

# How We Behave is a Concern

## "Engineering the Upswing"

**Introduction:** The democracy known as the United States of America is in serious trouble. In the past year, we have:

- Coped with a pandemic that took in excess of 750,000 lives. Many of these lives were lost because of refusal by some to believe that the pandemic existed or to take recommended precautionary measures such as wearing a mask or maintaining a safe social distance from others or becoming vaccinated when the opportunity arose. How we behave is a public health concern.
- Endured an assault on the nation's Capitol by a mob of angry citizens who had become convinced that a national presidential election had been fraudulently stolen. How we behave is a concern.
- Saw an increase in demonstrations for racial justice, ignited in several cases by instances of cross-racial police brutality. How we behave is a concern.
- Witnessed several mass shootings, some with racial implications. How we behave is a concern.
- Observed widespread loss of trust in basic institutions: e.g., the press, government, science. How we behave is a concern.
- Experienced increased political divisiveness to the point where basic civility is nearly absent across party lines. How we behave is a concern.



by Henry S. Pennypacker, Chair,  
Board of Directors &  
Trustee Francisco I. Perez



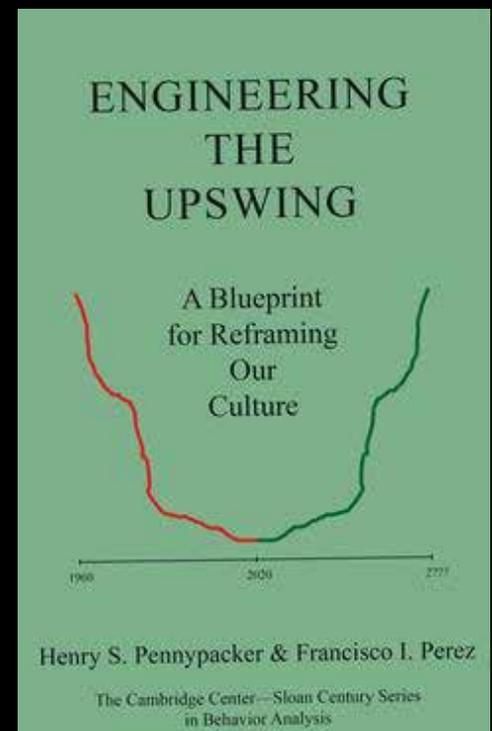
We have reached the point where some are seriously talking about dismantling the basic components of our representative democracy and reverting to some form of autocracy. They point to the failure of our institutions to live up to the devotion of the founding fathers to the ideals of liberty, equality, and justice for all. They assert that the failure to achieve these ideals in the present is justification for rejecting the progress made in the past. This reaction is tantamount to ignoring the uniqueness of the American experience which Alexis de Tocqueville (1945) famously lauded in his book *Democracy in America* and which millions of immigrants have sacrificed to achieve.

David Sloan Wilson (2019), an evolutionary scientist and proponent of developing practices for the intentional evolution of the culture, urgently warns us that evolution that is not intentionally guided and monitored can produce unintended consequences. And sure enough, our cultural evolution over the past several decades—unguided and unmeasured—has brought us to where we are today.

Using the examples of our recent actions—our individual and collective behavior—is an urgent place to start. Using the science of behavior to pinpoint the causes, we can look for ways to *intentionally guide our cultural evolution* to bring us back from the precipice. We also need to look at the environmental history of how we got here. To do this we need to carefully analyze the factors (prevalent cultural contingencies) that create the context for our behavior. The science of behavior will tell us where to look.

In this book, we will take a look at the challenge of how we behave, look at the context/environment in which we behave, and propose evidence-based behavioral technologies that can give us hope for changing behavior for the common good.

In their book *The Upswing* (2020), Robert Putnam and Shaylyn Garrett



document the significant cultural changes that occurred in the United States from the Gilded Age of the late 1800s to the present. Theirs is a meticulously researched and well documented collection of powerful longitudinal data that document the cultural evolution of the United States. They conclude, “The story of the American experiment in the twentieth century is one of a long upswing toward increasing solidarity, followed by a steep downturn into increasing individualism. From “I” to “We,” and then back again to “I.”

In their book, Putnam and Garrett noted that “change, whether for the better or for the worse, is not historically inevitable,” and they examined how “economic inequality, political polarization, social fragmentation, cultural narcissism, racism, and gender discrimination each evolved over the course of the last 125 years—not merely the last fifty.” They concluded that the up- and down-swings of communal solidarity are constructed and influenced by “human agency,” that is, by individual and collective behavior. As behavioral scientists, this assertion caught our eye.

*We propose that change can be managed, and that is what this book is about.* Government tries to do it by implementing laws, executive orders and well-intentioned public policy, but most of us probably would agree that quite often government gets a failing grade. Small changes are made, and the mistakes of the past are repeated. **Perhaps there is a better way.**