



A Visionary Nation

By Zachary Karabell
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Introduction

In this groundbreaking survey of American history, Karabell takes us through the values and cultural transitions that have marked distinct periods in American history, have brought us to where we are as a society today, and will possibly determine where we are headed in the future. Karabell traces the stages of our history beginning with the Puritans and their vision of a City on a Hill, through the ideals of individualism and freedom espoused by the American Revolutionaries, to the desire of national unity manifested in the writing of the Constitution and the fighting of the Civil War. He then describes the territorial and economic expansion of the late nineteenth century, the rise of the influence of government during the eras of the New Deal and the Great Society, and finally, the New Economy of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, as well as what may follow. Through all of these stages, Karabell finds a cyclical pattern of great vision followed by disappointment. He describes an underlying belief in American culture that we can have it all, that a perfect society is within reach, and that we as a society are always striving to be better. Leading the way to this better world is a handful

of visionaries who emerge in each era with promises of a new way of living that will bring about utopia. Ultimately, however, reality rarely meets the expectations that have been formed, and the existing paradigm crumbles and gives way to a new one. According to Karabell, we are currently in a highly charged era, and a fairly successful one, at least by material standards. The New Economy, with its focus on the stock market and the internet has revolutionized the lives of many Americans. However, the current paradigm, like those that have preceded it, does not fulfill all of our needs as a society, thus it too is in peril of being replaced by yet another stage. Karabell even goes so far as to predict what will most likely distinguish the imminent seventh stage -- the need for community and spirituality. The challenge however, according to Karabell, is not to simply replace one cultural framework with another, but to draw on what the visionaries of the past have aspired to, and try to combine past visions with current ones. Otherwise the patterns of vision and hope giving way to disappointment will only continue. **Questions for Discussion**

1. Karabell divides our nation's visionary history into six stages but acknowledges that these are not rigid, objective divides. Would you have "cut the historical pie" (p. 6) differently? How?
2. Is the shared American belief that everyone can have it all a foolish notion or a noble and attainable ideal? Discuss the ways that this is a uniquely American viewpoint.
3. Is there a particular stage of American history that best matches your own vision of what comprises the American dream?
4. Throughout our history cultural frameworks have been fashioned by a handful of individuals with a specific vision. Is a cultural paradigm legitimate if it is upheld only by a small percentage of the population?
5. Karabell offers three possible scenarios for the way the sixth stage will give way to the seventh:
 - a) that wealth will be generated beyond our imaginations;
 - b) that the stock market will collapse or;
 - c) that the upper tier will continue to thrive and the gap between rich and poor will widen (p. 195-96).
 Which of these scenarios do you think will actually occur? Why? Do you envision another scenario?
6. What elements of the past stages do you think should be combined with the present to create the perfect society of the future? Is this perfect society attainable given human nature? Even if it is theoretically possible, is it viable in practice?
7. Karabell believes that spirituality, intimate relationships, and community will be the watchwords of the seventh stage (p. 208). In what ways do you see the yearning for these things already?
8. Who are some of the visionaries alive in the United States today? Can you pinpoint ideas that are being discussed today that will revolutionize the future?