

Is restoring the American spirit a dream?

By Jim Nowlan

In his first address to Congress, President Trump exhorted us to renew the American spirit. I worry Americans are not up to the challenge. Or am I being much too dour, maybe because I live in Illinois, where entrenched dysfunction colors my view of the world?

Americans showed strong “can do” spirit from our 18th Century Revolution throughout history to the end of World War II, and carried forward a sunny optimism up to the Viet Nam Conflict of the 1960-70s.

Since then, our spirit has wavered.

In 1979, Jimmy Carter gave a speech about a “crisis of confidence.”

“We can see this crisis,” said the humorless, preachy Georgian, “in the growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of unity of purpose for our nation.”

The so-called “malaise speech” (he never used that word) went over like a lead balloon, in part because many Americans felt he was criticizing them, which he was.

The following year, Ronald Reagan projected his sunny personality and boundless optimism onto the national stage, to contrast himself with Carter and drive the latter from the presidency.

In 1984, Reagan gave his “It’s morning in America” speech.

I made a pilgrimage recently to Reagan’s boyhood home in Dixon, not far from where I live. Site executive director Pat Gorman, like Reagan a buoyant Irishman, gave me a tour of the

modest yet adequate wood-frame, two-story home, from an early 20th Century cookie cutter design, which all of us from small town America know well.

The unassuming home, for which the Reagans paid \$15 a month in rent (about \$182 in today's dollars), is inspiring in its modesty—to think that the son of a drunk salesman father and saintly mother could rise from a white house in Dixon to the White House in D.C.!

(By the way, the Reagan home is close to decrepit. You could help Gorman, new to his basically volunteer post and full of spit and vinegar, by donating for roof and other repairs. Go to reaganhome.org).

Reagan's efforts were not enough, otherwise Trump wouldn't have to implore us to renew our national spirit.

What success have leaders through history had in renewing spirit?

[Roman Senate leader Marcus Tullius Cicero tried in vain in the first century BC to protect the Roman Republic from slipping into an empire of Caesars.

[On the other hand, Joan of Arc aroused the French to beat back the English. Across the Channel in 1940, the magnificent war-time leader Winston Churchill gave voice to an indomitable English spirit that rose to save the world from Nazism. Yet in both cases, their efforts could not sustain long-term the spirits of their countrymen, exhausted by war.]

In the U.S., the Second Great Awakening in the early 1800s ignited great religious fervor and spirit among Americans.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Progressivism sought to cleanse American politics, with at least some temporary success.

In 1961, John F. Kennedy famously challenged Americans, especially young folks like me, with: “Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.”

But I worry that, as in the case of the fall of the ancient Roman Republic, luxe may be irrepressibly seductive, debilitating, corrosive.

In China today, for example, the unselfish goals of communism have been degraded by the princelings of the party's founders into an unseemingly pursuit of wealth for the powerful.

People here at home as well seem captivated by the individual quest for "things," rather than by a commitment to public and community virtues.

So, as you see, I am coming to my own pessimism about our capacity to restore national spirit.

I sense that many of my successful friends believe America is in for a slow, unalterable economic and civic decline. So, friends have basically given up, playing out their strings on Florida golf courses.

Trump is not the elected leader to accomplish a renewal of our spirit. He does arouse his base, yet at the same time trashes all the rest who don't agree with his every tweet. Not a recipe for unity of purpose.

Our major political parties, which used to be responsible for identifying and bringing forth our leaders, have been largely replaced by the cult of celebrity.

And the middle of our society is being split into warring camps of poor and rich.

In my dreams, I see a new political party of the center, to exhort the struggling among us to be more resilient, less dependent on government. In return, "the haves" might just be more willing to support long-term strategies to assist in lifting us all up for the common good.

Oh well, I can dream, can't I?