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The Abuse and Misuse of the Puritans

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Edmund Wilson once described Carl Sandburg's six-volume biography of Abraham Lincoln as "the worst thing to happen to Lincoln since his assassination." That acerbic comment came to mind as I read [this article](#) published in *The Times* [London]. This time, it is the Puritans who are abused once again.

In "[Americans Reveal Their Puritan Roots Whether it's in Business, Sex, or War](#)," writer George Walden perpetuates many of the old myths and mischaracterizations of the Puritans — and all in the service of making a political point. Walden claims that America's Puritan roots explain virtually everything about the national character — and generally for ill effect. Walden never defines Puritanism, but argues:

To understand its continued centrality, imagine an America with no Mayflower and no New England. The national temperament would be less earnest, less moralistic, gentler. There would be fewer people in jail, and no executions. There might also be fewer Republican presidents and Bible literalists, and because a non-Puritan America would be less mesmerised by sex and introspection, less pornography and fewer psychiatrists' couches.

On the other hand:

An improvement on the America we have got, you may say. But the country might also have been less energetic, less enterprising, less rigorously democratic, less uncompromisingly freedom-loving. A poorer, milder America would be less able to do good as well as harm in the world. More reluctant to become engaged in Vietnam, it might also have been less tenacious in its pursuit of the Cold War generally. It would certainly not have been in Iraq, but that would be small comfort to its French or British critics, because a softer, non-Puritan America might well have resulted in a Europe submerged by Hitler, Stalin, or both.

Mr. Walden is not entirely wrong of course, but Puritanism is only one stream that contributed to the development of American culture. Furthermore, a portrayal of Puritanism as anti-sex and repressive is just off-base. The inaccurate statement in Mr. Walden's article is his suggestion that "self-realisation" is "a very Puritan concept." In truth, that statement is almost entirely backwards.

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