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Examining The Dreams That Shaped America

Zachary Karabell sees a nation of visionaries

By Marc Spiegler

Economists may debate whether the U.S. faces a recession, but there's no doubt that a draining miasma of insecurity has replaced the New Economy's giddiness. Remember 1999? Profitless companies racking up mammoth valuations. Amazon's Jeff Bezos as Time's man of the year. Workers expecting imminent liberation from offices and hierarchies. Today it seems so absurd, delusional and, historian Zachary Karabell argues, singularly American.

Karabell's "A Visionary Nation" positions the New Economy's Internet-based, market-driven utopia as only the latest fevered dream to consume the U.S. More an essay on steroids than an intellectual tome, this book skims American history from the Pilgrims to the present, as the writer recounts six great vision stages that forged today's United States.

First came the religious fervor of the Puritans, aiming to erect their righteous City on a Hill. Then as the Colonies grew more diverse, the driving force became individualism, the right of each man to pursue his happiness unfettered by unnecessary laws and impositions (including Britain's rule). Karabell describes Benjamin Franklin as the era's archetype: "lusty, frugal, ambitious, curious, crude, devious, farsighted, astute, and above all, without a sense of limits ... a man who rarely doubted that he was the agent of his own destiny" But after winning their independence, the Colonies-turned-states clashed constantly. In response, the Federalists waged an intellectual campaign to form a true nation, engendering a vision Karabell terms unity.

Within a few decades the tension over slavery, always acerbic, ignited the Civil War, and Americans soured on crafting a perfect union. Instead, their thoughts turned to expansion in the West and throughout the hemisphere as a new colonial power. With the landscape changing so rapidly, laws took a back seat to the raw power that enriched robber barons such as Standard Oil's John D. Rockefeller and U.S. Steel's Andrew Carnegie.

As the 20th Century started, however, popular sentiment swung against the moguls; once praised as the economy's savior, financier J.P. Morgan suddenly became the target of congressional investigations. Starting with Teddy Roosevelt's creation of wildlife refuges and national parks, Karabell traces the ever-larger role government was expected to play within American society, throughout Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal and climaxing in the Great Society policies of Lyndon Johnson. "At its apex, the government ideal incorporated the wildest dreams of a bountiful, harmonious society, one that would be characterized not only by material comfort but by emotional well-being," Karabell writes. "Physical suffering would be eliminated, social tension would be decreased, families would communicate more effectively, and all in all, Americans would enjoy a spectrum of advantages that human beings have desired for centuries but never quite secured."

Inevitably, bureaucratic failures and political fiascos such as Watergate eroded that vision. By 1980 Ronald Reagan rode to power decrying big government (though, as Karabell points out, the government continued to swell during Reagan's presidency). The invisible hand of the markets, supplanted government as the panacea for America's ills, especially once the Internet commerce craze roared into full hype mode. The magazine *Fast Company* served as the dotcom bible, spreading the paradigm of "frictionless" transactions (which cut out middlemen) and the "free agent nation."

[N]ever before has the market assumed such prominence as the promised vehicle to a better future," Karabell proclaims. "Not only has the New Economy rushed in to fill the vacuum left by government's ideological retreat; it has also entered realms where government feared to tread."

Well, maybe not anymore. At this point fate--or, rather, publication schedules--tripped up Karabell, for his book includes the first tech-stock shakiness, but not the current doldrums roiling America's entire economy. Though this gives "A Visionary Nation" an unfortunately anachronistic quality, it hardly undermines Karabell's basic theory that each American vision he details has collapsed under the weight of its expectations. He predicted nothing different for the New Economy. The next stage? Karabell proposes connectedness, an emphasizing of family, emotional growth, community He's probably right. After all, his six successive vision stages reflect the country's oscillation between rank self-interest (individualism, expansion, market) and a more societal vision of life (religion, unity, government).

Historians, however, might question how clear-cut Karabell's stages really were. In this century alone we find several muddying episodes: the Roaring '20s and the hippie era--periods of major individualism--took place in the middle of Karabell's government period; Protestant evangelism and New Age religion grew strongly in the two past decades, when the selfish market was supposedly the main shaping force of the era. While Karabell discusses these phenomena, he either folds them too neatly into his vision stages or dismisses them as outlier phases.

And if "A Visionary Nation" will leave most historians begging for greater details, intellectuals will crave more ideas. In this sense the book lacks the depth required by its ambition. What's most missed is deeper analysis of the visions as memes--the mechanisms through which they grew, formed and eroded--and a detailed comparison with the arc of visions in other nations, such as England's evolution from hard-core Thatcherism to Tony Blair's "Cool Britannia." Karabell is probably on the right track, but to break new ground he must follow the trail farther.

As Karabell points out, America's successive visions have driven the nation forward dynamically, from the initial settlers populating Massachusetts to the technological developments sprung from Silicon Valley Yet to many foreigners, America remains at some level a frontier culture: There's a slim safety net for the poor, old, and sick; violence, from road rage to capital punishment, permeates daily life; work dominates existence; police enforce morality laws.

What's needed are not new visions, Karabell writes, but a more-grown-up way of handling the existing ones: "Ceaselessly striving for an ideal,

we do not honor what has worked in the past, and our fingers are always ready to pull the trigger on what is working in the present.” The visions Karabell cites have made the country strong, and rich, and creative, but they have also stalled the formation of a fully functional society. Almost 400 years after Jamestown was settled, America must learn to balance individualism with communal life, rather than betting double-or-nothing on visions and then feeling poleaxed when they fail to materialize.

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