
Grumpy Old Gent's Good Grief Grumblings

(The Home of Common Sense)

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"I have been privileged getting to know the territory." — John Kerry, Mason City, Iowa (at the Music Man Square), June 2003.

THE MUSIC MAN— AN AMERICAN ICON

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The original 1957 Broadway production of Meredith Willson's American musical *The Music Man* was nominated for nine Tony Awards and won six, including Best Musical.

The musical has been adapted for film twice: once in 1962, with Robert Preston as the music man, Shirley Jones as the Marian the librarian, Ron Howard as Winthrop Pardoo; it was directed by Morton DaCosta. This film won the Academy Award for Original Music Score and was nominated for Art Direction — Set Decoration, Color, Costume Design, Film Editing, Sound, and Best Picture.

The Music Man was adapted for the screen again in 2003, in a television movie starring Matthew Broderick, Kris-

tin Chenoweth, and Victor Garber, directed by Jeff Bleckner.

For those unfamiliar with the story, here is a quick synopsis. The music man, "Prof." Harold Hill, is a traveling salesman who sells boys' bands. He doesn't know anything about music—just salesmanship. He gets off the train in River City, Iowa and looks for an angle to use as sales. He picks the second most potent salesman's ploy: paranoia. In this case fear of corruption of the youth of the city because of the arrival of a new pool table. His solution is to keep boys occupied and away from the pool table by organizing a boys' band selling instruments and band uniforms. Then he plans on disappearing with the money before anyone figures out that the kids can't play anything.

He has invented a new method of teaching music "The Think System". To learn to play, meditate on the music, pick up your instrument, and play it. Any help from the instructor will just interfere with the learning process. This method is very convenient for a traveling salesman that knows no music.

The "intellectual" in town is Marian Paroo, a spinster, the librarian, and also the piano teacher. She figures out the

scam immediately. Also documents that the music man's credentials must be fraudulent, but she is seduced by the music man's sexual overtures, the most potent salesman's ploy: sex.

Marian has an innocent young brother, Winthrop, who lisps and trusts the music man to teach him to play. In the end, the town figures out they have been swindled, and plan to tar and feather Prof. Harold Hill. Harold, one step ahead of them, is on the way to the train out of town, when he gets caught in his own love affair and forced into honesty by Winthrop.

All turns out for the best, when the town band appears and marches around playing horrible music and the kicker is the town thinks the band is great because it is their kids making the noise. This relieves the music man of responsibility for selling something he didn't deliver. Presumably the music man is now reformed and marries Marian—as unlikely an outcome as a Zebra losing its stripes.

What is wonderful about *The Music Man* is its verisimilitude to free-enterprise reality. It teaches us the two most potent methods of selling, warns us about the consequences of failure to

depart on time, and provides moral lessons of unparalleled clarity.

The ideal free-enterprise system is based on several principles. One of which is that information about products is honest and easily available. If it is not honest, free-enterprise benefits primarily those who are the best liar/salesman. There are several economic models of lying in a free-enterprise system, but in the end the best free-enterprise system, from the consumer point of view, is one where lying is minimized and consumer information and competition is maximized.

It is not clear how this ideal is to be achieved. If one does not want a society in which lying is rewarded, one must work out a method of controlling it. However currently the only umpire in business is the government. It does not seem that government lives up to its responsibilities to set up a fair business playing field that maximizes competition and promotes honest advertising.

It is instructive to look at a few minor examples of this free-enterprise mode of communication that we commonly encounter every day. This is just an example, it is easy to find many worse examples.

“We will not be undersold by anyone” is a modern sales slogan that is the cousin of the “Think System” and the son of Harold Hill’s boys’ band. This phrase is used to sell expensive consumer items to gullible customers, it sometimes comes with a money back guarantee, just to make it sound better. But when you think about it, if you find it cheaper elsewhere, why not just buy it there. Who keeps on pricing items they have already been purchased anyway? Only the most compulsive insecure shoppers, fearful of being taken by a merchant.

Occasionally someone runs across a cheaper price by accident, and after a week this confident customer goes back to the store to “cash in” on his price guarantee. He will hear any number of excuses from the retailer, that are usually written down in the fine print on a document that he has never seen until he complained.

Here are a few possible angles the retailer might use to wriggle out of his price guarantee: 1. “It was the cheapest price when you bought it.” 2. “If it is unused and still in the box I’ll take it back and refund your money.” 3. “Oh they [the cheaper store] are using it as a loss leader [selling it at less than the price they bought it] — I can’t guarantee against people like that.”

Needless to say, seldom, if ever, does a store have to back up their price guarantee. It either never comes up, or they manage to avoid it. That makes the phrase “We will not be undersold!” a funny kind of half lie. It is like the music man’s boys’ band, it is there, but it is not really there. The retailer’s way out of his responsibility is to blame the consumer just like the “Think System” manages to do.

This may seem a trivial example, but it is the motivation behind the lie that is important. It proclaims a morality that rewards the liar. This is a lesson that everyone begins to learn early—starting with our first milk. By age thirteen or so we are usually so good at it we can even fool and manipulate our parents.

In a way one expects lying in children and the business sector, but it is less excusable in the educational, religious, governmental, and non-profit charitable sectors where free-enterprise does not play a part. Or maybe that should be: **should not** play a part.

Government, at least in our politicians, sets no shining examples of honesty. Most commonly politicians say whatever the listener wants to hear, because they are selling (in a free-enterprise sense) themselves for votes.

Because the current administration wants to paint its actions in a publicly favorable light it is also motivated to lie about what it is doing. So cutting down forests is called environmental preservation, and elimination of controls on toxic waste is billed as recycling.

Note the President Bush statements about the necessity of invading Iraq. The policy was clearly to say whatever needs to be said to get your way—lie or no lie. It is this same deception that seems to

accompany all free-enterprise endeavors.

Supposedly the non-profit organization was created to take it out of the free-enterprise system and allow tax-deductible support of worthy endeavours. But even the best of these lie and cheat and the worst are havens of the crooked.

The non-profit sector of our economic system is more or less divided into two parts: the have and the have-nots. The haves are the foundations established by wealthy individuals who want to secure large amounts of money in a place that can’t be taxed by the government, but which they control and can advance their own political, religious, and social agendas.

The have-nots are non-profit organizations that want to do something, but have to beg for money to do it. They depend on the government, the large foundations, and the public to support their activities. They are directly in the free-enterprise reward system and therefore are motivated to lie.

Nowhere is this corruption of values more evident than in Public Television and radio. The mantra of these “public” stations is: “We don’t interrupt our programming with commercials”. Or they use the special term: “non-commercial” as short-hand for the same statement. Note the wording and the unstated implication: one doesn’t interrupt a program by having advertising between programs.

This trick of redefining a commonly understood term to mislead the public is called “a term of the art” by lawyers who themselves are specialists in this sort of thing.

Public radio and TV, of course, provides commercial advertising all the time. Sometimes they devote entire programs to selling commercial products, and hide the fact as a documentary on some related subject. At least they don’t interrupt movies every five minutes with advertising, but then they rarely show movies.

They do interrupt musical programs constantly with advertising. Just try watching Public TV during any pledge

week and try to say you got uninterrupted programming with a straight face. Of course the Public TV executives would defend themselves by saying that begging is not advertising. Well give me a break—it is far worse than advertising.

This non-profit business is the same fine art as our music man—half-truths with excuses for anything else. The truth is that in the United States public TV and radio is **commercial** TV and radio—that also begs for money and doesn't pay taxes.

There is a third part of the non-profit sector that provides a valuable commodity—often insurance—for which the general public is willing to pay a lot. These non-profits are run to enrich and empower their managers: just look at the buildings and salaries of the major executives of non-profit health care providers. In the United States the Auto Clubs, also mostly non-profit organizations, exhibit a similar *modus operandi*.

In *The Music Man* the umpire and judge of moral conduct is Winthrop, the innocent lispng 10 year old brother of Marian. He asks the hard questions of Prof. Harold Hill and gets the straight answers. It is his innocence and persistence that exposes Hill's evasion and duplicity. Who in modern society could play this role for the free-enterprise system?

The umpire for free-enterprise ought to be the government, but that clearly hasn't worked. For example, has government cracked down on the duplicity in Public TV and radio? Not on your life. One might suppose they either approve of the way Public broadcasting is run or perhaps they worry they might end up having to support public broadcasting and education.

The Churches might be the umpire. However, the Churches have their own product to retail, and have been corrupt from very early on—Egyptian priests would sell empty animal mummies to people to offer as sacrifice to the gods. Christianity is not exempt from duplicity and corruption, exactly what was the Reformation all about anyway? The response of the Christian churches to recent church sex scandals has not been encouraging. Certainly the churches are

in no position to be the source of honesty to cleanse the free-enterprise system.

The communications media is already owned by big business, giving them the job of umpire would be to put the coyote in charge of the rabbit hutch.

Are there solutions to this general corruption? To really make progress, realignment of the political system must be the first priority. Taking free-enterprise motivations out of politics would go a long way to clean up the political system.

Independence in federal politicians could be encouraged by taking them out of the free-enterprise system as soon as they are elected. The state would provide housing, food, and an allowance for personal items. More or less this just puts them in jail. A place in which they probably belong. After their term in office they should graduate from jail and become society doyen, that are accorded the same state services and a nicer prison. Violation of doyen rules puts them in a real prison.

Politicians and society doyen would be deprived of the ability to accrue or pass on wealth, anything earned or saved would go into the government treasury. The congress will have to decide what to do with doyen dependents, but many reasonable solutions are available. This might slightly reduce the fervor for getting the job in the first place. But then the last thing we need is a politician who really wants the job.

To promote honesty in candidates for political office requires changing the voting system to rid it of its inherent economic inducement. This is easy, in place of the person who comes in first, just make the person who comes in fifth win an election. This will do wonders for honesty.

One can't "run" for fifth place. To win a candidate must irritate as many people as he pleases. This doesn't prevent him from lying, but it doesn't reward him for lying either. Thus speaking his mind honestly will get him a lot further toward winning. To insure a modicum of intelligence in politicians and a knowledge of governmental operation, candidates should have to pass a test that measures

knowledge about how the government runs.

The above two minor realignments to take the free-enterprise system out of politics would strongly reduce the power of the political parties. This in turn would produce a more neutral, thoughtful president and congress. With partisan passion and free-market pressures gone the government could begin to attack corporate corruption and start to build a fair free-enterprise system.

To help the non-profit sector regain its non-free-enterprise direction, boards of directors should be required to contain a majority of society doyen. This can't be done immediately, but as time goes on and the number of doyen increase, the requirement can gradually integrated from the wealthiest to the poorest non-profit organizations.

Like Jonathan Swift's *Modest Proposal* of 1729, I am sure this proposal will be welcomed by all. Like Swift's proposal these suggestions are so simple and effective that common sense says they should be adopted immediately. Parliament did drop the ball on Swift's proposal. But in this case, I am sure that the US Congress will immediately recognize the proposal's value and the whole country will begin a long struggle toward moral rectitude.

Perhaps Meredith Willson did not have a sardonic view of free-enterprise in mind when he wrote *The Music Man* in 1956. He certainly made enough money from the production to soften any criticism he might of had of our economic system. But in any case, reviewing Meredith's musical, half a century later, one certainly wonders if Willson had more serious matters on his mind when he wrote *The Music Man*.

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