

The Common Good by Robert Reich: a Review

The title, perhaps boring, names a vital and endangered reality in our society now. By “the common good,” Reich means our shared positive values like the truth, common decency, the rule of law, care for our mutual welfare. Now a septuagenarian, retired Secretary of Labor, and a distinguished professor of social science at UC Berkeley, Reich cares passionately about our society and our country. He sees President Trump not as a cause of our current situation but a symptom of it.

Reich sees our abandoning of those common goods in the scramble to do “whatever it takes” in business or in our political life to attain profit or power. He sees Martin Skreli as an exemplar of this in business. Skreli is the fellow who bought the company that makes Daraprim, a UN-identified “essential medicine,” and raised its price 5,000% from \$13.50 a pill to \$750—thus pricing some people into pain, suffering, and death. And defiant about it, while exemplifying the behavior of other corporate CEOs.

Reich sees three developments leading from the 50s, when corporate CEOs had and spoke about a responsibility to society in general to the apparent current corporate attitude that anything goes, any tactic. Watergate and whatever-it-takes politics began the erosion of our valuing the common good. Next came guys like Michael Malkin (junk bond king) and Jack Welch (CEO of GE) who both employed and spread the practice of doing whatever it takes to make huge short term profits. Reich’s third factor is the Powell Memorandum (it’s available on line; just Google it) in which Lewis Powell advised the Chamber of Commerce to spend big and long on funding think tanks, political action committees, and other activities to foster a more business friendly society. (Nixon later appointed Powell to the Supreme Court.)

Reich’s prescription is for us to insist on truth in public life instead of allowing evasions and lies—to honor truth and shame lies, to make education a bit less sharply focused on jobs and money and more on our civic society. An apology; this is a fine book for whose details and nuances there is no room in this brief note. The book impressed me greatly.

Bob McDonnell