

The Commentator
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When America dreamed
By Lawrence J. Haas

Fifty years ago today, a dashing young American president visited Rice University, in Houston, TX, and spoke words that reflected the optimism and can-do spirit that had defined his nation since its founding.

Explaining his call of a year earlier that the United States achieve the goal of “landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the earth” by the end of the decade, President Kennedy mused,

“But why, some say, the moon? Why choose this as our goal? And they may well ask why climb the highest mountain. Why, 35 years ago, fly the Atlantic? Why does Rice play Texas?”

“We choose to go to the moon. We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win, and the others, too.”

In the grand sweep of history, a half-century is a mere blip in time. In some ways, little has changed since that late summer day of 1962. America was the world’s strongest and most prosperous nation back then, and it remains so today.

Nevertheless, Kennedy’s words are particularly striking from the vantage point of 2012, for they reflect a soaring spirit that contrasts significantly with the more cynical outlook, the more restrained vision, and the more limited hope that color our politics and our people today.

We are a different nation in at least three important ways:

Living standards.

When Kennedy spoke, America was half-way through an extraordinary quarter-century, from about 1948 to 1973, in which living standards doubled. Across the broad middle class, families could expect to have more, buy more, and enjoy more from year to year, feeding their hopes for the future.

Since that period ended, living standards for all but upper-income Americans have largely stagnated. Families struggle to meet higher costs for health care and education and, often by necessity, more families have two earners instead of one. More Americans worry that their children will not live as well as they have.

Government debt.

When Kennedy spoke, the federal government was running a manageable deficit and, with the economy growing, could reasonably expect to generate the revenues to finance a long-term commitment to space or other grandiose dreams.

Today, however, the federal government is swimming in ever-rising debt. The longer that policymakers let the problem linger, the more that rising red ink leaves Americans with the false impression that, somehow, we can't afford to do big things. In fact, we are a far richer nation than the one over which Kennedy presided.

In a previous era of large budget deficits, the first President Bush said, "we have more will than wallet." He was wrong then, and he'd be wrong today. We had, and still have, all the wallet we need. What we lack is the will to do big things.

Cynicism about America's global role.

Kennedy was not just reaching for the moon. He was urging America to race there, to ensure that America reached it before the Soviet Union did. In space as on earth, the free world was competing with the Soviet-led communist world, with the fate of hundreds of millions of people at stake.

In those perilous times, Americans were surer about the difference between good and evil, more cognizant of the distinction between freedom and authoritarianism, more openly judgmental about other systems of government.

Today, we are less confident about who we are, more tentative about making judgments about other systems of government, less sure that we must reign supreme overseas in order to protect and promote freedom.

These problems of stagnant living standards, high government debt, and cynicism about America's global role reinforce one another. Stagnant incomes make Americans reluctant to pay higher taxes or part with federal benefits as part of deficit-cutting efforts; big deficits feed doubts about our political system; and doubts about our political system nourish cynicism about whether America has anything important to say on the world stage.

But, make no mistake – the world needs American leadership. Besides, Americans need to dream again.

Those are just two more reasons for policymakers to set aside their differences and get to the fiscal and economic problems that plague us.

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