

The New York Times

November 17, 2009

OP-ED COLUMNIST

The Nation of Futurity

By [DAVID BROOKS](#)

When European settlers first came to North America, they saw flocks of geese so big that it took them 30 minutes to all take flight and forests that seemed to stretch to infinity. They came to two conclusions: that God's plans for humanity could be completed here, and that they could get really rich in the process.

This moral materialism fomented a certain sort of manic energy. Americans became famous for their energy and workaholicism: for moving around, switching jobs, marrying and divorcing, creating new products and going off on righteous crusades.

It may seem like an ephemeral thing, but this eschatological faith in the future has motivated generations of Americans, just as religious faith motivates a missionary. Pioneers and immigrants endured hardship in the present because of their confidence in future plenty. Entrepreneurs start up companies with an exaggerated sense of their chances of success. The faith is the molten core of the country's dynamism.

There are also periodic crises of faith. Today, the rise of China is producing such a crisis. It is not only China's economic growth rate that produces this anxiety. The deeper issue is spiritual. The Chinese, though members of a famously old civilization, seem to possess some of the vigor that once defined the U.S. The Chinese are now an astonishingly optimistic people. Eighty-six percent of Chinese believe their country is headed in the right direction, compared with 37 percent of Americans.

The Chinese now have lavish faith in their scientific and technological potential. Newsweek and Intel just reported the results of their Global Innovation Survey. Only 22 percent of the Chinese believe their country is an innovation leader now, but 63 percent are confident that their country will be the global technology leader within 30 years. The majority of the Chinese believe that China will produce the next society-changing innovation, while only a third of Americans believe the next breakthrough will happen here, according to the survey.

The Cultural Revolution seems to have produced among the Chinese the same sort of manic drive that the pioneer and immigrant experiences produced among the Americans. The people who endured Mao's horror have seen the worst life has to offer and are now driven to build some secure footing. At the same time, they and their children seem inflamed by the experience of living through so much progress so quickly.

"Do you understand?" one party official in Shanxi Province [told James Fallows of The Atlantic](#), "If it had not been for Deng Xiaoping, I would be behind an ox in a field right now. ... Do you understand how different this is? My mother has bound feet!"

The anxiety in America is caused by the vague sense that they have what we're supposed to have. It's not the per capita income, which the Chinese may never have at our level. It's the sense of living with baubles just out of reach. It's the faith in the future, which is actually more important.

China, where President Obama is visiting, invites a certain sort of reverie. It is natural, looking over the construction cranes, to think about the flow of history over decades, not just day to day. And it becomes obvious by comparison just how far the U.S. has drifted from its normal future-centered orientation and how much this rankles.

The U.S. now has an economy shifted too much toward consumption, debt and imports and too little toward production, innovation and exports. It now has a mounting federal debt that creates present indulgence and future hardship.

Americans could once be confident that their country would grow more productive because each generation was more skilled than the last. That's no longer true. The political system now groans to pass anything easy — tax cuts and expanding health care coverage — and is incapable of passing anything hard — spending restraint, health care cost control.

The standard thing these days is for Americans to scold each other for our profligacy, to urge fiscal Puritanism. But it's not clear Americans have ever really been self-disciplined. Instead, Americans probably postponed gratification because they thought the future was a big rock-candy mountain, and if they were stealing from that, they were robbing themselves of something stupendous.

It would be nice if some leader could induce the country to salivate for the future again. That would mean connecting discrete policies — education, technological innovation, funding for basic research — into a single long-term narrative. It would mean creating regional strategies, because innovation happens in geographic clusters, not at the national level. It would mean finding ways to tamp down consumption and reward production. The most pragmatic guide for that remains [Michael Porter's essay](#) in the Oct. 30, 2008, issue of Business Week.

As the financial crises ease, it would be nice if Americans would once again start looking to the horizon.

[Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)