

COLLECTIVE AMBITION

Donald Trump's campaign slogan is "Make America great again." Since the Donald's current persona is a blend of P. T. Barnum's cynicism ("Never give a sucker an even break.") and the physical posturing of Benito Mussolini, what he might mean by this statement of ambition has given many people pause. Not all. I just saw a picture of a woman who had his slogan tattooed, in large letters, down her left thigh. I'd like to think this would be an embarrassment for her in the future, but after all I have seen this campaign season, nothing is sure. For the moment, the woman is clearly all in.

I agree with President Obama's response to Trump, saying that America is "already pretty great." Nonetheless, a meditation on what authentic American ambitions might be in these early years of the 21st century—not in Trump's understanding of the word, but in a much larger and less rhetorical one—might be worthwhile.

The birth of our country in the 18th century, revolting against the most powerful empire in the world and setting up a novel governmental system, for all its warts and injustices, was an enormously ambitious project. Its success must have been a surprise to people throughout the world, including the Founding Fathers themselves. The next ambitious project, Manifest Destiny, with its genocidal attacks on Native Americans and the Mexican War, succeeded in the consolidation of territory, but through shameful means.



There have been other great American projects: FDR's New Deal, that created a galaxy of government programs to pay the unemployed to do public work, saved millions of people from being destroyed by the Depression. Later in FDR's administration, the quick assembly of a manufacturing juggernaut in the early 1940s produced bombers, tanks, field guns, and even ships at a rate no one thought possible, supplying all of our allies as well as ourselves. More than any other thing, that miracle defeated the Axis. At the end of the war, the juggernaut was converted to the manufacture of consumer products, from houses to cars to refrigerators, somehow allowing us to avoid what was seen by many as an inevitable return to the Depression. Ike threw the weight of the federal government behind a monstrous infrastructure project, including the building of the interstate highway system. Governor Pat Brown did something similar in California, building new highways, an elaborate irrigation

system, and the most ambitious public education system in the world, including a greatly expanded University of California and California State College system that promised inexpensive and top notch higher education to every man and woman in the state. Then came JFK's promise to put a man on the moon within the decade. Shortly thereafter, LBJ created the War on Poverty and the Great Society, attacks on both racism and economic inequality. President Obama revived the tradition of the ambitious project with his healthcare reform, succeeding where others had failed for a century. He succeeded in other areas as well, but instead of consensus in Congress and across the country, the shared ambition that has made our country remarkable, he was fought by the right at every turn.

In all of these ventures, whatever their faults and whatever their relative failure or success, there was a shared, collective American ambition. It would be hard to

imagine that kind of thing in 2016. In the early 1980s, the Reagan Republicans launched a frontal attack on the federal government, best summed up by Grover Norquist: "I'm not in favor of abolishing the government. I just want to shrink it down to the size where we can drown it in the bathtub." The very idea of destroying the main engine of all the above-mentioned national projects is a declaration that shared national ambition is obsolete. All the physicists, engineers, city planners, and intellectuals of all sorts, who executed those ambitious projects of the past, would likewise become obsolete. In recent decades, the best students at the best American universities have turned their backs on science and the humanities and have found a sudden devotion to investment banking and the project of becoming Masters of the Universe. Driven by stock "activists" insisting on unrealistic profits from corporations, sensible research and development budgets were slashed, the work forces were "right-sized," and the dynamics of innovation in many areas were crippled. The rise of greed and social media driven narcissism has allowed Gordon Gekko's famous dictum, "Greed is good," to be quoted without irony.

In our assessment of the history of grand projects in the political sphere we should not forget writers and artists. American experimentation in the first two decades of the 20th century was aggressive and ambitious. Gertrude Stein said "The United States is just now the oldest country in the world. There is always an oldest country, and she is it, it is she who is the mother of the twentieth century civilization." That confidence (or delightful arrogance) is reflected in her own

amazing innovations, in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and even more in *Tender Buttons*. Marcel Duchamp, when asked about American work, claimed not only that New York had invented Dada, but that it *was* Dada. For much of the 20th century almost every aspiring young writer wanted to write the "great American novel," a big innovative work that transformed the genre. In the cynical view of post-modernism, all of that is now laughably delusional. Such an attitude reminds me of a particular review of P. T. Anderson's cinematic masterpiece, "Magnolia." The reviewer dismissed it as "too ambitious." He didn't say that it failed, or that it didn't have the chops to back up its ambition, but simply that it was "too ambitious." Who says we can no longer undertake visionary projects in fiction, poetry, cinema, and all of the other arts?

The question remains, what might we be able to do, collectively, if we could shake off this current embrace of ambitionless mediocrity? Undertaking big projects is not a frivolous exercise. In the context of global warming, it might be a question of survival. Call back the city planners, who could create new cities or recreate the abandoned ones. They could put together people-friendly living spaces with large pedestrian zones, cheap and efficient light rail public transit, buildings that use solar power to generate their power needs, and even urban agriculture, using innovations in closed-system methodology that would allow cities to produce most of their own food. James Lovelock, the man who first warned us about global warming in the 1970s, suggested that this kind of innovation will be necessary for the survival of humanity.

We could re-establish the quality of our public education system and return to the status we had in the 50s and 60s. Enough with the whining of so many parents and teachers. Kids can handle a rigorous academic program and still study music and art, and even pursue sports. (Just as they once did in *this* country, not just in Finland and South Korea.) What about converting the Bernie Sanders phenomenon into a huge activist movement that intensely pressures politicians, directs boycotts against the worst corporate abusers (and there are many) until they feel the pain? Maybe it's time once again for massive public demonstrations, like the marches on D.C. during the late 60s and early 70s. And yes, they actually did shorten the Vietnam War. What about the new phenomenon of crowd funding for start ups? Working from the bottom up, these entrepreneurs are apparently creating more new hires than large manufacturing and established small businesses. Maybe the biggest and most ambitious project of all would be to search for a way to dismantle the institutional segregation and intimidation of "minorities" in the United States. Many have fought this battle in the past, and some have died for the cause. It will be difficult but not impossible, and it may be as necessary for our collective well-being as finding a way to survive global warming.

We should be ashamed that the Ronald Reagan/Ayn Rand view of the world, which has in many ways stalled and crippled America, is acceptable to so many of us. Our greatest predecessors would not be able to understand how we could have set our sights so low.