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\$9 U.S. / \$9 CANADA

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# The Gospel *of* Consumption

*And the better future we left behind*

working day when all the wood is in," he suggested, the profit motive becomes "both the creator and satisfier of spiritual needs." For when the profit motive can turn nowhere else, "it wraps our soap in pretty boxes and tries to convince us that that is solace to our souls."

There was, for a time, a visionary alternative. In 1930 Kellogg Company, the world's leading producer of ready-to-eat cereal, announced that all of its nearly fifteen hundred workers would move from an eight-hour to a six-hour workday. Company president Lewis Brown and owner W. K. Kellogg noted that if the company ran "four six-hour shifts . . . instead of three eight-hour shifts, this will give work and paychecks to the heads of three hundred more families in Battle Creek."

This was welcome news to workers at a time when the country was rapidly descending into the Great Depression. But as Benjamin Hunnicutt explains in his book *Kellogg's Six-Hour Day*, Brown and Kellogg wanted to do more than save jobs. They

hoped to show that the "free exchange of goods, services, and labor in the free market would not have to mean mindless consumerism or eternal exploitation of people and natural resources." Instead "workers would be liberated by increasingly higher wages and shorter hours for the final freedom promised by the Declaration of Independence—the pursuit of happiness."

To be sure, Kellogg did not intend to stop making a profit. But the company leaders argued that men and women would work more efficiently on shorter shifts, and with more people employed, the overall purchasing power of the community would increase, thus allowing for more purchases of goods, including cereals.

A shorter workday did entail a cut in overall pay for workers. But Kellogg raised the hourly rate to partially offset the loss and provided for production bonuses to encourage people to work hard. The company eliminated time off for lunch, assuming that workers would rather work their shorter shift and leave as





during the war and the majority of them were re-  
to a six-hour day and thirty-hour week. Most of  
able to do so, for a while. But W. K. Kellogg and L  
had turned the company over to new managers i

The new managers saw only costs and no ben-  
six-hour day, and almost immediately after the  
war they began a campaign to undermine sho  
Management offered workers a tempting set o  
incentives if they would accept an eight-hour d  
vote taken in 1946, 77 percent of the men and 8  
the women wanted to return to a thirty-hour w  
than a forty-hour one. In making that choice  
chose a fairly dramatic drop in earnings from  
high wartime levels.

The company responded with a strategy o  
offering special deals on a department-by-depart  
where eight hours had pockets of support, typic  
highly skilled male workers. In the culture of  
post-Depression U.S., that strategy was largely  
But not everyone went along. Within Kellogg t  
substantial, albeit slowly dwindling group  
Hunnicuttt calls the "mavericks," who resisted l  
hours. They clustered in a few department  
managed to preserve the six-hour day until th  
eliminated it once and for all in 1985.

The mavericks rejected the claims made by th  
the union, and many of their co-workers that the  
they could earn on an eight-hour shift was wort  
the enormous difference in societal wealth betwe  
and the 1980s, the language the mavericks use  
their preference for a six-hour workday was alm  
to that used by Kellogg workers fifty years o  
woman, worried about the long hours worked  
said, "He has no time to live, to visit and spend ti  
family, and to do the other things he really loves

Several people commented on the link betw  
work hours and consumerism. One man said, "I  
along real good, so there was no use in me workin  
time than I had to." He added, "Everybody thoug  
going to get rich when they got that eight-hour  
really didn't make a big difference. . . . Some w  
bought automobiles right quick and they didn't g  
that because the car took the extra money they ha

The mavericks, well aware that longer work h  
fewer jobs, called those who wanted eight-hour  
overtime "work hogs." "Kellogg's was laying off  
woman commented, "while some of the men w  
really fantastic amounts of overtime—that's ju

Another quoted the historian Arnold Toynbee, who said, “We will either share the work, or take care of people who don’t have work.”

**People in the Depression-wracked 1930s**, with what seems to us today to be a very low level of material goods, readily chose fewer work hours for the same reasons as some of their children and grandchildren did in the 1980s: to have more time for themselves and their families. We could, as a society, make a similar choice today.

But we cannot do it as individuals. The mavericks at Kellogg held out against company and social pressure for years, but in the end the marketplace didn’t offer them a choice to work less and consume less. The reason is simple: that choice is at odds with the foundations of the marketplace itself—at least as it is currently constructed. The men and women who masterminded the creation of the consumerist society understood that

theirs was a political undertaking, and it will take a powerful political movement to change course today.

Bernays’s version of a “democratic society,” in which political decisions are marketed to consumers, has many modern proponents. Consider a comment by Andrew Card, George W. Bush’s former chief of staff. When asked why the administration waited several months before making its case for war against Iraq, Card replied, “You don’t roll out a new product in August.” And in 2004, one of the leading legal theorists in the United States, federal judge Richard Posner, declared that “representative democracy . . . involves a division between rulers and ruled,” with the former being “a governing class,” and the rest of us exercising a form of “consumer sovereignty” in the political sphere with “the power not to buy a particular product, a power to choose though not to create.”

Sometimes an even more blatant antidemocratic stance appears in the working papers of elite think tanks. One such





## Why You Buy

The notion that we can shop our way to happiness pervades mainstream American life. But it wasn't always this way. Consumer culture is the product of a deliberate campaign, developed in the 1930s by businessmen worried that they were meeting their customers' needs too well. In this issue of *Orion*, Jeffrey Kaplan explores how America was turned into a nation of consumers.