

Lost Horizon

A VISIONARY NATION: Four Centuries of American Dreams and What Lies Ahead

By Zachary Karabell / HarperCollins

Los Angeles Times - Los Angeles, Calif.

Author: James Ceaser

Date: Sep 2, 2001

It is difficult to decide whether Zachary Karabell, author of "A Visionary Nation," should be applauded for audacity or faulted for foolhardiness. The great scope of his undertaking, proclaimed in the subtitle "Four Centuries of American Dreams and What Lies Ahead," would be enough to deter the boldest of thinkers. But Karabell, identified on the book jacket as having a doctorate in history from Harvard University, plunges ahead.

Karabell is surely no historian in the usual sense. He writes as much about the future as about the past, devoting nearly half of the book to discussing where America is going. Karabell might therefore better be labeled a futurologist or perhaps a prophet. But neither of these descriptions seems quite to fit either: Karabell derives his claim to knowledge of "what lies ahead" not from extrapolations of current trends nor from divine instruction but from having discovered a cycle that has operated across the whole course of American history.

What is this cycle? American history, according to Karabell, has been dominated by a succession of "visions," each of which congeals at a certain point and then holds sway for an entire era. Neither economics, nor demographics nor political imperatives drive history; rather, it is driven by what George Bush pere once referred to as "the vision thing." Karabell is thus a proponent of the school of history that asserts the preeminence of ideas. But he is an idealist of a particular sort. In the American case, he argues, only ideas of a certain kind have been able to succeed. America is distinct in buying into visions that are, well, visionary: utopian and unrealistic, based on a belief that "it is possible to have it all, [that] not just a few people can have it all, but all of us can."

This utopianism supplies the key to the generation of the cycles. As a vision always promises more than it can deliver, it runs up against the shoals of reality and inevitably leaves some disillusioned. From the ranks of the disillusioned comes a replacement vision: "Only when ... a critical mass of people begin to express discontent and actively seek alternatives can the change from one stage to the next occur," as Karabell writes. Vision-arianism produces its own gravediggers. The cycle thus described-- vision, disillusionment, replacement vision--has continually repeated itself since the Puritan's arrival, producing the following sequence of visions: Religion (1620-1740), Individualism (1740- 1790), Unity (1790-1870), Expansion (1870-1930), Government (1930- 1990) and Market (1990-the present).

Karabell's technique of ascribing one vision to each era allows for an economical compression of history. Everything within an era is organized around a single value. That value establishes a kind of moral hierarchy that honors those who live in accord with it and marginalizes or even punishes those who do not--until, of course, disillusionment sets in and metes out a rough justice. Karabell is at his best in these historical sketches, drawing easily from diverse sources to sustain his account. He has a clear and vigorous style that disdains the use of complex sentences and that emulates an Ernest Hemingway rather than, say, an Edward Gibbon.

Yet Karabell is a prisoner of a flawed theoretical framework. His claim--that all American thought is utopian--forces him to fit all instances of political creativity into the same mold, insisting in effect that there is no qualitative distinction to be made among, say, John Winthrop, Steve Jobs and James Madison. But are they all really cut from the same cloth, touting the same "heady images of a perfect future"? Take America's founders, for example. True, they acted with boldness on behalf of a vision that they depicted as "a new event in the history of mankind." But a vision is not the same thing as a vision that is utopian. That depends on the vision. The least acquaintance with the thinking of Washington, Madison and Hamilton, men known for their sobriety and realism, makes a mockery of the claim that they promised impossible ideals. Indeed, they were so conscious of the dangers of utopianism that they frequently inveighed against it. The proof, however, comes in the results: The Founders accomplished much of what they set out to accomplish. Karabell has flattened and homogenized his analysis of American political thought by adopting without serious examination a formula that requires all thought to be the same.

But let us quit the past, which in truth serves for Karabell mainly as a pregame warmup for the real event, which is his treatment of the present and future. Karabell's analysis here begins with the observation that the last dominant vision, Government, is dead. To paraphrase former President Bill Clinton's only famous statement of political thought: The vision of Government is now over. Governmental activity does not cease, but the idea of government has lost its luster and no longer fuels the imagination. Whereas the most intelligent college students of the early 1960s wanted to be part of the New Frontier rather than managers for General Motors, who today would not prefer to be a high flier in the Silicon Valley than a policy expert in the Department of Housing and Urban Development?

The vision of government was replaced some time in the last decade by the vision of the Market. Although the harbinger for this vision came with some of the conservative critics of Big Government, its real champions are the spokespersons for the "New Economy." It is they who have offered a compelling vision of the Market in the form of a "technological utopianism" that foresees a "City on a Hill all over again, except that this time, the hill is virtual and so is the city." Because the reign of the Market seems to be only in its infancy--most cycles having lasted for more than half a century--it is interesting that Karabell should already be speaking of its demise and of the emergence of the next vision. Either, then, this era is going to pass more quickly than the others or the sources of disillusionment it is generating are especially easy to spot. Karabell argues both points. History, he suggests, is speeding up. More important, the Market cannot deliver all that is promised on its behalf. It is not so much that this system will not be able to enrich people--although a proletarian army of disillusioned dot-comers, deprived of their Lexuses, is not inconceivable--but that the Market will not be able to answer "spiritual fulfillment, intimate relations, and community." From these contradictions, Karabell can sketch the shape of the next vision, which he calls Connectedness. The visionaries here-- they exist already--will stress the nonmaterial side of life and will try to speak to the deeper needs of the soul. If intellectuals and teachers can just hold on, the hour will be theirs. Entrepreneurs will be scorned; the social worker will be praised. The notion that history is on the side of Connectedness, which is but another name for left-wing communitarianism, is, of course, the position favored today by a large part of America's academic intelligentsia. Although Karabell lends his weight to this position, he breaks with communitarianism's adherents in regarding their vision as qualitatively no different from the others. Remaining true to his schema, he counts Connectedness as just one more utopian idea. Far out on the distant horizon, some two cycles into the future, Karabell is already glimpsing the demise of Connectedness and its replacement with yet another vision.

It seems, then, that we are fated to accept a never-ending repetition of this cycle. Or are we? Unwilling to leave us suspended in this state of eternal recurrence, Karabell at the last moment offers a potential way out. If we can become aware of what moves history, we may be in a position to control our fate and break free from the cycle. Fantastic as this idea may seem, it is not nearly so surprising as the particular alternative that Karabell proposes to replace the articulation of a vision. He does not offer a coherent and intelligent vision but instead the forsaking of any single vision in favor of "embracing multiple stages simultaneously" and the combining of some or all of our past visions. If we have multiculturalism, there is no reason why we should not have multi-visionism. Although Karabell worries whether so flaccid a notion might rob historical actors of their energy, he presses forward, offering no analysis of what might make a vision coherent. If each is partial and utopian, then all of them together must be sober and realistic. While Karabell's impulse toward moderation is admirable, he has denied himself the theoretical tools to pursue his

objective with any rigor. In the end it is the author who offers not only the most utopian, but surely the emptiest, vision of all.

Credit: James Ceaser is the author of "Reconstructing America: The Symbol of America in Modern Thought" and the co-author of "The Perfect Tie: The True Story of the 2000 Presidential Election."