

Where Does the Laziness Lie Come From

The Laziness Lie is deeply embedded in the very foundation of the United States. The value of hard work and the evils of sloth are baked into our national myths and our shared value system. Thanks to the legacies of imperialism and slavery, as well as the ongoing influence that the United States exerts on its trade partners, the Laziness Lie has managed to spread its tendrils into almost every country and culture on the planet.

The word “lazy” first appeared in English around 1540; even back then, it was used in a judgmental way to mean someone who disliked work or effort.¹² Many etymologists believe it came from either the Middle Low German *lasich*, which meant “feeble” or “weak,”¹³ or from the Old English *lesu*, which meant “false” or “evil.”¹⁴ These two origins illustrate the odd doublespeak at work whenever we call someone lazy. When we say someone is lazy, we’re saying they’re incapable of completing a task due to (physical or mental) weakness, but we’re also claiming that their lack of ability somehow makes them morally corrupt. It’s not that they’re tired or even dispirited in some way we might sympathize with; the word implies that they’re failures on a fundamental, human level. The idea that lazy people are evil fakers who deserve to suffer has been embedded in the word since the very start.

One of the major factors that caused the Laziness Lie to spread throughout the United States was the arrival of the Puritans. The Puritans had long believed that if a person was a hard worker, it was a sign that God had chosen them for salvation. Hard work was believed to improve who you were as a person. Conversely, if a person couldn’t focus on the task at hand or couldn’t self-motivate, that was a sign that they had already been damned.¹⁵ This meant, of course, that there was no need to feel sympathy for people who struggled or failed to meet their responsibilities. By lacking the drive to succeed, they were displaying to the world that God hadn’t chosen them for Heaven. When the Puritans came to colonial America, their ideas caught on and spread to other, less pious colonists.¹⁶ For many reasons, a belief system that judged and punished the “lazy” was about to become very popular—and politically useful.

Colonial America relied on the labor of enslaved people and indentured servants.¹⁷ It was very important to the colonies’ wealthy and enslaving class that they find a way to motivate enslaved people to work hard, despite the fact that enslaved people had nothing to gain from it.¹⁸ One powerful way to do so was through religious teachings and indoctrination. A productivity-obsessed form of Christianity evolved from the older, more Puritanical idea that work improved moral character, and it was pushed on

enslaved people. This form of Christianity taught that suffering was morally righteous and that slaves would be rewarded in Heaven for being docile, agreeable, and, most important, diligent.¹⁹

On the flip side, if an enslaved person was slothful or “lazy,” there was something fundamentally corrupt and wrong with them.²⁰ Enslavers made it a point to keep enslaved people as busy and exhausted as possible out of fear that idle time would give them the means to revolt or riot.²¹ Even more disturbing, enslaved people who tried to run away from bondage were seen as mentally ill and suffering from “runaway slave disorder.”²² By not accepting their proper role in society, they were demonstrating that they were broken and disturbed. This worldview became the foundation for American capitalism.²³

The Laziness Lie had been born. It would quickly spread to other marginalized people, including indentured servants, poor white laborers, and Native Americans who had been forced into government boarding schools.²⁴ These exploited groups were also taught that working hard without complaint was virtuous, and that desiring free time was morally suspect. As the Industrial Revolution changed the landscape of the country, with more and more Americans working long hours in manufacturing plants, the Laziness Lie was pushed even more. The wealthy and highly educated began to claim that poor whites also couldn’t be trusted with “idle” time. In fact, too many breaks could make a person antisocial.²⁵ Propaganda from that time often claimed that if the working poor weren’t kept busy, they would resort to crime and drug use, and society would run amok.²⁶ Laziness had officially become not only a personal failing but a social ill to be defeated—and it has remained that way ever since.

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16. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 125.

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25. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, chapter 5.

26. A. P. Foulkes, *Literature and Propaganda* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2013), 46.