

Barbarism Makes a Comeback

BY MARJORIE KELLY

Notes from the file labeled, "I can't believe they said that."

It seems less and less fashionable, these days, to talk about social responsibility or stakeholder management. I'm not sure whether management practices themselves have regressed, but the discourse certainly has. The verbal climate has become more hostile to ethics. And it's a deeply disturbing shift.

I've started keeping a file, labeled "I Can't Believe They Said That"—containing business utterances that are ruthless, brutal, even cruel. There's a tone so uncaring as to sneer at the very idea of caring. These are Real Businessmen (and they are all men). Here is how they talk:

"What do you do when your competitor is drowning?" asks Coke President Doug Ivester. "Get a live hose, and stick it in his mouth." That's from *Fortune*, October 28, 1996 (thanks to Sherry Sweetnam of Eden Prairie, Minn. for sending it). What's remarkable is, oddly, how unremarkable the quote is—how commonly we hear such things. If competition requires us to be brutal, we'll be brutal with gusto. We're Real Businessmen, they say, grabbing the vine and swinging away.

Barbaric quotation number two: This one is from an editorial commentary by Thomas G. Donlan in *Barron's*, August 12, 1996. It was before the election, and he was writing about tax cuts Bob Dole was trumpeting. Ridiculing one proposed Dole cut, Donlan wrote: "He proposes a \$500 tax credit for taxpayers with children—as if having children were an economic advantage to the nation or conferred some special entitlement." (But on second thought, maybe Donlan's right. Maybe parents should be ridiculed for using precious national wealth to feed their children—when that wealth could go toward something useful, like interest-rate derivatives.)

The thumping of Armani-clad chests can be heard in the distance, growing closer. I come to *barbaric quotation number three*. In *The Wall Street Journal*, October 29, 1996, columnist Holman W. Jenkins Jr. defended the behavior of Archer Daniels Midland—which had just settled criminal charges of price fixing—by saying price-fixing was a "crime" that "exists mostly in the eye of the beholder." Collusion "can be a good thing," he wrote. (I'm not making this up.) And trying to fight it "is like fighting the weather." What's a little collusion among friends, anyway? We all know the real problem isn't illegal corporate behavior—it's greedy parents wanting their criminal \$500 tax cuts.

Finally, *barbaric quotation number four*, from the *Wall Street Journal*, March 19, 1997: In an article worrying that Craig Weatherup may be "too nice for Pepsi-Cola's own good," one consultant is quoted saying, "What's needed

at Pepsi is some basic brutality." CEO Weatherup disagrees, saying he would not sacrifice the company's humanity to get from \$55 to \$60 a share. The *Journal's* response? "That kind of talk hardly thrills Wall Street," it says, noting shareholders would love a price boost, "humanity or no humanity."

I am left stunned, and disturbed. This casual brutality in business writing today is reminiscent of the casual racism of the 1960s, or the sexism of the 1950s. There's a callous self-centeredness that is contemptuous of any group other than one's own. It is discourse like this that makes it acceptable to lynch blacks, beat wives, cheat employees—or collude on prices.



Margaret Moorman said it well, in *Waiting to Forget*. "There are climates of approval or disapproval that cloud or clear the moral weather of a time and place and make it possible or impossible to feel all right about certain actions," she wrote. These climates "affect us so pervasively that we honestly believe that we are making individual moral choices, while in reality we are simply responding to the *Zeitgeist*."

She was writing, in fact, about reproductive choice for women. But the sentiments apply in an uncanny way to business. The moral weather of business today makes unethical choices not only likely but mandatory. Executives choose to ignore filthy, subhuman conditions in overseas sweatshops, believing "global competition" justifies this. Boards pay CEOs obscene amounts and look the other way as employees get stiffed, believing "market forces" require this.

They are making necessary business choices, while in reality we are responding to the spirit of the times. It's a spirit that is totalitarian: demanding a heartless way of thinking that may not be overtly challenged. And it's a spirit that is nurtured by the talk we weave around ourselves everyday.

In business, we have both more and less ethical choice than we acknowledge. The real choice we make is in what moral climate we condone. For in condoning a brutal discourse, what we truly condone—indeed require—is brutality itself.

"It staggers me that for whatever reason being nice is seen as being inconsistent with being tough."

—Craig Weatherup, CEO, PepsiCo.

SAYS WHO?

Business school students who admire downsizers like Chainsaw Al Dunlap:

60%

Cornell University study