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Viewpoint: American Optimism: Is All Hope Lost, or Can We Find It?

By Andrew L. Yarrow

The resonance of Sen. Barack Obama's call for "hope" is striking, because hope seems in such short supply. This spring, 81 percent of Americans told the New York Times/ CBS News poll that "things have pretty seriously gotten off on the wrong track"; 9 out of 10 gave the economy a negative rating in a Washington Post/AP survey; and 74 percent told Public Agenda that the world is becoming a more dangerous place. As Phil Gramm so indelicately said, we are in a "mental recession."

America's sour mood has many roots and faces. The economy - with the deepening credit crisis, a \$9.5 trillion national debt, collapsing personal savings, a punctured housing bubble, the dollar's free fall, soaring gas and food prices, and China's relentless rise - seems headed to hell in a handbasket. We've been in Iraq and Afghanistan longer than it took to rout the Nazis, and for purposes that seem ever less discernible, besmirching America's image abroad. Political leaders appear corrupt and vicious. Finance, business and the media are close behind in public contempt. And this ignores pesky issues such as education, global warming, crumbling infrastructure and national security.

A palpable pessimism wafts from sea to shining sea. (Some might call it "realism," but it is gloomy and narrow nonetheless.) College students don't expect their lives to be as good as their parents'. Working Americans feel they can't pay their bills, and are quick to lash

out at trade, government, immigrants, corporations and other culprits. Daily life is ever more colonized by scary expressions of frustration such as road rage, airport angst and other easily vented vitriol.

In such times, it can be easy to forget that America was predicated on optimism. Today was great; tomorrow would be greater. Paraphrasing General Electric's 1950s slogan, progress was our most important product. As one pundit wryly said, we believed that America was perfect - and getting better all the time.

This was particularly true from World War II until the mid-1960s. In 1960, a Gallup poll found only 8 percent did not think that American life would get better indefinitely. Liberals and conservatives, business owners and workers staunchly believed that a growing abundance generated by technology and wise leadership would bring a paradise of wealth and leisure, enabling us to cultivate cultural, spiritual and personal pursuits.

Amid the detritus of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, his rhetorical optimism is often forgotten. As LBJ said in 1964: "We have the opportunity to move not only toward the rich society and the powerful society, but upward to the Great Society. ... The Great Society is not a safe harbor, a resting place, a final objective, a finished work. It is a challenge constantly renewed, beckoning us toward a destiny where the meaning of our lives matches the marvelous products of our labor."

Say something like that today, and you would be sneered out of the public arena.

This isn't a pitch for Great Society liberalism. It's a pitch for regaining the optimism that once characterized most Americans.

Is that spirit impossibly lost, or can we reignite it? If so, what does it take? Inspiring leaders? A buoyant economy in which, as John F. Kennedy said, a "rising tide lifts all boats"? Domestic politics and foreign policy in which liberty, justice, freedom and democracy are more than buzz words?

Yes, all of the above. But it will take more. The changes needed to become an optimistic nation again involve culture as well as policy and economics.

We need what we've lost: grand goals, powerful symbolism and a collaborative spirit of we're-in-it-all-together. We need to find the sparks that motivate people to work for better tomorrows. On so many fronts - from energy, environment, education and economic security to infrastructure, international relations and innovation - we must break free of the bonds of small ideas and partisanship so characteristic of the last few administrations. As Rep. Tim Murphy, a Pennsylvania Republican, recently said, "We need an Apollo Project for energy" - and for so much else, to meet pressing needs but also to inspire.

New technologies and initiatives must yield tangible, exciting advances that are socially beneficial and that capture the imagination - experimental "green" cities with

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energy-efficient and architecturally dazzling designs; high-speed rail and snazzy, alternative-fuel urban cars; nationally chartered biotech, environmental science, robotics, infotech, and other specialized university, research and development campuses. Children need a better start in life, so why not create "baby bond" investments and universal preschool? To increase U.S. savings and diminish debt, think of Chilean-style mandatory savings, requiring pension plans to invest a fixed percentage in U.S. securities, and creating a commission and national conversation on revaluing how workers are compensated. Look for economic development and sustenance for the soul: Invest big in the arts.

Stop dumping on the United Nations and fix it. With soaring idealism, we created it; we can re-create it for a world confronted by new transnational issues such as climate change, migration, infectious diseases, global capital markets, terrorism and victims of ruthless governments such as Sudan's. Patriotism and connection to one's country might suggest universal national service and new structures for invigorated public, community engagement.

A thriving America must be forward-looking, visionary and can-do. We need "challenges constantly renewed." Calling for grand goals and new engagement in community, national and global affairs might lead cynics to hear strains of "Kumbayah." But cynicism keeps us on auto-glide toward a dyspeptic hollowing of our souls, as well as economic and political decline.

As Winston Churchill once said: "I am an optimist. It does not seem too much use being anything else."

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