

Trump and “Business Be Damned”

G. Ginocchio

Since the unfortunate turn of events last November with the election of Donald Trump as President, including now several weeks of actually occupying that exalted office, any number of perceptive critical commentaries have tried to capture who he is and what his administration represents. Some of the many labels critics have used to characterize President Trump have been: right-wing populist, nationalist, autocrat, dictator, even Nazi. While all these labels have some merit, none is more fitting, I believe, than the label, businessman, a label which I am certain Mr. Trump and his supporters would ardently embrace. No doubt many who voted for him did so because they thought a successful businessman would make a better president than your typical politician -- that he would promote economic growth and create jobs and would see to it that government is run more like a business. The problem with this seemingly innocuous label that would generally be interpreted as a positive attribute is that such an interpretation is based on a misperception of the true nature of the businessman and business. Properly viewed, the businessman and business are really the enemies of culture and civilization and government and the public good, as Elijah Jordan so insightfully brings out in his appropriately titled book, *Business Be Damned* (1952).

Throughout his critical dissection of business, Jordan uses terms such as caprice, irresponsible, ignorance, force and fraud to characterize the mind and activities of business. For example, note the following characterization of the business mind in his first chapter, “Business Is King:” “...the type of mind demanded of business is entirely lacking in either intellectual or moral capacity or character. Business feeds upon falsehood and has not the intelligence to see that its lies cannot be validated by further lies. This fraudulent ignorance has become implemented in a unique method -- propaganda -- the method of disguising its own lies by advertising.” (p. 18) Given the hyperbole, deception, and “alternative facts” that have characterized the Trump campaign and his first weeks in office, it is not too much of a stretch to suggest that our businessman-president fits Jordan’s description of the business mind rather well.

To sharpen your wits and critical thinking, not to mention explore the relevance of Jordan’s thought for our time, I want to invite you to discuss some examples from the Trump phenomenon which illustrate any of several selected passages from *Business Be Damned* which are quoted below. These are by no means the only or even the most relevant passages, but I believe they do provide an opportunity to critically reflect on the rather dire straits we find ourselves in today. I would also welcome submissions of any other relevant passages which you believe are pertinent.

I drew the following passages from two chapters in *Business Be Damned*: (1) Chapter 4: Business the Destroyer, and perhaps most directly relevant, (2) Chapter 7: Business, Politics, and the Statesman.

1. Chapter 4: Business the Destroyer

4.1 “Business is, unconsciously, but nevertheless effectively, opposed to any kind of political order of society. Business is the world anarchist.” (p. 55)

4.2 “Since it is the way or method of thought that comes to be established as an institution, discussions of institutions are beyond the powers of persons not specially trained to thought. This is why businessmen are totally ignorant on these questions, and why they make such a hopeless mess of things when they engage in the conduct of public affairs.” (p. 55)

4.3 “Nothing more forcefully demonstrates the utter primitiveness of the business mind than the extent to which the businessman carries his dependence on what he calls ‘psychological methods.’ It is to be seen in the professional optimism of businessmen’s organizations and the shallow propaganda by which they attempt to deceive themselves into believing what they know to be false. Such propaganda to maintain ‘confidence’ is a form of primitive magic.” (pp. 56-57)

4.4 “...the businessman is crude and crass and yet unconscious of his pretense in the presence of genuine objects of culture. It also explains why he is loud in his protestations of his own intellectual competence.” (p. 62)

(2) Chapter 7: Business, Politics, and the Statesman

7.1 “In practically every public activity business has a blind finger; no motive toward the public good is not exploited and profited on. The methods are the same always: force and fraud, power exercised through deception, and dependence upon the advantage that can be taken of human honesty and decency by irresponsible cleverness.”

“A most interesting instance of this fraud as a vital thrust at the public good is the propaganda for ‘economy.’ Every public function is to be starved and robbed so that more of the public substance may be swallowed up in private gain. ‘Tax reduction’ is a similar rape of the public welfare in which every public institution, the school, the instruments of justice and public convenience, is sacrificed to swell the profits of private business.” (p. 106)

7.2 “Business is not only destroying politics, it is destroying *respect for politics* in the minds of people generally. What business calls ‘politics’ is held up to ridicule and contempt on every occasion, or without occasion. Ridicule is the form that business propaganda against public purpose takes. No opportunity is let slip to destroy the interest in public welfare in the minds of men. The very term politics itself has come to have derisive and odious implications.” (p. 113)

7.2a “Note the phrases and ‘slogans’ by which politics is brought into contempt and business eulogized... ‘More business in government and less government in business.’ ‘The nation’s business is business.’ As a result government and public purposes and activities are looked upon by many as essentially opposed to the interests and welfare of people, and interest in public affairs is disappearing.” (pp. 113-114)

7.3 “*The corruption of politics is therefore merely the application to it of the regular methods of business.* A political office can often be made a valuable source of gain to the one who holds or controls it. It may control the purchase of large quantities of supplies, or the disposal of property or of jobs. All of these, from the point of view of business, are merely so much business to be done, upon which a ‘legitimate profit’ is to be made. And, as in business generally, the largest profit obtainable is due the person who does the business. *What is therefore called political corruption or ‘graft’ is merely the application of ordinary business methods to public functions.*” (pp. 119-120)

7.4 “The very idea of the public good is perverted in the business mind. He thinks of it in purely physical terms of comfort and utilitarian terms of convenience. The quality of goodness he does not know. Welfare to him is a stuffed belly and a tickled nerve. Our ‘captains’ of industry and ‘magnates of business’ are not intelligent men.” (pp. 120-121)

7.5 “His method of fraud and force has involved him and he too lives in a world of deception -- self-deception. All his intellectual energy goes into the propaganda by which he keeps himself self-deceived. He is an optimist; that is, expert in convincing himself that it is his moral duty to deceive himself into believing what he knows to be false. This narcotic optimism....” (p. 126)

7.6 “It is with a mind framed in force and fraud and fear that the businessman faces his public responsibility.” (p. 127)

As I noted previously, the above passages from just two chapters in *Business Be Damned* hardly exhaust the relevant passages that conceivably could have been cited. In this regard, I welcome other passages you may contribute; and, of course, I welcome the examples you may describe from the Trump phenomenon in reference to the passages I have provided herein. For convenience sake, you may refer to the numbers of the passages which I have assigned them (eg., **4.1**) in discussing your examples. I look forward to your contributions.