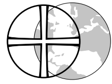

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We're Number *What*? Winning as a Cultural Icon

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One Sunday morning, I was making my way in to church from the lot where I had just parked my car. Two little boys came dashing out of the church school building, racing headlong toward a gray minivan at the far end of the lot. The boys seemed fairly close in age, perhaps five and six years old, both so towheaded as to be obviously related to one another. As they arrived breathless at their destination, the older boy slightly ahead of the younger, the loser in the footrace cried out with obvious delight: "Wow! You run really fast!" I smiled at this statement of unabashed sibling admiration. Yet I also found myself wondering how many years (or months?) would pass before the outcry would become something more along the lines of: "No fair! You got a head start!"

It is a significant, if sardonic, question. At some point, many of us unfortunately pass from eager delight in the accomplishments of others to grudging resentment of their successes. In this trajectory, our personal development seems to reflect the evolution of our culture. In the early years of the twentieth century, legendary sportswriter Grantland Rice penned words that played their subtle part in shaping a generation's values:

> For when the One Great Scorer comes
> To write against your name,

> *Our cultural emphasis on winning at all costs, while producing many striking results, exacts a heavy toll on individuals and society. It also places Christians into conflict with Jesus' admonition that "whoever wants to be first must be a servant."*

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> He marks—not that you won or lost—
> But how you played the game.[1]

Just a few decades later, however, a far different motto moved into cultural prominence. Equally legendary football coach Vince Lombardi trumpeted to his Green Bay Packer team the now-iconic slogan: "Winning isn't everything. It's the only thing."[2]

As Yale law professor Stephen Carter has noted, one of the corrosive ills of USAmerican society today is the fact that "we care far more about winning than about playing by the rules."[3] Nor is this fixation with winning as "the only thing" restricted to the athletic arena so familiar to Rice and Lombardi. In politics and academics, economics and entertainment—indeed, even in the context of ministry and church growth—we find ourselves seduced by a narrative that tells us our lives are more valuable if we are "Number One." Among the college students I teach, the height of scorn is to refer to another person as a "loser." Being an "also-ran" is simply not good enough.[4]

In the following pages, I intend to explore this cultural mythos in greater detail. Beyond the slogan from Vince Lombardi and the critique from Stephen Carter, what evidence do we see that a preoccupation with winning afflicts us in the United States—on both personal and national levels? What are the origins of this preoccupation; why are *we* this way when other cultures of the world are not? Finally, what costs as well as benefits accrue to us from our winning ways? While the eager pursuit of excellence assuredly results in many goods, a Christian theological perspective also must note some perils to our persistent desires to be "Number One."

CHILD'S PLAY

Imagine two children at play, seated at opposite sides of a game board. On the board in front of each player is a "goal" area. In the center of the board is a small box filled with marbles. The marble box is rigged with strings, such that it can be maneuvered back and forth across the board. Each player holds two of these strings. The object of the game is to slide the box until it lands on top of one's home

[1]Found online: http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/g/q118344.html [cited 8 December 2002]. See also William Harper, *How You Played the Game: The Life of Grantland Rice* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1999).

[2]Cited by Brooks Clark in "What'd I Say? (Vince Lombardi)," *Sports Illustrated* 81/1 (1994) 7.

[3]Stephen Carter, *Integrity* (New York: Basic Books, 1996) 4. The neologism "USAmerican" is not Carter's but my own. I shall use it throughout this essay as an adjective to describe the dominant culture of the USA. The more familiar adjective "American" ignores the existence of other countries on the continent we share, thereby reinforcing one of the notions I critique: the imperialist sense that we are "Number One" and that therefore only our existence counts.

[4]A "loser," according to the *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang* (New York: Random House, 1994), is "a person who is worthless, unappealing, chronically unsuccessful, etc." The first known written usage dates to 1955—coincidentally, the same decade as Lombardi's famed welcome-to-training-camp speech to the Packers.

"goal," whereupon a marble will drop into place and earn the goal-scorer a prize. The game is timed, but otherwise there is no limit to the number of prizes that may be won.

Researcher Linden Nelson has made some interesting discoveries about the way children from different cultures approach this type of game.[5] By the age of ten, most are clever enough to figure out that both players can win a lot of prizes if they will simply assist one another in pulling the marble box back and forth from goal to goal: plop! a prize for you! plop! a prize for me! In fact, this turn-taking cooperative mode is the way in which ten-year-olds in rural Mexico will play the game described. Not so, however, for ten-year-old Anglo-American children in urban Los Angeles. Rather than participate in a mode of play that will enable a "rival" to win on every other turn of the game, they prefer to engage in a tug-of-war over the box—a counterproductive strategy that fairly well guarantees that no one will win any prizes during the time allotted.

"while **losing** *feels disgraceful to USAmerican children and* **playing to a tie** *carries all the romance of 'kissing your sister,' cultures with more cooperative orientations instead stigmatize rivalrous behaviors"*

Writer Alfie Kohn summarizes a number of cross-cultural studies that arrive at similar conclusions.[6] While *losing* feels disgraceful to USAmerican children and *playing to a tie* carries all the romance of "kissing your sister,"[7] cultures with more cooperative orientations instead stigmatize rivalrous behaviors. According to anthropologists Kimball and Romaine Romney, for example, the Mixtecans of Juxtlahuaca, Mexico, "regard...competitiveness as a minor crime."[8] The Tangu people of New Guinea play a variant of skittles in which the objective is not to win, but to reach an exact draw between teams; in this context, for one team to seek to acquire more points than the other would simply be nonsensical behavior.[9] Blackfoot Indian children, Israeli kibbutzniks, Australian aborigines, the Inuit of Canada, the Kikuyu of Kenya: all prefer games whose goal is teamwork over those in which a single winner makes off with all the marbles (literally or metaphorically!). In other

[5]Linden Nelson and Spencer Kagan, "Competition: The Star-Spangled Scramble," *Psychology Today*, September 1972, 53-56, 90-91.

[6]Alfie Kohn, *No Contest: The Case against Competition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992) 24-39.

[7]The "kissing your sister" quote is attributed to Alabama football coach, Paul "Bear" Bryant. See http://www.utm.utoronto.ca/~nfogaras/WC14.htm [cited 12 December 2002]. His line has been taken a step further by baseball player George Brett, with the much-quoted remark: "If a tie is like kissing your sister, losing is like kissing your grandmother with her teeth out." See http://www.thesoftballsite.com/quotes.html [cited 12 December 2002].

[8]Cited in Kohn, *No Contest*, 37.

[9]The game, called *taketak*, involves spinning a top into a pattern of stakes. Points are scored by getting the top to ricochet off stakes, but the game is not concluded until both teams have achieved an identical number of ricochets—a feat requiring considerable strategy and skill. See George Leonard, "Winning Isn't Everything. It's Nothing," *Intellectual Digest*, October 1973, 45.

words, whatever a culture's values may be—whether competitive or cooperative in nature—these values get instilled through the medium of child's play: which ends up not being "child's play" at all!

Conspicuous Competition

Rather than being born into us, therefore, the drive to compete is a learned behavior. Psychiatrist Harvey Ruben maintains that by age four, we start to "*teach* our children competitive behavior as part of their acculturation process," using games as seemingly innocent as musical chairs.[10] The older an Anglo-American child gets, the more competitive she or he will become—even when such competition runs counter to self-interest, as we saw in the marble-box example. Blocking a competitor's access to prizes becomes as gratifying as gaining prizes for oneself. Such "sadistically rivalrous" behaviors sadly dog us into our more "mature" years. Psychologist Nelson concludes: "We can easily find adults whose drive to compete overrides self-interest—in academia, athletics, business, politics, and [global affairs]."[11]

At the turn of the twentieth century, Thorstein Veblen defined a USAmerican cultural trend of "conspicuous consumption"; at the dawn of the twenty-first, we might amplify that description to include the ills of "conspicuous competition" as well.[12] Virtually any endeavor is now fair game for being turned into a winner-takes-all contest. In the 1970s, Vince Lombardi's quote about winning as "the only thing" found its way out of the locker room and onto the walls of the "war room" of the Committee to Re-elect the President during Richard Nixon's infamous campaign.[13] Both Nixon and Johnson vowed at various points in their careers that "they were not going down in history as 'the first American President who lost a war.'"[14] Renowned lawyer F. Lee Bailey has defined a trial in the U.S. courts as "a battle of gladiators," an image leading at least one analyst to conclude that, in our legal system, *winning* matters more than the pursuit of either justice or truth.[15] Corporate analysts Josh Hammond and James Morrison define a "Big and More" cultural force in USAmerican business that manifests itself in an "obsession with being Number One."[16] Eun Y. Kim, president of an international management consulting firm, cites the pertinent mission statement of USAmerican corpora-

[10]Harvey Ruben, *Competing: Understanding and Winning the Strategic Game We All Play* (New York: Lippincott & Crowell, 1980) 20.

[11]Nelson and Kagan, "Competition," 53.

[12]Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), cited by Laurence Shames in *The Hunger for More: Searching for Values in an Age of Greed* (New York: Times Books, 1989) 142.

[13]Clark, "What'd I Say?" 7.

[14]Cited by Thomas Tutko and William Bruns, *Winning Is Everything and Other American Myths* (New York: Macmillan, 1976) 5.

[15]See Anne Strick, *Injustice for All* (New York: Putnam, 1977) 20.

[16]Josh Hammond and James Morrison, *The Stuff Americans Are Made Of: The Seven Cultural Forces That Define Americans* (New York: Macmillan, 1996). Hammond and Morrison discuss the "Big and More" cultural force in relation to being "Number One" on pages 5, 105, 116, 126, and 145.

tions with which she has worked: "We'll not tolerate losing. Our company is about winning."[17]

Not just politics and law and business, however, manifest our conspicuously competitive tendencies. From her vantage point as a native-born Korean who has become a naturalized U.S. citizen, Kim observes: "For competitive Americans, who hate losing, everything in life is a game to win. [The] love of competition is reflected in [an] obsession with ratings and rankings": from the "best cities" to live in, the "best colleges" to attend, or even the "best-dressed" celebrities or the "most eligible" bachelors and bachelorettes.[18] Both a symptom of this winning-obsession and further fuel to its fire, so-called "reality television" has become one of the hottest new trends in the entertainment industry. In ABC's *The Bachelor*—a program that makes the old *Dating Game* seem tasteful by comparison—young women compete for the privilege of achieving a romantic relationship with an available male. In CBS's *Survivor*—one of the most successful shows in the history of U.S. broadcasting, earning between $40 and $50 million dollars in advertising revenue during its final three episodes in the summer of 2002—contestants employ whatever strategies are necessary to "survive" in a challenging exotic environment while eliminating their competition. As one college student (the network's target audience) has summarized the "message" of the program: "Looking out for Number One justifies anything."[19]

"ME-FIRST" OR "US-FIRST"?

As we have already seen through the medium of child's play, other cultures do not manifest our mania either to "look out for Number One" or to *be* "Number One." According to Kim, in fact, "Asians believe that it is neither necessary nor beneficial to be obsessed with winning...[but that] it is better to promote peace and harmony than to win at any cost."[20] To get a clear sense of this contrast, we might imagine a *Survivors* program (note the plural) in which people go out of their way, even at some personal expense, to keep one another *on* the island rather than to maneuver each other *off*!

In the 1930s, Margaret Mead and her colleagues conducted a set of thirteen now-classic studies aimed at distinguishing competitive cultures, like ours, from the more cooperative ones to which Kim alludes. According to these studies, competitive cultures feature

(1) strong ego-development and reliance on individual initiative;
(2) the acquisition and use of property for individual ends;

[17]Eun Y. Kim, *The Yin and Yang of American Culture: A Paradox* (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural, 2001) 41.

[18]Ibid., 40.

[19]The statistics on *Survivor* are drawn from Kevin Howley, "Reading *Survivor*: A Primer on Media Studies." Online: http://www.media-culture.org.au/reviews/sections.php?op=viewarticle&artid=102 [cited 16 September 2002]. The college student is Matthew Andrews, University of California at Santa Barbara, from his website devoted to reality television: http://www.uweb.ucsb.edu/~andrewsm/drawbacks.html [cited 16 September 2002].

[20]Kim, *Yin and Yang of American Culture*, 42.

(3) sufficient openness or flexibility in status systems to permit individuals to rise or fall along societally-defined scales of success.

Cooperative cultures, on the other hand, are characterized by

(1) suppression of ego-development and individual initiative, in favor of "fitting in";

(2) distribution of property in accordance with ritual obligations rather than individual achievement;

(3) social stratification such that each person occupies a secure place in an ordered universe, with "rising" in status seen as neither possible nor particularly desirable.[21]

The basic contrast between these cultural types hinges on the distinction between a "me-first" and an "us-first" orientation. Competitive cultures exalt *achievement* and exhort individuals to "Get ahead!" Cooperative cultures, in contrast, honor *affiliation* and teach the wisdom: "Know your place."

> ***"Competitive cultures exalt* achievement *and exhort individuals to 'Get ahead!' Cooperative cultures, in contrast, honor* affiliation *and teach the wisdom: 'Know your place.'"***

In attempting to understand why some cultures develop along "me-first" and others along "us-first" lines, we might initially speculate about the relative abundance or scarcity of natural resources available to them. With imaginations schooled in oversimplified images of Darwinian evolution, we might thus hypothesize that competition emerges out of contexts in which the necessities of life (food, shelter, and so forth) are in short supply, resulting in a combative struggle to survive. We would, however, be wrong. Mead's studies conclude that availability of resources, in fact, has very little to do with whether a culture comes to promote individual achievement or group affiliation.

More recent cross-cultural analyses carry Mead's insights an intriguing point further. Ironically, according to psychologist Edward Stewart and intercultural communication theorist Milton Bennett, a "fixed pie" of goods may actually work to promote "us-first" rather than "me-first" behaviors. When a social group knows that its means are limited, it is well served by learning to live peaceably within them. "If there is not enough for everyone," Stewart and Bennett conclude, "it is unlikely that the society will countenance perpetual...competition for the economic and social spoils."[22] Rather, the mythic structures of the society will establish a hierarchy of roles and ranks, and resources will be allocated accordingly. From

[21]Margaret Mead, ed., *Competition and Cooperation among Primitive Peoples* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1937; reprint Boston: Beacon, 1962) 480-481, 486, 511.

[22]Edward Stewart and Milton Bennett, *American Cultural Patterns: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, rev. ed. (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural, 1991) 83.

birth forward, individuals will understand what portions of the pie they may—and may not—legitimately expect. "Know your place" will be the prevailing motto, and the harmony of the whole will matter far more than the freedom for any individual to "get ahead." In fact, as Korean-American analyst Kim observes, in "us-first"-oriented Asian schools and companies, "If someone dares to be different or pulls ahead from the pack, he or she will be labeled a renegade, and a collective effort will be made to discredit that person."[23]

"pilgrims and immigrants have sailed to our shores intent on escaping the allotted ranks of their former, hierarchical societies and exploiting the riches of this fantastically vast continent"

In contrast, Stewart and Bennett assert, "Some of the...competitiveness of American society can no doubt be traced to the belief that there are enough material goods for everyone."[24] Styling ourselves as the "Land of Opportunity," we in the United States have not historically experienced ourselves as hampered by an economy of scarcity. Quite the contrary: pilgrims and immigrants have sailed to our shores intent on escaping the allotted ranks of their former, hierarchical societies and exploiting the riches of this fantastically vast continent. "Winning"—and indeed, "winning big"—thus comes early on to be embedded in the master narrative of our country, as in the lives of its fiercely individual founders.

UN-SETTLERS

Those founders are intrepid folk. Their foremost observer, the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville, concludes of them—of *us*—in his still definitive study, first published in the 1830s: [US]Americans are "a driven people." Only the energy of immense ambition would seek to conquer an entire continent—at what we now know, sadly, to have been the tragic cost of both natural resources and native peoples. As one student of Tocqueville notes, while the Canadians to our north and the Mexicans to our south seem intent on building more stable societies, we here in the middle are "forever pushing past existing frontiers, simultaneously destroying and advancing civilization, [our] own and that of [our forebears]....[The young French aristocrat] is flabbergasted to see successful people on the frontier, leaving civilization behind in order to create something newer and freer."[25] These settlers are a most *un*settled and *un*settling crew!

The rapidly expanding United States thus authors for itself a story line in

[23]Kim, *Yin and Yang of American Culture*, 32.

[24]Stewart and Bennett, *American Cultural Patterns*, 83.

[25]Michael A. Ledeen, *Tocqueville on American Character: Why Tocqueville's Brilliant Exploration of the American Spirit Is as Vital and Important Today as It Was Nearly Two Hundred Years Ago* (New York: St. Martin's, 2000) 16-17.

which drive, competition, and winning are hailed as consummate values. A wide-angle lens provides a panoramic perspective on this story. Early "unsettlers" focus on winning life-and-death struggles against the wilderness (and against prior inhabitants of the continent); patriots dedicate their "lives, fortunes, and sacred honor" to winning a victory against colonial oppressors; adventurers seek to tame and "win" the western frontier; waves of immigrants persist in pilgrimage to the self-styled "New World" in order to "win" new wealth and opportunities. The absence of an entrenched class system in the USAmerican democracy opens the possibility—at least theoretically—for anyone, regardless of birth, to achieve success based solely on individual initiative. A prevailingly Protestant ethos honors the vigorous pursuit of one's calling in the most secular of affairs and tiptoes close to viewing material success as proof of providential election.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, *laissez-faire* capitalism eagerly embraces the ideology of Social Darwinism, pitting individual self-interests against one another in economic competition for a presumed "survival of the fittest." Entrepreneurialism thrives on this aggressive, risk-taking spirit of "unsettledness." Technology, "one of the most powerful engines of [US] success,"[26] emerges out of a happy union of entrepreneurial capitalism with the scientific, pragmatic spirit of Newton, Bacon, and Locke. As former White House domestic policy analyst Dinesh D'Souza concludes, "Science provides the knowledge that leads to invention, and capitalism supplies the mechanism by which the invention is transmitted to the larger society, as well as the economic incentive for inventors to continue making new things."[27]

Economic vigor contributes to a burgeoning sense of political preeminence as well. From our earliest days, we have seen ourselves as a "chosen people." Governor Winthrop's famous sermon aboard the ship on its way to Massachusetts Bay in 1630 proclaims, "We shall be as a City upon a Hill; the eyes of all people are upon us."[28] Though sorely tested—by our own misconduct as much as by any external challenges—the dream persists. In the thick of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln echoes the belief that the United States remains "the last best hope of earth."[29] By 1945, the Allied victory in World War II ratifies a conviction that the USA is destined to take its place as "the world's foremost economic and military force," standing on the frontline of defense against tyranny worldwide.[30] Despite a sobering brush with defeat during the Vietnam era, after the Gulf War U.S. political rhetoric returns to a fixation on winning—whether winning access to desired oil reserves or winning a global "war on terrorism." A year after the galvanizing events

[26]Dinesh D'Souza, *What's So Great about America* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2002) 66.

[27]Ibid.

[28]Cited by Robert Bellah in *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 15. I have taken the liberty of modernizing the spelling.

[29]Cited by Derek Leebaert in *The Fifty Year Wound: The True Price of America's Cold War Victory* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 2002) 13.

[30]Ibid., especially pages 5, 14-16, and 58.

of September 11, 2001, *Newsweek*'s "Conventional Wisdom" column sums up a "new saber-rattling Bush doctrine" in terms of an old, familiar slogan: "We're No. 1."[31]

Closing Costs

Victory in such economic and political contests, however, brings in its wake both spoils and *spoiling*. In her book on the paradoxes of USAmerican culture, Eun Kim reports having asked more than a thousand non-Americans what they think about the United States. Her respondents laud our "competitive spirit" as a cultural virtue while they lament our accompanying "arrogance" as a cultural vice. Still seeing ourselves as a "City on a Hill," "the last best hope of earth," we have increasingly taken on a special role in the world, using our leverage to spread democratic ideals—a mission that evokes both admiration and resentment. Some Asians, Kim notes, "criticize Americans for interfering in the affairs of other countries, as if they are somehow superior," presumptuously preaching about human rights to others around the globe, all the while failing to live up to our own vision at home.[32]

Business analysts Hammond and Morrison offer further evidence of ways in which our missionizing zeal to be Number One—accompanied by our enterprising fascination with "Big and More"—constitutes a mixed blessing. At the turn of the twentieth century, to be sure, "big and more technology transformed America into a big power in the world." In the opening years of the twenty-first century, however, "Big and More" also result in "big national problems": a mind-boggling federal deficit, skyrocketing health care costs, escalating environmental devastation.[33]

"in a culture that prizes winning as 'the* only *thing,' the toll on individuals is huge"

In a culture that prizes winning as "the *only* thing," the toll on individuals is huge as well: hostile workplaces; increased incidence of cheating, whether in the boardroom, the classroom, or the sporting arena; insomnia, anxiety, a panoply of stress-related illnesses.[34] For a graphic depiction of the dangers, we have but to recall the tragic scenario of one "hockey dad," convicted of manslaughter in the death of another man as the result of a fistfight over their sons' hockey practice.[35]

[31]"Conventional Wisdom," *Newsweek*, 30 September 2002, 6.

[32]Kim, *Yin and Yang of American Culture*, 95. For the author's summary lists of our cultural "virtues" and "vices," see pages 3-4.

[33]Hammond and Morrison, *The Stuff Americans Are Made Of*, 27-28.

[34]Kim, *Yin and Yang of American Culture*, 42; Ruben, *Competing*, 106. See also Pauline Vaillancourt Rosenau, "Competition as a Public Health Problem"; online at http://apha.confex.com/apha/130am/technprogram/paper_43543.htm [cited 13 November 2002].

[35]Online: http://www.channelonenews.com/articles/2002/01/03/hockey/ [cited 12 October 2002].

Does winning really matter to us this much? To return to Stephen Carter's remarks on *Integrity*, with which we began: "If we teach [our children]...in the arena of fun and games that winning is the highest value, they will carry that lesson on to other, more serious areas of life, where we can expect them to act corruptly."[36] We will find this a hollow victory, indeed.

Yet, as Carter continues, the very fact that we continue to acknowledge a distinction between a "good sport" and a "bad sport" shows that "we want to be people for whom winning is *not* everything."[37] What is more, if we are not simply U.S. citizens but also *Christians*, citizens under God's rule, we are subject to a master narrative that runs distinctly counter to our cultural preoccupation with being "Number One." Tellingly, when the sons of Zebedee clamor for places at the right and left hand of the Christ in the coming realm, Jesus answers them: "Whoever wants to be first must be a servant" (Mark 10:44). He does not thus deride their—or, for that matter, *our*—desires for preeminence, but he does reframe them. Thus, from a Christian perspective, the critical question to ask about our ventures is *not*: Do they move us *up* in the world, *up* into the winner's circle, *up* to the right hand of the Ruler of Glory? Rather, the appropriate question is: Do our pursuits move us *closer*—closer to what God is calling us to do in compassion for our neighbors and our world: sharing what we have with one another, weeping with those who weep, and rejoicing with those who rejoice?[38]

I think back to that exemplary "good sport," the little boy I heard in the church parking lot, exulting with his brother, "Wow! You run really fast!" And I have to wonder: though that younger child *lost* the footrace, did he not perhaps show himself to be a *winner* in a far more important way? ⊕

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[36]Carter, *Integrity*, 170.

[37]Ibid., 155.

[38]For the distinction between moving *up* and moving *closer*, as for the analysis of the sons of Zebedee story, I am indebted to Robert Schnase, *Ambition in Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993) 29-30.