

The Failure of Success

The Failure of Success:

Americans' Ambiguous History of Ambition

By

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INTRODUCTION

Are you a success? If so why, and, if not, why not? What is success, anyway? Big questions, most would agree, and not easy ones to answer given the slipperiness of the subject. Success in America is frustratingly difficult to measure, making it not surprising that we usually settle on how much money we happen to earn or have in the bank as a common scorecard. Wealth is a crude measure of success, however, a lesson many have painfully learned after acquiring plenty of it. Other often used yardsticks grounded in economic or social status also fall short in determining whether one is or isn't successful, suggesting that we need to dig deeper into the subject to try to figure out what it's really about.

Uncertainties surrounding my own degree of professional success no doubt played a big role in driving me to investigate the matter further. With a PhD, a couple of dozen published books, and a nice consulting career under my belt, I certainly look good on paper (or LinkedIn). But then why do I feel less than truly successful? Such doubt and insecurity go to the heart of what this book is about. Success is in large part a relative concept, meaning we tend to compare how much of it we have to that of others. Sadly, falling into this trap is almost always a losing proposition, as there will invariably be others who at least appear to be more successful than oneself. Using externally defined criteria to measure one's own level of success is not a good way to go about it, we can safely conclude, yet it has served as the method of choice for most Americans for many decades. As well, looking into the rear-view mirror of our lives can make the pondering of our own success an even more depressing affair. Regrets, missed opportunities, and what-ifs heavily inform the memories of a good many of us, making us speculate on how much more successful we might have been had we made a different turn when we reached a key fork in the road.

The very definition of the term suggests that Americans have gone astray in evaluating both professional and personal expressions of success. While success is primarily defined as the "achievement of intention," a secondary definition for the term is the "attainment of fame, wealth, or power," a clue to how Americans have largely (mis)interpreted the concept. Outer-directed measures of success have generally served as the means to determine how successful an individual is or isn't, a practice

that has worked to the disadvantage of many of us over the years. Most of us are not famous, wealthy, or powerful, after all, and even if one does qualify on any of those dimensions, there are always other people who possess greater quantities of one or more. This model of success has made a good number of Americans feel less successful than they would otherwise feel if more inner-directed measures were used, I believe, and something that has led to much emotional insecurity and psychological angst. We have for the most part been using the wrong kind of social currency to gauge or assess success, in other words, a contributing factor in our unimpressive national levels of happiness and wellbeing. In short, success in America has largely been a failure, I maintain, a curious thing given how much significance we assign to the pursuit of it.

Failure or otherwise, it cannot be argued that the desire among most of us to succeed is a big chunk of the American idea and experience, making its parsing a worthwhile exercise that reveals much about who we are as a people. The range of arenas in which success intersects reflects the subject's centrality in everyday life in America. Success overlaps with psychology, science, religion and spirituality, business, medicine and health, relationships, philosophy, sociology, child raising, and politics, making this work truly multi- and interdisciplinary. And rather than follow a linear path, success has bobbed and weaved over the decades, we learn, its arc or trajectory a twisting and unpredictable one.

That success has served as a binding thread in our social fabric makes one ask why this is so. What is our pronounced individual and collective drive for success really about? Are we trying to prove something to ourselves and/or to others? Does it reflect some kind of inner insecurity or function as an attempt to rectify a perceived deficiency or weakness? Or is it more of a national trait, i.e., part and parcel of our progressive ethos that goes back to our "conquering" what was considered by new Americans as a virgin land? Putting on my psychological hat, I believe that success (which I define as the realizing of one's potential as a human being) is much about the attempt to make up for the shortcomings we felt as children, but that's a different story to be told.

While central to the American idea and experience, success is admittedly a remarkably vague concept that is difficult to define with any precision. Ask anyone what success means to them and you will likely get very different answers, a function of the nebulousness of the term. Adding to the challenge is that on an individual level, success is a moving target; personal goals are for many continually shifting, making it very much a product of a particular time in one's life. As well, success is heavily shaped by the social, economic, and political forces of the times, and is

thus an expression of a period's cultural climate. In short, Americans' relationship with success has been, as they say on Facebook, a complicated one, filled with contradictions and ambiguity.

Although much of *The Failure of Success* has to do with the professional arena, i.e., careers and jobs, this book also approaches the subject from a broader, more holistic perspective. As well, both the macro and micro are taken into consideration, with real stories of real people embedded into the grand narrative of success in America. What comes through loud and clear is what could be called the cheerleading of and for success by authority figures. Success is integral to the American Way of Life, making it in the interests of those holding a stake in the economic or political system to encourage citizens to earn and spend money. The rhetoric of success can thus be seen as a form of propaganda spread by parties invested in the workings of consumer capitalism; our supposed even playing field is often held as proof that the United States is a meritocracy offering unlimited upward mobility. Interestingly, failure has often been not seen as the opposite of success but as a natural part of the process to making it to the top. Persistence and perseverance are the X factors that separate the winners and losers of life, we hear over and over again; this don't-give-up exhortation represented a significant component of the extensive urging for Americans to reach their goals, no matter how ambitious. For anyone seeking success, nothing has been judged worse than having a self-defeatist attitude, putting positivism and optimism into the forefront of the story.

Paradoxically, however, a strong wave of "anti-success" sentiment is consistently apparent in the narrative of the subject over the course of the last century or so. There are costs, dangers, and risks involved with succeeding, we are often told, with significant fear and guilt associated with getting ahead. Selling out or giving up a piece of one's soul is part of these counter narratives of success, a remnant perhaps of Puritan ideology subscribing to the values of modesty, humbleness, and sacrifice. Success is even sometimes presented as a form of mental pathology, especially if an individual chooses to place winning above everything else in life.

Not surprisingly, the story of success has run parallel with the country's self-help movement, the common denominator being the desire to improve or better oneself in some way. The therapeutic culture of the 20th century fueled this developmental orientation to life, portraying individuals as works-in-progress. To this day, however, the key to success is cast as a secret, its ways mysterious and almost magical. Why are some people successful and others not? The question is asked over and over with

innumerable theories posed, but the answer remains largely a riddle. (That the answer can never really be definitively found accounts for why the market for products and services promising consumers greater success has been and continues to be enormous.) Attitude is more important than intelligence, almost everyone agrees, with mixed opinions about the role that luck plays in the mix.

Given such less than sanguine findings, is there any hope for success in America? Absolutely. There are many other, perfectly valid ways to consider the worth of an individual (degree of happiness, kindness, and wisdom, to name just a few), and it behooves us as a society to integrate those into our definition of success. On a grander level, we need to reassess what makes a person truly and genuinely successful in life, as doing so would go a long way towards making us a happier and more contented people. This takeaway offers us a blueprint for how we can potentially adopt a more meaningful and positive model of success in our lives, a genuinely worthy endeavor as we look to our individual and collective future.

CHAPTER 1

STRIVING FOR UTOPIA

*“Strive and Succeed, the world’s temptations flee
Be Brave and Bold, and Strong and Steady be.
Go Slow and Sure, and proper then you must.
With Fame and Fortune, while you Try and Trust.”*
—Horatio Alger, Jr.

In 1866, 34-year old, Massachusetts native Horatio Alger, Jr. arrived in New York City and promptly looked for employment. Alger’s life to-date had been less than spectacular, a function in part of the limitations imposed by his strong religious faith. The son of a stern Unitarian minister, Alger had embraced his father’s fire and brimstone teachings, so much so that he had earned the moniker “Holy Horatio” while attending Harvard College. Ready to start over, Alger took a job writing “juveniles” (literature for young people) for William Adams aka Oliver Optic, whose books for boys and girls were very popular. Alger quickly learned the tools of the trade and was himself soon churning out both non-fiction and fiction for that same audience.¹

Throughout the remainder of the 19th century, young readers could not get enough of Alger’s hastily written, ultra-formulaic stories. Alger’s specialty, which he is credited with having invented, was his portrayal of the protagonist as the “self-made man.” For thirty years, Alger produced 135 novels of this genre that collectively sold an estimated 20 million copies, the even more remarkable thing being that they all followed the same essential story. In the books, a young, honest-as-the-day-is-long lad growing up in poor circumstances works hard to keep his family going, often as a newsboy. One day, good fortune shines down upon the lad, a typical conceit being the finding of a wallet loaded with cash. Does the boy keep the much-needed money? No, of course. Said lad takes said wallet to its rightful owner, a rich man who rewards the boy by offering him employment at his big company. There the clean-living boy thrives, even saving the company from financial ruin orchestrated by a swindling, economically privileged, and tobacco-smoking co-worker.

Along the way the protagonist and the boss's beautiful daughter fall in love, all the ingredients now in place for the couple to live happily ever after.²

Why recount such a silly, Victorian-era story? Through the first half of the 20th century, success in America remained heavily steeped in the Horatio Alger mythology, providing an ideal foundation for the nation's brand of consumer capitalism to flourish after the war. The United States was a land of unlimited opportunity, propagandist rhetoric reiterated over and over again, and our democratic system grounded in free enterprise guaranteed each citizen the chance to find success in life. In short, achieving anything and everything was possible if one put one's mind to it and worked hard enough, experts advised, creating a narrative of success that mirrored the progressive spirit of the times.

However, alongside this loud endorsement of success could be found widespread trepidation concerning the dangers of trying to reach one's goals in life. "Better be careful of what you wish for" might have served as an apt description of this less sanguine side of success, with a multitude of potential perils awaiting those who put the desire to win ahead of everything else. There was a price to success, more were beginning to think, and a growing sense that one wasn't in full control of one's own life. There was little doubt that the concept of success in America was experiencing a kind of existential crisis, making the future an uncertain one.

The Passport to Success

The deep desire among most Americans to succeed was of course rooted in our origins as a nation. The opportunity to invent or reinvent oneself was a radical notion in the late 18th century, as was the possibility to break free from one's current social and economic position. Similarly, the freedom to be who one wanted to be and pursue endeavors not bound by the reach of church and state was a literally revolutionary concept. From this long view, success can be seen as heavily steeped in America's core values, and as woven into the Enlightenment's celebration of the self.

It hardly needs to be said that the idea of success has been a source of interest and often fascination for many, many years in much of the rest of the world. One reason this is so is because of the elusive, mysterious nature of success, i.e., that there is no definitive formula for how to realize it. "Few subjects in man's long history have excited more attention than the somehow magic qualities that lead to success," wrote the editors of *Nation's Business* in 1963, thinking that, "what success is, how

it can be acquired and what it does to those who possess it are questions which for centuries have intrigued men of virtually all stations in life.” As well, the very meaning of success is up for grabs, with a potentially infinite number of interpretations of what it constitutes and connotes. Success is admittedly a messy concept, something reflected in its rather broad history. Containing the subject to the United States over the past eighty years is thus a necessary thing, and I welcome other histories of the subject that cover different times and/or places.³

Still, it is important to sketch out the role of success in America before 1940, when I believe our contemporary expression of it first emerged. We may think of American-style success as a relatively new thing, perhaps something that blossomed during the Reagan era, but in fact the subject goes much further back. In his 1963 *The American Idea of Success*, Richard M. Huber described the dominant early American “gospel” of success as the “character ethic,” in which ambitious individuals were instructed to repress their consumerist and hedonistic desires and subscribe to the will of God. The making of money was thus a morally sanctioned act, according to popular works by Cotton Mather and Benjamin Franklin, with honest, hard-working Christians thus most likely to find success. Inherited wealth was a troubling sign, proponents of the character ethic made clear, almost sure to limit one’s potential as a human being. There was, however, an inherent flaw to such thinking: the temptation to apply less than fully ethical techniques in the acquisition of money and the things it could buy, and the longing for luxurious items that far surpassed one’s needs. This tension between taking the high road and the low road in terms of achievement was a consistent theme in the idea and practice of success in America from the nation’s founding through the Gilded Age.⁴

By the early 19th century, in fact, the nation’s original concept of success was already becoming perverted as the forces of consumer capitalism started to dominate American culture. (Second generation Americans were very different from their colonial-era parents.) Money quickly became the primary “scorecard” of success, accelerating the degree to which competition played in everyday life. Over the next hundred years, a variety of external markers—net worth, house, occupation, education, and even clothing— became heavily relied upon to determine whether a person was or was not successful. Social and economic class was of course very much tied in with this more other-directed concept of success.

In the 1920s, the idea of success entered a new orbit as the forces of modernity changed Americans’ expectations of and approach to the

concept. Uncertainty defined the United States after World War I, as it was not clear which political and economic direction the country would take. Autobiographies of men who had achieved considerable success before the war were selling briskly, however, with readers eager to know how they had risen to the top. Teddy Roosevelt was a popular speaker on the lecture circuit, but it was becoming evident that his macho, scorch-the-earth brand of success was fast going out of style. Youth was increasingly being considered a primary form of cultural currency in the Roaring Twenties, and almost everything related to the Victorian era deemed out of date and old fashioned. By 1925, a large crop of millionaires had sprung up in the United States, prompting many Americans to join the bandwagon of success in order to get their fair share of the pie.⁵

What was “the passport to success,” as one journalist put it in 1927?⁶ Positivism, directness, assertiveness, determination, and courage were viewed as the traits that would take one to the top, as was eliminating whatever weaknesses or handicaps one might have had. Loyalty to a particular company was quickly dissipating, however, as employees were quick to grab a new and better opportunity should one come along, preferably with a larger firm. Much attention was given over these years to why some men and women succeeded in business and some did not. (Women were increasingly holding office jobs.) Those who did succeed likely had a good degree of “social intelligence,” i.e., the ability to communicate well with a wide variety of people.⁷ Biological factors too played a role, it was believed, something not at all surprising given that this was the golden era of eugenics. (This idea would resurface many years later, oddly enough, when research showed that there may be a genetic component to success and that it could be a function of neurological wiring.)

Our National Disease

After the stock market crash in 1929, however, a shift in the idea of success in America could clearly be detected. In place of the businessmen and bankers who were presented as models of success through the twenties, it was now men and women of science and medicine who were viewed as heroes to emulate. On a grander level, some began to question Americans’ seeming obsession with success. What exactly was success, anyway? more people began to ask, the chase for promotion and higher salaries in one’s career leading to a dead end when many jobs and companies disappeared. Through the 1920s, religious leaders had cautioned congregants of the dangers associated with getting caught up in

the race for success, but few had heeded their warnings. Now in the 1930s, many Americans felt lost and confused and were questioning their quest for upward mobility and faith in our consumerist way of life. When asked what the necessary qualifications for success in the world were in 1932, Albert Einstein replied, "Only a life lived for others is the life worthwhile," a sign that the plates of ambition had clearly shifted after the economic collapse.⁸

Some valuable lessons could be learned from the Great Depression with regard to success, however, one of them being that it was never too late to start over. Another was that happiness was more important than money, making some re-evaluate their priorities in life. Self-help books dedicated to helping Americans realize their definition of success had by the late thirties emerged as a literary genre unto itself, although now the economy had largely recovered due to the pre-war manufacturing build-up. "It still happens in America," proclaimed Gilbert J. Hill in *Nation's Business* in 1938, thinking that the American success story was now fully back on track.⁹

As the ideological power of the character ethic faded in the early 20th century, Huber continued, the personality ethic emerged as the primary narrative of success. Most compellingly exemplified by Dale Carnegie's 1936 huge bestseller *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, the personality ethic was steeped in a quasi-religious brand of optimism that, in Huber's words, emphasized "affirmation, attraction, and the right mental aptitude to achieve the heart's desire."¹⁰ Whichever school of thought was in play, advice was usually doled out in biographical terms. Like today, inspirational how-tos were in the past often delivered by those whose success spoke for itself and thus appeared at least to practice what they preached.¹¹

In a 1975 article in *Christian Century* fittingly titled "The American Success Syndrome," Harold V. Vanderpool traced the history of success in America all the way back to the Protestant Reformation. Leaders of the 16th century European movement, notably Martin Luther and John Calvin, saw work as the centerpiece of a life well lived, laying the foundation for American Puritanism. With aphorisms like "God helps them that help themselves" and "The sleeping fox catches no poultry" sprinkled throughout his annually published *Poor Richard's Almanack*, Franklin did much to Americanize the Calvinist work ethic. (His popular 1758 essay *The Way to Wealth* was arguably the nation's first how-to-succeed guide. Englishman John Bunyan's 1678 Christian allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress* can be considered an even earlier how-to.)¹² In the 19th century, novelist Horatio Alger "created a virtual American mythology of

success,” Vanderpool believed, a narrative echoed by real life self-made men like Andrew Carnegie (whose essay “Wealth” also became a classic in the field).¹³ Real or imagined stories of heroes like George Washington, Andrew Jackson, Davy Crockett, and Abraham Lincoln were widely circulated (especially those penned by Mason “Parson” Weems), serving as inspiration for children and adults alike having dreams of achieving big things in life.

Indeed, there was no shortage of literature dedicated to the pursuit of success in the 19th century and early 20th century. McGuffey’s “Readers” integrated Calvinist thinking into the nation’s educational system (sales of the grade school primers rivaled those of the Bible and Webster’s Dictionary), and Russell Conwell’s “Acres of Diamonds” lecture (in which he argued that anyone could get rich if he tried hard enough) was delivered more than 6,000 times between the 1880s and 1920s (making the man the Tony Robbins or Suzie Orman of his day). Forty million copies of Elbert Hubbard’s 1899 essay “A Message to Garcia,” in which the value of self-motivated ambition was praised, were distributed, further spreading the ethos of success into America’s cultural DNA.¹⁴ “The theology of success reached its zenith in the Gilded Age,” posited Robert G. Gunderson, a professor at Indiana University, in 1981, although some believed at the time that our secular religion had become too zealous. In 1906, Harvard psychologist William James labeled Americans’ unbridled ambition as “the exclusive worship of the *bitch-goddess* SUCCESS” and “our national disease,” triggering a backlash of sorts against an extreme work ethic.¹⁵

As Americans recovered from the horrors of World War I and the 1918 flu epidemic, however, the drive for success returned in full force. The beginnings of the self-help and -improvement movement can clearly be seen in the “positive thinking” trend of the Roaring Twenties, with such an attitude unapologetically designed to “get ahead.”¹⁶ Adman Bruce Barton’s 1925 *The Man Nobody Knows* presented Jesus Christ as the most charismatic person in history and his parables as advertisements, illustrating the degree to which personality was considered to play in the quest for success, while Napoleon Hill’s 1937 *Think and Grow Rich* maintained that having a positive attitude and literally winning personality was the key to success.¹⁷ Hill had spent almost thirty years researching the subject (after the idea was suggested to him by none other than Andrew Carnegie), making it perhaps the most methodologically robust study of success ever completed.¹⁸

The World's Greatest Failure

Against that historical backdrop is when our real story begins. The economic rebound following the Great Depression proved to forge a new narrative of success that would continue through the remainder of the 20th century and into the 21st, one grounded in the nation's twin core mythologies of the American Dream and the American Way of Life.¹⁹ Although the war in Europe was obviously a deeply troubling development, the end of one of the worst decades in American history, at least economically, was cause for celebration. Jobs were becoming plentiful in 1940, especially those in manufacturing as the country prepared for possible entry in the war. Self-confidence, both on a national and individual level, was up, something that could clearly be detected in the cultural zeitgeist. "Surely the thirties have swept away the beautiful mirage of a chicken in every pot," *Fortune* magazine noted a couple of months into that year, "yet even the unemployed, who have suffered the bitterest lessons of insecurity, cling to the traditional American belief in the main chance that [success] may be just around the corner." Almost two-thirds of Americans were willing to take a job that offered a high probability of advancement even if there was an equal chance of getting fired, the magazine had learned in a survey, a finding that would have been very unlikely during the Depression when security was top of mind.²⁰

Not everyone, however, was convinced that Americans should spend so much time and energy pursuing success, especially given the disastrous events of 1929. Religious leaders were especially critical of our determination to achieve things that had no spiritual connection, thinking that doing so was essentially missing the point of life. The Rev. Paul Scherer, pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Manhattan, was one such man of the cloth who was convinced that careerism would never lead to genuine happiness. Americans had a "success complex," he told his congregation in late 1940, this "striving for utopia" ultimately a dead-end street because God was typically left out of the equation. Joyfulness came from being thankful for what one had rather than from yearning for something else, Scherer pointed out in his sermon, an insight lost on those constantly hoping that something bigger and better was coming around the corner.²¹

While the country's entry in World War II pushed the idea of personal success towards the backburner, spiritual leaders continued to express their concern that Americans were living lives without real meaning and purpose. The Rev. William Ward Ayer of the Calvary Baptist Church in Manhattan believed that, given world events, it was an

opportune time to follow the teachings of one's faith. It was a "war-mad world," he sermonized a year after Pearl Harbor, more reason to affirm the relevancy of religion despite what might be considered the failure of Christianity. "It is not easy to preach that Christ is a success," Ayer confessed, going so far as to admit that the man could now be seen as "the world's greatest failure." Christ's message of love and mercy had been replaced by hate and murder, the basis for what appeared to be a wholesale rejection of the wisdom to be found in the Bible. But it was Man who failed, not Jesus, he made clear, confident that Christ would one day be recognized as the most successful person in history.²²

It was indeed a war-mad world, but the conflict afforded an ideal opportunity to showcase American-style success within the context of patriotic sentiment. With the Depression now over, citizens turned their attention to the even greater challenge of preserving the American Way of Life from those with very different views. Morale on the home front was now seen as a critical factor in success; any and all enemies could be defeated if we stuck to our traditional values rooted in determination, grit, and the sheer will to win. Local businessmen exemplified this nationalistic spirit. The nation's industrial giants were providing most of the machinery of war, but thousands of owners of small businesses across the country were also contributing to the effort, something the media relished pointing out. Herman "Breezy" Wynn was "one of the men Hitler forgot," a 1942 article in *Nation's Business* told readers, the man doing whatever he could to supply the Army with what it needed to fight the Axis forces. His firm, the Knoxville, Tennessee-based Southern Athletic Company, manufactured sporting goods, and received a huge order from the government for barrack bags, mattress covers, and kneepads (for paratroopers). Wynn had retooled his machines and ran the plant day and night to fill the order, a prime example of how owners of small businesses were serving the nation. "Adolph, Tojo and Benito overlooked Breezy Wynn—and thousands like him," readers learned, presenting success in terms of sacrifice and love of country.²³

Although clearly propagandist (no mention was made of the big money to be made through large government contracts), such a story served as evidence that success was a malleable concept that could be defined in different ways. As well, the ideological backdrop of the war, specifically our defense of pluralistic democracy against racist fascism, helped bring out American success stories that were too often ignored. The business world was overwhelmingly a white one, of course, with African Americans largely excluded from the ranks of management. Because success was so heavily associated with business in this country, achievements

by people of color were typically under-recognized, something Edwin K. Embree directly addressed in his 1944 *Thirteen Against the Odds*. In the book, Embree told the stories of thirteen African Americans who had accomplished great things in their lifetimes, bringing a much-needed measure of multiculturalism to the narrative of success in America. (The thirteen individuals were Mary McLeod Bethune, Richard Wright, Charles S. Johnson, Walter White, George Washington Carver, Langston Hughes, Marian Anderson, W.E. Du Bois, Mordecai Johnson, William Grant Sill, A. Philip Randolph, Joe Louis, and Paul Robeson.) Interestingly, while battling segregation and discrimination was a big part of these individuals' respective paths to success, Embree chose not to focus on race. "It is the Americanism of these lives that interests me most," he wrote, thinking that, despite all the handicaps because of the color of their skin, "these are not people apart."²⁴

The country also had an equal rights dilemma with women as the end of the war drew near. Many women, having either served in the military or taken a factory job on the home front, had every intention of working after the war, perhaps even by starting their own business. With fears of a postwar depression and massive unemployment rampant, the government was already doing what it could to help returning servicemen find jobs and, for more entrepreneurial types, create their own businesses. At the Army's request, for example, the Department of Commerce was preparing a series of books on how to run twenty different small businesses, the guides designed to make it easier for ex-GIs to transition back to civilian life. But only four of the twenty enterprises had a "definite women's appeal," thought Malvina Lindsay of the *Washington Post* in 1944, making her think that women might find success outside of operating a beauty shop, apparel store, restaurant, or bakery. Why couldn't women run a hardware or drug store or open up a real estate or insurance office? she asked. For that matter, why couldn't those women with newly acquired mechanical experience open an auto repair shop, a gas station, a heating and plumbing business, or even a sawmill? "What line women's initiative will take in postwar business can now only be guessed," Lindsay mused, convinced that success of all kinds awaited her sisters in the postwar years.²⁵

For the following decades, in fact, success as related to women would represent a challenge all its own, making gender dynamics a big part of the story. Because of sexism and discrimination in the workplace, women faced an extra struggle in achieving success and being recognized as successful people. Successful women were likely to be seen as having adopted "masculine" values, an unfair claim that plainly revealed how the

cards were stacked against them in the workplace. Much talk revolved around women who strove to realize greater success in their professional lives but happened to be married and/or had children, putting the concept of “balance” firmly into the equation. It was also believed that women especially feared getting ahead, further establishing success as a tricky terrain for them to navigate.

For both women and men, however, the desire to be one’s own boss exploded as the war wound down, no doubt fueled by soldiers’ experience of having to take orders from anyone with more stripes or bars than they. Author Leo Cherne reported in 1945 that at least one out of every seven servicemen wanted to start a business after the war, a sentiment shared by many civilians. Newspaper reporters were thinking of starting their own paper, salesgirls trying to figure out how they could open up their own boutique, and radar experts planning on capitalizing on what would certainly be a big boom in the radio business. “This is as it should be,” Cherne wrote, believing that, “the impulse toward business independence is one of the most forceful drives in American life.”²⁶

Despite the fact that a good many new businesses (half, actually) failed in their first few years, other experts urged Americans thinking about their future to take the entrepreneurial plunge. William Benton, a vice president at the University of Chicago, had recently made a passionate plea to young men to go into business for themselves, citing success stories like those of Samuel Zemurray (who went from banana cart pusher to head of the United Fruit Company) and the Goldblatt brothers, who rose from nothing to department store kings. Benton himself was a poster child for the self-made man, partnering with Chester Bowles to start an ad agency on the eve of the Depression that turned out to be so successful that he retired at age thirty-six to devote his life to education. That 600,000 businesses had closed down during the war made the notion of owning one’s outfit that much more appealing, the wads of cash that many Americans had socked away while there was little to buy another juicy carrot dangling in front of entrepreneurs-to-be. The loan provision in the GI Bill was extra incentive, knowing that Uncle Sam would pay back half of the amount borrowed (up to \$2,000) if one’s business failed making the leap an almost no-lose proposition.²⁷

This Sportsmanlike Approach

Because success was (and is) a relative concept with no absolute measure by which to judge, however, it has been easy for many Americans to feel somehow inferior when comparing their careers to those of others. Self-

doubt and envy have heavily imprinted the discourse surrounding success, a natural result of our competitive society. Advice in the field in the late 1940s often addressed this theme by reminding apprehensive readers that they were likely more successful than they perhaps might think. Reaching middle age was an especially vulnerable time for those wondering if they were failures. "Some time around your forty-fifth year the face in your bathroom mirror will ask you a group of disturbing personal questions," wrote Pat Frank in *Nation's Business* in 1947, those questions all revolving around whether the reader had at some point gone down the wrong path in his or her professional life. Frank assured such insecure folks that they probably underestimated themselves, having understandably fallen into the trap of the green-eyed monster. At such critical moments, it was important to objectively and unemotionally assess the arc of one's career. "Odds are that you will discover you're in the business you like best and that you have progressed as far in that business as your age, and the opportunities for advancement, warranted," Frank assured such readers.²⁸

Such therapeutic-like assurances can be seen as part of a broader effort to instill and reinforce the idea of success in America in order to maintain our social and economic system based in consumer capitalism. The prospect of millions of Americans thinking they were failures would not only be bad for business but pose a distinct threat to our core values of progress, achievement, and "can-do-ism." The probability of realizing success and possibility of getting rich were integral components of our national identity, and organizations and institutions subscribing to "consensus" ideology proudly showcased each on a regular basis. This was especially true during the Cold War, when it was considered imperative to demonstrate how and why our way of life was superior to communism and socialism. Soviet leaders were not reluctant to point out the bell curve nature of American corporate culture and bourgeois lifestyles of the large middle class in their own propagandist campaigns, making it necessary for voices of authority to loudly claim that the United States remained a land of unlimited opportunity.

The ability for each American to go from rags to riches, as the expression went, was often held up as an example of what made this country great and different from all others. With the war over and business back on track to do what it did best, the image of the self-made man reached what was perhaps a zenith of popularity. Businessmen who had started from scratch to attain prestigious positions in major corporations were considered to be among the most successful Americans, according to a 1947 survey conducted by Kenneth J. Beebe, president of the American

Schools and Colleges Association. Who specifically had most successfully turned the Horatio Alger mythology into reality, according to faculty members and college students? Walter S. Mack, president of the Pepsi-Cola Company, headed the list, having risen to that role after beginning his career as a textile salesman. Next was Grover Whalen, currently chairman of the beauty company Coty's, whose disadvantage in life was presented as simply having grown up on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Also on the list were Charles Wilson, president of General Electric (who had worked for \$4 a week after returning from World War I), and Robert R. Young, president of the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad (who had suffered a string of failed business ventures before getting on the road to success).²⁹

The results of Beebe's survey revealed that although they were fictional and created during the horse and buggy era, Horatio Alger's stories retained much currency in postwar America. When it came to defining success, Americans clearly preferred characters who had begun their careers or lives in a disadvantageous position and had overcome those obstacles to realize a certain degree of power, status, money, and/or fame. Business was often seen as a kind of competitive game or sport and Americans were famous for rooting for the underdog, making it not surprising that it was those who came from behind to win who were deemed most successful. "This sportsmanlike approach, plus courage and ingenuity, accounts for the fact that there are more successful businessmen in America, in proportion to our population, than in any other country in the world," claimed Beebe in reporting the results of his survey. More anecdotally, stories abounded of immigrants who had arrived on our shores with just a few dollars in their pockets but through perseverance had reached the top of a particular field, an alternative version of the traditional American success story grounded in the possibility of upward mobility.³⁰

"Industrialists," as they were often called in these years, took special joy celebrating extraordinary success stories in which an individual not only started from scratch but also rebounded from major adversity. Such was the case in 1948 when members of the Congress of American Industry took time out from their annual meeting to recognize the achievements of Lewis P. Reese. Reese had started up a pottery business in Scio, Ohio, in 1932 and, after meeting his first payroll, had just eleven cents left in the bank. Over the next fifteen years, however, the business grew to be worth over a million dollars, with enough profits for Reese to hand out generous bonus to his employees every Christmas. Then, disaster struck in 1947, when a fire destroyed the uninsured plant. But right out of a Frank Capra movie, hundreds of volunteers, both employees and

townspeople, came forward to rebuild the plant, with workers able to be back at their jobs in just two months. "This common disaster proved to me that the faith I have always had in the American way, the economic system of free enterprise, is more than justified," Reese told the gathering to rousing cheers.³¹

Left out of such stirring stories was the alleged psychological makeup of certain men who had achieved great success. Like Horatio Alger himself, who had led a dark, gloomy life despite being one of the most popular authors of his day, a good number of people considered to be successful were believed by psychiatrists to be mentally troubled in some way. That was the case made by Lawrence Kubie, one of the country's leading psychiatrists and psychoanalysts, who asserted that many outwardly successful people suffered from unconscious neurotic forces. "External success is not an infallible indication of internal health," he told a group of medical professionals at the University of Rochester in 1949, his clinical experience showing that realizing one's professional goals often soon led not to contentment but rather depression. Psychic misery was likely to follow a socially approved accomplishment such as the earning of a great deal of money, being recognized by one's peers with an award, or even marrying the "perfect" person, Kubie argued, calling this phenomenon a "nearly universal human tragedy." Happiness appeared to reside more in the chase than the capture, the Yale professor was suggesting, a finding that many other researchers would uncover in their own studies of human emotion.³² Given such views, it was rapidly becoming clear that success in the postwar era was loaded with complications, something that was about to become even more readily apparent.

CHAPTER 2

THE ABC'S OF GETTING AHEAD

“Formulate and stamp indelibly on your mind a mental picture of yourself as succeeding. Hold this picture tenaciously. Never permit it to fade. Your mind will seek to develop the picture.”

—Norman Vincent Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952)

In 1950, Charles W. Cole, president of Amherst College, reported the surprising results of a study he had conducted. It was commonly believed that those who earned the highest grades in college were most likely to have successful careers, as the brightest students were often rewarded with good jobs that put them on a fast track. However, college grades turned out to be a poor predictor of later success, Cole had found; his research showed that students who received average or below-average grades frequently rose to the top in business and other professions. These findings raised many questions and encouraged all kinds of theories explaining why this was so. For Cole, it was that different people “peaked” at different times in their life, with some realizing their highest potential as teenagers, others as young adults, and still others in middle age. There were late-bloomers (people who peaked later in life), under achievers (those who were able but lazy), and another group that Cole referred to as “half-achievers,” i.e., people who were greatly gifted but did only respectably because they approached work inefficiently. Unfortunately, the system was rigged for early achievers, Cole concluded, and he called for new ways to predict future success based more on motivation than precocity.¹

Many assumptions about success were in fact beginning to be challenged in postwar America. Encouraging individuals to be as successful as possible was reaching a new zenith in popularity, yet underneath such exhortations lurked a darker side to a preoccupation with ambition. As the pressure to succeed intensified during the Cold War—a function of the heavily conformist, consumerist, and anti-Communist ethos of the times—so did the signs of mental and physical strain. The number of casualties appeared to be greatest within Corporate America, where the competition to climb the ladder of success was especially

intense. By the end of the so-called nifty fifties, many Americans were having serious doubts about the socially endorsed drive for success, laying the foundation for a full-scale questioning of our way of life.

The Power of Positive Thinking

Although most Americans at midcentury perceived the playing field of success as being an even one (despite the obvious biases based on race and gender), there was little doubt that the winners possessed certain attributes that others did not. Different kinds of psychological assessments were heavily relied upon in the 1950s in order to determine who was most likely to succeed, as the popular expression went. Success was a matter of following a certain set of rules and behaving in a certain manner, according to the popular literature of the day. In 1951, for example, *Reader's Digest* offered "The ABC's of getting ahead,"² while that same year *Rotarian* advised its readers how to "avoid mental stagnation" so that success could naturally follow.³ Housewives were instructed how to succeed in their own pursuits, with homemaking, marital life, and the raising of children all considered valuable enterprises that helped to make us the greatest nation on Earth. Facing and conquering one's fears was a big part of this, and adopting a can-do spirit was deemed vital to being successful in whatever endeavor one chose. The idea of improvement too was woven into the idea of success at midcentury, i.e., that one, as *American Magazine* expressed it in 1950, "can always do better."⁴

No magazine article offering how-to-succeed advice, however, came close to matching the popularity of Norman Vincent Peale's 1952 *The Power of Positive Thinking*. The book made the case that having an optimistic outlook was the key to success in any endeavor, hardly an original idea, but Peale's packaging of it was undeniably compelling. Grounded in faith, *The Power of Positive Thinking* struck a chord among millions of readers with its premise that an affirmative approach to life was the means of conquering any obstacle lying in one's path. Most critics found the book trite, but it was a fixture on the bestseller list for years (and still sells well.)⁵

Although Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* was steeped in Depression-era rhetoric, that hugely popular book also remained a bestseller. The man was still making the lecture circuit rounds in the early 1950s with his own affirmative message centered around success. Carnegie's 1948 *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living* had also been a big hit, and his courses in self-improvement, public speaking, salesmanship, interpersonal skills, and corporate training were

widely attended. In 1952, the now 63-year old President of The Institute of Effective Speaking and Human Relations delivered what he called “guideposts to success” to The Executives’ Club of Chicago. What did one of the foremost authorities on the subject consider to be the secret to success? In a word, it was enthusiasm, something that “comes from the inside out.” Many shared equivalent skills, abilities, and intelligence, but it was being excited about and even loving what one did that was the key differentiating factor in how successful one was likely to be. Best of all, enthusiasm was contagious, he told the group, with considerable history showing the degree to which others would follow the lead of a genuinely enthusiastic person.⁶

Also strongly embedded within the ethos of success in the postwar era was the notion that making mistakes was a natural and expected part of the process. “Stumbling” was perfectly fine and, in fact, if one didn’t occasionally fail, it probably meant that one wasn’t setting high enough goals. Defeat was inspirational, in other words, as it simply made one try harder. Smartness, on the other hand, was overrated when it came to success, according to many experts. One certainly didn’t need to be brilliant to succeed, all agreed, as getting ahead resided in a different set of skills or attributes than mere intelligence. Such a view gave the averagely intelligent hope, of course, and reinforced the egalitarian, anti-elitist spirit of the times.

With so much success-oriented literature in circulation and eagerly consumed, it was not surprising that Shepherd Mead’s *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* was such a hit. The 1952 bestseller, which inspired the equally popular 1961 Broadway musical, was a satire of the kind of self-help books being published (most notably Stephen Potter’s 1947 *The Theory and Practice of Gamesmanship* and 1950 *Some Notes on Lifemanship*). It was not ability but Machiavellian office politics that would lead to the upper executive ranks, Mead’s book suggested, something that had considerable truth in the dog-eat-dog world of postwar corporate culture. (Its subtitle was *The Dastard’s Guide to Fame and Fortune*.) “Be an ‘all-around’ man of no special ability and you will rise to the top,” went one line in the book, not words one was likely to read in your typical business advice book but something that occurred more often than one might think. (In real life, the 38-year old Mead was a vice-president at the Manhattan ad agency Benton & Bowles.) Memos should be written not to recommend any action but to impress superiors, this too absurd while at the same time carrying at least a grain of truth.⁷

Mead reprised his satirical critique of corporate climbers the following year in a short piece in the *New York Times* called “How to

Dress Your Way to Success!” Again, rather than brains or aptitude, he suggested, it was cunning that would get one to the top, in this case the kind of clothes one wore at different points in one’s career. “Gay plumage” was the way out of the mailroom or shipping room, according to Mead, as otherwise it would be easy to never be noticed by anyone important. Plaids and houndstooth ensembles were a great way to get off the bottom rung, although the good old gray flannel suit was also quite serviceable. Having now reached junior executive, it was time to adopt the “Madison Avenue Look,” which was designed to make one appear “careworn and harassed.” Finally, after having impressed one’s boss with such a shabby chic wardrobe, one was ready to dress like a Senior Executive. While this could take various forms, Shepherd explained, the important thing was to stand out in some way. Wearing a pink sports jacket with mismatched slacks once in a while would do the trick, as would arriving at the office in striped trousers, sandals, or an erotically painted tie. Alternatively, wearing the same old, frayed suit everyday was equally likely to impress top management by conveying the sense that one was “above” clothing, the additional advantage being that it freed up money for more enjoyable pursuits.⁸

While Mead’s observations were designed to be funny, postwar popular culture had often not been kind to the idea of success in America. Since the end of the war, in fact, the dark side of success was a running theme in movies and theater, an important reminder that our central mythology was often elusive and occasionally went terribly wrong. (Even the holiday favorite *It’s a Wonderful Life* of 1946 is one sense a tragic telling of success, with George Bailey never making it out of Bedford Falls despite learning, by the end of the film, that he is “the richest man in town.”) Movies such as *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), *On the Waterfront* (1954), and *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957) were about as far away from Doris Day and Rock Hudson trifles as one could get, exposing the underbelly of self-delusion, missed opportunity, and unbridled ambition that often came along with the headlong pursuit of success. Plays like *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), *Death of a Salesman* (1949), and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) were, meanwhile, epic-like discourses in dashed hopes and decline, adding a good dose of tragedy to the narrative of success.

A Bright Thread Through American Folklore

While witnessing the rapid rise of the super ambitious J. Pierrepont Finch (the protagonist in *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*)

made great entertainment, what was the actual probability of going from rags to riches in America within one's lifetime? Richard B. Morris, a professor of history at Columbia University, had that very good question on his mind in the early 1950s, and was resolute to discover the answer. "The theme of rags to riches, exploited monotonously but with singular success by Horatio Alger, runs like a bright thread through American folklore," he wrote in *Saturday Review* in 1953, looking back at history to try to separate the mythology from reality. Woven into the mythology was the idea that many of the greatest Americans had humble origins, having grown up in a rural setting without the privileges of a formal education or inherited wealth. "The country boy, according to the accepted success formula, is a sure bet to overtake the city slicker in the long run," Morris explained, locating the "self-made man" within the framework of our democratic ideal.⁹

The power of the mythology had much to do with its prevalence and prominence within the nation's education system. Until the late 1960s, when a new generation of historians took a more critical look at American history, students were well-schooled in the stories of heroes like Andrew Jackson and Abraham Lincoln who had transcended their poor or frontier origins to become legendary figures.¹⁰ Accounts of the meteoric rise of business tycoons such as James B. Duke (whose father had reportedly returned from the Civil War with just a half-dollar in his pocket) and Andrew Carnegie (who had begun his career in a Pittsburgh cotton mill with a weekly wage of \$1.20 a week) were often part of these lessons. The incredible and indisputable economic expansion of the United States from its founding to present times lent more credence to this mythology, making it no wonder that so many Americans accepted it as fact.¹¹

But how true was the Horatio Alger mythology? To find out, Morris and a team of experts laboriously examined the lives of who they viewed as the three hundred most notable Americans in history, paying close attention to which individuals "conformed to the rags-to-riches formula." The list of people was, as can be imagined, impressive. (It served as the basis for the biographical section of the recently published *Encyclopedia of American History*, a reference book edited by Morris, and was divided into "The Presidents," "Jurists and Lawyers," "Statesmen," "Military and Naval Figures," "Belles Lettres," "Philosophy and Social Sciences," "Artists," "Architects," "Theater and Allied Arts," "Musicians and Composers," "Religious Leaders," "Educators," "Social Reformers and Labor Leaders," "Journalists, Editors, and Publishers," "Pioneers and Explorers," "Business Leaders," "Inventors," and "Scientists.") In order to be considered for the list, "the candidate's contribution must have been

notable not only for its time and place,” Morris explained, “but still have a measurable impact on our way of life.” “Staying power” and the degree to which an individual shaped or reshaped his or her field of endeavor thus were given great weight as criteria, a means of discounting tremendous but fleeting success or the mere amassing of a fortune.¹²

The results? “At least 204 of the three hundred notable Americans came from privileged backgrounds, from families of wealth, social position, or strong cultural interests,” Morris reported, with 84 rising from poverty to legitimately become “self-made” men. (The list was, as could be expected, overwhelmingly male and white, and included just one immigrant: Alexander Hamilton.) Other interesting findings emerged from the project. For example, the great majority of the three hundred lived between the years 1825 and 1900, leading Morris to think that the days of realizing great individual achievement could well be over, an observation many others had made due to accelerating corporatization. The trend towards specialization was also apparent; the chances of a Renaissance man like Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Samuel Morse, John J. Audubon, or John C. Fremont coming along in the 20th century were essentially nil. Still, despite the results suggesting that future success relied heavily on having a head-start over most others, Morris himself couldn’t resist reiterating the potency of the Horatio Alger myth. “There is still room on the upper rungs of the ladder for the barefoot boy with straw in his hair,” he concluded.¹³

Indeed, the ghost of Horatio Alger refused to disappear, despite the fact that the author himself had somehow not gotten rich from selling millions of copies of books about young men going from poverty to wealth through sheer moxie. Alger’s personal failure, however, did not take anything away from the legacy he left. “He formulated the success mythology so effectively that, before he got through, he had created a whole new school of literature and had stamped the legend indelibly on the American consciousness,” observed Bruce Catton in *American Heritage* in 1955. Catton was reviewing Kenneth S. Lynn’s new book *The Dream of Success*, in which the author made the case that because Alger’s stories were rooted in American individualism, the legend and our desire for success remained as strong as ever. “More obsolete than the Model-T, Alger continues to be our myth-maker,” Lynn wrote, believing that Americans were reluctant to discard the idea because it served as an attractive and powerful marker of our national identity.¹⁴

More broadly, the persistence of the Alger mythology reflected how integral the concept of success was in America around the midpoint of the 20th century. In his 1949 *Mirror for Man*, Clyde Kluckhohn made