that, with its founding, the oppressions of Europe had been left behind, that America was a *tabula rasa*, capable of being molded into a prosperous and democratic society of equals. Self-evident truth became identified with free enterprise and electoral politics. Loyalty to the American way became a unanimous and compulsive reflex action, a petrified and dogmatic commitment that transcended the vicissitudes of the business cycle and political venality. Confidence became the national ethos; mistrust became aberrant and heretical. The decay of this positive public feeling, however, has been the leitmotif of recent decades.

Crises of confidence are rare and, therefore, revelatory, X-rays, as it were, that reveal the bones beneath the flesh of the body politic. When the bedrock of trust is eroded and the unanimity of the liberal tradition threatened, it is possible to explore the degree to which the American commitment is an artifact of nationalistic public relations, a false consciousness of massive proportions, or a genuine love of country. It is possible to locate, with some precision, what in the national terrain is anchored and what may give way in stormy seas.

Talk Radio and the American Dream is the first book to document and analyze a period of American history through tape recordings of hundreds of hours of talk radio. Talk radio is now a significant vehicle of public opinion in America. Thousands of shows in hundreds of cities accumulate a magnificent archive of Americana, an unparalleled oral history of our time. Thousands of hours of daily conversation, rich and prolix, serious and banal, largely working class, catalog the intimate concerns of daily life and comprise a record of political and social commentary that has never been tapped by students of American life. This massive and enormously rich record of the public sentiment is obliterated every few days when radio stations erase their tapes. Yet these tapes reveal the tension of American life: sorrow and anger, bigotry and tolerance, mistrust and pride in country. These tapes record a strong sense that public good and communal

feeling are being eroded by the callous self-interest of big business and the venality of political apparatchiks.

This oral history, largely spontaneous and anonymous, is an astonishing testimony to the growing belief that something fundamental and corrosive is sapping the vitality of the republic. The diagnosis of callers is inchoate and diffuse, but the sense of malaise is there, particularly when callers articulate the petty concerns of daily life—the seemingly insignificant interchanges between neighbor and neighbor, customer and salesman, citizen and policeman. It is here that the callousness of the nation is exemplified in microcosm.

Talk radio is a particularly sensitive barometer of alienation because the hosts promote controversy and urge their constituencies to reveal the petty and grand humiliations dealt by the state, big business, and authority. Controversy and intimacy nourish the audience and multiply the station's revenues. But the unique quality of talk radio has much to do with the fact that it is the province of proletarian discontent, the only mass medium easily available to the underclass. The talk show is the most déclassé of media; it is the captive of smaller budgets, less-sophisticated technology, less-famous hosts, and relatively smaller audiences than television. Working men and women, the uneducated, and those who live on the margins of mainstream America need not fear the exposure that video creates. Anonymity reduces the reluctance of the uneducated. The abundant civic complaints that are a show's stock-in-trade nourish the urge to talk. As the prime conduit for proletarian despair, talk radio has become an oral history of the other America, a channel for the vast underground of discontent that lies below the calm surface of American life. As such, talk radio has become one of the very few delegitimizing voices of America. As a chronicle of disenchantment, the talk show represents the obverse of television's prime fairy tales: the Ewings and the Carringtons.

Talk Radio and the American Dream utilizes this goldmine of Americana to document the turbulent history of the 1960s and 1970s. Seven hundred hours of broadcasting on two of New England's most important political talk shows—one conservative, the other liberal—were tape-recorded in 1977 and 1982. The tapes were used to construct portraits that are more than impressionistic representations of the time but less than scientific abstractions of reality. Talk radio is not a random sample of public opinion, but it has a vibrancy and

emotional range, a nakedness and reality that can never be conveyed by the quantitative measures of the public opinion pollster. This first effort to use talk radio for serious social analysis is frankly experimental, but the portrait of reality that emerges is unique, a stunning and poignant parade of American types.

Talk radio as oral history has advantages over survey research. Talk radio can be truly a human interchange, faceless but heartfelt, between real people, not pollsters and respondents playing roles and bound by rituals. During two or three hours of talk radio, it is possible to develop dialectic that reveals a complexity and a wide range of feelings. Talk radio is confrontational; it presents opinion responding to contradiction. In this sense it is richer than the static opinions frozen in time by the pollster.

The talk is full of anger towards the politicians and parties and towards big business and labor. The lower middle class and proletarian callers who often make radio their private preserve despise social welfare, affirmative action, and secular humanism. But they also attribute many of the nation's ills to unrestrained self-interest and excessive materialism. They speak of their alienation and powerlessness, of the futility of voting, and of the corruption and unresponsiveness of politicians. They sense the disappearance of communal bonds and the decline of mutual aid. They speak of the maldistribution of social justice. The crisis for them is moral, not merely political.

There is a brooding but inchoate feeling among callers that the moral basis of the nation has gone sour, a sense that the old ethical and moral guidelines are losing their force. There is a sense of despair—not concretized, but present—a sense that the American Dream is under siege. The deeper crisis is located in this despair. It is here that the talk captures the sadness as well as the anger of the age.

Talk radio is not merely a record of the past, it is a portent of things to come. The talk of working Democrats, violently opposed to the welfare state, full of hatred of the poor, blacks, and the counterculture, forecasted the Reagan triumph. Talk radio in the late 1970s was inundated by Democratic working men and women who were fed up with their party's commitment to economic equality. Mistrust of America converted Democrats into conservatives.

Talk Radio and the American Dream attempts to document this shift and the wave of powerlessness and alienation that swept the nation. The effort naturally leads to comment on the possibility that future crises of confidence may become crises of legitimacy, large-scale withdrawals of allegiance.

Chapter 1, "Mistrusting America," deals with the creation of a culture of confidence in America and the emergence of the crisis of confidence. Chapter 2, "Talk Radio and Proletarian Despair," explores the milieu of political talk radio: the role of the host, the guests, and the nature of the talk. Chapter 3, "Everything That's Good We No Longer Have," presents the angry talk of neoconservatives, which now reverberates in national politics. Chapter 4, "Have a Nice Day," is preoccupied with talk of the debasement of the manners and morals in daily life. Chapter 5, "I Looked in His Eyes and I Knew He Was a Crook," examines the politics of the alienated voter. Chapter 6, "To Catch a Thief," presents several strategies to counter the stereotype of the politician as liar and crook. The degradation of American politics is the issue. Chapter 7, "Liberal Language and the Failure of Class Consciousness," considers the impediments to class consciousness in America and some preconditions for a more radical politics. Finally, "Nagasaki Mon Amour," concerns the trust in America of one of the men who directed the atomic bomb run on Nagasaki.

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Mistrusting America

A PICTURESQUE version of American history, a fable, has become an article of national faith. The United States was settled by men and women who fled the oppressions of the Old World. The absence of these oppressions—monarchic absolutism, aristocratic privilege, and religious intolerance—made the Enlightenment dream of equality and democracy a reality in America. Americans in the eighteenth century, so the fable goes, were aware of their unique and good fortune. They had left the feudal world of Europe behind, and had escaped the burdens of the past: ritual, magic, tyranny, class, and superstition. Their prospects were unlimited. Land was abundant and easily accessible. Democracy was the natural heir to this shared opulence; God and nature seemed to assure a humane, prosperous, and democratic outcome. Confidence in America was the natural response to this bounty.

Trust in America was buoyed by the rhetoric of patriots, preachers, and burghers, who reminded their fellow expatriates of the profound difference between tyrannical Europe and free America. This dichotomy was understood to be God's redemptive work.

The New World was cast in the image of the Garden of Eden, a wondrous and bountiful miracle created for man by God. This miraculous image and the reality of a rich and fruitful land promoted a culture of trust and optimism, a national sense that America offered the good life and could be trusted to fulfill its promise.

Americans luxuriated in this vision of a new and unprecedented age of freedom. The enormous natural advantages of the nation generated a dream of abundance and a belief that America could provide social justice. Optimism, trust, possibility, expansion, af-

fluence, and confidence became the building blocks of the national psyche.

The uniqueness of America is symbolized by its revolution: the only upheaval designed to preserve the past rather than destroy it. The revolution was fought to preserve the ancient rights of Englishmen, little more. The American Revolution, like no other was quietly affirming and unprophetic. There is a very important cue here: A revolution that is so down to earth—so without prophets and visions—can occur only in an advantaged and self-confident nation. The French writer Alexis de Tocqueville understood these revolutionary origins: “The great advantage of the Americans is, that they have arrived at a state of democracy without having to endure a democratic revolution; and that they are born equal, instead of becoming so.” With this blessing, America became a rock of ages.

The founding fathers mediated the theories of John Locke and based America on liberal self-evident truths: men are created equal and possess equal rights, sovereignty resides in the people, private property is sacrosanct. The belief that it embodied nature’s universal truths made America a revered and sacred community—honored, trusted, destined to convert the faithless. With such a blessing, confidence can easily give way to hubris.

The rapid triumph of capitalism reinforced America’s identification of moral superiority with free enterprise. The production and reproduction of affluence transformed *laissez faire* from an eighteenth-century novelty into a national religion. Capitalism became the American way. This fusion of moral rectitude with affluence defined the American experience and reaffirmed the image of America as a Garden of Eden, a “City upon a hill,” a cornucopia of equality and prosperity, a unique experience in world history. This image of opportunity, plenty, and equality has been the popular and official conception of the republic since its founding. It is a confident and trusting image, frozen in our national monuments and our official art.

This commitment to America and free enterprise, however, is not relaxed. It is strident, dogmatic, and compulsive; it is passionate and metaphysical. Free enterprise has become a matter of such transcendent conviction that to test its reality is superfluous. The Great Depression, disastrous wars, and political scandals have not seriously disrupted the true believer nor created a demand for systemic di-

agnosis. Nourished by apparently self-evident norms, and thus beyond history, patriotism in America can easily give way to visceral super-patriotism.

Despite the forces that discourage dissent, despite the liberal orthodoxy that is our signature, America has developed a modest, basically polite, nonviolent tradition of dissent, a skepticism that is occasionally excited by gross inequality. Amercian critics and reformers speak in muted, nonradical tones. Neither the muckraking Progressives, nor the “radical” New Dealers systematically criticized the existing order or created a political party inimical to capitalism. With the exception of Populism, the constituency of mistrust never proposed a radical vision of a better society. Reformers have periodically focused attention on specific evils—bosses, political machines, trusts, corruption, collusive business practices—but they have not proposed remedies to alter the distribution of power of justice in fundamental ways. America, in the midst of its most cataclysmic depression, did not produce a master critic of the system, or a mass conservative or radical movement, or a prophetic visionary armed with a new model of production and a correlative social ethic. The genius of American politics has been its ability to pacify without sacrificing, to produce and reproduce, from generation to generation, an enormous reservoir of felicity and patriotism.

But a collapse of this magnanimous feeling occurred in the two decades preceding Ronald Reagan’s election. An unprecedented nationwide explosion of mistrust, an erosion of faith in America, was precipitated by repeated shocks such as the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, ghetto riots, the women’s rights movement, the gay rights movement, the racial equality movements, inflation, recession, and stagflation. The country often appeared to be out of control. During the 1960s and 1970s, much of the country lost confidence in the White House, the Congress, and the electoral process. Big business, many of the professions, and labor leaders also became suspect. Virtually every section of the country, every social class, and racial and religious group, experienced a precipitous falling away from traditional loyalties. There was an unprecedented crisis of confidence.

This crisis was characterized by a profound sense that the gap between the American Dream and reality had become intolerable. Large minorities questioned the virtue of self-interest as a way of

life. Many began to doubt that a nation so divided could generate a sense of community to nourish the mutuality of interest and felicity that produces civic culture: compliance to law, willingness to accept defeat, a disposition to compromise. A widespread and prolonged withdrawal of trust threatened the civic order.

During the 1960s and 1970s, mistrust of America became the centerpiece of political culture. Pollsters reported that political alienation and feelings of powerlessness had reached unprecedented levels. A substantial majority of Americans believed that the distribution of social justice had become profoundly skewed.

The confidence gap was so public, the despair and anger so deep, that every public opinion pollster and survey research center—Gallup, Harris, Roper, Yankelovich, Caddell, Seasonwein, Cantril, the University of Michigan Center for Political Studies, the Opinion Research Corporation, the National Opinion Research Center, Cambridge Reports, ABC, CBS, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*—documented the rising tide of mistrust, and raised questions concerning the viability of the American system. The loss of faith was so sudden and so dramatic that pollsters refer to it as an “explosion of mistrust,” a crisis of confidence.

Mistrusting America became a national preoccupation for rich and poor, black and white, educated and uneducated, Protestant, Catholic, Jew, Democrat, and Republican. There were refinements, exceptions, and asymmetries within each group, but the thrust of national public opinion was clear: a confidence gap of historic proportions.

Daniel Yankelovich, one of the nation’s most thoughtful pollsters, documented the crisis.

We have seen a steady rise of mistrust in our national institutions. . . . Trust in government declined dramatically from almost 80% in the late 1950’s to about 33% in 1976. Confidence in business fell from approximately a 70% level in the late ’60s to about 15% today. Confidence in other institutions—the press, the military, the professions—doctors and lawyers—sharply declined from the ’60s to mid-70s. A two-thirds majority felt that what they think “really doesn’t count.” Approximately three out of five people feel the government suffers from a concentration of too much power in too few hands, and fewer than one out of five feel the congressional leaders can be believed. One could go on and on. The change is simply massive. Within a ten-to-fifteen-year period, trust in institutions has plunged

down and down, from an almost consensual majority, two-thirds or more, to minority segments of the American public.¹

These data are unprecedented in the history of survey research. The decline in trust was precipitous and all-inclusive. This explosion of mistrust matured within a few years, and became a contagious alienation that ultimately spread to the moral foundation of the nation: liberal ethics, the fundamental building block of legitimacy. The extent of bad feeling was so pervasive that some politicians and scholars speculated that a crisis of legitimacy was possible, a widespread withdrawal of allegiance. The crisis of confidence was, in essence, a bitter outcry that democratic routines and the system of social justice had been inverted.

By the late 1970s government, big business, and labor had lost substantially more than half the support they had enjoyed in the 1950s. In 1980, in the land of Horatio Alger, less than one-sixth of the people retained their confidence in big business. The working man's representatives at the bargaining table were also in disrepute. In two dozen polls taken between 1966 and 1981, the proportion of the population expressing a "great deal of confidence" in the leaders of organized labor fell from 22 percent to 12 percent. When Ronald Reagan was first elected president, almost 70 percent of Americans believed that "the government is run for the benefit of a few big interests."²

During the late 1950s almost four-fifths of the American public felt confident about the role of government. In 1976, the level of trust had declined to approximately 38 percent. In 1958, less than one of every four people believed that there were "quite a few crooks" in government; in 1979, almost one-half held that view. In 1958, 43 percent agreed that the government wasted a great deal of money. Twelve years later, seventy-eight percent concurred.

During the 1960s and 1970s numerous pollsters reported a sharp decline in political efficacy, the belief that voting counts, that politics is understandable, that people have some meaningful influence on political outcomes. The ultimate test of political efficacy is the conviction that one has some say about what the government does.

During the 1960s and 1970s dozens of pollsters asked, "Do you agree or disagree with the statement, voting is the only way that people like me can have any say about how the government runs

things.” In 1964, almost 75 percent agreed. When Ronald Reagan took office, 58 percent agreed. Between 1960 and 1980, the proportion who agreed that politics was too complicated to understand, increased 12 percent. In 1960, the year of John F. Kennedy’s triumph, only 27 percent believed that they had little or no say in what government does. A decade later, 45 percent reported that they lacked influence over the government. When President Reagan took office, 39 percent agreed with the statement, “People like me don’t have any say about what the government does,” and 48 percent felt that politics was too complicated to understand.³ Two decades after myth-makers crafted Camelot and the national mood was reaffirmed by so many Beautiful People, perhaps one-third of all Americans felt politically alienated.

In the two decades following John Kennedy’s death, majorities perceived the government as increasingly unresponsive and bureaucratic. Large numbers of people lost much of their faith in the meaningfulness of elections. Between 1964 and 1980, the Center for Political Studies at the University of Michigan attempted to measure the perceived responsiveness of the government. “Over the years, how much attention do you feel the government pays to what people think when it decides what to do—a great deal, some, or not much?” The proportion who responded “a great deal” declined from 32 percent in 1964 to 8 percent in 1980.⁴

By the time President Reagan was inaugurated, fewer than one of every two Americans believed that government was responsive to public opinion. This decline in confidence was paralleled by growing mistrust of political parties and elections. Between 1964 and 1980, the proportion of respondents who believed strongly that parties “help to make the government pay attention to what people think” decreased from 41 percent to 18 percent, while faith in elections as responsive vehicles declined from 65 to 51 percent.⁵ By 1980, less than one-fifth of the respondents had a “good deal” of faith in the responsiveness of parties, congressmen, or “the government.” This dramatic decline in trust was accompanied by a sharp decline in party affiliation.

Pollsters explored perceptions of the attentiveness of congressmen during these decades. The Center for Political Studies, for example, reported that during the crisis of confidence, the proportion who believed that their congressman paid “a good deal” of attention de-

clined from 41 percent to 16 percent.⁶ The belief in popular sovereignty had seriously been weakened. The state and its agencies were no longer perceived as fiduciary agents, but as unresponsive enclaves of self-interest. The public sensed a profound negation of good faith, an illegitimacy, an inversion of good order and right.

Fifteen years of political and economic upheavals eroded the traditional optimism of the American people. Patrick Caddell, President Carter's pollster, reported that Americans, in the late 1970s, were becoming increasingly pessimistic about their personal lives and skeptical about the future of the country. Pollsters reported for the first time that a majority of Americans believed the near future would be worse than the present.⁷ This finding, unique in the history of survey research, indicates that mistrust of the system had become personalized: Americans actually expected the quality of their daily life to decline.

The crisis of confidence was not merely political. Confidence in big business fell from approximately 70 percent in the late 1960s to 15 percent in 1977. Substantial majorities perceived big business as venal and motivated solely by self-interest. Big business, for example, was perceived as the prime spoiler of the environment. Although majorities expressed their appreciation of the technological achievements of American business year after year, they nevertheless rated business negatively in several critical areas. Big business was considered to be uninterested in containing increases in the cost of living. Business was also perceived as actively involved in planned obsolescence and inadequately motivated to produce new and better products.⁸

The public service role and ethical standards of business were the subject of numerous public opinion polls during the crisis. Yankelevich, for example, asked respondents for several years whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement: "Business tries to strike a fair balance between profits and the interest of the public." In 1968, 70 percent agreed. The figure plummeted to 33 percent in 1970, and then declined to 23 percent in 1980. As of 1981, less than one of every five Americans believed that big business was willing to curb its own interests on behalf of the public interest.⁹ The Roper Organization discovered, during the crisis of confidence, that two-thirds of their sample doubted that business advertising was honest. Six out of ten doubted that business paid its fair share of taxes.