

# A Reaffirmation of Self-Reliance? A New Ethic of Self-Sufficiency?

By Karlyn H. Bowman

So unusual was the story that it made page A-3 of the *Washington Post*. Weeks before the Blizzard of 1996, Richard Sorcinelli, a painting and wallpaper contractor in Springfield, Massachusetts, got fed up waiting for state and local officials in his area to decide who was going to clear the snow on the city's memorial bridge. Sorcinelli felt sorry for the people who had to fight traffic to cross the bridge and took matters into his own hands. Using an all-terrain vehicle equipped with a snowplow, Sorcinelli cleared the bridge himself as embarrassed officials pointed the finger at each other. "He took over where we failed," said the chairman of the town's board of selectmen. Today, with skepticism about government's ability to solve problems in the stratosphere, many Americans may be ready to follow Mr. Sorcinelli's example, a development that could have a profound impact on our politics.

Poll data from a variety of sources suggest that an old virtue—self-reliance—may be reasserting itself. Self-reliance never disappeared, of course, but other qualities may have overshadowed it. Societies face different challenges as they mature, and those challenges bring forth new responses from governments and citizens alike. Government stepped in after the Great Depression to help with responsibilities that had previously been handled by families and neighborhoods—a development that may have dampened self-reliance. Today, however, generations without memories of the Depression or the New Deal find themselves criticizing rather than calling on the federal government. President Clinton himself declared in his recent State of the Union address that "the era of big government is over." There is a strong preference for state or local governments handling responsibilities that have long been Washington's. While there is little evidence that Americans want to privatize Social Security tomorrow, there are signs that we are receptive to thinking anew about the balance between government and personal responsibility for retirement needs. This is particularly true among the young, but the

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evidence of a reaffirmation of self-reliance can be seen across the population. Related to this, but more tentative and filled with contradictions, may be a movement toward greater self-sufficiency—what some call *voluntary simplicity* or personal *downshifting*.

## The Critique of Government

The electoral sweep of 1994 did little to dispel widespread skepticism about Washington. A Gallup poll taken in mid-January of this year found that 58% of those surveyed believe the federal government is doing too many things that are best left to private business and individuals. Only 35% said the government should be more involved in solving the country's problems. A poll taken by the Times Mirror Center for the People & the Press last October found that over 6 in 10 saw the government as almost always wasteful and inefficient, and only about a third took the position that government often does a better job than people give it credit for.

A vast, faceless federal government is an easy target, of course. But even when looking at specific government programs, the lack of confidence is overwhelming. The American Council of Life Insurance has been asking the public since 1975 how confident they are in the future of the Social Security system. In that first year, 63% were very or somewhat confident about the system's future. In the 1995 poll, confidence had dropped over 20 percentage points; only 42% expressed such confidence. Among those 18-29 years of age, the figure was even lower—32%. Skepticism about Washington's abilities is one reason that polls taken during the recent firestorm over Medicare showed the public generally receptive to reforming Medicare, if not to GOP solutions. Fewer than one in five believe that Medicare should be left alone because it is working well. In an area such as education where the federal government's role has historically been limited, the public sees progress coming not from Washington but from people themselves. When asked by Wirthlin Worldwide in December 1995 to choose from a list of agents which would be the most effective in improving the education system in the United States, nearly two-thirds of Americans said *parents* and 21% *educators*. Only 3% said *federal government*. When asked which one would be least effective, federal government led the list by a substantial margin.

The public's negative view of federal government performance explains support for shifting responsibilities to state and local governments. Over the last 15 years Roper Starch Worldwide has been asking a series of questions that focus on the year 2000. In 1979 four in ten respondents expected a shift of power away from the federal to state and local government; in 1994, a majority (51%) did. And, not only does the public endorse and expect



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such a shift, but it may be pleased with the results. Two recent studies show many Democratic and Republican governors getting high marks for their performance. (See, *The Public Perspective*, December/January, 1996, pp. 54-55.)

At the same time that many Americans are growing more skeptical about the effectiveness of federal government programs, they may be less confident as well about the corporate environment. Nearly half of all workers are employed by firms with 500 or more people. A January 1996 NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll showed that 60% of those surveyed were satisfied, and only 20% dissatisfied with their own job security—findings mirrored by other recent polls. About 30% said they had been affected by corporate downsizing. Still, about 9 in 10 expected corporate downsizing to continue; only about 10% said that it was mostly over. Media accounts of corporate layoffs may be contributing to uncertainty about the future. These perceptions go at least some way toward explaining the reawakening of self-reliance.

### An Old Value, New Emphasis

Geoff Garin, president of Peter D. Hart Research Associates, conducts bi-monthly surveys on social and cultural issues for MTV. Garin reports being struck by the numbers of young people who tell interviewers they want to be small businessmen and women. “The economic ideal for this generation of young people is to be a small businessman or woman.” The reason, says Garin, is that “they don’t have to rely on anybody else.” Results from a recent poll by Roper Starch Worldwide for the Kemper-Roper Retirement Monitor, about Social Security, mirror those of the American Council of Life Insurance surveys reported above. In this poll, 71% of baby boomers and 81% of those 18-29 years of age did not feel that Social Security would be available for them when they retire. When asked in a follow-up question about their financial priorities, being financially independent ranked first for these young people, followed by the need to provide for their

own retirement—responses that reflect a desire for self-reliance. Garin says that the “dominant ethic” among this group today is “people have to take responsibility for themselves.”

The revitalization of self-reliance, as seen in career interests, is not found just among the young. In August 1995, Roper Starch Worldwide asked a national sample whether owning their own business is something they would like to do: 45% said that it was. Roper reported that people were twice as likely to say they would like to own their own business as to be a top executive in a large

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company, and four times as likely to say they would like to own their own business as hold an important position in politics and government. Roper argues that as confidence in traditional notions of job security, pay and benefits has ebbed, people are looking to themselves to find success and satisfaction. Interestingly, people who are self-employed are much happier with their work than those who are not.

The Garin and Roper results show an idealized view of the life of a small businessman and woman. But as the Roper report notes, even if most of us don’t actually become entrepreneurs, it’s likely that we are becoming a nation that *thinks more like entrepreneurs*—another way of saying that self-reliance is reasserting itself.

Self-reliance was a prominent theme in the Million Man March in October.

When Princeton Survey Research Associates asked people whether they agreed with Louis Farrakhan’s views in a number of areas, 77% of whites, and over 90% of blacks, said they agreed with his views on the need for blacks to work harder to help themselves. Nearly three-quarters of blacks said that this was a necessary step on the way to a more successful integration in the future; only 4% see it as blacks turning away from integration.

In 1945, the Roper Organization identified a group of “influential” Americans; they have been looking at these individuals ever since. Roper defines influentials as people who have done three or more things from a list of political or social activities, including such things as holding political office, making a speech, writing a letter to the editor, being an officer of a club or organization or serving on a committee. The group represents about 10% of the population. The influentials, like the young, are often in the forefront of change. A key finding of the 1995 “influentials” study, conducted for the *Atlantic Monthly*, was “the need for a revival of the concept of citizenship in which Americans take more responsibility both for their own actions and for the course of their communities.” This group was found to be more disposed to shift responsibilities away from Washington to state and local government than was the public as a whole.

In this latest survey, the influentials were asked whether 13 activities were definite responsibilities of the federal government. Similar strong majorities of the public and the influentials felt that *providing for the nation’s defense* and *protecting individuals rights* were definite responsibilities of government. In other areas such as educating the young, protecting the environment, building roads, and housing the homeless, the influentials were less likely than the public as a whole to see these as definite responsibilities of the government in Washington.

In the 1983, 1988, and 1994 surveys of influentials, Roper Starch World-



wide asked whether *business* or *government* should take the primary responsibility for a list of things, such as caring for the elderly and educating people. Perhaps reflecting a new interest in individual responsibility, Roper split its sample in the 1994 iteration of the question, asking whether these things were the primary responsibility of business, government, or individuals. In both versions, substantial numbers volunteered the response that these were responsibilities of both government and business, or all three. In not one instance did a majority of the public or influentials say that the primary responsibility belonged to government. Taken together these poll results suggest that Americans are thinking more about relying on themselves.

**From Self-Reliance to Self Sufficiency?**

In spring 1995, the Harwood Group conducted four focus groups and a national survey to examine a wide range of issues connected to consumption, the environment, values, and priorities. The project was sponsored by the Merck Family Fund which describes its work as “stimulated by the alarm at the international level about the disproportionate share of global resources consumed by the United States and other northern, industrial nations.” The Harwood survey is one of several new efforts to examine the idea of voluntary simplicity. Interest in the area has been percolating for at least a decade and the nascent movement has produced a substantial academic and popular literature.

The Harwood Group reported that 28% of those surveyed had in the last five years “voluntarily made changes in their life [not including retirement] which resulted in making less money.” Among the changes noted were: quitting a job, working fewer hours, and changing to a lower-paying position. They found that downshifters were somewhat younger

than the population as a whole, and that 60% of them were women. The report acknowledges that “it is unclear from this research whether 28% is historically high or low, or if the proportion has remained fairly constant over the years.” It does not argue that people are repudiating the notion of improving their stan-

new study, the “Quality Quotient Poll,” taken in November; they argued that Americans are “looking for ways to simplify their lives.” “If there is a new mantra for the 1990s,” the release said, “it is: ‘simplify.’” Bozell/*US News* reported that nearly half (48%) of those they sampled had done this by moving to a new community with a less hectic way of life, cutting back their hours at work, lowering their expectations, reducing their commitments, or declining or not seeking a promotion.

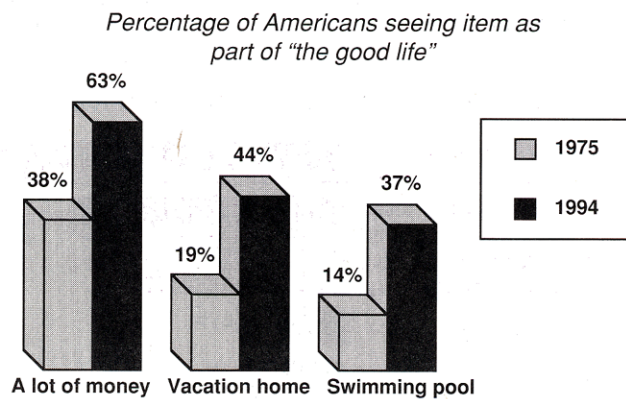
At times, then, the three reports seem more confusing than clarifying. All of them point to some old truths, while struggling to come to grips with the ways people are adapting in modern times. Occasionally, the hype—the desire to identify a **bold new trend**—and ideology get in the way of the analysis. In some areas, the reports seem to produce diametrically opposing findings. In the *US News* poll, for example, 51% of those surveyed said “I’d rather have more free time, even if it means making less money.”

Thirty-five percent said they would rather earn more even if it cut into their free time. In the Harwood Group poll, people were asked whether items in a list were (1) a good idea and one we should move ahead with, then, (2) a good idea, but one that the individual was not personally ready to do, or (3) not a good idea. A majority said it would not be a good idea to “spend less time working and earn less money” than they were earning now. Despite these and other contradictions, the reports have much common ground.

All three surveys reaffirm the importance of family and spiritual life. Work follows at a distance. Because we care so much about these core values, it isn’t surprising that we are very concerned about their possible erosion. Thus, as the Harwood report suggests, Americans believe our priorities are out of whack and want to return to basic values. At the same time people see

**Figure 1**  
**We’re Hardly Rejecting “Materialism”...**

**Question:** ...When you think of the good life—the life you’d like to have, which of the things on this list, if any, are part of that good life as far as you personally are concerned?



**Source:** Survey by the Roper Starch Worldwide, December 1975 and December 1994.

dard of living, but that they want more of a sense of balance in their lives.

In its July 1995 *Public Pulse*, Roper Starch Worldwide dismissed voluntary simplicity and downshifting—what it called the “new mantras of the 1990s.” Roper argued that its own research showed that “rather than downshifting to a less materialistic lifestyle, Americans are setting their sights on improving their standard of living” with long wish lists of things they would like to own. In what Roper dubbed “the possessions paradox,” the survey organization argued that people didn’t want just material goods; they wanted it all: “A job that contributes to the welfare of society and a lot of money. Inner peace and a swimming pool.”

In a December 1995 news release, the advertising giant Bozell Worldwide in partnership with *US News & World Report*, weighed in with results from a



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problems in the country, they are pretty confident about their own moorings. Ninety-one percent in the survey said that family life was an important guiding principle for them (defined in the survey as ranking at point eight or higher on a ten-point scale); only 45% said that was the case for their fellow citizens. So, too, with responsibility. Ninety-two percent said this was a guiding principle for them; only 28% thought this was true for most Americans. Thirty seven percent said prosperity and wealth were central for them; a majority (58%) felt that was the case for most Americans. Bozell/*US News* finds that people want a simpler, more family-oriented way of life. There is little that is new here. Survey after survey shows that Americans are solidly anchored by their families and their religious faith—but are not as confident that this is true for the rest of society.

It's not surprising that all three surveys, like so many others, focus on the importance of children. Given its environmentalist orientation, the Merck/Harwood survey emphasizes consumption issues and finds that 86% of those surveyed are concerned that "today's youth are too focused on buying and consuming things." In a separate question, 58% answered that most Americans' children are "very materialistic." People are concerned about the values parents are imparting to their children. Again, nothing exceptional here. Respondents said that parents were primarily responsible for the values their children have.

Many surveys also identify concern about the pace of modern life and the amount of stress many people feel. A huge and controversial literature has developed examining the notion of the "overworked" American. Despite the

Roper Starch Worldwide rejection of voluntary simplicity and downshifting, its own survey work reinforces Harwood's findings. Before the term "stress" became so popular, Roper asked people whether they felt they were in the "rat race," that is "that they are so busy trying to keep up at their job or keep the household running that they feel they

made some significant changes in their lives that seem to support the idea of downshifting. It may be that if we had data going back 20 or 30 years, we would find the number little changed. Some people may simply be more temperamentally disposed than others to make adjustments in the place of work in their lives and the amount of money they

need to live comfortably. Or it may be that a generally affluent society with all kinds of labor-saving devices has more time to think about the place of work in life.

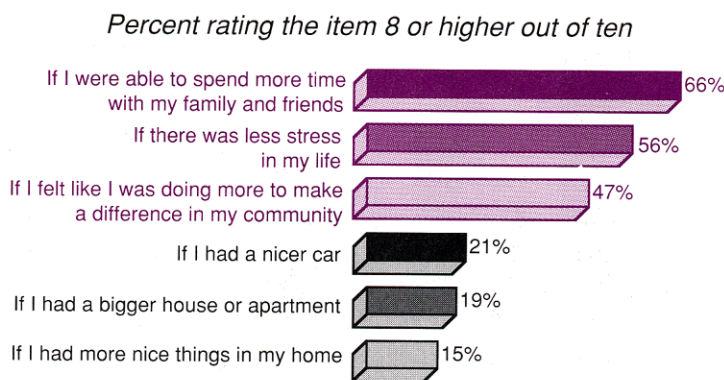
While the Merck Family Foundation clearly wants the public to become more environmentally conscious and sensitive to consumption, the report states honestly that people are not repudiating material gain—a majority in its survey agree that "material wealth is part of what makes this country great." Nor are people denigrating the place of work in their lives. Survey after survey shows that solid majorities believe that less emphasis on work would

be bad. At the same time, however, 82% agree that most of us buy and consume far more than we need. The old verities that money doesn't buy happiness, or that work is not the source of total fulfillment, may be contributing to downshifting.

Another explanation for downshifting may be demographic. Many in the baby boom generation have young children, and in many of these families, both parents are working. In a 1980 survey by the Roper Organization for Virginia Slims, a plurality of employed women said they worked for the extra money; today a plurality say they work to support their families. It's not surprising, then, that baby boomers in the Harwood study were more likely than other age groups to say they would like to simplify

**Figure 2**  
**...But Non-Material Needs and Values are Really What Counts**

**Question:** Now I'm going to read a list of things some people say would make them more satisfied with their lives. Please rate each one on a scale from 1 to 10, where ten means it would make you much more satisfied with your life, one means it would make you much less satisfied with your life, and five means it wouldn't make much difference. ...I would be much more satisfied with my life...



**Source:** Survey by the Harwood Group for the Merck Family Foundation, February 1995.

really don't have much time to enjoy life." Roper started asking this question in 1978, and has repeated it three times since. Roughly three in ten in each survey felt they were in a rat race. Over 60% said they had friends who were. Roper then asked whether "in the past" the respondent had made a "real change ... to get out of what you thought was the rat race." While the percentages have varied a bit over the last 15 years, in August 1995, 31% said they had made such a change. Of those who had, most had changed their job situation.

### Is it Real?

Whether changes in lifestyle are a result of stress as Roper suggests, or motivated by a desire to achieve more balance in life as Harwood suggests, roughly 30% of the population have



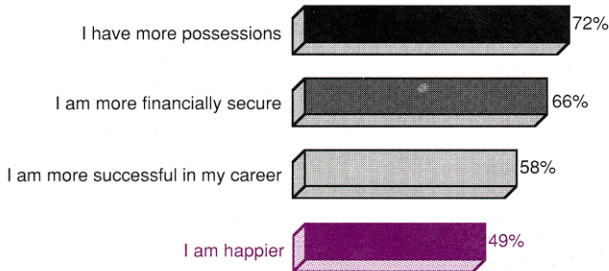
**Contradictions:**

**I have more things, but I'm not sure I'm happier.**

**Question:** Now I'm going to read some statements comparing the way you live with the way your parents lived when they were your age. For each statement, please tell me whether you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree....

**Compared to my parents when they were my age...**

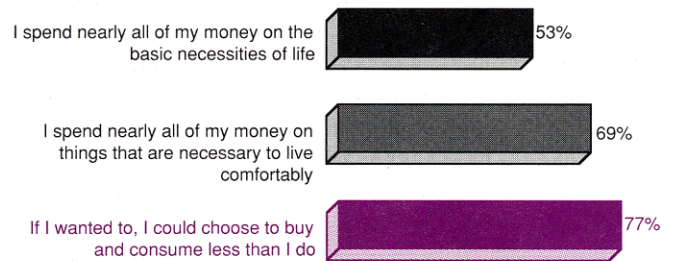
*Percent who strongly agree/agree*



**I need every dollar I earn, but, really, I could get by with less.**

**Question:** For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree...

*Percent who strongly agree/agree*



**Source:** Survey by the Harwood Group for the Merck Family Foundation, February 1995.

their hectic lives. So, too, it is natural to think about a reordering of personal priorities when children are growing up and need attention. It may also be that those at the front end of the baby boom cohort are beginning to think about retirement—and changing work and spending habits is a natural part of that transition.

Harwood reported that its downshifTERS are slightly younger than the population. The youngest age group in the population is more environmentally aware than its older brothers and sisters. Some in the first environmental generation may place less emphasis on material possessions and may have a different idea of the proper balance between work and leisure in their lives. The growing interest in religion (new-age and traditional) in our already deeply religious society may be stimulat-

ing interest in downshifting. A curious assortment of people with very different interests and priorities is driving the publishing phenomenon associated with voluntary simplicity. It includes books on the environment, religion, and household management. The non-material emphasis of voluntary simplicity has been a real money maker for some.

Finally, it may be that for many, downshifting is simply a way of becoming more self-reliant, of doing things for yourself so that you don't have to pay someone else or rely on someone else to do things for you. Making a change in your life that means earning less money or having more free time may also be a natural response to widespread doubts about being able to count on government or private business. Diverse interests and ideologies surround voluntary simplicity and downsizing.



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