

AmeriKa Psycho

Published in the 'Good Weekend', Sydney Morning Herald 19 May 2001.

Richard Neville peers behind Uncle Sam's mask of sanity

Maybe George W Bush has done the world a favour. When, in March, he renounced the Kyoto treaty on greenhouse emissions (because it would hurt America) he helped peel away the mask of sanity from Uncle Sam, revealing him for what he is, in all his savagery and nonchalance – a glutton and a psychopath. Forget the Taliban, Gaddafi or the beastly Saddam Hussein, it is the United States that is out of control, the wildest rogue nation of all. The assertion of America's lifestyle rights, come what may, over any other consideration – including the survival of future generations – was made during the week of the Oscars. Catching a transit-lounge glimpse of this spectacle, I marvelled at its imperial might, its furious flame-fanning of consumer desire. The desire for beauty (although of an exterior kind), wealth, fame, luxury and crappy movies. The Oscars are Hollywood at its height: an off-camera underclass at beck and call, the comedians neutered, cosmeticians in the wings, the cost of designer gowns ranging from \$US10,000 to \$40,000 per star, not to mention the diamonds. The confirmation of America's technical flair and export prowess came with the crowning of Gladiator, along with an unconscious identification with Imperial Rome. See, we rebuilt the Colosseum. And therein lies the beguiling genius of Uncle Sam – the dissemination of illusions consumed as reality. Not just in movies, but in its products, politics and foreign policy.

America is the land of the free. Really? How about an Oscar from the World Academy of Jailers for holding the highest proportion of its citizens in custody. Of the global prison total, one quarter is incarcerated in the US, minus the 152 inmates executed by George W. Bush when Governor of Texas – a State that provides no funds for the defence of the poor. Much of Australia's prison system is now in the managerial grip of a US correctional chain.

America fosters unbridled competition, which benefits all. In media, manufacturing, high tech, entertainment, oil, groceries and much more, the giants are on a roll. Four companies now control 87 per cent of American beef, another four control more than 84 per cent of its cereal, and just two companies control almost 80 per cent of the world's grain trade. Almost all primary commodities are controlled by six or fewer companies. From such an elite are drawn the President's puppeteers: \$US2.3 million from Exxon Mobil helped elect Bush, whose administration is awash with former oil executives. Another Bush supporter, Rupert Murdoch, is now seeking to bypass cross-media ownership restrictions in New York and extend his opinion-shaping domain. The man who pays the piper produces Gladiator as well as the daily news. As in the ecosystem, diversity is shrinking. Happiness is honoured. How come the most prosperous nation on earth exhibits the highest rates of clinical depression? The country which wrote the happiness quest into its constitution reels from an epidemic of the malignant sadness. This, too, is a marketing opportunity. The annual report of pharmaceutical company Eli Lilly chortles, "Prozac changed everything, and that's just

the beginning." America promotes the global expansion of human rights. Not according to the record. Kyoto apart, the US has spurned vital international treaties on war crimes, land mines, the prohibition of the execution of juveniles, arms controls, test bans and even the Convention of the Rights of the Child (standing alone with Somalia). The refusal is based on a fierce assertion of US sovereignty. As law professor Peter J. Spiro noted in the journal *Foreign Affairs*: "Only free trade agreements, as long as they are limited to free trade and do not include environment, labour issues or human rights, pass muster ... because they are thought to serve American interests." The nation so keen to safeguard its own identity is quick to submerge that of its trading partners. The key human right promoted abroad is the right to shop. The land of opportunity.

Yes, but the deck is stacked. The richest 1 per cent has more financial wealth than is possessed by the poorest 90 per cent of Americans combined; the starkest inequality among major Western nations. The net worth of Bill Gates, according to Ralph Nader, is equal to the combined net assets of the poorest 120 million Americans. The impact of such division percolates through the country. You see it the moment you land at the airport and feed a credit card into the trolley machine: the tattered touts, the stretch limos, the battered buses, the bright lights of Tiffany's. What's unseen is worse. About 40 million US citizens are not covered by any form of health insurance, a figure that is increasing each year.

And so on, and on: the decline of public education, infrastructure, welfare and all the rest. Basically, the US is a republic of lobbyists attached to a global public relations machine bent on turning the whole of life into a series of paid-for, staged events, like guzzling fake food in themed restaurants, while displaying designer sportswear, and chattering about *Gladiator's* special effects as we wash down Prozac with a Starbucks soy latte, and remain largely oblivious to the deeper tragedy taking place on the late great planet Earth. George W. Bush is not an original. He is pursuing the doctrine formulated by his father on the eve of the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, 1992, which laid the groundwork for Kyoto. Bush the Elder said he was prepared to talk about the environment, but – here's the rub – "the American way of life is not negotiable". Got it? This mantra should be burnt into the brains of six billion earthlings, because the American way of life is now diminishing the life of everyone else. In disaster movie speak, it's *Planet Hollywood* versus the world. Already, with less than 5 per cent of the global population, the US uses almost 30 per cent of the planet's resources. Its emission record is the world's worst, spewing 20 tonnes of greenhouse gas per person per annum – a quarter of the world's total. (Australia comes in second with 18 tonnes.)

The US consumes a quarter of the world's oil, a third of its paper, and 40 per cent of its beef and veal. The reason given by the US President, G.W. (Global Warming) Bush for his abandonment of Kyoto was uttered with commendable brevity: "Emission controls do not apply to the developing world." So? In most cases, their energy use is minuscule, only 5 per cent of per capita emissions of the West, while its inhabitants are climate fodder already, living and dying on the frontline of hurricanes and floods. Emissions from developing nations will rise, but let's not overlook the reason. Their farms, factories and infrastructure are throbbing to service the appetites of distant consumers, whether it's Kenya airlifting flowers to the Netherlands, or Korea shipping cut-price cars. The source of the fumes ascending from their smokestacks is ... us. Meanwhile, the average

American uses 10 times more coal than the average Chinese person – and contributes over 50 times more carbon dioxide to the atmosphere. The average American also requires four times as much grain and 27 times as much petrol as the average Indian. The land of the free is also the land of the fat; its citizens are plagued with obesity. While many may deny the existence of global warming, the overwhelming advice of the scientific community is that we should prepare now for rising seas and disruptive weather. Earlier this year, the massive Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), reported that the 1990s were the hottest decade since the 1860s, when instrument records were first taken, and that 1998 was the hottest year. It foretold "future large-scale and possibly irreversible changes in Earth's systems". This report broke new ground by citing the cause of the warming as "mostly due to human activity". And this activity is not about to wind down.

The American way of life is not negotiable. Worse – the American way of life is inescapable. And the nation that runs the world is ruining the world as it runs amok in Armani, dazzling us with Julia Roberts and gangsta rap, making us sick with fast food, workaholia and porno violence, as its hordes of silent seamstresses in tropic locations stitch Calvin Klein onto our Y-fronts. All for the glory of shareholder value. And yet, according to the Economic Policy Institute, "85 per cent of the increase in the stockmarket since 1976 has accrued to 1 per cent of the population". It's worth it, you say, it's worth it. On highways, at airports, at universities, for a splash of change, I can slake my thirst with a Burger King strawberry milkshake. Even in Kathmandu, probably. It's the nearest thing to mother's milk, evoking dairy maids and Jersey cows, a singing-dancing Julie Andrews plucking the fleshiest berries. Actually, this beverage contains more than 50 chemical flavours, including yummy amyl acetate, ethyl methyl-phenyl-glycidate and methyl anthranilate. Most of the flavour in most of the food eaten today in the US is concocted by scientists. Like the Oscars, it is the triumph of illusion over reality. It might be bad for our health, bad for the ecosystem, but it's good for shareholder value. The economy, stupid. The deeper you dig, the worse it gets. As soon as I write it, I hate that sentence.

It's not that I think everything about America is appalling – far from it. Many of its products are delightful, irresistible, like Austin Powers, jazz, literature, the First Amendment, Jewish humour and the PowerBook. On a dark, stormy highway with famished toddlers, I've even felt a rush of gratitude at the sight of the Golden Arches – sure, we'll have fries with that, unaware such an impulse serves to shrink the world's variety of crops. As with other food chains, according to the Worldwatch Institute, McDonald's demands in each country it enters that the varieties of potatoes grown by local farmers be replaced by their global standard, the Idaho Russet. Taste and technique must remain uniform, so the global potato harvest is now "precariously homogenous", dependent on pesticides of declining oomph. As climate warms, the range and resilience of the pests increase, invoking fears of a potato blight – a global replay of the Irish famine. In my madder moments of reflection about America, it seems like it's the Vietnam War all over again; except, instead of "killing gooks", it's about making a killing. Instead of poisoning the forest with Agent Orange, it's about despoiling the biosystem. Once a "peace probe" referred to the annihilation of a village; now the term "outsourcing" stands for a sweatshop. Once it was the Vietcong who were blitzed with US propaganda, now it is the rest of us who are blitzed with US propaganda. Maybe the

old slogan is true, after all: "We are all Vietcong." The ad biz is a friendly harbour for creative types and some of its output is witty and fun. At its core, however, the industry is a volcanic eruption of lies: CDs will never scratch, you too can have the shiniest hair in the world, the stealth bomber is invisible, we appreciate your patience and will be with you shortly. No longer confined to promoting products, advertising has insinuated itself into the culture in such a way as to be indistinguishable from everyday life. It is not just the commercials seen on TV, it is the lifestyle depicted by the TV: the logos, restaurants, cars, facelifts and how-to-solve-a-problem-with-a-gun. The ads and the programs are synonymous. Without being aware of it, we live inside a nonstop marketing event. As insistent and pervasive as it is – piped into planes, buses, schools, motels, Borneo – its source is singular. Seinfeld and Friends are screened on most Qantas flights; the menu of movies-on-demand in Australian hotels is almost exclusively from Hollywood. Does this matter? You be the judge. When did you last watch a sitcom from Brazil, a pop clip from India, a movie on love and marriage among Kurdish refugees in Paris? (On SBS, the last one. No guns, no fisticuffs; riveting.) While US content lately honours ethnicity, to the point of caricature, and even alternative attitudes, the slant is quintessentially God Bless America. "Ours is a wonderful culture," a US soccer star said on TV. "We're individualistic, we're competitive, we're aggressive." Her team went on to conquer the local Matildas, just like her "wonderful culture" is set to conquer the world. Back in 1924, Monsieur Costil, then head of the French Gaumont cinema chain, told his countrymen it would be "a very long time" before French films found favour in America. They were "too strange and complicated". Success in the US required "a formula". Three-quarters of a century later, Costil's deconstruction of a Hollywood hit remains intact: "voyages, sports, dances, records and audacious examples of force". Meanwhile, American movies and the values they embody have swept the world. From his grave, Costil's final caution has bite: "remember, every American is at heart a 'business man'". And so, too, now are we. The Man from Snowy River, having turned himself into a brand, is hunched at midnight over a business activity statement, pitting the depreciation of assets, including his "small and weedy beast", against GST. Perhaps he now regrets his capture of the colt from old Regret.

Most people I know are working their guts out, even the ones who should be singing soft-rock ballads around the piano in pink dressing-gowns at Shady Acres. "Have you been on the Harbour Bridge at 7.30 pm?" gasps a friend. "It's still peak hour." As Jack Munday points out, in 1800 the Governor of NSW set the working hours for convicts at 50 hours a week, and today many people are working longer hours than convicts in a penal colony 200 years ago. Workaholia is not the only Wall Street export. Share options and pay for performance have also spread to Europe and Australia, further sharpening wealth disparities. In the past decade, the salaries of CEOs in the US have jumped 481 per cent while worker pay has risen only 28 per cent. Overall, American CEOs earn 419 times the pay of the average US worker. In 1976, an Australian CEO earned three times the average wage, today it can be up to 30 times as much. A survey conducted by the Australian Financial Review found that two years ago, CEO salary packages of Australia's top 100 companies rose by 22 per cent, to an average annual whack of \$1.45 million. On top of that come share options, with an average gross value of \$6.15 million. Everyone is desperate to be a millionaire, a superstar, a dot.com (still!), a brand name – even the teens. This trivialisation of desire reaches into our innermost being, and

that of our offspring. Marketing prattle is unstoppable, without any sense of its own absurdity: "Teens have a keen sense of 'me'," notes an analyst, whether it's "selecting the colour of their laptop ... or customising the colour of their cell phones." Being aware of the latest fad has come to define what it means to be a child. The Web site iTurf uses "hip street talk to lure its young customers and sell them products online," reported The Sydney Morning Herald, "...discussing such topics as breast size, how to attract sensitive boys and repel body hair". Its founder plans to expand iTurf to offer teens their first credit cards, their first mortgages, their first chat-room romances. His goal is clear: "We're going to own this generation." Perhaps he will. Thin on the ground are the anti-heroes; the mystics and mavericks who proclaim alternative values and hold in contempt the obsessive accumulation of wealth – today's Jack Kerouac, Martin Luther King, Ned Kelly, Timothy Leary, the young Germaine Greer... Since I can remember, New York has hosted a profusion of wild young things, rebels without a super fund, or even a charge account at Gap, whose mission was to have fun and shatter the self-confidence of millionaires. They set alight dollar bills on Wall Street, let buzzards loose in Macy's, raged, plotted and howled against the machine. While times a-change and all that, even so, during a brief visit last year, I was taken aback by this fabulous city's capitulation to materialism and its brazen credo: get as much as you can as fast as you can. People pound pavements shouting into mobiles; the skyscrapers double as billboards, the cafe docketts are emblazoned with bold reminders, "gratuity not included", each worthy recipient allotted a dotted line: chef, maître d, waitperson, etc, plus tax. The fixed price is becoming obsolete, inciting haggling, even over the price of toothpaste. This is fine in Morocco, enfolded into a ritual of mint tea, pipe passing and Sydney Greenstreet, but wears a bit thin in an alcove at Macy's at rush hour. Don't imagine you can counter the vibe by cruising the Museum of Modern Art, where the "voluntary donation" is compulsory and the marketing relentless. (In the mid-1990s, gallery space at 120 large museums grew by 3 per cent while the amount of space given to museum stores jumped by nearly 30 per cent.) Even the message of the themed exhibition – the idealists – mirrors the mood of the times: marvel at these hoodwinked dreamers who contemplated a fairer world and wound up with Stalin. Silly Picasso. Another light that's failed, at least during my visit, is environmentalism. The only endangered species that sparked concern was a trench coat by Yves Saint Laurent, costing \$US9,250, which had been scooped from the stores. The coat is made from the skin of rainforest pythons. More than 10 million pythons have been taken from the wild in the past 15 years, over half from Indonesia. A pink python jacket from Chanel, with white chiffon trim and matching skirt, retailing at \$US8,455, had also slithered out of the boutiques. "Spokeswomen for four fashion houses that use python," The New York Times wryly noted, "said they had no idea where the skins come from." Hardly anyone knows or cares where anything comes from, or where it ends up, because it is only what's on show that matters, in the windows, in your face, on the billboards, at the Oscars ... fame, riches, power; these are the drivers that seem to be shaping the third millennium, whether we like it or not, despite their ravaging of planet and personhood. "Wealth beyond what is natural is of no more use than water to a container that is full," said the Epicurean philosophers of Ancient Greece, but the dazzling package of popular culture proclaims the opposite – happiness depends on high consumption. We'll keep on splurging till the wells run dry. Soon after the trip to New York, I visited Tonga, one of the poorest nations on earth. Its political system is

unjust, resources are few, and yet I was surprised by joy. Not mine so much, as that of the inhabitants. Laughter echoing through open doorways day and night, none of it canned (scarce TV), extended families and communal lifestyle (free babysitting), time plentiful, shops few, food fresh, a profusion of local poetry, song and dance, none of it tech-dependent, and the people not bent on turning every tourist into a meal ticket. Not yet, anyway. Sure, most of us would prefer to live in pulsating New York than to emulate the Tongans, including the Tongans themselves, probably, and therein lies the dilemma of our time. If everyone lived like New Yorkers, what would be left alive? Perhaps the flurry of survivor TV shows is a subliminal playing out of this post-apocalypse vision. Solar panels and recycling are not much chop against melting ice caps, rising seas, gaping ozone holes and the mass extinction of species. Even if Kyoto is fully enforced, it will only reduce atmospheric carbon by 5 per cent within 10 years. What is required to stabilise climate is a reduction of between 60 and 80 per cent. The American way of life is not negotiable. And it is not sustainable. The loss of biodiversity, according to Worldwatch's editorial director Ed Ayres is "arguably the most dangerous of all threats to human security at large, and to the long-term sustainability of civilisation". He cites an American Museum of Natural History survey of 400 biological scientists which found "a large majority" believe that during the next 30 years, one of every five species alive today will become extinct. It is no longer enough to have an ecological notion; we need to create an ecological self. This is a hard call when you're wearing a trench coat stitched from pythons. Sooner or later, the business community will need to come to its senses. It will need to go further than putting in skylights and greening its logos. Can we rely on its leadership? Corporate titans would much rather win a battle for market dominance than save a species from annihilation. But in the end, there may not be a market, unless the wholesale theft of the future is stopped. What Monsieur Costil foresaw as the philosophic failure of American movies all those years ago – action, force, a formula – was more recently echoed in the Harvard Business Review by consultant Gary Hamel as he skewered the lack of managerial foresight: "The future is left largely unexplored and the capacity to act, rather than to think or imagine, becomes the sole measure of leadership." A common trait in this country, too, both in business and politics. Will globalisation accentuate future-blindness, or can it also trigger a countervailing wave of enlightenment? It will do both. Thankfully, a growing number of Americans share the above concerns, although few of them sit on Capitol Hill. The global Green Party boycott of Exxon Mobil and other predators of the commons is a clue to future strategy, as was the showdown over proprietary drug rights in AIDS-stricken Africa. Global tax, global justice, a global environmental agency, are all on the horizon. The concept of sovereignty was already transcended by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea in 1982, which protects the ocean as "the common heritage of all mankind", in which all rights in the resources of the area are vested. By similar means, eventually, all arms trading can be ended and an agency can be established to distribute all surplus food to the starving. At its deepest level, globalisation is about sharing, just like the Internet, and once understood will incite a value revolution of such sweep that within 100 years the main business of business will no longer be business, and politics will no longer be about swapping preferences, placating nutters and jailing refugees. The total goal will be planetary restoration – social, economic, ecologic. The question to ask ourselves as we

journey into the 21st century is this: is each of us at heart a businessman, or is each of us at heart a human being? On our answer will hinge the fate of the earth. ENDS

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