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Editor’s Note: Quo Vadis, America?

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Quo Vadis, America?
by Michael J. Kryzanek

Americans have a seemingly innate need to rank their country and to define the times they live in. Whether it is asking questions about who's #1 or trying to make sense out of each decade, Americans appear determined to clarify where we are in the world and what we are about as a people. As we move through the 90s, Americans are already beginning a new round of introspection concerning their status compared to the Japanese and the Europeans and their character as a people headed toward that magical year 2000.

The early returns on this introspection process are quite mixed. Many Americans suspect that we live better than most people, but they are bothered by deteriorating political, social and economic conditions. The current recession has done little to elevate the spirit of many Americans and has begun to affect their perceptions about whether we remain #1. Winning a war in the Persian Gulf while the Japanese win the economic war is of little comfort.

Added to the questioning of our place in the world is the current national fixation with defining the decade. Where the 60s was an age of commitment, the 70s of rebellion, and the 80s of greed, the 90s is quickly evolving as an age of middle class anger and frustration. After seeing minorities gain attention in the 60s, the young in the 70s and the wealthy in the 80s, the middle class has decided that the 90s is their time.

It is now common in America to see protests by a new group of demonstrators - the white, middle class. Whether the issue is taxes, abortion, affirmative action, big government or public corruption, the middle class has now become the 90s version of the 60s “hippies” - disillusioned but determined critics of the system, dedicated to overthrowing the status quo.

Taken together, the questioning of our power in the world and the frequent outbursts of the middle class have created a disturbing climate in this country. As we move deeper and deeper into self-doubt and paralysis, we also begin to lash out wildly against easy targets of our frustration. We blame the Japanese, welfare cheats, politicians, feminists, immigrants and African-Americans. Rather than seeing our current malaise as the result of years of neglect, laziness, phony priorities, and selfishness, we look to the poor people of color or tiny minorities as the source of all that is wrong with America. Perhaps more troubling, we begin to be attracted to the quick fix artists who know how to use a slogan and appeal to the anger of the middle class.

Somewhere lost in this false clatter is the serious talk about taking those tough and long term steps to maintain our position as a world leader. A country that is serious about being #1 and looking toward 2000 with hope and pride works through its distress, rolls up its sleeves, throws out what doesn’t work, experiments with new ideas, and tells its leaders to develop policies to address the real needs of the people and not the pet projects of the special interests. A country that wants to remain #1 does not wallow in self-doubt, cynicism, and constant whining over how bad things are.

To avoid the charge that I’m merely spouting off and scolding my fellow Americans without taking a stand, here are a few ideas that may help this country remain powerful and move toward the year 2000 with its affairs in order:

1. Develop a tax system that is both fair and stimulates investment. The system we have now is not only cumbersome, but squeezes the middle class while failing to create a climate conducive to business. It is possible to have a tax system that satisfies both constituencies.

2. Invest in people. This country was made great by a public education system that prepared people for the challenges of the future. We will go nowhere unless we spend money on the young, those who need to acquire a technical skill, and those who are displaced by corporate restructuring.

3. Pay off the national debt. This country cannot grow and meet the needs of its people with such a huge debt burden. If the process of paying off the debt requires spending cuts and new taxes, then so be it.

4. Move quickly toward national health care. The time is now. The doctors and the insurance companies won’t like it, but the current system is in shambles and waiting for the national political leadership to do what most Americans now want desperately.

5. Take money out of politics. If our democratic system is not working it is because money not the voice of the people has become the driving force. The key is to get the television networks to provide free air time during campaigns and to outlaw contributions from so-called political action committees.

Our past proves beyond a doubt that we are a people of energy, innovation and determination. Surely if we put our minds to it we can stop placing blame and pointing fingers and begin to get the country moving again. As the Nike commercial so aptly states - Just Do It!