



*Colossus: How the Corporation Changed America*

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Jack Beatty, *Colossus's* author/editor, is a prominent writer and former editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*. Recipient of fellowships and awards for writing and literary criticism, he has authored biographies of Boston mayor James Michael Curly (*The Rascal King*, 1992) and management theorist Peter F. Drucker (*The World According to Peter Drucker*, 1998). After *Colossus*, Beatty wrote a history of the Gilded Age (*Age of Betrayal: The Triumph of Money in America, 1886-1900*, 2007).

*Colossus* follows the corporation in English America from the founding of James Fort (later Jamestown) in 1607 by London's Virginia Company through the Dot Com boom of the 1990s. It suggests that the corporation bears responsibilities to society and that politics and government, traditional frameworks for considering history, have been sideshows to the real catalyst for societal change – business.

Though considered an anthology, Beatty himself penned nearly one-third of its 511 pages and drew from other authors to reinforce his positions. These were professional writers who, beyond Beatty, included novelists and journalists. Beatty's work plus excerpts from novels, magazines, and newspapers account for nearly half of the text. Historians take up another third, with the rest contributed by sociologists, economists, management experts, and a Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.

The chronology comprises five eras: 1607 – 1820 (the royal charter corporation), 1820 – 1860 (capitalization of American expansion), 1870 – 1930 (organization of economies of scale), 1930

– 1973 (consumer-driven economy), and 1973 – 1999 (post-oil embargo decline). The earliest text comes from Chief Justice Roger Taney’s 1837 decision in *Charles River Bridge v. Warren Bridge*, and the most recent is Beatty’s, which introduces and frames others’ works in addition to his own. The closer the era to the present, the denser. For example, 214 years between Jamestown and 1820 are explained in 63 pages, while 107 pages cover 27 years between 1973 and 1999. Authors probe the Puritan work ethic, the company’s role in creating representative government, lack of money and the slave trade, national expansion and capital markets, textile mill labor, mechanization, early railroads, and slave labor shaping Southern railroads.

Modern post-Civil War corporations precipitated “social change on a scale unimaginable.” These were the great trusts, such as Standard Oil, the great labor strikes, and F.W. Taylor’s concept of scientific management.

Years from the Great Depression to the 1973 oil embargo are titled “Bust to Boom.” America is fed by dehumanizing corporations – hence excerpts from Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, Wilson’s *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*, and Heller’s *The Office in Which I Work*. The postwar military-industrial complex – of great interest to DAU students – rates three pages, while corporate influence on university research is given 20.

The last section covers falling American productivity and living standards and the rise of consumer imports. It features leveraged buyouts, hostile takeovers, downsizing, shareholder rebellion, and the shift from manufacturing to services. Authors discuss CEO behavior, race and gender relations, and the corporation’s role in setting social norms.

Finally, Beatty deliberates on government and corporation. Which functions in the modern society, he asks, are proper to government, and which may be left to private enterprise?

That parting thought highlights how rooted the book is in the late-1990s. Much has changed since 2000 when Beatty asserted that we were “leaving the century of the ‘passions’,” nationalism and interstate war, and entering a “century of the ‘interests’” of globalization. Amazon.com was then five years old and a teenaged Mark Zuckerberg was learning to program computers. *USS Cole* was attacked and 9/11 occurred as the book was published. It was pre-Brexit and pre-*Operation Iraqi Freedom*. Would his approach and selections be the same today?