

Editorial

Anxiety and the American Spirit

In the movie “Seabiscuit,” the racehorse’s owner Charles Howell is fascinated with the future. But in the non-fiction story, the future took a bite out of Howell’s life when the Northern California car mogul’s son was killed in an automobile accident. Howell’s purchase of Seabiscuit and the horse’s romantic romp through the Great Depression era and into American sporting lore redeem Howell’s love of life and zest for the future. Howell is not a man who fears.

Viewed through the lens of post-9/11 America, the movie couldn’t help but bring a strong sense of nostalgia to audiences wanting a simpler, less dangerous world. Director Gary Ross provides a panoramic view of the Golden State in the 1930s depression, making it feel like the Golden Age of America. Yes, a simpler time.

But all in the 1930s was not as romantic as Ross portrays some 65 years later. In 1938, the future that Charles Howell so eagerly contemplated would include a World War that in seven years would take the lives of *50 million* people. And the depression itself looked more like John Steinbeck’s novel, “The Grapes of Wrath,” than the romantic, leisurely world of Charles Howell and his horse Seabiscuit.

Post-9/11 Americans, trudging through what is now the fourth year of the “War on Terror,” now view the often soulless but “go-go” ’90s with nostalgia. It is the future that Americans are anxious about, and more often since 9/11 have come to view pessimistically. This is a mistake. Because the case for Howell’s optimism, if the American spirit is up for it, is stronger today than it was in the ’30s.

Ten days before the election, Daniel Henninger of the *Wall Street Journal* wrote about the future—and the challenges America faces beyond the war on terrorism. Henninger begins with China, although he could have started with India, where 400 million people have in the last decade risen from poverty to middle class—thanks to an American invention called the computer (this is the side of globalization that the media never bothers to tell you about).

... China changed its economic policies to make them appropriate to the world as it existed, not as China wished the world would be... India the past five years has similarly broken with its longtime statist past. Brazil is attempting a similar transformation. All three are huge countries in the process of rapidly creating a smart, globally relevant business class. This country’s biggest problem isn’t “Halliburton” but the realization, just sinking in, that internal U.S. labor costs are being set by a suddenly thriving, truly global marketplace. This is the real cause of the famous “middle-class squeeze,” and it’s a force more powerful than any one person sitting in the Oval Office.

Two days later Tom Friedman of *The New York Times* weighed in with a ditto theme about the future:

The second group of boomers barreling down the highway are the young people in India, China and Eastern Europe, who in this increasingly flat world will be able to compete with your kids and mine more directly than ever for high-value-added jobs. Attention Wal-Mart shoppers: The Chinese and the Indians are not racing us to the bottom. They are racing us to the top. Young Indian and Chinese entrepreneurs are not content just to build our designs. They aspire to design the next wave of innovations and dominate those markets. Goods jobs are being outsourced to them not simply because they'll work for less, but because they are better educated in the math and science skills required for 21st-century work.

When was the last time you met a 12-year-old who told you he or she wanted to grow up to be an engineer? When Bill Gates goes to China, students hang from the rafters and scalp tickets to hear him speak. In China, Bill Gates is Britney Spears.

America shouldn't be afraid of the future. After all, we invented it. But as Michael Barone warns in his book, "Hard America, Soft America—Competition vs. Coddling and the Battle for the Nation's Future," the country is developing a growing culture that fears the hard work and hard choices of global competition.

Vahe Sarkissian, CEO of FEI, an international company based in Hillsboro, Ore. that manufactures nanotechnology tools, has noticed. Sarkissian believes there is no safe place to hide in the world economy, no place for a growing but dangerous entitlement culture. Societies either compete or they watch their standard of living shrink. Sarkissian, like Howell, sees the future. Because he does, he isn't sympathetic to American outsourcing complaints. As he told this magazine last month, "People will gravitate toward the lowest level cost production area, no matter what. Water flows downhill. The world is an open competitive place. Jobs go where things can be done better. It is a globalized world no matter what you say...and it is dangerous to look for entitlements."

September 11 shook America's confidence not just because of the tragedy and the ensuing "War on Terrorism," but also because Americans wonder if the country's character is solid. Or as solid as it was in past generations. Comparing one generation of Americans to another really misses the point because it misses the opportunity the future holds. Throughout the lifetimes of American baby boomers, the majority of the world lived in under-developed nations. In the future, starting now, the majority of the world's population will live in the growing developed world. It is a staggering accomplishment, and though it comes with many problems—pollution, AIDS, a "war on terrorism"—it also comes with tremendous opportunity should America be up for the contest. It is a coming age that Charles Howell would be only too eager to embrace.