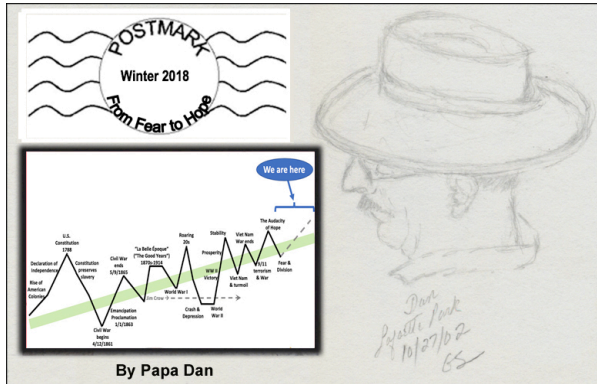


A Path From Fear to Hope

By Dan Sapone



**“Look to those who have gone before us.
They have much to teach.”**

url: Convivio-online.net/a-path-from-fear-to-hope/

We’ve been taught to hope by people with a lot of experience. For me, it started with my grandparents. They escaped fear, poverty, and a devastating earthquake to sail across an ocean to America 111 years ago. With no marketable skills, my grandparents Antonio and Giovanna Maria survived a West Virginia coal mine, a typical destination for illiterate Italian immigrants, and crossed a continent to California to grow grapes and make wine. (During prohibition, so the story goes, people came from miles around to buy his ‘expensive’ oranges and he gave the wine away for free.)

Pictured: Antonio front/center, Giovanna Maria right. →→



My parents — the children of these adventurers (although they certainly didn’t think of themselves that way) — learned early that hope was a struggle. But, a guy who didn’t finish the 8th grade could get a job as a singing water, work in a steel mill, go to night school, and end up making a lot of money as an insurance agent. Yes, hope was a struggle, but a manageable struggle for determined people.

←← Al at 14 ← Pictured → Mae & Al, 1971 →→

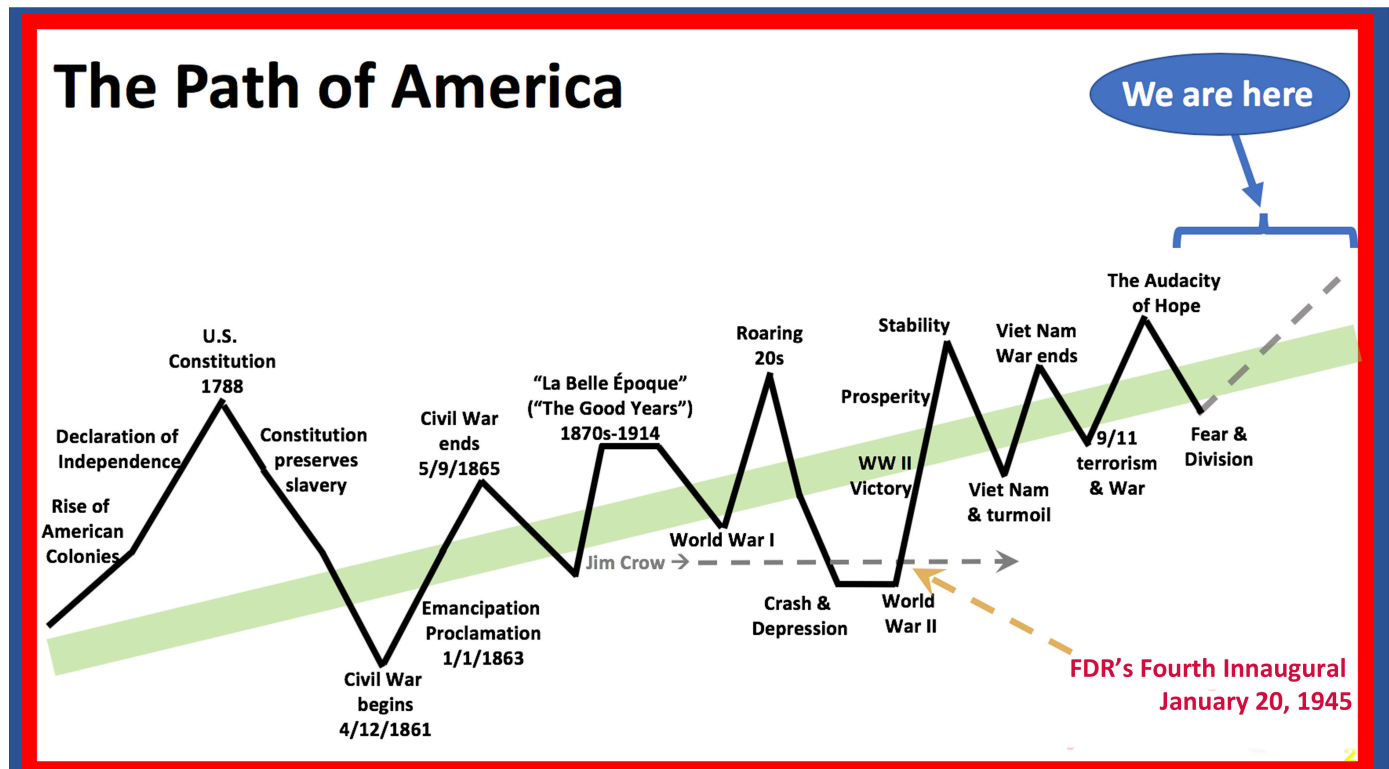


The grandchildren of those pioneering immigrants grew up during the depression (my sister) and then in the stability and prosperity of the 1950s (myself). Both learned that hope was justified. Then, Antonio’s great-grandchildren became well-educated contributors to a complex California society and *their* children, growing up here in the 21st century, four generations after Antonio and Maria’s immigration, are being raised with a strong belief in a hopeful future.

It is not an unusual story. Lots of people have similar family stories of progress across generations. America has been on a hopeful path — an upward path — for a long time.

But that path has not been a straight line.

The Path of America



The Path

So, we have arrived 'here' (shown in the upper right corner of the timeline pictured above). The quote at the bottom, from Franklin Roosevelt's fourth inaugural address at the height of World War II, describes America's path. Great heights of achievement have been followed by declines into great depths of fear; followed by sharp advances in the fortunes of America and Americans:

- The rise of the British colonies to independence and the rule of law led to the U.S. Constitution
- The compromise of the constitution established slavery as a fixture of American life
- The argument between strong national government and the pre-eminence of individual states — driving bitter divisions on the morality of slavery — led directly to the Civil War.
- Elation in the Union's victory and the end of slavery was countered by the despair of the South that their culture had been destroyed. As a result, the former Confederacy effectively sabotaged that northern victory by refusing to allow any semblance of equality for African Americans. That led to the establishment of "Jim Crow" laws and practices that perpetuated longstanding racial divisions that remain with us today and overshadowed the period of recovery after the war.
- Forces that drew America into World War I led to an even broader international downturn.
- The end of that war led to a period of prosperity, and then a deep world-wide depression.
- Then, of course, World War II — plunged the world into another monumental disaster followed by another cycle of victory, prosperity, and stability (for many, but not all).
- Then of course, Vietnam and the political, cultural, and racial turmoil of the 60s and 70s — the end of that war was celebrated as an upturn, followed by the rise of terrorism.
- The Obama presidency led many to believe that America had moved past racism and division, only to find that reactionary forces would bring American back to a period of deep divisions in all segments of society and fear of the future.

Phew!!! What a ride!

After all those ups and downs, here we are, well into the 21st century. Despite evidence of prosperity and technological advancement, once again, there is fear in the air. Just as it was with other “lows” in American history, that fear is not concentrated in any one segment of society. Many who are prosperous fear that their prosperity may be lost to forces beyond their control. Many fear that their pre-eminent place in society may be undermined by people who are different from them. Those striving to improve their prosperity and rise to a better place in American society fear that those wealthier and more powerful will push them down and sabotage their struggle to advance. American values that we were taught would provide opportunity for success with hard work and education seem to be increasingly out of reach for those most in need of that opportunity.

That condition is not new. American history, as documented in recent months by some of our most respected historians, has often been punctuated by moments of despair — times when the demise of the American experiment seemed likely and imminent. Doris Kearns Goodwin writes in her new book, *“Leadership in Tumultuous Times,”* that it took extraordinary leadership by people like Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, and others to bring the nation back from serious disasters and back to an upward path. Jon Meacham makes a similar point in his new book *“The Soul of America — The Battle for Our Better Angels.”* One key message both of them convey is that, at times of maximum fear (the downward spikes on the timeline), strong leadership and widespread belief in positive human values have reversed that decline and pushed America back upward toward hope. Meacham’s overarching point is that the ‘up-and-down’ feature of the path of American life has always been a constant struggle between hope and fear. We all grew up learning Franklin Roosevelt’s famous advice in his 4th inaugural address: “We have nothing to fear but fear itself.” That was important for the people of his time to hear during the darkest time of the war. But he had something more important to say to us, who would come later. He said:

“Things in life will not always run smoothly. Sometimes we will be rising toward the heights — then all will seem to reverse itself and start downward. The great fact to remember is that the trend of civilization itself is forever upward; that a line drawn through the middle of the peaks and the valleys of the centuries always has an upward trend.”

We see that in my timeline, pictured above. So, when we look at the fear many of us have today, our history reminds us that, when we reach a low point, a rise is imminent. That is the basis of hope — the hope that drove others before us, like our grandparents — and that must drive us forward today. Meacham, writing this year, provides an important comparison to the inspiration that came from Roosevelt in 1945:

“In the best of moments, witness, protest, and resistance can intersect with the leadership of an American president to lift us to higher ground.”

And then his message for us, today:

“In darker times, if a particular president fails to advance the national story, — or worse, moves us backward — then those who witness, protest, and resist must stand fast, in hope, working toward a better day.”

Progress has been “slow, painful and tragic,” he tells us; “Yet the journey has gone on, and proceeds even now.” As a historian, Meacham tells us, “There’s a natural tendency in American political life to think that things were always better in the past ... that ‘once there was a Camelot,’ without quite remembering that the Arthurian legend itself was about a court riven by ambition and infidelity. ... Imperfection is the rule, not the exception.”

The message delivered through Meacham’s chapters is that progress has always been a struggle between fear and hope. So, you may want to cut to the end and ask “Which wins — fear or hope?” The answer is “both fear and hope have their moments of victory, but both are temporary.” It is our job to figure out what we must do to shorten the victory of fear and hasten, maybe even lengthen, the victory of hope.

The cynics of our time have tried to discourage us — “Hope is not a strategy,” they’ve told us. The truth is: hope must be the foundation of a strategy of action. We’ve asked these questions before and now we must answer them:

“What must I do?”

“What must you?”

Look to those who have gone before us. They have much to teach.



P.S. Take a look at “This Week in Good News”:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/22/briefing/week-in-good-news-chess-norway-steven-pinker.html?smprod=nytcore-ipad&smid=nytcore-ipad-share>

