

ARTICLES.

■ TSONGAS'S CITY-STATE

No Miracle In Lowell

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Lowell, Massachusetts

The big deal in Lowell this winter was an all-day "motivational program" given by a TV self-esteem pitchman named Tony Robbins to a crowd of some 2,700 people, each of whom paid \$179 to scavenge vicariously in what Robbins calls "a warehouse full of cutting-edge technology . . . to create success." Early on the appointed morning in February, a parade of smartly dressed men and women, briefcases in hand, headed for Lowell Memorial Auditorium, a handsome neoclassical building rising above one of the ancient canals that powered the many textile mills that rose here 150 years ago, and that gave the city the noble sobriquet "Venice of America." These were the canals, by the way, that a young city councilor named Paul Tsongas once proposed be paved over to facilitate vehicular traffic.

The youthful managers and eager professionals in Robbins's audience need all the technology he can deliver. The growth, prosperity and success promised them just a few years ago, by Paul Tsongas in particular, are in short supply. His ballyhooed experiment in urban revitalization for Lowell has not only run out of steam, it seems now to be running in reverse. Lowell's troubles, while in some cases less acute than those of its sibling Merrimack Valley communities not blessed with pork-barrel funds, are nonetheless grave. Jordan Marsh, the only big department store in town, is closed for good. The Hilton hotel that Tsongas coaxed into town (with a federal grant) as a development anchor has become a Sheraton and may well be a Motel 6 by the time the tourists return this summer. Wang Laboratories (another federal beneficiary), headquartered here, has taken a serious bath, and its red-brick high-rise training center is now a community college library. An immigrant influx of some 25,000 Cambodians and other Asians has produced soaring unemployment and predictable symptoms of urban decay. It had somehow slipped Tsongas's mind to include the poor, the working class, the unemployed, the unions or the discount shoppers in his experiment, and now in the general slump they are paying doubly for their exclusion. No wonder that Tony Robbins, not Paul Tsongas, is the major motivational source in the city today.

Before he came down with cancer in 1983, Tsongas was planning to run for President on his record in Lowell, the success story par excellence of urban renaissance in America, at least for a few years in the 1980s. It seems crazy now, but his economic philosophy was informed by the optimism of expansion, not the gloom of decline. He had every reason to take credit for the city's flashy prosperity, its national reputation, its creative attractions. By acclamation he was acknowledged

as the patron of the city; "Saint Paul" was born again on the way to Lowell. Pre-eminently, if not quite single-handedly, Tsongas put together the pieces of the new Lowell and in many cases micromanaged the result. Of course with characteristic (and slightly suspect) modesty, Tsongas did not take all the credit he deserved; he told Harvard urban development researchers, "Eliminate a dozen people and none of it would have happened." But the researchers knew better; they wrote later in their case study that "Tsongas is too modest. . . . Eliminate one individual, Tsongas, and Lowell's revitalization would not have been nearly as dramatic."

Cosimo the Competent, Lorenzo the Managerial.

The plan (that word is central to this story) Tsongas imagined and to a large extent executed does not make sense without an understanding of Lowell's place in American history. In the second quarter of the nineteenth century it became, quite simply, the most concentrated industrial center in the nation, the showplace of the Industrial Revolution and the birthplace of industrial capitalism in the New World. In 1810 a Boston Brahmin named Francis Cabot Lowell traveled to England and saw for the first time the incredible benefits of water-powered looms to elevate the profit positions of textile-mill owners in the Midlands. In a feat of legendary industrial espionage and unauthorized technology transfer, Lowell memorized the mechanics of the operations and sailed home with the blueprints in his head.

Back in Boston, he put the workings down on paper, organized a posse of friendly entrepreneurs and scouted locations for mills on the Midlands model. Ur-Lowell was a place called Chelmsford Neck, at a bend in the Merrimack River about thirty miles north of Boston. The Pennacook Indians, who had once been given deed to the area, were on the losing side in King Philip's War and were forced out by the European settlers. The Neck had the right specifications: a perfect drop in the river (to turn the machines), abundant cheap labor (teenage daughters of hard-pressed farmers) and proximity to good ports and stores of raw materials (slave-picked cotton came into nearby Massachusetts Bay landings). In other words, fair nature, hard times and inhuman exploitation all conspired to turn Lowell into a gold mine for the infant capitalists. (Readers will be spared further commentary on the ironies of that dialectic for our candidate's time.)

In any case, before long those pesky contradictions that bedevil smooth-running economic operations, like hidden viruses in computers, sent the whole system crashing. The farmers' daughters were unhappy with their long hours, unhealthy work environment and brutal living conditions, and went on strike for a better lot. Most quit anyway after a few years at the loom. Their places were taken by a succession of European ethnic immigrants—Irish, French Canadian, Italian, German,

Greek—who overwhelmed the Yankees and transformed the culture and politics of the city. The new technology of the 1820s became obsolete by the 1860s, and newer mills on other rivers, or powered by steam, took the competitive edge.

The immigrant workers, inspired by European socialism and American labor activism, organized themselves against the millowners and struck as the Yankee mill girls had done. What with the terrible depressions that hit in the 1890s and again in the early 1900s, Lowell's competitive edge dulled to disappearance. In the years just after World War I the factories began fleeing south in the vanguard of what would become the wholesale evacuation of manufacturing from Massachusetts, which continues to this day despite the state's brief economic "miracle" of recent memory. (Or was it a dream?)

World War II brought a bloom to Lowell's sallow cheeks, but it turned out to be no more than the evanescent blush of a dying consumptive, and the city coughed its last when the war factories were demobbed. Or so it seemed. The economic decline drove thousands to booming regions, and those who remained wallowed in self-disregard. Tsongas told the Harvard researchers, "It was difficult to be proud of your hometown if you came from Lowell."

Tsongas grew up in Lowell at its nadir in the 1950s and early 1960s, mired in the swamp of deindustrialization and depression. He worked in his father's dry-cleaning business (he suspects that fumes from the chemicals used may have caused his lymphoma) and, like most ambitious young men of his generation, got out of town as soon as possible: Dartmouth for college, Yale for law school, Ethiopia in the Peace Corps. But like his rival Bill Clinton, he went home again to fashion a political career from the building blocks of his heritage.

It took some time for the light bulb to go on. His idea of 1972 to pave over the wonderful canals, built primarily by Irish contract labor, was unheeded. Well, here's Plan B: a privately organized development project primed with a huge flow of public money directed to transform the working-class and welfare-dependent city into a middle-class tourist attraction, an upscale shopping zone and a high-tech haven. Bingo.

The cornerstone of the edifice, however, was not industrial development but historic preservation. Tsongas—by the late 1970s a member of Congress—got on the appropriate subcommittee, wrote the pertinent legislation and shepherded a bill through to passage that established the country's first urban national park in his old hometown. Not just a national *monument* like the Indian mounds in Iowa, or a historic *site* like the Herbert Hoover birthplace: Lowell now has a proper park, with Smokey the Bear rangers, a museum, canal walks, mill tours, a display devoted to local antihero Jack Kerouac, ethnic fast food, fake trolley cars, *real* trolley cars—the genuine article, like Yellowstone or Yosemite. Without the bears.

At the same time, a web of interlocking agencies was spun to supervise economic development. As a U.S. Senator, Tsongas produced the Lowell Plan, a dreamy 1979 scenario for community renewal based on improbable cooperation between all sectors of society. In the local legend, the muse of development came to Tsongas in a Greek restaurant and caused him to draw up the Plan on a paper placemat. (That would put it in a category with supply-side economics, first published by Arthur Laffer on a cocktail napkin over lunch.) Parts of the city not quite up to national-park importance were set aside as a heritage state park and other lesser categories. Tsongas also set up the Lowell Development and Financial Corporation as a nonprofit to funnel private and public funds in the form of low-interest loans to businesses and developers in the city. That's right, breaks for business.

Lowell itself became a kind of economic theme park, parallel to the national historical one. Money was cadged from Washington to restore the drab old buildings, repoint the crumbling brick and install ersatz gaslights along the narrow streets. A great swath of territory was cleared for the federally aided hotel, né Hilton. Shops that sold staple goods at a discount to the poor, the elderly and the unsophisticated were rather rudely forced out of business to make way for boutiques. There's a folk music festival in the summer. In all, a deliberate attempt was made to turn plain old Lowell into one of those new yuppie quarters that draw shoppers and immigrants to Boston, Minneapolis, Seattle and places in between.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY D.B. JOHNSON

Tsongas's role in all of this was almost Medicean: a humane philosopher/aristocrat creating, managing and protecting a flourishing city-state by the force of his own vision and the political tools at his command. Cosimo the Competent, Lorenzo the Managerial. His loyal princelings ran the various agencies, held office as City Manager and sat on the City Council and the school board. There was occasional friction and Tsongas didn't get his way every time. For instance, he fought with a school superintendent over a piece of prime property. The superintendent wanted it for a "magnet" high school; Tsongas, who makes a big deal out of his promotion of education, wanted it for upper-middle-class private development. Tsongas lost.

What's wrong with Lowell is what's wrong with Tsongas's industrial policy.

But he had many more wins than losses. He convinced An Wang to locate the world headquarters of his computer company in a new industrial park in Lowell. Of course, Wang already had a facility on the outskirts of town, so it wasn't that much of a stretch. But Tsongas used both his economic leverage with the development agencies and his princely powers of persuasion to draw Wang into the Plan. In fact, he got the government to give \$5 million to the development corporation, which in turn lent it to Wang. The tycoon built a training center and other handsome structures, and Lowell was suddenly a major pushpin on the high-tech map of America.

Tsongas utilized the development corporation as the vehicle for pressuring local banks to contribute one-twentieth of 1 percent of their deposits to a loan pool for redevelopment. Some bankers figured there would never be any more development, so why protest? New England's most prominent rent-a-quote economist, the Bank of Boston's James Howell, gave the verdict on Lowell in 1975: "[It] has no future . . . no economic hope." But when other bankers balked, Tsongas ratcheted up the campaign, reminding them that he sat on the House Banking Committee and they had best do his bidding. He had been extremely helpful to the industry by leading the fight to deregulate savings and loan associations in the early 1980s, a legislative triumph he curiously omits from his speeches.

Now a city-state needs a city university, and Tsongas helped convert two minor-league colleges—Lowell State and Lowell Tech (the latter a relic of the textile industry days)—into Lowell University, a part of the University of Massachusetts system; last year it was further upgraded into UMass-Lowell. Its mission is frankly to aid the development of the region, and its engineering and management schools are closely allied with high-tech businesses in Lowell itself and in the vast techno-zone around Route 128, the East Coast's Silicon Valley, not very far to the south.

Naturally, Tsongas was given a seat on the Board of Trustees of Lowell U, and later he headed the Regents for the whole

UMass system. His reign there, as it was in the cultural affairs of the city, was largely benevolent. As one academic put it, "He allowed good things to happen." For instance, he did not object when the university's president set up a work environment department in the engineering school and staffed it with some of the most progressive—and renowned—occupational health and safety professionals in the country. The highly interventionist program could be considered hostile to some of Tsongas's corporate comrades in the region (although so far it is not), but he has put no crude strictures on the school to rein in its ideologically deviant members. Years ago, when socialist Michael Harrington came to speak at Lowell University, Tsongas approved because, as he said at the time, "these guys keep us honest." Nor has he questioned the national park's stunning presentation of the class struggle in Lowell. A slide show run every half-hour (there were 800,000 visitors last year) describes the old Lowell as "a city based on the exploitation of a permanent working class," a line seen nowhere in the Plan.

But Tsongas still keeps his hand in the minutiae of academic and cultural life. He strewed art in public places (none of it up to Florentine quattrocento standards), and in the middle of his campaign for the presidency he is trying to get the University to move its bookstore into downtown Lowell, which now has none. Tsongas was reportedly dismayed to see that Nashua, another old mill town and a rival to Lowell just across the New Hampshire border, has a Barnes & Noble right on its Main Street. The students strongly object. Tsongas, however, would override their demands for his dreams.

If Lowell's success in the 1980s was a model for America, its sudden failure must have heavy resonances for the country as well. It's why you don't hear much about Lowell from Tsongas in his current campaign, and why the great experiment in urban revitalization is not touted as his plan for the country. But to a large degree what happened to Lowell is what happened to America, and Tsongas's own failures in that regard should be instructive as he tries to sell himself as an economic savior. All the points mused up in his famous booklet, *A Call to Economic Arms*, are illustrated in the living city.

To begin with, the Lowell Plan and its various projects completely ignored the working-class neighborhoods, the poor, the immigrants and the aging ethnic populations that make up the bulk of the city—just as Tsongas never mentions those sectors in his economic manifesto. The implicit idea is that prosperity trickles down from upper-class development into the worlds of the deprived.

It simply didn't happen. Worse than that, Tsongas's henchpeople in city government tried to bulldoze—literally—the lower orders out of the picture. City Manager Joe Tully, for years Tsongas's key man on the ground, planned in 1982 to raze a large part of an old working-class district called The Acre, which lies on the edge of the national park and the boutique belt. Many of the 15,000 inhabitants were Latinos of various national provenances. The Lowell *Sun*, not always a Tsongas fan but a Lowell Plan booster of unbounded proportions, ran vicious editorials against the inhabitants; one editorial cartoon depicted them as hideous rats jumping the good


ship Acre: "LET THE CRIMINALS LEAVE . . . and we'll have a better ship." Only the successful struggle of a local grass-roots organization, Coalition for a Better Acre, saved the area. And as for Tully—he was on the grift and went to jail, though Paul Tsongas came to his trial as a character witness.

The business and political elites Tsongas commanded were in effect an army in a war for territory—some of it geographical, some cultural, some ideological—with other classes, races and interests. The same fight has been waged in most major cities, most fiercely when urban land is contested by redevelopers on the one hand and poor residents on the other. In Lowell, however, it was total war, for the contested territory included the whole city and its society.

In a sense, the battles began 300 years ago when the British replaced the Pennacook Indians. More recently, middle-class "Americans" in advanced assimilation have taken territory from poorer ethnics. "Little Canada," where the mill-working Québécois had lived, was largely flattened and the cultural community devastated. The Acre survived because the Coalition was able to outsmart the central planners, but the life of the neighborhood has been severely circumscribed by the elimination of cheap stores, restaurants, services and attractions. Its citizens, as well as Latinos and Asians in other quarters, lost ground in schooling, social mobility and political influence.

In a revealing passage in his memoir of cancer and its aftermath, *Heading Home*, Tsongas recounts how he broke the news to his twin sister, Thaleia, that there is no Santa Claus. He has been telling the country the same thing this year on the campaign trail. But it was in Lowell that he acted out the "truth" that he insists we learn: That government is best which aids the upper middle class and lets the poor fend for themselves.

Grinch capitalism has its own contradictions, however, and they became as apparent in Lowell as the contradictions of early industrialism did a century ago. Without a steady dose of public tax money (for parks, for housing and urban development, for welfare) the private sector can't cope. At the same time, an industrial policy can't be sustained in one city without regard to regional and national conditions. Even in the good times, most Lowell residents riding the boom worked outside the city in the defense-based and electronics companies along Route 128. Many professionals "blow in" daily from their homes in the more desirable suburbs closer to Boston. Those at the bottom of the scale took the leavings. The Cambodians, for instance, were low-tech workers in high-tech industries: Many of them assembled circuit boards in "electronic sweatshops" under contract to Wang, Raytheon, A.T.&T. and other big-name companies. The Cambodians were nonunionized, poorly paid, denied benefits, kept in poor conditions—and laid off when the companies began downsizing. Now there are no jobs for them, nor will there be in the future unless there's another military buildup or the companies successfully convert to civilian production at the level and in the same location they were when their decline began. That would probably require public investment in corporate equity, an idea utterly anathema to Tsonganomics. After all, there are industrial



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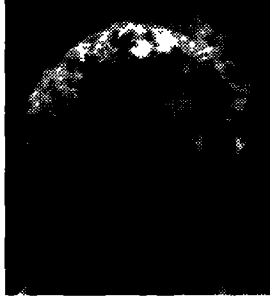


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policies and there are industrial policies. Meanwhile, the plight of the displaced workers—an enormous chunk of the local population—replicates that of the Yankee mill girls and their immigrant successors.

When the regional industries declined, the city's economy suffered more severely than it might have if a better class mix had been maintained. The boutiques brought in to replace the discount stores went under, and the center-city streets are now lined with shuttered shops. The infrastructure built to support upscale Lowell is falling apart, and it is doubtful the downscale tourists who visit the national park in summer will shore it up again. For some reason, the planners were too shortsighted to see what would happen when the economic and demographic conditions of the early 1980s changed.

Tsongas goes around the country promising high-wage jobs in new manufacturing industries by means of a program of public aid to business for research and development, tax cuts for capital gains and investments, job-training programs and educational reforms, an aggressive policy of opening foreign markets and an easing of antitrust laws. Many of those ideas have been tried in the laboratory of Lowell in local forms, shapes and sizes. The university, publicly funded, contributes a kind of R&D to industries, and other schools and colleges train and track workers into local businesses. The city has given out tax breaks until it's blue in the face. Boosters have touted Lowell's wares beyond the Merrimack, and have especially hard-sold its attractions to tourists, a lucrative kind of "foreign trade."

What's wrong with Lowell is what's wrong with Tsongas's industrial policy: It won't work unless everyone affected by it participates in making the decisions, setting the agenda and allocating the resources. Who decides? is at least as important a question as Who benefits? Certainly the consequences of "planning," in the Tsongoid sense, differ widely as to how those questions are answered. The Harvard researchers who studied Lowell in the mid-1980s saw even then the flaws in the picture: "The revitalization story of Lowell illustrates that the trickle-down aspects of development cannot be assumed; it often requires an engaged citizenry to ensure that the benefits from development are more evenly distributed." In other words, the time when "aggressively pro-business" policies were successful has long passed, and Paul Tsongas might think again about paving over the canals. □

■ HISPANIC U.S.A.

The Mirror of The Other

CARLOS FUENTES

The U.S.-Mexico border, some of those who cross it say, is not really a border but a scar. Will it heal? Will it bleed once more? When a Hispanic worker crosses this border, he sometimes asks, "Hasn't this always been our land? Am I not coming back to it? Is it not in some way ours?" He can taste it, hear its language, sing its songs and pray to its saints. Will this not always be in its bones a Hispanic land?

But first we must remember that ours was once an empty continent. All of us came here from somewhere else, beginning with the nomadic tribes from Asia who became the first Americans. The Spaniards came later, looking for the Seven Cities of Gold, but when they found none in what is today the southwestern United States, they left their language and their religion, and sometimes their blood. The Spanish empire extended as far north as Oregon and filled the coastal region with the sonorous names of its cities: Los Angeles, Sacramento, San Francisco, Santa Barbara, San Diego, San Luis Obispo, San Bernardino, Monterey, Santa Cruz. When it achieved independence, the Mexican republic inherited these vast, underpopulated territories, but it lost them in 1848 to the expanding North American republic and its ideology of Manifest Destiny: the U.S.A., from sea to shining sea.

So the Hispanic world did not come to the United States, the United States came to the Hispanic world. It is perhaps an act of poetic justice that now the Hispanic world should return, both to the United States and to part of its ancestral heritage in the Western Hemisphere. The immigrants keep coming, not only to the Southwest but up the Eastern Seaboard to New York and Boston and west to Chicago and the Midwest, where they meet the long-established Chicanos, the North Americans of Mexican origin, who have been here even longer than the gringos. They all join to make up the 25 million Hispanics in the United States—the vast majority of Mexican origin, but many from Puerto Rico, Cuba, and Central and South America. It is the fastest-growing minority in the United States.

Los Angeles is now the second-largest Spanish-speaking city in the world, after Mexico City, before Madrid and Barcelona. You can prosper in southern Florida even if you speak only Spanish, as the population is predominantly Cuban. San Antonio, integrated by Mexicans, has been a bilingual city for 150 years. By the middle of the coming century, almost half the population of the United States will be Spanish-speaking.

This third Hispanic development, that of the United States, is not only an economic and political event; it is above all a

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