

Cleaning Out the Third World

Local firm unites Christian capitalism, resource exploitation in American way

Hubert VanTol

Amway Corporation operates out of Ada, Michigan, where its main plant sprawls out over 280 acres of river bank soil. Amway is a growing corporation, and new buildings and products are being added each year. Started in 1959 by Richard DeVos and Jay VanAndel, natives of Grand Rapids and former students at Calvin College, the company has expanded from an idea about multi-level selling to a business which has retail sales of 120 million dollars per year.

After working together in several partnerships for nearly ten years experimenting with a direct sales program, DeVos and VanAndel formed Amway Corporation in 1959 and have developed a business around the manufacture and distribution of household cleaning and maintenance products. Already in the early 1960's they were receiving state and nation-wide attention for their bold new program, which was becoming increasingly successful. Since then they have received numerous awards and recognitions, and the growth of the company has continued, from thirty-eight million dollars in retail sales in 1966, to fifty million in 1967, to sixty-five million in 1968, to eighty-five million in 1969, to 120 million in 1970, and the 1971 sales are so far ahead of the 1970 sales, according to DeVos, "that it almost scares us."

The first Amway product was a liquid all-purpose cleaner. Since then they have begun producing powder, aerosol, and tube products. They produce many of their own containers and the corrugated shipping boxes. They have printing presses for the production of their own literature. There are laboratories for the developing and testing of their products, and lots of machines.

Because it is relatively new, multi-level selling is perhaps an often misunderstood concept. In some businesses which use this approach, the selling of the actual products has taken on less importance than simply pushing the product down the sales hierarchy. But Amway demands that a certain percentage of actual retail sales be made by each member in the sales hierarchy before he can take in profits. When used well, this approach is a beautiful method of cutting down expenses and prices by elimination of the middleman wholesaler. But actually I'm not sure that the people who are going to read this article are terribly interested in the Amway plant and its success. Let it suffice for me to say that they have a lot of big machines, and they sell many different

products, and that they are making large profits.

At a Knollcrest luncheon for businessmen who contribute to Calvin College, Mr DeVos (perhaps the more outspoken of the two-man team) told the businessmen not to be ashamed when critics begin blasting profit-making. Rather, businessmen should be telling the world how great profit-making is. He also emphasized reaching students and telling them how great the free enterprise system is. The barriers between students and businessmen disappear when they get to know each other, according to DeVos.

Amway stands for the American Way—the American Way of life in general, but



DeVos

greatest standard of living the world has ever known." He adds, "Don't tell me that our system is out of date—it was never more in date."

Attempting a critique of the assumptions and thought patterns which govern the ideas behind Amway Corporation is not an easy job, because we think and talk on two completely different levels. And perhaps the easiest critique that an individual can make of the "Sell America because America's system has produced the wealthiest nation in the world" philosophy is to simply smirk and say, "So what?"

To say simply that the American way is the way of materialism and greed is correct,



VanAndel

more specifically the American Way of free enterprise. The leaders of Amway have committed themselves to proving that free enterprise is still very much alive and growing. In his now-famous speech "Selling America," DeVos tells the world "how great this system really is." The great thing about our free enterprise system is that it allows people freedom of opportunity and freedom of choice, he says; "that's why we have the

but not actually a devastating critique when given by materialistic, greedy people. One often gets the impression from young dissidents who attack the American way that their anger is not directed against the system itself but rather against particular companies which happen to be particularly good at using the system (General Motors, Amway, etc). These same dissidents will quite likely have a closet full of hip clothes, shelves of "necessary" books, and beautiful stereos with dozens of albums, all produced by greedy, materialistic companies exploiting the wealth of American youth. But somehow we are led to believe that people who produce "groovy things" are not materialistic.

But to go on to more serious matters, the American way which Amway symbolizes and wants to preserve and sell represents a problem of international importance. Certainly America has become the most affluent nation of all time. Our per-capita income likely doubles and triples the income per-capita of the other highly industrial western countries. And our per-capita income is perhaps fifty to one hundred times the per-capita income of the poorest Third World nations.

We have become a wealthy nation by developing a consumer economy within the United States which is completely fantastic. Product after new product is produced and then sold as a necessary luxury to a gullible and greedy American public by subtle and not-so-subtle advertising and other mind-manipulating devices. Thus every married couple "knows" that living in the suburbs in a new house is a prerequisite for leading a successful life. Every housewife "knows" that she must fill her house with electrical gadgetry in order that she may have more leisure time to develop her personality. Every young male "knows" that true and authentic sex is obtained by driving the newest cars, wearing the most fashionable clothing, and drinking the most expensive liquor. So our economy keeps burgeoning as corporations, salesmen, and advertising men keep convincing Americans that they need more and more. Our government spends billions on worthless and obsolescent defense products; it shoots billions of dollars of hardware into the air off Cape Kennedy

to keep that economy going. But how do Americans develop all this technology and ability to make this tremendous wealth possible? I don't know, and I imagine there is only a complex historical-sociological-psychological study of the world's culture in comparison to our own might give some reasons. But what I do know is that America is bleeding much of the rest of the world to maintain its affluence.

The most important issue in maintaining a wealthy economy is maintaining control of the raw materials needed by American industries to keep producing the finished products. The United States simply does not have the raw materials necessary to maintain its wealthy economy. Almost every significant raw industrial resource that American industries use is imported from the poverty-stricken Third World countries, Africa, South America, and Asia. Thus, the American Way has a vested interest in maintaining control over the countries from which the resources come. The control might be maintained by sheer economic brute force, by political manipulations, or by rewarding governments which are friendly to us, by CIA-inspired coups of leaders who are not cooperative with us, or by warning "maintain freedom" and to "prevent the spread of communism." The United States has a vested interest in keeping these Third World countries from developing their own industries because there is only a limited amount of raw material available, and the United States needs nearly all of it to keep its monster economy moving. So the American Way or, more specifically, the leaders of the American Way, the corporations and government leaders, have a vested interest in keeping those Third World countries poverty-stricken so that they cannot gain the economic power to resist American economic exploitation. Because once the Third World countries begin withholding those vital materials from United States industries in significant amounts, our monster economy could easily fall to pieces.

But you may ask what all this has to do with Amway Corporation. I am not trying to say that they are consciously evil people exploiting the poor in other countries. In fact, I found DeVos and others of the Amway people to be extremely concerned and caring for the dignity and welfare of the poor within the United States. Amway is just one business in the total United States business world which includes such monsters as General Motors, the oil companies, and numerous huge corporations. But because its name and because of what the purpose of the company seems to be—to sell and promote the excellence of the American Way—the company has become an adequate symbol for every United States business. Amway stands for those same ideals which have made world-wide exploitation of the poor possible. A fanatic belief in "free enterprise without governmental or "socialistic" controls is logically consistent with the outlook that the United States has the right to use the world's resources indiscriminately. A belief in scientific progress is logically consistent with a belief that solutions will always be found for the world's problems before a crisis explodes. A belief that economic strength is the ultimate test of the "rightness" of a system is logically consistent with producing suicidal weaponry at a tremendous cost to protect the system, with polluting the world to a slow death, with maintaining slaveholder control over much of the rest of the world in order to maintain the strong economy.

I find it incredibly sad that two Christians like DeVos and VanAndel find it important and necessary to sell the American system because it has made America the wealthiest nation in the world. More than an article of Amway this is perhaps an open letter saying: Mr DeVos, the rift between you and some students cannot be bridged at this time because some of us are hoping, praying, and working for the destruction and humiliation of the very system which you are trying to sell. And we are asking you and others to come over and join us before it is too late and the world ends with a bang or a whimper because of the greed of the American Way.

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