

The Spirit of America – Its People

by George Friedman - January 9, 2025

Editor's note: *If it feels as though the world is changing, that's because it is. Global economic reconfiguration, demographic decline and geopolitical realignment have fundamentally altered long-held conventional political wisdom, perhaps nowhere more markedly than in the United States. Like all countries, the U.S. is mutable. But unlike most others, changes there have global consequences. The situation in America signals a break in the natural process of a country. America has surprised the world many times, and it is doing so again. The following essay is the first in a series by George Friedman seeking to explain why that's the case.*

America needs a sense of perspective. In this time, all is not wonderful, nor is it all terrible. We need to find the order in the United States. We need to understand America's soul. In business, we don't succeed by rushing into a deal – we wait for a chance and make sure it's the right chance, because if it's the wrong one, we risk losing it all. Paradoxically, the United States lives off that fear. America needs to recognize this and make peace with itself.

America is a sober country. It speaks quietly and honestly. When we look at the nature of the country, this makes sense. The United States has a vast central plain running from the north to the south. In that plain, there was always great hope, deep loneliness and uncertainty about the future. It is a place where humans lived heroically. As you move through the western plains, you are struck by how empty the country is and by how hopeful it is. This story is found not only on the plains but also in the darkness of the cities. Each city has a different meaning, a different promise and different threats. I grew up in a city, and I have lived in the plains. There is something fearsome in the cities and desolate in the plains.

This is really a story about the American people. In “The Storm Before the Calm,” I wrote:

Most nations define nationality in terms of shared history, culture and values. The American people had none of these. They did not even share a language. Rather they came as aliens, having nothing in common. But an odd evolution took place. The immigrants came to have two cultures. One was a culture of their families, recalling their past. The other was the culture of their nation into which they merged without disappearing. The American culture was defined by this dichotomy, and hence the “American people” is a very real – but artificial – construct.

The encounter with reality amid the quietude of the plains is what introduces Americans to their country. They learn the extreme promise, the real pain – and from this the American homeland becomes powerful. There are those who would like to cleanse the homeland and take away the pain, but then what would be left? It is not a pleasant life, nor is it just. But where else in the world could such a diverse people come together and form one nation under God?

The question we must answer is: What will all this become and what will America's future be? And we will answer that, but first we must wallow in the reality of the country. We can speak of income, investment, etc., but in the end, people must confront their fellow countrymen. Out of this, we must consider the nature of America and what lies ahead. But as I said, unless we understand America now, we will be blind. One of the problems in discussing America is the simplicity of vision and the failure to understand how complex it is. America is dedicated to speaking the truth about itself, but frankly, its glory is found where we came together and stood the line.

America needs to make peace with itself. We are at war with each other, but we need to recognize that we are bound together in making history. When the settlers went inland, they faced hardships that made them stand together. When immigrants settled in cities, it was the same story. To be successful, Americans stand guard, whether it's over their property, their business or their country. They do so because they have nowhere else to go. These are the men who are the foundation of the republic. They went where they had to go and refused to apologize. To understand America in the future, we need to understand the people who are doing the building and the defending.

Americans are proud, and with that pride, they invent starships and other things that are said to be impossible. They take big risks and fight every way they know to win. Thomas Edison, Henry Ford, Steve Jobs, Elon Musk and people like them denied the impossible and did what others said could not be done, just like the nation's founders did. To see the American perspective, you need to understand the people who founded the country, who founded the businesses, and who stood guard over the land. How does this spirit move into the future?

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