

# Debunked: ‘What’s Good for Business is Good for America’

There it was again - in an editorial of a newspaper - the cliché I’ve heard all my life: “What’s good for business is good for America.”

As a Christian theologian, I have spoken out against “folk religion,” which consists of unconsidered, unreflective clichés. Is there such a thing, perhaps, as “folk economics”?

The editorial was promoting the election of “pro-business” candidates for public office. For that particular editorial writer, “pro-business” meant anti-government regulation of businesses.

He or she seemed, however, simply to take for granted that readers would agree that “What’s good for business is good for America.” It’s an old saying, an old saw. As I said, I’ve heard it all my life.

As an ethicist, however, I have to ask some questions about this cliché.

And, at the end of my reflections about it, I have to put it in the same category as - in theology - “God helps those who help themselves.” The category is “half-truths (if even that generous) not to be taken at face value.”

One of the tactics of propaganda is the use of clichés that sound good but, upon examination, turn out to be overly simplistic - to the point of practically needing to be discarded.

Is it really the case that what’s good for business is always good for “America”? Let’s parse out the cliché.

First, what is “business?” Today, in the U.S., “business” can mean different things. It’s simply too broad a term to use without explanation.

What all falls under that label and into that category? Well, everything from a neighborhood cooperative grocery store to an international corporation seeking a monopoly on a resource and the products made from it.

“Business” includes Enron and those still functioning that are like it was.

Let me give a case study close to home.

Many years ago, there stood a family-operated health food grocery store near my home. (Not where I live now.)

It was the only place in town to carry many organic and specialty foods related to helping people struggling with dysfunctions of health. It was thriving, and I shopped there many times.

Then a major grocery store chain built a megastore immediately next to it. A year or two later, the major grocery store chain began advertising “health foods” and placing them in a special section of the enormous big-box grocery store.

Within months, the small family-owned and operated health food store went out of business.

Then the big-box grocery store stopped carrying many of the specialty foods needed by people with certain health problems.

To me, anyway, the motive and tactic were clear – drive the small competitor out of business and then drop the specialty line of products that didn’t bring in profit.

I observed that the big grocery store used “loss leader” tactics to draw customers away from the smaller, family-owned health food store.

“What’s good for business is good for America.” What is meant by “America?” Does “America” include everyone living in the U.S.? Only citizens? Only people with money?

What about people who fall into “demographics” easily ignored by businesses

because they don't have much money or don't shop as much as others?

This word "demographics" has become a frequent defense of businesses catering to certain populations and ignoring others. Someone will say, "Well, that's capitalism: demand and supply." Exactly.

Where does that leave, say, the 49 percent of the population who don't spend as much as the 51 percent of the population - on certain products?

Those products then tend to disappear, especially from the large corporation-owned stores.

I do not claim to be a victim of anything, but let me illustrate the point from my own experience and then ask you to apply it to others.

My shirt size has always been 14.5 neck, 32-inch sleeves. With shirts and sweaters and so on that do not specify sizes that way, my size is "small."

Over the past few years, I have seen "big and tall" sections of men's clothing stores (and men's departments within stores) grow, while my size of shirts, sweaters and so on have virtually disappeared.

I go into a men's clothing store and search for my sizes in shirts, pants and so on and have great difficulty.

So, I talked to a manager of a men's clothing department where I have shopped for clothes for many years. He admitted that my size is being phased out by manufacturers and buyers.

He said that of 100 shirts they receive in a shipment, perhaps two or three are "small" and 14.5 x 32 does not exist anymore. He suggested I shop in the boys' department.

However, that is nothing compared with the near total non-existence of black dolls in toy stores.

A couple years ago, I found myself inside a large doll store attached to a suburban mall. This particular doll store sold literally hundreds of different dolls and doll paraphernalia.

I decided to look around and see how many black dolls existed for sale. I found one - out of hundreds of many different types. Demographics again.

But these are rather minor issues with the cliché under consideration here.

“America” also includes very many abused employees, underpaid employees, employees “laid off” because they are older and make too much money and are replaced by younger, lower-paid employees, customers deceived by false advertising and so on.

One increasingly common practice of large corporations is to overwork salaried employees.

Put employees on salary and then make them work 60 hours a week (or more). Place impossible demands on them, burn them out and then replace them.

Those of us who have studied our history know that businesses tend to fall into these patterns of abuse and neglect without government regulation.

Money becomes the god of business, and people become the sacrifices to that god.

Yes, yes, of course, sometimes government regulation becomes overly burdensome, too heavy-handed, and that needs correction also.

But the simplistic cliché, “What’s good for business is good for America” is deceiving and ought to be dropped from editorials and election campaigns.

Its over-simplicity makes it outright stupid and insulting to anyone with any experience and intelligence.

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