

David Brooks, “The First Invasion of America: And the Cultural Earthquake It Is Unleashing” -
The New York Times, May 23, 2020

I was an American history major in college, back in the 1980s.

I’ll be honest with you. I thrilled to the way the American story was told back then. To immigrate to America was to join the luckiest and greatest nation in history. “Nothing in all history had ever succeeded like America, and every American knew it,” Henry Steele Commager wrote in his 1950 book, “The American Mind.”

To be born American was to be born to a glorious destiny. We were the nation of the future, the vanguard of justice, the last best hope of mankind. “Have the elder races halted?” Walt Whitman asked, “Do they droop and end their lesson, wearied over there beyond the seas? We take up the task eternal.”

To be born American was to be born boldly individual, daring and self-sufficient. “Trust thyself: Every heart vibrates to that iron string,” Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in an essay called, very Americanly, “Self-Reliance.”

To be born American was to bow down to no one, to say: *I’m no better than anyone else, but nobody’s better than me.* Tocqueville wrote about the equality of condition he found in America; no one putting on airs over anyone else. In 1981, Samuel Huntington wrote that American creed was built around a suspicion of authority and a fervent rejection of hierarchy: “The essence of egalitarianism is rejection of the idea that one person has the right to exercise power over another.”

I found it all so energizing. Being an American was not just a citizenship. It was a vocation, a call to serve a grand national mission.

Today, of course, we understand what was wrong with that version of American history. It didn't include everybody. It left out the full horrors of slavery and genocide.

But here's what has struck me forcefully, especially during the pandemic: That whole version of the American creed was all based on an assumption of existential security. Americans had the luxury of thinking and living the way they did because they had two whopping great oceans on either side. The United States was immune to foreign invasion, the corruptions of the old world. It was often spared the plagues that swept over so many other parts of the globe.

We could be individualistic, anti-authority, daring and self-sufficient because on an elemental level we felt so damn safe.

University of Maryland scholar Michele Gelfand has spent her career comparing national cultures. Some nations grow up relatively spared from foreign invasion and the frequent devastation of infectious disease. Gelfand finds that these are loose nations: individualistic, creative but also disordered, uncoordinated and reckless.

Other nations have not been so lucky. Harsh necessity has made them tight nations. Hardship has taught them to pull together, to be more conformist, but also better at building social order and self-control.

Gelfand wrote a book called "Rule Makers, Rule Breakers." We Americans have been rule-breakers, the classic loose nation.

But what happens to a loose nation when the sense of existential security disappears? Over the first two decades of the 21st century, America has lost its sense of safety, the calm confidence that the future is ours, that our institutions are sound or even minimally competent.

And if there was any shred of existential safety left, surely the pandemic has taken it away — around 100,000 dead so far, an economy ravaged. We've had threats before, a few foreign incursions like in 1812, even pandemics when America was less just than it is today. But we've never had them smack in the middle of a crisis of confidence, a crisis of authority, plus social and spiritual crises all at once.

So in that sense, this is the first invasion of America. This is the first time that a menace has crossed our borders, upended the daily lives of every American and rocked our ancient sense of safety. Welcome to life in the rest of the world.

Aside from a few protesters and a depraved president, most of us have understood we need to suspend the old individualistic American creed. In the midst of a complex epidemiological disaster, to be anti-authority is to be ignorant. In the midst of a contagion, to act as if you are self-sufficient is just selfish.

But something more profound is going on. We are undergoing a more permanent shift in national consciousness, a reconstruction of meanings, symbols, values and narratives. If the old American creed grew up in an atmosphere of assumed security and liberty, the new one is growing up in an atmosphere of vulnerability and precariousness.

In this atmosphere, [economic resilience will be more valued than maximized efficiency](#). We'll spend more time minimizing downside risks than maximizing upside gains. The local and the rooted will be valued more than the distantly networked. We'll value community over individualism, embeddedness over autonomy.

Something lovely is being lost. America's old idea of itself unleashed a torrent of energy. But the American identity that grows up in the shadow of the plague can have the humanity of shared vulnerability, the humility that comes with an understanding of the precariousness of life and a fierce solidarity that emerges during a long struggle against an invading force.