



Book Review: David Sokol and Adam Brandon's 'America In Perspective'

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The question about whether America is in decline is arguably best answered by those who aren't American. The reason for this is very simple: when all you know is the staggering abundance that defines daily life in the United States, it's easy to become jaded.

This is worth keeping in mind in a U.S. where the "worst president ever" who is in the process of "destroying the United States" are thrown around with great frequency. It doesn't matter who is in office, there's always a sizable slice of the population certain that the individual occupying 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue is bringing on America's ruin. The proponents of this gloomy narrative come off as spoiled, and also uninformed.

Evidence supporting this claim is the happy truth that the world's poorest continue to risk it all (including their lives) to make it to the United States. This powerful market signal is an inconvenient truth for the dominant ideologies. To members of the Left convinced that rampant wealth inequality will be the U.S.'s undoing, the desperately poor who migrate to the most unequal parts of the world's most unequal country mock you.

As for the conservatives thoroughly convinced that we're on the fast track toward socialist desperation, the arrival of the world's strivers similarly mocks you. And for those convinced that the would-be Americans at our borders just want handouts that a socialist government would provide until the money's gone, they might explain why more people crossed back into Mexico and beyond from 2009-2014 than entered the United States. More than either ideology would like to admit, the tired and hungry risk it all to get into the United States the most when soaring inequality born of impressive economic growth is most evident.

All of which ably answers the question about whether America is in decline, and if the Dream is over. The migrations of human beings are easily the most powerful market signal of all, and at present the world's poorest are loudly reminding us that the American Dream is alive and well.

The above is a useful jumping off point on the way to discussing *America In Perspective*, an essential new book by David Sokol and Adam Brandon (full disclosure: Brandon is my colleague at FreedomWorks, and someone I very much admire). They've written their book to counter a growing narrative that "our best days are behind us." Considering immigration, they're clear in their view that "the best way to determine the truth" about the U.S.'s health is "to look at what

people do in the real world.” In the real world they’re setting their sights on the United States, and this explains why the authors are not buying what the pessimists on the Left and Right are peddling. But at the same time they’re realists. As they note in their introduction, there was a time when Argentina was regularly attracting the world’s ambitious in concert with towering economic growth.

There’s nothing inevitable about history, and because there isn’t the authors are out to remind us that “there are many reasons to celebrate and love America.” Yes, there are. And if we’re celebrating what’s brilliant, ideally we will work to maintain what makes the U.S. so special. To Sokol and Brandon, “opportunity” is at the core” of what makes the U.S. great. Yes, undeniably. It’s not handouts, or the illusion of security care of government that has proven a magnet for the ambitious. The lure has been the opportunity to freely prosper.

Notable about their optimistic view of the U.S. is that the authors have lived it. They describe the U.S. as “a land of believers,” and they’re among the believers about the possibility within. Sokol grew up in Omaha, and in a family that “was in the middle class, but by today’s standards would be considered poor.” Still, there was no victimhood within the Sokols, no anger about their relative want (in the U.S. we’re seemingly all rich by global standards), and the expectation from his parents was that he would improve on the circumstances he grew up in. And he did.

By the age of 33, Sokol was CEO of Ogden Products, a billion dollar NYSE listed company. From there he led MidAmerican Energy, a corporation with over \$100 billion in assets and that was eventually acquired by Berkshire Hathaway BRK.B +0.5%. Talk about an endorsement of one’s business acumen! The main thing is that Sokol believes deeply in a country where it’s possible for people of varying backgrounds and economic conditions to thrive. This is very valuable. It’s too easily forgotten that the late Steve Jobs was of Syrian descent. Does anyone think Apple AAPL -0.3% would exist today if Jobs had spent all his days in Damascus? The question answers itself. Sokol and Brandon’s book embodies the “only in America” view of America.

In Brandon’s case he descends from Czech immigrants who migrated from the relative stagnation of Europe in pursuit of American plenty. The name was Busta upon arrival, and remained so right up until Brandon’s father Americanized it. Adam’s dad was raised in Cleveland, OH by the people who worked in and around factories so that he wouldn’t have to. About this, it’s useful to pause here. That is so because there’s a tendency among politicians to romanticize the past, and worse, to promise that the past will be brought back. Brandon’s family’s history in Ohio is a reminder that those least likely to be nostalgic about the halcyon “olden days” are those that lived them. Put another way, those who brought up Brandon’s father weren’t attracted to the U.S. because it offered generational employment, but precisely because it didn’t.

In the case of Brandon’s father, he worked nights at Cleveland Ball Bearing so that he wouldn’t have to eventually work days at Cleveland Ball Bearing. The work was his way out. It financed a college degree, followed by dental school, followed by a move out to the suburbs. Adam’s parents routinely took him to Europe growing up. They would give him what they didn’t have. When politicians promise the past, it’s hard to know whom they’re speaking to. The America that Sokol and Brandon are so enthusiastic about is brilliant because the past has never defined

the future. Translated for those who need it, once back-breaking work starts becoming generational in the U.S., those who look askance at immigration won't need to fear it anymore. While there are varying views of immigration, what's inarguable is that the arrival of people is the surest sign of a country's immense vitality.

Which brings us to what is plainly the biggest theme of the book, and one that is weaved through out: merit. Sokol and Brandon prize the meritocracy that is the United States, and the simple but logical notion that "good, effective people should and will be promoted." This happy, non-discriminatory truth has long been a magnet for strivers. The U.S. isn't defined by a certain race as much as it's an ideal. The people who risked their lives to get here over the centuries weren't in search of security as much as they were seeking an ethos defined by "good, effective people" having a chance to succeed. Such was the basis for a ballooning population that began to powerfully grow even before the colonies became the United States. Sokol and Brandon note a population of 250,000 in 1700 that was *2.1 million* by 1770. And that was just the beginning. By 1870 there were 40 million Americans, which became 99 million in 1914.

From the above, it seems excess to ask what the lure was. It was economic opportunity born of freedom. Word travels fast, it seems. Better yet, there was a sense within the political classes that something special was at work. As the authors put it, the view was that the prosperity that the U.S. embodied "was the exception and deserved protection." People were free in the U.S. to pursue their individual bliss. As Cato Institute co-founder Ed Crane has put it, a fierce individualism has long been the most defining American characteristic. Politicians would protect it. Amen to that, after which politicians would protect Americans not with handouts, but with the freedom to pursue happiness. Call it trite, or saccharine sweet, but the flow of people vivifies the genius of the approach.

At the same time, Sokol and Brandon channel the old Adam Smith line about a lot of ruin in a nation. Nations can most certainly take turns for the worse. Not too many decades ago they were starving in China after having been prosperous in the centuries before. Argentina has already been mentioned. Again, there's nothing inevitable about progress, and that's true even in a country like the U.S. that personifies progress.

The above explains why the authors are first out to remind Americans of how things used to be. Most crucial here is their point early on in the book that the original U.S. states "were completely independent of one another." It's so interesting how they talk about this. The states were part of the United States, but they weren't forced into the union. And with travel largely a non-factor, the states were autonomous in a country where interaction with the federal government was almost completely not a factor. Really, who was going to travel to Washington, D.C. and the seat of government? Surely not back then. People were tied to the states they lived in.

Obviously we can't return to the past that they're describing, but it's not unreasonable to strive for the form of governance that formerly prevailed. If realistic, there's a powerful desire to return to it. Figure that people complain all the time about how "divided" we are, and they complain while urging all sorts of action from Washington. It's apparent they don't see the obvious contradiction in their yearnings. The more the federal government does the more divided we'll be. It's kind of simple. Returning power to the states wouldn't cause us to fall in love, but it certainly would localize the many fights that are presently taking place on the national level.

Better yet, it would seriously limit the ability of national politicians to do so much damage. If you doubt this, think back to March of 2020 and beyond. With the coronavirus spreading, the national response proved disastrous. That is so because President Trump's decision to sign a \$2.9 trillion spending bill is what subsidized the lockdowns. If no federal response (Republicans at least talk limited government and states' rights) there's quite simply no way the state-ordered lockdowns last even two weeks, let alone months.

When the federal government is all-powerful, when so much of our attention is focused on national politics, we're handing those national politicians the power to do serious damage. In short, Sokol and Brandon don't seek a return of policymaking to the states out of nostalgia (they acknowledge the U.S.'s myriad warts back when the federal government was less consequential), but because they believe doing so would bring on national healing.

Indeed, another major theme of *America In Perspective* is the optimistic assessment from the authors about the U.S.'s ability to "self-heal." Again, while they plainly love the United States, it's useful to point out that their analysis of it isn't hagiography. They point to slavery, the need for a Civil War to settle the latter, the Jim Crow laws that followed war, the need for a Civil Rights laws to right the previous wrong, the limits on women in the workforce, etc. They're not ascribing perfection, but they are saying that a better America keeps emerging from the periods of self-heal. Which is so true, and logical. Imagine the kind of America that could emerge from a shrinking of the national government so that people are freer to pursue their legislative ideal locally. One can dream.

All of which brings us back to the American Dream. The strong belief here is that the true dream of parents is that their kids live better than they did via opportunity to better themselves with work opportunities that greatly exceed those of their parents. In promising the past, politicians are confusing the dream. They should read *America In Perspective* to understand what it is they don't presently understand.