

True believers in the American dream wake up to a nightmare

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ANALYSIS: WE ALL HAVE TO BE WEANED OFF THE MYTHOLOGY OF ETERNAL OPTIMISM, WRITES
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DEPENDING ON one's sense of irony, it was either a brilliant stroke of satire or a bizarre editorial brainstorm. RTÉ Radio 1's Morning Ireland chose to end its coverage of a momentous week by devoting the last few minutes of yesterday's programme to a recitation by Johnny Cash of a stream of purple prose called I Am the Nation.

5 The recording, found among Cash's effects after his death, has been released to promote a new collection of his work. According to a PR man for the record company, it "reminds us what our country stands for" at a time of division and crisis. With its evocations of Paul Revere and Davy Crockett, of Babe Ruth and Walt Disney, of the Golden Gate and the Grand Canyon, it undoubtedly strikes a chord, not just for Americans but for all those
10 around the world who dream the American dream.

And yet, I Am the Nation is actually a perfect illustration of why the American dream can so quickly turn into a nightmare. It is, for a start, a product, not of patriotism, but of corporate advertising, written in 1955 by Otto Whittaker for the Norfolk and Southern Railway. (The only change in the text, made during the centennial celebrations in 1976,
15 was to add "the steaming jungles of Vietnam" to the places where the "heroic dead" answered freedom's call.)

And, like most ads, it is also a grotesque exercise in denial. The "nation" it evokes is overwhelmingly white, male, Protestant and entirely characterised by "freedom". Just two women get a mention - Harriet Beecher Stowe and "Betsy Ross with her needle" (sewing
20 the first American flag - a good womanly occupation).

This America does not contain Rosa Parks or Eleanor Roosevelt, Mother Jones or Betty Friedan. And not a single black or Hispanic person belongs in the nation - no Frederick Douglass or Martin Luther King, no César Chávez or Ella Fitzgerald. It is an entirely invented America, one in which sententious pseudo-patriotism obliterates vast human
25 complexities.

In a week when George Bush, elected as the front man for a neo-conservative project to make the US an unchallenged hyperpower, uttered the immortal line: "If money isn't loosened up, this sucker could go down," a farrago like I Am the Nation may seem to be the least of our worries.

30 But its suddenly renewed prominence this week as a reminder of "what our country stands for" is in fact intimately connected to the financial apocalypse that Bush so graphically conjured. The connection can be summed up in two words - wishful thinking. The delusion of American exceptionalism, the idea that the US is somehow better, purer and even holier than the rest of the world, fed into the sheer unreality of the financial system.

35 The dream, to an increasing extent, has fuelled the nightmare.

As Morning Ireland's strange choice showed, the notion of America evoked in I Am the Nation is not just American. It is shared by people around the world - and nowhere more so than in Ireland. In the words of Otto Whittaker via Johnny Cash, it is not so much a political idea as a quasi-religious belief system, a prayer to a sacred place: I was
40 conceived in freedom and, God willing, in freedom I will spend the rest of my days. May I possess always the integrity, the courage and the strength to keep myself unshackled, to remain a citadel of freedom and a beacon of hope to the world.

The belief that the US is God's own country is often a literal one.

"Can we doubt," Ronald Reagan asked, "that only a divine providence placed this land,
45 this island of freedom, here as a refuge for all those people in the world who yearn to breathe free?"

The rub, of course, is in the "we". The indigenous American population, ruthlessly massacred and expropriated, might not have understood Reagan's question to be merely rhetorical. Nor would the millions of Africans kidnapped and enslaved to serve the needs
50 of a growing America for cheap agricultural labour. Or the Hispanic-Americans

incorporated into the USA, whether they liked it or not.

But for generations of others, around the world and across the centuries, the rhetoric of the "beacon of hope", the "island of freedom", the "shining city upon a hill", has not been empty. It has represented in part a reality (tens of millions of migrants and refugees have indeed made better lives in the US) and in part an aspiration (even in China, Kentucky Fried Chicken and Nike shirts have a magical appeal). The paradox of America - that it created freedom for some by exterminating and enslaving others - has never dimmed the desire to share in the happier side of the equation.

From the late 1960s to around 1990, that appeal undoubtedly waned. The assassinations of Martin Luther King and the Kennedys, the obscenities of the Vietnam war and the humiliating flight from Saigon, the vicious US-backed military regimes in South America, the Iran-Contra scandals and the decline of traditional American industry all took the shine off the city on the hill.

But from the Clinton years onwards, America's stock rose exponentially.

Victory in the cold war (which happened on Bush snr's watch but which Clinton consolidated), the ending of most of the dirty little wars in which the US had behaved so badly, the immense "soft power" of American dominance of film, television and popular music in an increasingly globalised culture and the new wave of dot.com economic exuberance did not merely revive the American dream. They made it shinier than ever.

Even the ascent of the neo-conservative radicals, with their hugely divisive and aggressive mission to assert America's primacy in the world, actually fed the hype. Beneath the profound cleavage that divided pro-Americans from anti-Americans, there was agreement. Both saw the US as a hyperpower with realistic ambitions of long-term world domination. For one side, it was God, for the other Satan. But providence and the devil share the attribute of being superhuman, unfathomable forces, with powers beyond rational calculation.

The force of the myth was so great that it occluded the structural weaknesses that have led to today's crises. The fact is that the American dream was clearly dying. The idea that every generation would be better off than the previous one was collapsing: the earning power of the middle class was being gradually eroded. Middle-class lifestyles were being preserved only by working harder (two incomes became necessary in order to stand still) and by debt (huge levels of personal credit and mortgage refinancing). But the belief in the possibility of becoming rich, or indeed the delusion that you were rich, remained strong. A Timemagazine survey in 2000 found that 19 per cent of Americans placed themselves in the top 1 per cent of earners and a further 20 per cent expected to be in the top 1 per cent some day. As David Brooks put it: "None of us is really poor; we're just pre-rich." And being pre-rich, it was okay to keep spending money that the US, as the world's most debt-dependent country, does not have.

The ultimate expression of this delusion was, of course, the subprime mortgage - a device based on the pretence that the poor are actually not poor, that people with very low incomes can borrow and pay back large amounts of money. There is a kind of bitter poetic justice in the way that this brazen denial of poverty has wiped out the entire American investment banking industry and humbled its masters of the universe. But it should not have taken a new Wall Street crash to make it obvious that large segments of American society were not living the dream. The 45 million people with no health insurance might have been a clue. So might the 37.5 million people living in poverty.

The belated realisation that "this sucker could go down" offers an opportunity to replace the American dream with an American reality that is both good and bad, that has equal measures of cynicism and idealism. But for that to happen, both the US and the rest of us have to be weaned off the mythology of eternal optimism. That is as much a challenge for Barack Obama, with his powerful rhetoric of uplift and aspiration, as it is for the right-wing pseudo-patriots. Unless he can come up with a version of I Am the Nation that includes the sobering realities, he will inherit, not a shining city, but a slowly dimming illusion.