



Rol-A-Top (1981) by Charles Bell

AMERICA'S GAMBLING FEVER

Nearly 50 years ago, gangster "Bugsy" Siegel built a casino in the desert town of Las Vegas, Nevada, unwittingly altering the course of American social history. Today, practically anywhere in America, you can try your luck at lottery offerings of every description, electronic keno, and other games of chance. Casinos are popping up everywhere. Our authors search for precedents in America's history of ambivalence toward gambling, and they weigh the pleasures and perils of this increasingly popular national pastime.

PLAYING WITH MONEY

BY JACKSON LEARS

Americans have always been of two minds about gamblers and gambling. Several decades ago, Baltimore sportswriters searching for the ultimate accolade for the Colts' daring, crew-cut quarterback, Johnny Unitas, dubbed him a "riverboat gambler" in tribute to his knack for making big plays. But during those same years, the Maryland legislature went about abolishing the slot machines that had been a feature of every bar and roadhouse from Baltimore to Leonardtown. Public support for legalized gambling was at a low ebb. The riverboat gambler remained an appealing metaphor, but slots-playing waitresses and sheet metal workers seemed intolerable.

For more than two centuries, gambling has played a confused and contradictory role in the American imagination. Generations of moralists have dismissed the gambler as sybaritic, sinful, backward, or pathological. Yet at times the gambler has also embodied grace under pressure and a certain ideal of masculinity. Elements of courage, calculation, and skill have entered the picture alongside the feverish itch to squander. The cultural significance of gambling is not always easy to fathom.

No such uncertainties obscure the central facts about gambling today: during the past quarter-century, it has become more respectable than ever. Legalized gambling—from parimutuel wagering on horses and dogs to convenience store keno—has spread to an unprecedented degree. There are only 13 states that do *not* have lotteries today. Casinos, until recently confined to Las Vegas and a few other tawdry hot spots,

are popping up on Indian reservations and in other places across the country. Riverboats outfitted with slot machines and blackjack tables once again ply the Mississippi, as well as the Missouri and Red rivers. The image of the gambler has been correspondingly domesticated. The sharkskin jackets and shoulder holsters of yesteryear's archetypal gambler have given way to jogging suits and fanny packs. Gambling has lost the *frisson* of the forbidden; it has become family fun, as well as an attractive source of revenue for financially strapped state and city governments.

Not everyone is convinced that these are healthy developments. No less a block of prudential granite than Walter Cronkite interprets the legalization of gambling as moral decline, complaining that "a nation once built on a work ethic embraces the belief that it's possible to get something for nothing." Cronkite's attitude typifies the outlook of many Americans—indeed of anyone raised in the faith that there is no such thing as a free lunch, that unearned wealth is somehow tainted. Given our persistent attachment to a Protestant ethic of disciplined achievement, it should come as no surprise that lotteries and draw poker can still provoke anxiety as well as exhilaration.

Criticism of gambling is never about gambling alone. It is always freighted with larger cultural issues. Cronkite's condemnation of the something-for-nothing mentality, for example, reflects some fundamental ambiguities in our attitudes toward eco-

conomic success. In an entrepreneurial society, the line between illegitimate and legitimate gambling has always been difficult to draw. The big gamble has always been a persistent feature of our economic and cultural history. What were the earliest English settlements at Jamestown and Massachusetts Bay if not enormous gambles?

Professional historians and business mythologists alike have celebrated the speculative go-getter, the man of vision rather than the respectable plodder. Students in search of American "national character" have repeatedly cited Alexis de Tocqueville's observation in 1835 that American commerce resembled "a vast lottery." Tocqueville wrote that "those who live in the midst of democratic fluctuations have always before their eyes the image of chance; and they end by liking all undertakings in which chance takes a part." Risk taking, from this perspective, was the engine that powered the progress of a fluid, mobile democracy.

But some kinds of risk taking were considered more salutary than others. Gambling with cards or dice provoked more sustained criticism than gambling with stock certificates—though at times the two practices seemed indistinguishable. What made the first kind of wagering illegitimate was the gamblers' refusal even to feign obedience to the work ethic. Stock speculators, if they were successful, could claim to be men of enterprise but casino gamblers could not. In their flagrant pursuit of something for nothing, they dramatized publicly what many people sensed privately about success in America: hard work often had little to do with it. Luck was the key.

The affluent have always found it easier than the poor to believe that the rich were rich because they deserved to be. The Protestant belief in providence, which began

with the principle that the fruits of human striving are God's alone, was gradually (and paradoxically) transformed so that it endowed the striver's success with moral worth. "The doctrine of providence was always less likely to appeal to those at the bottom end of the social scale than the rival doctrine of luck," writes the historian Keith Thomas. "The concept of luck explains any apparent discrepancy between merit and reward and thus helps to reconcile men to the environment in which they live." This is as true in the 20th century as it was in the 17th. The novelist Dorothy Allison writes of her dirt-poor childhood, two decades ago in South Carolina's Piedmont: "The only thing my family wholeheartedly believed in was luck and the waywardness of fate."

Making a virtue of necessity, believers in luck created an ethos of resignation—and something more. From early colonial times, they also helped fashion an important and enduring subculture, one more at ease with chance and contingency, less committed to a faith in human mastery over fate, than the dominant culture of enterprise, efficiency, and control. Despite the elements of calculation involved in some gamblers' success, the subculture of luck was the gambler's true home. If we take that subculture seriously, we may discover that the American debate over gambling, conducted during the course of several centuries, is not merely about changing definitions of vice and virtue; it is about different ways of experiencing the world.

One way to illuminate the larger significance of gambling is to treat it as play—in the larger sense developed by historians and anthropologists—not just as a manifestation of immorality or pathology. The play impulse, as the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga argued in his classic *Homo Ludens* (1938), animates art, poetry, and religious ritual as well as sports, games, the child-

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A 19th-century painting by Benjamin Franklin Eddy seems to warn against the dangers of gambling.

world of make-believe—and, I think we can safely add, most forms of gambling.

“Deep play,” according to the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, serves important cultural functions. Geertz saw deep play in the cockfights enjoyed by the people of Bali. They constituted, in his understanding, an important social ritual and also a form of art. “Like any art form,” he wrote, “the cockfight renders ordinary, everyday experience comprehensible by presenting it in terms of acts and objects which have had their practical consequences removed and been reduced (or, if you prefer, raised) to the level of sheer appearances, where their meaning can be more powerfully articulated and more exactly perceived.” Issues of status, hierarchy, masculine pride, the frus-

tration of ambition, the contingency of fate—all, Geertz claimed, are rendered concrete and meaningful in the cockfight.

The same could be said of other forms of gambling in other times and places, including the United States. Gambling takes money and raises it to the level of sheer appearances—piles of colored chips whose only immediate purpose is to keep the game in motion. In many ways, the game is a ritual re-enactment of the risk taking and status striving in everyday American life.

Yet at times it is something else. Playing for absurdly high stakes, gamblers can display their disdain for money as a medium of exchange. They can transcend the utilitarian

calculus that dominates the society outside the sacred circle of the game. At such moments, gambling provides a subversive commentary on dominant social values. It opens the closed world of calculation to the play of the imagination. It even resonates with religious longings—above all the longing to cast off economic care, to “take no thought for the morrow” (as Jesus advised) and put oneself in the hands of Providence. Naturally, such moments are fleeting, but to understand their significance we need to untangle some major themes from several centuries of debate over gambling in the United States.

From earliest colonial times, the debate over gambling in America was inflected with religious idioms and regional accents. Although the English settlers were overwhelmingly Protestant, there was more than one Protestant ethic. It is too simple to pose Anglican against Puritan, Cavalier against Yankee. But it is not completely mistaken. The contrast between Massachusetts and Virginia does reveal a developing pattern of conflict, a pattern that points to broader cultural contradictions in an emerging entrepreneurial society.

To be sure, Puritans had theological warrant for opposing gambling. In the strict Calvinist view, there was no such thing as chance: all events were governed by providential decree. Casting lots was therefore nothing less than a means of catching a glimpse of God's mind. “Now a Lot is a serious thing not to be trifled with,” Increase Mather wrote in 1687, “the scripture saith not only (as some would have it) of *Extraordinary Lots*, but of a Lot in general, that *the whole disposing* (or Judgment) *thereof is of the Lord*, Prov. 16.33.” Casting lots (or throwing dice or shuffling cards) “in a Sportful Lusory Way” was a trivial pursuit that demeaned God's providence.

Yet in shaping attitudes toward gambling (and many other things), Puritan ethics were more important than Puritan theology. As early as 1631, the Massachusetts General Court declared that “all persons whatsoever

that have cards, dice, or tables in their houses shall make away with them before the next Court, under pain of punishment.” Punishment would most likely take the form of fines, and though they were rarely if ever levied against Puritans gambling at home, a person caught racing horses in Ipswich could be forced to pay the huge sum of 40 shillings.

But it is not clear how consistently these laws were enforced. By the 1720s, horse races were being promoted in the Boston newspapers. Even as the Puritans inveighed against frivolity, the city was filling with newcomers, including raucous habitués of the London alehouses who brought their cards and dice with them across the Atlantic. This was another version of a transatlantic (and easily caricatured) cultural confrontation: the respectable middle-class reformer clucking over the common folk at their traditional revelries. Sometimes the common folk struck back. The Reverend Samuel Sewall of Northampton, Massachusetts, rebuked some gamblers on a Sabbath eve in 1699, and came home a few days later to find a pack of cards strewn all about his “fore-yard”—a mocking, anonymous counterthrust against authority.

Still, by the mid-18th century, gamblers were increasingly disreputable figures in New England society. Among the respectable majority, the old evangelical commitments to disciplined holiness mingled with newer aspirations to gentility. The growing force of a middle-class, Protestant morality rendered gambling more disreputable than ever.

In Virginia, the same destination was reached by a significantly different route. By the early 18th century, the planter elite had turned gambling into deep play—a way to demonstrate one's masculine honor, an opportunity to show that one was a hell of a fellow who knew how to have a good time and cared not a fig for money matters. From Williamsburg to Richmond, Virginians bet not only on horses, cards, dice, and cockfights, but also

on women, crops, prices, and the weather—in short, on just about anything. This was more than mere status display. It was a way of puzzling out one's *fortuna* in the largest, oldest sense of that term. "A gentleman's dice were like the soothsayer's bones from which they had descended—a clue to the cosmos, and a token of each individual's place within it," observes the historian David Hackett Fischer.

In Virginia, too, gamblers met clerical criticism. But unlike the Puritan clergy, the Virginia Anglicans were gentlemen of the gamblers' own social background. Their reproofs were mild. Like William Stith, the rector of Henrico Parish near Richmond, they tended to worry not that high-stakes wagers trivialized providence but that they threatened the gambler's capacity for self-determination. By the 1740s, however, in Virginia as in New England, evangelical revivalists of the Great Awakening were encouraging the pursuit of personal holiness. Gambling was declared guilty by association with the entertainments of the alehouse.

During the revolutionary era, gambling came into even worse odor when it was lumped together with the "parasitic" pursuits of a corrupt aristocracy. Gradually the "something for nothing" quality of gambling began to assume more prominence in the minds of the critics. The parasitical gambler was the antithesis of the virtuous "producer"—the yeoman farmer and the hard-working mechanic—of republican mythology. Yet games of chance survived and flourished for decades after the Declaration of Independence. Nearly all state governments continued to sanction and sponsor lotteries. In a new country where banks were few, the lottery was a convenient means of pooling large amounts of capital for joint ventures or what we now call "infrastructure." In 1793, President George Washington joined in sponsoring a lottery to finance improvements in the District of Columbia. Lotteries played a key role in raising money for Harvard College, the University of Virginia, and the University of North Carolina.

Even at this early stage in American economic history, it was sometimes difficult



Thomas Hart Benton placed games of chance at the center, literally and figuratively, of the mythology of the American West in his panoramic celebration, Arts of the West (1932).

to tell the difference between gambling and legitimate business. The boundaries became even more blurred with the rapid spread of market exchange after the War of 1812. What we now call the antebellum decades did not seem "antebellum" to those who lived through them. They were filled not with foreboding about the future (at least until the 1850s) but with spurts of manic optimism, punctuated in 1819, '37, and '57 by financial panics. The entire country—or at least a good many of the free white males—seemed engaged in the feverish pursuit of quick cash. "Gambling hells" proliferated in frontier towns and port cities. Public disapproval sometimes erupted unpredictably. In Vicksburg, Mississippi, five gamblers (notorious confidence men all) were lynched in 1835. The gambler was a pariah. When 11 people were killed by an explosion on the steamer *Constitution* near Cincinnati on May 4, 1817, a German traveler noted that "among them was a gambler, who was buried separately." But outrage was often mingled with admiration. The gambling spirit caught many features of the masculine temper in a raw new country.

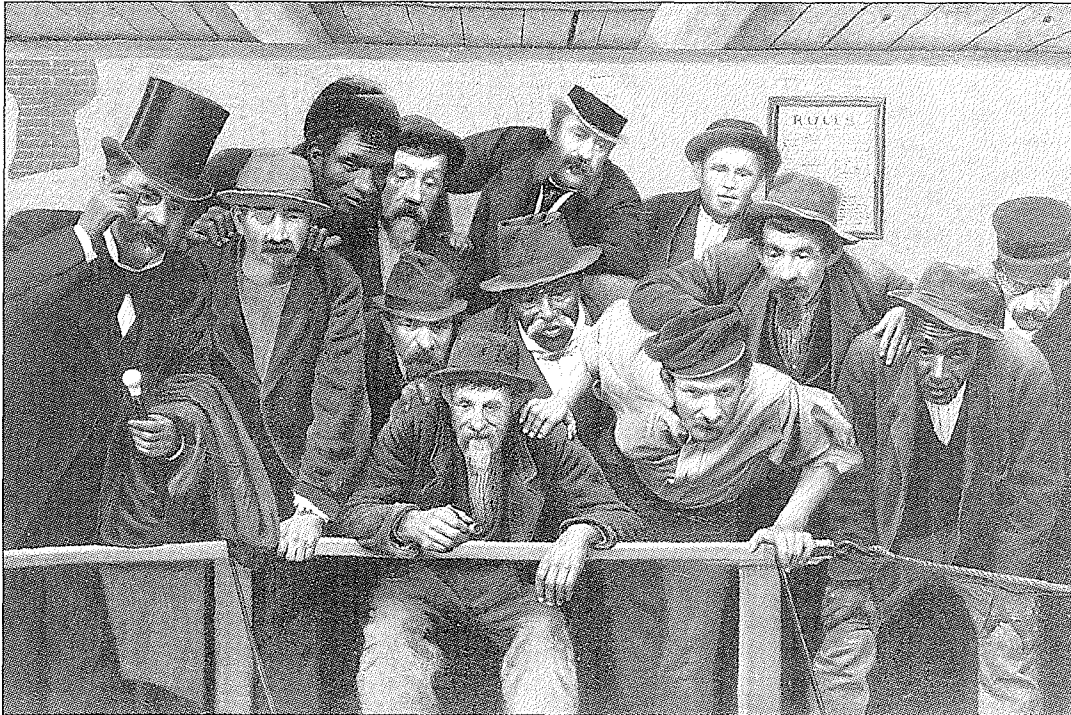
The importance of the frontier during this period, both as metaphor and as everyday experience, cannot be underestimated—notwithstanding the many simple-minded applications of Frederick Jackson Turner's "frontier thesis" by 20th-century interpreters of America. Aided and abetted by foreign observers, Americans began to mythologize their frontier experience even while they were in the midst of it. Tocqueville, visiting during the 1830s, wrote that Americans went west for the same reason they liked to gamble, "not only for the sake of the profit it holds out to them, but for the love of the constant excitement occasioned by that pursuit."

Hubert Howe Bancroft, who trekked to California in search of gold and later wrote the first major history of the state, captured some of the essential qualities that seemed to unite the frontiersman and the gambler

in his description of the '49ers at the gaming tables: "It is a fine thing to get a peck or a bushel of gold just by betting for it. . . . The tremulous rapture of mingled hope and fear is almost compensation enough even if one loses. . . . Next to the pleasure of winning is the pleasure of losing . . . only stagnation is unendurable."

Bancroft was writing in 1887, deep in the era of frontier mythmaking, when "tremulous rapture" was more appealing than ever to his elite audience, who felt themselves sliding into a morass of "overcivilization." Bancroft's gambler, with his contradictory tendencies, seemed an appealing representative of masculinity: "Supreme self-command is his cardinal quality; yet, except when immersed in the intricacies of a game, his actions appear to be governed by impulse and fancy. . . . He is never known to steal except at cards; and if caught cheating he either fights or blandly smiles his sin away, suffers the stakes to be raked down without a murmur, treats good-humoredly, and resumes the games unruffled. . . . He accustoms himself to do without sleep, and if necessary can go for several days and nights without rest. . . . He deals his game with the most perfect sang-froid, and when undergoing the heaviest losses there is no trembling of fingers or change of expression."

The riverboat gambler, that suave, bejeweled gentleman, as easily mythologized as the '49er, also came into his own during the antebellum period. He operated on the geographical margins of society (the rivers), usually with a sidekick disguised as a hick (or as an Irish greenhorn, Yankee merchant, or itinerant preacher). Often stuck with pariah status, the riverboat gambler could nevertheless carve out a successful career. Elijah Skaggs, for example, put faro (player versus dealer, one on one, high card) and three-card monte (the carnival shell game, with cards) on a new level of organizational complexity, creating a network of dealers in



Nearing the Issue at the Cockpit (1870), by Horace Bonham. Rich and poor mingled at cockfights.

dozens of cities. He was known ironically but respectfully as “Brother Skaggs, the preaching faro dealer” because of his ministerial garb and abstemious mien. This theatricality was of a piece with the self-promoting antics of P. T. Barnum and other 19th-century confidence men. No matter what the endeavor, a knack for publicity was often at least as important as hard work if you wanted to get ahead.

The gambler’s style and strategies were indeed difficult to distinguish from those of the speculative plunger. As the Jacksonian economic theorist Richard Hildreth wrote in 1840, “When speculation proves successful, however wild it may have appeared in the beginning, it is looked upon as an excellent thing, and is commended as *enterprise*; it is only when unsuccessful that it furnishes occasion for ridicule and complaint, and is stigmatized as a *bubble* or a *humbug*.”

Material success brought solidity and moral standing to the upwardly mobile American—sometimes even to gamblers. From the 1830s to the ‘50s, for example, Edward Pendleton ran a luxurious (and legal) Washington, D.C., gambling establishment he called the Palace of Fortune just a few blocks from the White House. Pendleton was the prototype of the civilized sporting man. Dapper and articulate, the scion of an old Virginia family, he often loaned money to his less fortunate customers. He pioneered the use of “lady lobbyists” to minister to the needs of his clientele, which included members of Congress, presidential candidates, and cabinet officers. Yet Pendleton had a place in society. When Mrs. Pendleton died in 1859, according to one Washington newspaper, “President Buchanan stood, hat in hand, at the foot of her bed.”

But even as some gamblers managed to win a measure of respectability, many moralists and business apologists sought to

draw a sharper distinction between legitimate and illegitimate means of accumulation. The emerging ethical consensus smiled upon any profit-seeking activity that seemed to be conducted within the circle of self-control, will, and choice. Most forms of gambling—and certainly the many state-sanctioned lotteries—fell outside it. When waves of evangelical reform sentiment swept America during the 1820s and '30s, the lottery was targeted for abolition. Lotteries embodied an outlook antithetical to what was becoming the dominant ethos of success through disciplined achievement. As a Maryland poet named St. Denis Le Cadet wrote in *The Lottery* (1815):

She seems to give to all who ask
Without imposing labour's task
The idle as the busy bask
Alike in the sunshine of her mask.

Evangelical reformers redefined notions of manliness to exclude gambling. In antilottery literature, the gambler was not a cool and masterful embodiment of masculinity but a pathetic slave of passion. Fashion, not Fortune, was his goddess. The lottery, according to one pamphleteer in 1833, "is the effect of 'that Little Flippant Thing' called *Fashion*, at whose Shrine are offered daily sacrifices, from the Crowned Monarch, down to the Hatless Vagrant."

The evangelical assault on gambling was part of a broad effort to institutionalize self-control as the key virtue that would stabilize the centrifugal forces of the marketplace in a democratic society. As the historian Ann Fabian writes in her excellent study of gambling in 19th-century America, *Card Sharps, Dream Books, and Bucket Shops* (1990), by the 1830s "gambling represented an anachronistic expression of aristocratic pretensions, as well as a dangerous flirtation with unstable passion, and a serious violation of the steady accumulation and delayed gratification designed to control a wild enthusiasm for gain and turn selfish profit

seekers into a capitalist community." Gambling upset the delicate equipoise between discipline and desire that lay at the heart of a capitalist, entrepreneurial democracy.

The stakes in the struggle against gambling were higher than the merely political; the gambler posed a threat to the evangelical vision of the United States as a Christian nation. The assault on lotteries was largely successful. By 1878, Louisiana was the only state that still ran a lottery. The war on gambling was part of an ideologically charged reform agenda that included temperance, Sabbath observance, and the preservation of domestic sanctity. The domestic connection was probably the most important. Like drunkenness (and slavery), gambling broke up the idealized American home—that island of utopian harmony in a chaotic sea of self-seeking.

In many ways, the Civil War ratified and nationalized the Victorian consensus. It discredited the last vestiges of the aristocratic order in the South, a society based at least in part on contempt for labor and on archaic conceptions of masculine honor. It sanctioned the virtues of self-control and personal productivity.

Yet the war also spurred the growth of the nation's cities, where growing numbers of non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants sustained a popular culture of luck. Freed slaves, Irish, Germans, and, later, immigrants from southern and eastern Europe—all maintained an attraction to policy (the 19th-century "numbers" game). One manifestation of policy's popularity was the proliferation of "dream books," which offered tips on numbers to play based on the interpretation of dreams. Like patent medicine circulars, dream books such as *Old Aunt Dinah's Policy Dream Book* (1851) and *The Gypsy Witch Dream Book* (1903, rev. ed., 1930) drew on the old fascination with exotic lore, claiming to communicate the occult wisdom of Africa or the Orient. They constituted a kind of vernacular divination, a means of ordering and acting upon the chaos of everyday life—a system, you might say, of

hope maintenance that offered not guarantees but possibilities of magical self-transformation.

Gambling after the war was not confined to back alleys and immigrant ghettos. There was plenty of action upstairs as well. The Gilded Age (1865–1900) got its name from Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner's novelistic send-up of fraud, but the term could as easily be used to reflect the gambler's dazzling and misleading use of surface effects to achieve his ends. It also caught the essence of the palaces in New York, Chicago, Baltimore, and other cities where gamblers plied their trade for years after the Civil War. These gambling resorts ensconced a nouveau riche world where a man's worth was measured by the girth of his stomach and the size of his diamond stud. It was a world where the gambler could cut quite a figure.

John Morrissey was one who did. He embodied an Anglo-Saxon nightmare: the barely literate, irredeemably crude Irish immigrant who accumulated a glittering mound of ill-gotten gains and enormous political influence, not to mention a seat in Congress. Morrissey was brought to Troy, New York, from Ireland by his parents in 1834, when he was three years old. On the streets of Troy he learned how to use his fists, becoming first a gang leader and later a successful bare-knuckle prizefighter in New York City. In 1858, after winning \$5,000 in a side bet on himself, he announced his retirement from the ring, saying, "My duties to my family and myself require me to devote my time and effort to purposes more laudable and advantageous." He then turned to building a career as a professional gambler and machine politician.

Morrissey was better at gambling than politics. Though elected twice to the U.S. House of Representatives, he could never quite get the etiquette of the place down.

Whenever anyone disagreed with him, he demanded that the other fellow put up his dukes. But in the world of gambling he acquired legendary status. As much impresario as participant, Morrissey ran opulent (and technically illegal) establishments in Providence, Newport, and New York City, and played a major role in the transformation of Saratoga Springs, New York, from a sanatorium to an elegant watering place.

Morrissey was a brilliant and absolutely honest poker player. In the games he organized for others he was a skillful swindler, unless a more straightforward strategy suited his interest. His resorts were little more than "skinning houses," yet they were magnets for the famous and the fashionable. Morrissey, resplendent in swallowtail coat and white kid gloves, and with his lovely wife on his arm, would work the crowd of paunchy sybarites at his Saratoga Club House night after night. At the height of his fame he was worth millions, but by the time of his death from pneumonia in 1878 his estate had shrunk to less than \$75,000. He had squandered almost everything, not on cards or dice but on stocks and bonds, following the reckless advice of his financial adviser, the old robber baron Cornelius Vanderbilt. Yet he and others like him, by bribing the right public officials and setting a standard for personal style, made gambling seem a fascinating, desirable, and maybe even respectable business.

And why not, in a society where money was the universal solvent? The gambler's cash was as convertible as the banker's. Indeed, the two occupations could meet on cordial terms, as they did in a possibly apocryphal poker story that came out of Denver in the 1890s. Three bleary-eyed men showed up at a bank when the clerk opened it at 9 A.M. One wanted to borrow \$5,000; his collateral was the poker hand he held concealed in an envelope, which he furtively showed to the bank clerk. The baffled teller

stammered refusals until the bank president walked in from his own all-night poker game. The loan applicant explained his case again and gave the executive a peek at the cards. The bank president promptly agreed to make the loan. He began piling bundles of twenties on the table in front of the poker players, upbraiding his employee for not knowing good collateral when he saw it. "Remember that in future four kings and an ace are always good in this institution for our entire assets, sir—our entire assets," he told the clerk.

Despite the growing acceptability of gambling within the business community, it still stirred intense opposition in many quarters and remained illegal virtually everywhere. Among those provoked was Anthony Comstock, whose name has become a synonym for the overly zealous religious reformer. A Congregational minister from rural Connecticut who rose to prominence in the 1870s, Comstock was obsessed with eliminating such "filth" as birth control advertisements from the mails. He was also given to conducting his own raids on pool-rooms and betting parlors and dragging the outraged occupants off to the police—who often released the prisoners if they had anted up the requisite protection money. This only intensified Comstock's rage and zeal for strict enforcement of the law.

Comstock personified the pinched, parochial version of Protestant reformer. He occasionally staged raids in resorts such as Saratoga, but he reserved most of his energy for those of lower class and darker hue. He assailed policy as "superstition's stronghold. The negro dreams a dream, the Irishman or woman has a 'pre-sintimint,' and the German a vision, and each rushes to the 'dream book,' kept in every policy den, to see what number the vision calls for."

Comstock was convinced that the entire social world surrounding him was on the

verge of disintegration. Young men especially, in Comstock's view, were being exposed to urban temptations that would completely undermine their capacity for self-control. "Business men," he wrote in a warning about horse pool betting parlors, the (illegal) precursors to today's off-track betting establishments, "a clerk who frequents these places, and is brought under these seductive influences, is not to be trusted in office or store. The wild excitement that fires his brain will unman him." Here again we are in the presence of the reformers' great reversal: gambling was the opposite of manliness.

A more refined version of Comstock's critique was offered by Octavius Brooks Frothingham, a Massachusetts Unitarian minister. Writing in the *North American Review* in 1882, he described gambling as "one of those perilous devices by which men try to suffuse romance into their otherwise dull existence, to add zest to their experience, to drag some portion of heaven down to their clay. To procure this, one goes to the wine-shop, another to the house of prostitution, another to the dance, another to lascivious music." But "gambling is the most fascinating because it is the most intense, the most lasting, and the most social. It brings the greatest number of stimulants together, and exerts their power on the most sensitive nerves."

What was at stake, Frothingham believed, was nothing less than the possibility that man was relapsing into beast: "Not only is [the gambler] destitute, as he must needs be, of any perception of the divine import of money as a sign of man's supremacy over the lower spheres of nature, he equally lacks comprehension of its higher social advantages. He is animal and passionate through and through." In this progressive reinterpretation of traditional Christianity, money is no longer a temptation but a sign with "divine import"; it represents the ascent of man over beast. The problem with the gambler, in this view, is

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not that he is obsessed with money but that he cares nothing for it.

Frothingham's image of the gambler as beast was part of a broader attack on the popular culture of luck, conducted less in the name of Christian morality than under the banner of human progress. In this crusade, secularists such as economist Thorstein Veblen could participate alongside liberal ministers. In *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), Veblen excoriated the belief in luck, which he found among "leisure class" sportsmen and other American groups as well as peasants and pre-industrial folk generally, as a relic of primitive animism. It was sand in the gears of the industrial machine and therefore an impediment to progress. The key to efficiency was a work force with heads uncluttered by superstition and filled instead with matter-of-fact understanding of cause and effect. Non-gamblers, all.

Sounding like nothing so much as a late-20th-century social scientist discussing "obstacles to modernization in the Third World," Veblen wrote: "This lowering of efficiency through a penchant for animistic methods of apprehending facts is especially apparent when taken in the mass—when a given population with an animistic turn is viewed as a whole." Veblen did not specify which given populations in the United States might be so afflicted, but he gave a hint of how widespread he thought the problem was when he noted that "the gambling spirit which pervades the sporting element shades off by insensible gradations into that frame of mind which finds gratification in devout observances." For Veblen, though, the mechanisms of industrialization worked inexorably; values would evolve to meet the new industrial conditions. Meanwhile, we would live with what a later generation of technological determinists would call "cultural lag."

The vision of a huge plan of progress,

unfolding under the direction of Science rather than God, was the late-19th-century positivist's substitute for older beliefs in providence. The newer deterministic scheme had even less room for notions of chance. In the minds of positivists such as Thomas Henry Huxley (1825-95), Britain's great advocate of Darwinism, to acknowledge any place for chance was to give way to ignorance. Behind every apparently random event lay a mechanical cause-and-effect relationship; scientists just hadn't discovered it yet.

Not everyone was delighted by this new picture of things. William James, the great Harvard psychologist and philosopher, for one, was chilled by the implications of the positivist "block universe." In "The Dilemma of Determinism" (1884) and other essays, he sought to vindicate the persistence of chance in our philosophical—if not our physical—universe. Chance, in James's view, had been loaded with a terrible lot of moral baggage that the poor word couldn't handle. It had been treated as a synonym for irrationality and disorder when all it really meant was "that this is not guaranteed, that it may fall out otherwise." Acknowledge the persistence of chance, reject the block universe of iron law, and you open the door to the possibility of human freedom, of ethics, and even of religious belief. If Providence existed in James's universe, he admitted, it would have to be a little less than omniscient, a little more like a chess master facing an amateur opponent: the master knows how the game will come out (he will win), but he doesn't know all the moves.

For most Americans at the turn of the century, conversations about gambling evoked concerns more immediate than the free-will-versus-determinism debate. Populists, socialists, and social gospel ministers increasingly traced the era's ruinous unemployment, farm foreclosures, and business failures to the parasitical machinations of



In 1910, amid renewed anti-gambling sentiment, illegal Chicago slot machines met the sledgehammer.

finance capital. And these often seemed virtually identical to gambling. "When one man bets another that a certain card has such a face, or that one horse will trot a mile in fewer seconds than another, or that wheat will sell for so many cents a bushel 30 days from date, and the loser pays the bet, what exchange takes place?" asked Washington Gladden, a prominent social gospel minister. "The winner gets the loser's money; the loser gets nothing at all in exchange for it. This is gambling. The gambler's business is simply this: to get money or other property away from his neighbors, and to give them nothing whatever in exchange for it." Gladden offered the "something for nothing" critique with a communal twist: the gambler's error was not his failure to work but his refusal to participate in mutual exchange.

The views of Gladden and his allies merged with those of a new generation of

good-government political reformers that arose at about the same time. These reformers saw corrupt politicians and businessmen as only barely distinguishable from prominent local gamblers such as Morrissey of New York and Mike McDonald of Chicago. From the 1870s to the '90s, McDonald ran a magnificent (though technically illegal) palace of chance he called "The Store" at the corner of Clark and Monroe streets. McDonald, who coined the phrase (usually attributed to P. T. Barnum), "There's a sucker born every minute," developed a devious formula for success: his dealers and croupiers systematically cheated the fat folks with cash but no influence while playing fair with powerful government officials (including his pals Mayor Carter Harrison and Governor John Altgeld) and professional gamblers who could spot a scam.

The Store's career was brought to a

close by two events: the assassination of Mayor Harrison on October 28, 1893 (by the proverbial "disgruntled office seeker" who always seemed to be lurking in the shadows of Gilded Age politics), and the creation of a reform-minded Civic Federation inspired by a muckraking exposé by the British journalist William T. Stead. The bankers, ministers, and businessmen behind the federation were full of good-government fervor, and one of the group's first achievements was to harass the Store so constantly that the owners finally closed the place.

The rise of organizations such as the Chicago Civic Federation marked a key transitional moment in the public debate over gambling. A new breed of corporate executives and public officials was emerging around the turn of the century, inspired not only by genuine humanitarian sentiments but by a new and more encompassing vision of self-control and social efficiency. Some progressive reformers did devote themselves to the pursuit of public health and social justice, launching campaigns against adulterated food, child labor, and other evils. But many were preoccupied with personal morality. These moral reformers helped make the Progressive era (1900–1916) a period of national self-purification dominated by movements to establish stricter taboos: the Prohibition movement, the first "war on drugs," and a variety of crusades against gambling and municipal corruption. The body and the body politic were alike in need of purgation—in the name not only of morality but of rational efficiency as well.

The managerial world view defined society as a smoothly functioning system, with no room for randomness or unpredictability. ("The chief work of civilization is to *eliminate chance*," the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency asserted in a 1909 pamphlet.) The managerial scheme of things allowed play but only when it was reduced to "recreation"—something satisfying but fundamentally

unserious, a sport or hobby that would re-create the player's capacity to perform where it counted: in the workplace.

Gambling did not fall into this category. The first two-thirds of the 20th century were hard times for sanctioned gambling, maybe the hardest in American history. Protestant moral revulsion persisted and even intensified as big-time gambling became increasingly associated with swarthy Mafiosi and labor racketeers. By the 1950s, clinical idioms reinforced moral language; an emergent psychology of adjustment identified gambling with neurotic compulsion. "I submit that the gambler is not simply a rational though 'weak' individual who is willing to run the risk of failure and moral censure in order to get money the easy way, but a *neurotic with an unconscious wish to lose*," the psychoanalyst Edmund Bergler wrote in 1958. The gambler was labeled pathological as well as immoral.

Still the games went on. Men (and, increasingly, women) of all classes and conditions held their private poker nights. The urban subculture of luck flourished: shiny-suited bookies taking bets and shooting craps; policy players paying their hope-maintenance tax to the daily numbers runner; ordinary guys like Felix and Oscar of *The Odd Couple* gathering nonchalantly for their Friday night poker game. The more affluent middle and upper classes headed for exotic gaming locales: Havana and (especially after World War II) Las Vegas. Scenes of tropical decadence or *faux*-Oriental splendor reinforced the otherness of the gambling experience for tourists, muffling any lingering prudential doubts and reminding them that this was no place like home.

Yet, by the early 1970s, gambling had begun to return to everyday life. State governments, led by New York, revived lotteries (1967) and off-track betting (1971); Vegas was increasingly accessible in an era of frequent flying; and in 1978 Atlantic City inaugurated the return of legal casino gambling to the East

TAKING CHANCES

Percentage of Americans favoring legalized casino gambling (1992):
in their own state to raise revenues: *51 percent*
in a major city in their own state: *40 percent*
on Indian reservations: *42 percent*
on riverboats: *60 percent*

Percentage of Americans saying they had gambled in the past year:
in 1950: *59 percent*
in 1989: *71 percent*

States that have no legalized gambling of any kind: *Hawaii and Utah*

State lottery sales:
in fiscal 1990: *\$20 billion*
in fiscal 1995: *\$32 billion*

Number of Americans who play the lottery:
every week: *30 million*
occasionally: *70 million*

Amount spent by states on lottery promotion in
fiscal 1994: *\$380 million*

Annual lottery sales per capita:
Massachusetts: *\$441*
California: *\$66*



Approximate percentage of revenues returned as prize money:
by the average Las Vegas slot machine: *95 percent*
by the average state lottery: *50 percent*

States with the highest levels of gambling per capita: *Nevada (\$72,111), Mississippi (\$6,620), New Jersey (\$4,555)*

States with the lowest levels of gambling per capita: *North Carolina (\$5), South Carolina (\$23), Wyoming (\$24)*

Number of Mashantucket Pequot Indians: *300 (approx.)*

Number of slot machines at the Pequots' Foxwoods Resort Casino: *3,864*

Average wagering budget of a Las Vegas gambler: *\$479.77*

Proportion of current problem gamblers: *1.2 to 4.8 percent of the adult population (in eight states surveyed since 1991)*

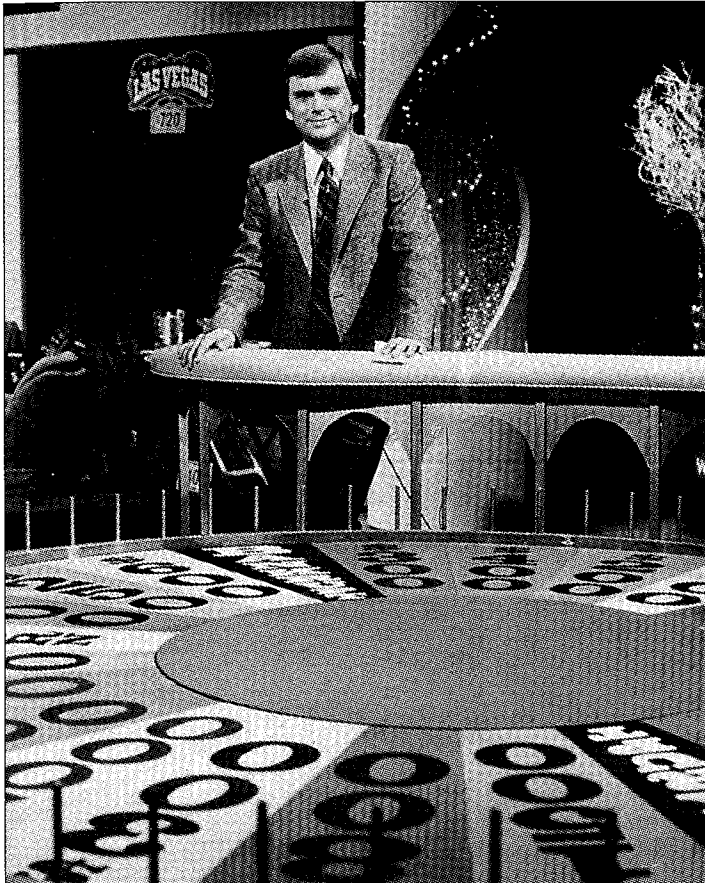
Estimated volume of illegal betting on sports, horses, numbers, etc.: *\$43 billion*

Arrests for illegal gambling activities (1993): *15,336*

Number of marriages performed per hour in Las Vegas: *12*

Price of a personal appearance by "Elvis" at wedding: *\$100*

Sources: *The Public Perspective* (Jan.-Feb. 1994); *North American Gaming Report 1995*; *La Fleur's Lottery World*; the *New York Times* (various editions); California State Lottery; *Gambling in America* (1992), by Bertha Davis; *International Gaming & Wagering Business* (various editions); Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority; Gemini Research; Federal Bureau of Investigation; *Casino Magazine* (May-June 1995).



The gambling spirit is everywhere in American life, from TV game shows such as Wheel of Fortune to newspaper sports pages, where point spreads and other information used in illegal betting are printed.

Coast. Within less than a decade, a national casino boom was underway.

What is striking about the contemporary revival of legalized gambling is its ordinariness—its integration into everyday life, even “family entertainment.” Offering everything from magic shows to acrobats and performing dogs, resort hotels such as Circus Circus in Las Vegas have begun to breach the citadel of middle-class respectability. One of the strongest arguments against gambling has always paralleled arguments against alcohol: both vices, it was alleged, undermined the family. Now, in the new world of casino gambling, unthinkable scenes are being enacted daily (un-

thinkable, at least, to Comstock or Cronkite)—kids are capering about within yards of the spot where grandma is pumping quarters into a slot machine.

How could promoters reverse long-standing moral conventions in less than two decades? At this point, we can only speculate. The supply-side part of the explanation would emphasize de-industrialization and the shifting of investment capital in the United States from manufacturing to service industries, including casino gambling. As organized crime has made room for “legitimate” investors, the whole scene has gradually come to seem more sanitized. De-industrialization has also helped depress personal incomes and state tax revenues, especially in the Northeast, bringing the lottery back into favor as a money-raising strategy. Public hostility to taxes has also increased the allure of lotter-

ies and other forms of legalized gambling.

On the demand side, one could say that there is a “gambling instinct,” or propensity to take risks, embedded in “human nature” that is now finding new outlets. But a fuller explanation would emphasize the possibility that cultural values have changed during the last several decades. It is possible to see this change as a decline, for instance, an abandonment of the work ethic that built this country. Despite the mantralike quality of this argument, there is something to it. No one can deny that, for many of the new casino patrons, gambling has become an addiction or a destructive compulsion—an anxious, desperate perversion of the spirit

of play, with calamitous consequences for gamblers and those around them. The rise of Gamblers Anonymous tells part of the story, but one need only saunter by the casinos in the early morning hours and watch the hollow-eyed habitués pump up their VISA card indebtedness on the ubiquitous cash machines to be persuaded that the problem is real. This is not necessarily a way of life we want to encourage.

Yet, to complicate the notion of decline, we should also consider the connections between cultural and economic history during the past 20 years. De-industrialization, the export of capital and jobs overseas, the return of a "root, hog, or die" mentality to the center of political debate—all these developments have led to a shrinkage of the middle and upper working class, as well as a contracting sense of the possibilities for upward mobility. There are fewer opportunities, but there may also be fewer inhibitions, and greater need for the maintenance of hope. If gambling seems like "action" in a life going nowhere, and kids eat free, then why not head for The Mirage? A similar argument applies to the retirees who flock to casinos. Why shouldn't bored oldsters, weary of facing one more trek around the mall, find in the slots a bit of a thrill, an experience of play?

Gambling can be pathological, but it can be many other things besides. One of the main things it can be, as writers such as Robert Hermann and David Spanier have suggested in recent years, is play. But play is not just a moment of spontaneity snatched from routine. To glimpse a broader and more complex conception of play, we have to listen to the participants in the World Series of Poker, interviewed in downtown Las Vegas by the journalist A. Alvarez and reported in *The Biggest Game in Town* (1983).

These poker players were mentally ag-

ile enough to calculate the odds for almost any hand in any situation; they embodied the calculation and coolness that has always characterized gambling in its agonistic mode. Yet they had little but condescension for limited-stakes poker as "an unimaginative mechanical game." It is merely "a disciplined job," said Jack Straus. "Anybody who wants to work out the mathematics can be a limit player and chisel out an existence." But high-stakes poker brings out the bluffer, the feinter—the player—in gamblers such as Straus. "If there's no risk in losing, there's no high in winning," Straus said. "I have only a limited amount of time in this world and I want to live every second of it. That's why I'm willing to play anyone in the world for any amount."

This is the quest for intense experience, but something more: a fine, careless disregard for utilitarian standards. As Alvarez points out, in gambling the test of a true professional is insouciance in matters of money—handling big losses nonchalantly. It's only a game.

The willingness to reduce (or raise) money to the status of mere counter in a game returns us to the largest significance of gambling. The gambler inhabits a world where prudential economic values have been inverted. When the countervalues are articulated, the results can be arresting. Consider the advice of Harlem Pete, in a dream book published in Philadelphia in 1949: "If you want to be rich, Give! If you want to be poor, Grasp! If you want abundance, Scatter! If you want to be needy, Hoard." Harlem Pete's world view embraces the paradox of giving: "The more I give to thee," says Juliet to Romeo, "the more I have." It is a world view profoundly at odds with one based on rational self-interest. It also sounds a little like Christianity.