Looking to America's past to find a path for the future

By Glenn Altschuler | May 24, 2009

THE AMERICAN FUTURE: A History
By Simon Schama
Ecco, 416 pp., $29.99

"This is the time to stand for things that are close to the American spirit," George McGovern proclaimed in 1972 as he accepted the Democratic Party's presidential nomination. McGovern promised to take on wasteful military spending, entrenched special interests, prejudice based on race and sex, and the despair of the old and sick. "Come home America," he pleaded, "to the ideals that nourished us from the beginning."

In this speech, McGovern tapped a venerable American tradition: invoking the past to inspire and legitimize change. Abraham Lincoln did it, in his Gettysburg address. So did Ronald Reagan, when he invoked Massachusetts Bay's "city on a hill."

In "The American Future," Simon Schama, a professor of history at Columbia University, looks to an alternative America "that was actually there all along" to address the disintegration of the nation's moral authority and economic security. Grounded in the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution, this America, he argues, views government not as the enemy of freedom and free enterprise but as their guardian and guide. This America is inclusive and tolerant, accepts natural resources as a public trust, and does not go to war without good and sufficient cause.

An essayist for The New Yorker who has written more than 30 documentaries for the BBC, PBS, and the History Channel, Schama is a masterful stylist and storyteller. Moving back and forth in time, he draws on the "micro-histories" of notables and nobodies (from Thomas Jefferson to Pastor Johnny Hunt) to demonstrate that "the republic is shouting to be remade" - and that, although nothing is certain these days, "take it from me, it can."

Schama is too good a historian to ignore the powerful forces arrayed against his rejuvenating alternatives: prejudice, intoxication with power, and the presumption of a people of plenty that the future will take care of itself. And so, the evidence in the book does not always match Schama's confidence that aroused Americans can "turn on a dime, [and] abandon the habits of a lifetime."

Wars, Schama suggests, have been fought on behalf of "perverted and authentic" versions of America. Loud with "a Hamiltonian sense of global destiny," James K. Polk, Theodore Roosevelt, and George W. Bush craved "imperial masculinity." Speaking out with a kinder, gentler patriotic voice, Thomas Jefferson founded West Point to immunize America from war lust by making Army officers citizen-soldiers, deferential to civilian commanders, and trained as engineers of democracy. At the end of the 19th century, Mark Twain and W.E.B. Dubois saw in the Spanish-American War and the suppression of Filipino independence a perversion of everything for which the United States was supposed to stand.

It's not easy, of course, to specify "the right kind of war to be fought." Hawks, no less frequently than doves, claim they are enhancing and extending human freedom. Throughout American history they have tended to have the whip hand. Although Schama lets himself ask what might have happened had Teddy Roosevelt sat in on a West Point course, "Why presidents go to war when they don't have to," he knows the answer. The Rough Rider would have been no less certain that a splendid little war would revivify a nation enervated by pollution, polls, and plutocrats.

More persuasive is Schama's assertion that at the heart of American history is a distinction between protecting religious belief and promoting an American-Christian theocracy. He makes a compelling case that Roger Williams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison made "America uniquely qualified to fight the only battle that matters" - the battle between a faith that commands obedience and one that promises liberty. If school children recited Jefferson's "Statute of Religious Freedom" instead of "the mindlessly reverent Pledge of Allegiance," Schama suggests, "they would understand, right away, the proper meaning of their nation's existence."

Mass immigration, Schama contends, echoing Thomas Paine and Hector St. John Crevecoeur, is not only compatible with liberty and prosperity in America, it helps create these conditions. Nonetheless, a "rumble of anxiety" that an open door endangers America's racial and ethnic identity "never really goes away." When the economy tanks, nationalists want to extinguish the torch on the Statue of Liberty and make newcomers walk the plank. Consequently, Schama understands that it's too soon to say that the founders of American cultural pluralism - Franz Boas, Horace Kallen, and Randolph Bourne - have carried the day. "Perhaps," he adds, "it will always be too soon."
Finally, Schama is unable to find viable alternatives to the conviction that cost-free abundance, with the next generation always better off than the last, is America's manifest destiny. To be sure, Emerson and Thoreau thought enough was as good as a feast. As Jimmy Carter discovered, however, that no politician can survive as a salesman of scarcity and self-sacrifice.

President Obama, then, has got his work cut out for him. Seeking "to catch the wind rather than be blown along by it" in tough times, Americans do, indeed, look back toward the future. But they don't always choose the most enlightened alternatives.

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