

RECKONING

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF CANADA

PART 1: THE RISE AND FALL OF AMERICAN BUSINESS CULTURE

The United States of America may not yet be in dire economic straits. But judging by the great bank of opinion sampled in this film, a radical change in attitude, a sharp shift in focus, would need to be accomplished quickly if that country is to hold its own into the next century. Japan and other Pacific Rim countries are posing a challenge that the United States seems not to have the ability, philosophically or economically, to withstand.

On the evidence presented here, one enormous problem facing our neighbour is a serious malaise in its manufacturing sector. No longer competitive in the world market, forced to buy more than it can, the United States nevertheless continues to bask in the glow of past glories instead of dealing with current problems. Leaning on economic theories that, say several of James Laxer's interview subjects, may never have had much validity to begin with, the United States borrows for its inflated needs while watching its cities die.

Robust Japan, by contrast, is seen to plan its economy in a way that protects its growth from the whim of politics. It has long recognized the importance of a secure, well-motivated workforce in attaining its material goals, and has been reluctant to sacrifice the individual soul or its collective culture in the process. Viewers who have until now seen the United States as the great respecter of human individuality and Japan as the reverse, may find it ironic that Kohei Goshi, Chairman of the Japan Productivity Centre in Tokyo, laments a tendency he sees in the United States to treat workers as mere cogs in the industrial wheel.

Interviewees in Part 1 include: economist John Kenneth Galbraith; Professor Gregory Baum, McGill University; broadcaster and scientist Dr. David Suzuki; Kazuhiro Fuchi, Director, Institute for New Generation Computer Technology, Japan; Dr. Edward L. Hudgins, policy analyst, The Heritage Foundation, Washington, D.C.

A SERIES OF FIVE ONE-HOUR FILMS

Produced and distributed by the National Film Board of Canada

PART 1: THE RISE AND FALL OF AMERICAN BUSINESS CULTURE

Produced by PSYCHOMEDIA INC. for the NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA

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60 minutes approximately

Kalle Lasn

Director, Editor and Producer

THE RISE AND FALL OF AMERICAN BUSINESS CULTURE

Part 1 of RECKONING: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF CANADA

Q: Had you thought much about the notion that the American business culture is in decline before you started making this film?

Lasn: Yes, I've been going in and out of East Asia for the last twenty years. I used to have a computer consulting company in Tokyo in the sixties, and ever since I've been going in and out producing films there. My company still has an office there right now. So this notion of American business culture in decline is something suggested to me fifteen years ago in Japan. It was a lively topic of discussion there way back then.

Q: Is the Canadian business culture in any way different? Can Canada separate itself from American business culture?

Lasn: This is the central question posed in the film. Many times throughout the film the audience will think well, "is Canada a part of this decline and can we go our separate way?" This is an open question. I really don't know. Our business culture is similar to the American, and yet in many ways we are also unique. We are a smaller country, and not so ideological and therefore, capable of changing in ways that America can't. Over the next ten years, I hope we can develop a more uniquely Canadian business culture.

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Q: The Rise and Fall of American Business Culture highlights a lot of problems, but does it pose any solutions? What is the purpose of the film if it doesn't pose solutions?

Lasn: I really like a story that Jim Laxer told me once when we were still researching this film. He said, if fifty years ago you went up to a British guy on the street and you said to him, "listen, your way of doing business isn't working anymore, your British business culture is now in decline," he would have laughed at you. I think the same is true here in North America today. If you tell an American that his business culture isn't No. 1 anymore, that it's now in long-term decline, he wouldn't be able to accept that. He would probably laugh at you. So, I think the purpose of this film is to make people take this idea seriously. Until we take it seriously, there is no way we can start tackling our growing competitive problems in today's global marketplace.

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Q: Do you think that the rest of the series completes the film, or complements it to the extent that it gives it even more meaning than it would otherwise have on its own?

Lasn: Yes. This first film in the series has a global perspective. It tends to be philosophical. It explores some of the fundamental issues confronting us. The other films in the series explore the more down-to-earth issues, like the relationship between Canada and the United States, and free trade.

But later on, when we look at the free trade issue in detail, then all of a sudden you realize that, hey, we in Canada are negotiating with a business culture in decline. And that puts a whole new perspective on things.