

## Our Changing Economy

# Seven Years of Rule By Big Businessmen

*By Philip Stoddard Brown*

Years ago I used to patronize a bank whose head teller was a whiz. He could count money faster than anyone I've ever seen. His every movement had a flourish and dexterity that was high art. Not only that, his whole manner was masterful, almost lordly . . .

Then one day I saw, and scarcely recognized, this man in a restaurant. Gone was his proud and confident manner. Inaudible was the crisp reply to a customer's question or the curt instruction to another teller. The deft and rapid flick of fingers and wrist was not visible. He was just a mousy little fellow in an ill-fitting sport jacket.



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Longer in memory is the glimpse of the foremost bass singer of my hometown, playing craps in a country club locker room. Except as his turn came to roll, his companions took no notice of this pudgy drab man. Yet how commanding a figure he was in his white surplice, standing in the back row of the distant choir, his powerful voice rising in equal concert with the massive organ music. All other voices were shallow and as nothing compared with those deep rich tones that engulfed life, like eternity itself, and choked me with emotion. Then it was that the great Jehovah seemed very near.

Life is like that. A man may play one role brilliantly and another drably. Last summer, my young son and I listened to a baseball game, during which his favorite player visited the broadcasting studio and was drawn into a running commentary on the game. His remarks ranged from "that was a real nice play" to "he's a real good fellow." By the time he had drawled "real good" for the twentieth time, my son was amused, but I could see that he was also let down.

My mind went back to the dull gray pain I remember feeling years ago when I read about Bill Tilden, my great hero, standing pitifully in court waiting to be sentenced for conduct so jarringly incongruous with my memory of him at Forest Hills: His cannonball service, his giant strides, his flat deep drives and his imperious impatience with ball-boys, linesmen and umpires.

We never get accustomed to these letdown feelings. The boy in us cries "Say it ain't so, Joe."

Well, what prompted all this musing is reflection upon the long succession of prominent businessmen appointed to high office in Washington in recent years, whose ineptitude in public affairs has been embarrassingly exposed and whose exodus, in some cases, has been so undignified.

Most of these men had been successful in some field of business and I guess I have an inordinate respect for entrepreneurial ability. Besides, many of these appointees were well-meaning, good men.

Yet, as the time for summing up approaches, it is increasingly evident that the present Administration has performed best in those areas from which businessmen have been excluded, and worst where they have taken over. Surely the record of the Treasury, Commerce and Defense Departments and many regulatory agencies is a disappointing and, in some cases, sordid one. The Administration has not done well in developing missiles, in atomic power plants, in administering foreign aid and regulating gas companies, airlines, broadcasting companies and drug firms.

The successful transfers of recent years have been those of civil servants and military people into business; the unsuccessful ones, in the main, those of businessmen into government.

Why is this? Why did many businessmen (William Batt, Robert Lovett, Paul Hoffman and others perform so successfully in government under former Administrations not remembered for their cordiality toward big business?

Today, the business world has many more men and women who have thought seriously about social and political problems than it had 20, or even 10 years ago. Why have they not been the ones called to Washington?

The mistake, I think, has been in assuming that any head of a large corporation can administer any public agency wisely, and that administration is an art divorced from any profound knowledge of the jobs which any agency is set up to perform. Time and again, corporation executives with no understanding of the complicated problems at issue have been appointed to high office—sometimes to serve only a couple years and then be replaced by others with an equal lack of understanding.

To be sure, heads of great corporations are more than private businessmen. They are rulers of vast non-Statist organizations and, to a large extent, of society itself.

These men should have reflected profoundly upon the public aspects of their activities. Many have. But the quality and tone of much advertising, much behavior toward regulatory agencies and legislative bodies and the frequent unconcern for the public domain are clear indications that many corporate executives have no more understanding of public issues than the run-of-the-mill professional boxer has.

When a great steel company, one of the world's largest, allows the management of a huge plant in the South to side with, and support, over a long period, the most irresponsible and reactionary political faction in the state, surely this reveals that political immaturity (or unconcern) can and does exist side by side with the expertise in steel-making.

When the heads of great chains of stores—and the President himself—are unwilling to say a word in behalf of a Negro desiring to eat a sandwich and drink a Coke alongside a white man in Atlanta or Richmond, nearly 100 years after Appomattox and adoption of the Fourteenth Amendment, this too reveals that they have opinions about public issues that most of us think are long outdated.

To be head of a large corporation is not qualification enough for a top government job—or should not be.