

Rockne and Lombardi: Models of Certainty in Uncertain Times

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Knute Rockne and Vince Lombardi enjoyed great popularity during the latter parts of their coaching careers. Notre Dame University became a well known institution largely on the fame Rockne and his football teams gained on the playing field. Vince Lombardi became during the latter part of the sixties the undisputed genius of pro football. Each man gained the respect of everyone in the coaching profession, as well as from important figures in all professions, including businessmen, clergy, and politicians to name a few.

Rockne and Lombardi's unusual popularity suggests that they were important role models for their respective era. This paper established a link between the models each man represented and the "social character" of the eras. It further shows that the era of Rockne, the twenties, and the era of Lombardi, the sixties, are essentially the same,

and that the needs of each era for a role model were fulfilled in very similar fashion by the two coaches. The models and the needs of the era were described and analyzed in David Riesman's framework of inner and other direction, and Alan Wheelis' concept of super ego foundation.

The eras of the twenties and sixties were quite similar in their sociological trends and the historical events that produced the trends. During both eras the United States was suffering from the disillusionment of a lost peace. In the twenties, the failure of the Treaty of Versailles to establish a lasting peace frustrated Americans, and the "war to end all wars" seemed to have been a useless sacrifice of life and effort. Having made all the sacrifices of war to no avail, Americans were understandably dismayed at the prospect of making similar sacrifices for improvements at home after the war.

In the era of the sixties, the nation's frustrations over the Vietnam War increased as our ineffectiveness to win or bargain for peace became more apparent. Parallel to the frustrations over foreign policy of the 60s were the problems and set-backs in the fight for racial equality. The discipline of early demonstrations such as the boycott of busses in Montgomery, Alabama, led by Martin Luther King, disintegrated to riots at Dr. King's assassination. In both eras, what David Reisman would call "inner directedness," and inner directed actions, actions of sacrifice in the hope of achieving inner held goals, proved ineffective.

As America's confidence in inner direction declined with the results of the wars, the nation's confidence in the moral values of inner direction, such as sacrifice, self-denial, the balanced life, manifested itself in the 20s as the "roaring twenties," and in the sixties as the revolt of the youth culture against the traditional morality of their parents. The moral values were just another sacrifice which, at that time, did not seem to make any difference, so they were formally abandoned in the roaring twenties culture and the youth culture

Another way of framing the developments of the moral values of eras besides Riesman's inner and other directedness is Alan Wheelis' conception of super ego formation in children by their parents. According to Wheelis, what people who suffered from the sort of disillusionment of these eras needed was a stronger super ego. The super ego is usually instilled by a strong dominating father who would force the discipline of hard work on his child until the child would, because of his father's influence, come to feel the discipline important and would want to discipline himself.

Wheelis' way of conceiving the problems of motivation suggests that Rockne and Lombardi served as father images to Americans of the twenties and sixties. The position of football coach give the authority, and if a coach were to display any emotional attachment of concern for his players, the father image is quickly established. One former football player of Rockne said at his funeral, "Rock was like a father to me while I was at Notre Dame." Perhaps more impressive is a statement made about Lombardi by the wife of an astronaut, a grown woman with a family. "Suddenly, when I was introduced to him, my skirt was too short and my back was too bare. We were all reduced to feeling like children."

During the eras of the twenties and the sixties, the people needed inspiration, and direction to a goal. Rockne and Lombardi both made popular the goal of success. For their players, winning football games was the goal. For others, winning in life was the goal for which football serves as a microcosm. Rockne and Lombardi also provided the inspiration in what has become classic style. After all, it was Rockne who, on a cold day in the fall of 1928, roused a badly outmanned Notre Dame team to beat the national champions, Army, with the words: "Win this one for the Gipper." Similarly, Lombardi was said to have an uncanny ability to inspire his oldest players as easily as the youngest rookies. An old professional, Em Tunnel, remembered his last season with Lombardi, "I was 35, and thought I had a little sophistication, but when he gave his pre-game talks, I'd cry, and go out on that field and try to kill people."

Both Rockne and Lombardi were models of successful inner directedness and thus were prized by the people of their eras. They rallied around them those who had lost faith in inner directedness, and inspired in them hope for continued success and progress through dedication and self-sacrifice.