

# LIFE & LETT

## WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE AMERICAN DREAM?

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### INTERNATIONAL HISTORIAN JEREMI SURI LOOKS BACK AT AMERICA'S GREATEST VISIONARIES TO SHOW HOW OUR NATION CAN ACHIEVE GREATNESS AGAIN

Some of America's greatest triumphs were built on dreams. Without dreamers, Neil Armstrong wouldn't have walked on the moon, proving the sky isn't the limit. Steve Jobs wouldn't have transformed the way we work, play and communicate through Apple technology. Henry Ford wouldn't have created the Ford Model T, revolutionizing mass production and transportation throughout the world.



American greatness is the greatness of big dreams, says Jeremi Suri, professor in the Department of History and the LBJ School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas at Austin. But lately, he says, these great visionaries are few



Jeremi Suri, Mack Brown Distinguished Professor for Global Leadership, History and Public Policy. Photo by Sasha Haagsen.

and far between. And as our nation struggles with the crippling effects of a recession and the longest war in American history, the time has come for a new cycle of game-changing visionaries.

“It’s absolutely crucial to take a step back and dream big,” says Suri, who holds the Mack Brown Distinguished Chair for Leadership in Global Affairs. “The problem is that people with a lot of privilege and resources lack the motivation to make the world a better place. Dreaming allows us to do more than just follow the same path we’re on. We draw a new path, a better path for ourselves and others.”



A leading expert on American nation-building, Suri explores how the most effective wielders of power were able to connect the worlds of social and political history. In his book “Liberty’s Surest Guardian: American Nation- Building from the Founders to Obama,” he combs through more than 200 years of U.S. foreign policy to show how history’s most revolutionary leaders improved societies at home and abroad by taking calculated risks, making connections — and most importantly — dreaming big.

“As an historian I can say the leaders and the citizens who have made the biggest difference are those who have thought beyond the immediate of the day to day to figure out the things they could accomplish,” Suri says. “And the models they draw on are historical models. There’s no how-to for this, but there’s inspiration we can see by looking back.”

## MOVING FORWARD BY LOOKING BACK

Turning back the pages of time, Suri points to a pivotal chapter in American history: The Great Depression. Amidst World War II and the worst economic crisis of the 20th century, American citizens came together through hard work, personal sacrifice and service to their country.

“The World War II generation suffered some of the worst sacrifices of any group of citizens in American history,” Suri says. “They’ve dealt with poverty on a scale that we couldn’t even imagine today. They dealt with international challenges well beyond anything we’ve dealt with in our lives. They were not surviving simply to cope. They were surviving to improve — and that encouraged them to dream, to think, to look beyond their immediacy.”

Most significantly, Suri says, they sacrificed their private lives for the public good. They were willing to pay more taxes and put their bodies on the line to accomplish one common goal: to make the world a better place.

“The worst of times led them to pursue the best of times,” Suri says. “It’s not that they were altruistic; they believed that it served their interests and the interests of their families. Though they might have been from the smallest little towns in the country, they had the biggest visions in the world.”

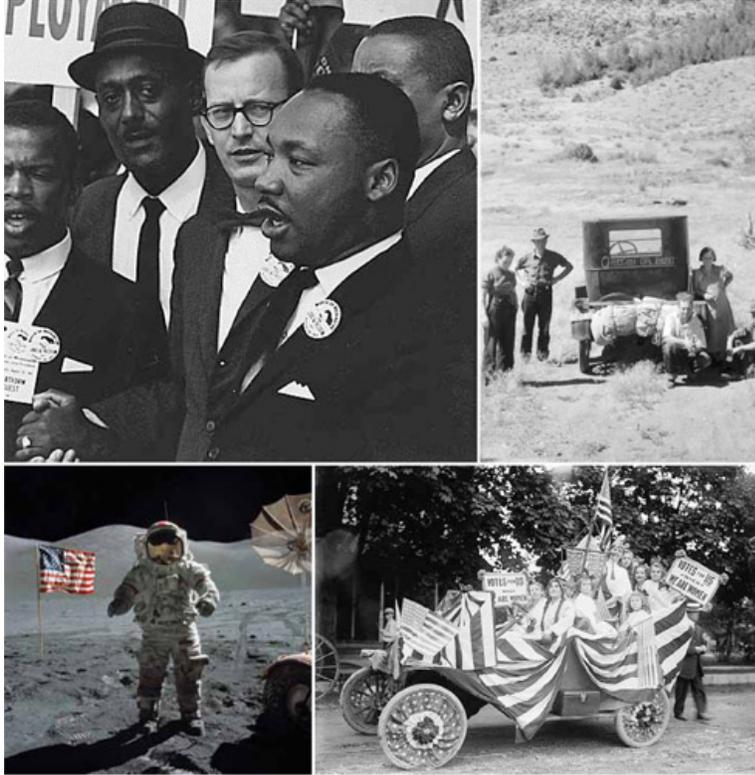
Now we have turned away from those visions, Suri says. Though we have many more resources than the World War II generation, Americans seem to have forgotten who they are as a society. To reawaken a nation of frontiers and possibilities, President Barack Obama needs to take a page from Franklin D. Roosevelt’s playbook.

“FDR was a deep believer in the American spirit and he never in the worst moments allowed himself to get discouraged,” Suri says. “One of his biggest strengths was his supreme self-confidence in his ability to manage risk. Because of his own personal struggle overcoming polio to some extent, he believed he could manage risks and bring good outcomes.”

Declaring, “I pledge you, I pledge myself, to a new deal for the American people,” FDR inducted the

New Deal, a series of federal tax programs focusing on relief, recovery and reform. Despite its chaotic blueprint and myriad flaws, Suri says the radical program made great strides in pulling America out of economic disaster.

But with every bold legislative move comes a high degree of risk. In a country that prides itself on democracy, the New Deal earned the scorn of those wary of socialism. According to H.W. Brands, a nationally renowned presidential historian, some critics believed FDR's experimental programs put too much public power in private hands.



Clockwise, from top left: Martin Luther King, Jr. during the Civil Rights March On Washington, D.C. in 1963; Vernon Evans and family of Lemmon, South Dakota, leaving the drought-stricken plains for a new start out west, 1936; suffragists in parade, Hempstead, N.Y., 1913; astronauts Eugene Cernan (pictured) and Harrison Schmidt of NASA's Apollo 17 mission spent more than three days walking — and driving — on the moon, 1972. It marked the last time people traveled to the moon, or even went beyond low-Earth orbit. Photos courtesy of Library of Congress (3); NASA.

“Many Americans favored the New Deal, but a sizable and noisy minority thought it was socialism and despised it — and despised Roosevelt,” says Brands, who has written extensively on FDR's life and political career.

Despite the growing concerns of impending socialism, Suri says the New Deal provided the country with what it needed during a national crisis. The mark of a great leader, he says, is having the confidence to take a big risk in defiance of controversy.

“Leadership requires serious efforts at compromise, but also bold moves during moments of stalemate,” Suri says. “Although bold moves are risky, they are sometimes necessary. President Obama admires Roosevelt, but he did not show similar courage on this issue.”

When prosperity returned, more people accepted FDR's policies, Suri says. To this day, Americans continue to reap the benefits of the improvements that were made under the New Deal programs.

“New agencies were formed not to provide easy solutions, but to bring people together under new

kinds of projects,” Suri says. “Look at all the art, schools, parks and infrastructure that our society produced during that time. Americans had to come together in ways they’ve never been brought together before to solve concrete problems.”

## UNIFYING A DIVIDED AMERICA

After the recession of 2008, Obama missed an opportunity to spark that passion, Suri says. President George W. Bush also missed his chance to reunite the American public after the Sept. 2001 attacks. During these difficult times, they failed to exemplify our areas of commonality, he says.

“I was struck by how patriotic Americans were after Sept. 11, but I was also surprised by how we didn’t use that patriotism in the best ways for our society,” Suri says. “We should be ready to use these opportunities, not simply to solve our immediate problems, but also to dream beyond the challenges of the moment.”

Now, in a deeply divided America, our president needs to find a better way to encourage the American public to stand together, Suri says. FDR proved this could be done with his fireside chats, an evening radio program addressing concerns about the war and the New Deal. He often referred to the listeners as “friends” and discussed concerns about the state of the nation’s economy using inclusive words like “we” and “us.”

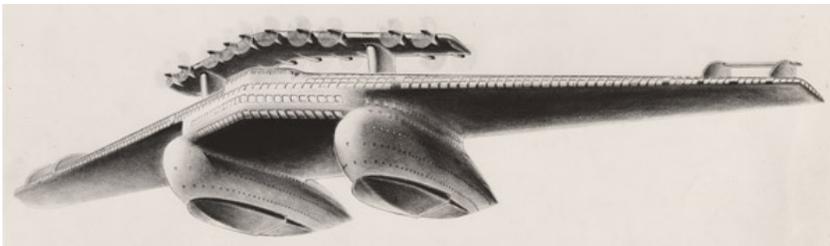
By leveling with the American public about the challenges they faced together, the fireside chats made millions of people believe the government was looking out for them and working in their interests, Brands says. If Obama takes the same genuine, forthright approach, he could make a similar connection.

Of the many lessons Obama could glean from Roosevelt’s four-term presidency, Brands says he needs to emulate the same level of confidence in his decisions.

“Obama can learn that you don’t have to win over the whole country,” says Brands, the Raymond Dickson, Alton C. Allen and Dillon Anderson Centennial Professor. “FDR certainly didn’t. I called my book ‘Traitor to His Class,’ to capture this ambivalence. But if you can reach 60 percent of the public, you’ve got it made.”

## INVESTING IN A FUTURE OF DREAMERS

Another way to unify Americans is to make investments, Suri says. With the GI Bill, FDR delivered on America’s promise of a land of opportunity. Signed in June 1944, the significant piece of legislation offered a college scholarship to all military personnel and low-interest mortgages on their first homes. The benefits helped suburbanize America and ultimately created the American middle class.



In 1929, American visionary and designer Norman Bel Geddes imagined his “Airliner Number 4” as a 9-deck amphibian airliner that incorporated areas for cruise ship-style deck-games, an orchestra, a gymnasium, and a solarium. The image is featured in the exhibition, “I Have Seen the Future: Norman Bel Geddes Designs America,” on display through January 6, 2013, at the Harry Ransom Center, located on The University of Texas at Austin campus. Image from The Edith Lutyens and Norman Bel Geddes Foundation. Courtesy of the Harry Ransom Center.

“The idea was to integrate people and to get them working together,” Suri says. “There was an emphasis upon receiving government help to work with others, not because you were owed it as an

individual. I think it's dangerous to think of the government as a paymaster. It's better to look at it as an investor in our working together."

Looking back at America's rise to prosperity after the Second World War, Suri says he is both frustrated and optimistic about the future of the United States. Although our society is filled with more creative young people than ever before, their potential to dream big is often stunted by inferior education.

"We shouldn't be investing in education because we believe citizens have a right to it," Suri says. "We should be investing in education because it's good for our society and it's a great way to bring people together, to dream together, to create things together."

In an increasingly borderless world, now is the time for future thought leaders to relate to different cultures and speak other languages, Suri says. Rather than playing it safe by studying a specific trade, more students need to explore their interests in languages and humanities courses.

"In the early 20th century, education levels exceeded all other societies, and our citizens were prepared to be global actors," Suri says. "We have the opportunity to take the lead in this area because we have so many talented people. There's no easy answer for how we can get more students to take language classes and study abroad, but these are things we need to talk about."

To help launch a new cycle of forward-thinking global scholars, Suri participates in several public outreach programs. Most recently he joined the LBJ School of Public Affairs' educational and research initiative "Reinventing Diplomacy." Launched in April 2012, the program aims to make the study of diplomacy more comprehensive through innovations in teaching, research and public outreach.

As part of the program's research component, Suri will help students and scholars use historical and social science research to work with representatives from other societies. Through his teachings, he hopes to encourage students to reflect on their thoughts and dream of a better tomorrow.

"If you're simply doing your daily job, you're not doing enough to dream beyond the world we live in today," Suri says. "American history has not been about the greatness of sure things, it's about the greatness of lavish, outlandish ideas like a Ford Model T that everyone could buy."

But in this fast-pace dizzying technological age, people need to figure out how to turn off all the bells and whistles and make time for dreaming, Suri says. In fact, some of the best ideas from our nation's leaders came from a quiet room, a ballpoint pen and a notepad.

"I remember George Schultz, former secretary of state, once told me he used to block out two hours of his day in the middle of the week to sit alone and gather his thoughts," Suri says. I think it's really important to do that, but now that the world has sped up, we don't allow ourselves to be alone with our thoughts as much."

To paraphrase Henry David Thoreau, most of us are just sleepwalking, unaware of where we really are and what is really possible, says Randy Lewis, associate professor of American studies at The University of Texas at Austin. Without education, he says, we're asleep but not dreaming, at least not in a productive way.

"For me, the university provides a space to wake up to what is possible, and to shake off the tendency to fall into unquestioning routines that divorce us from our deep originality and creativity," Lewis says. "If we don't wake to who we really are, 'we shall be found sailing under false colors,' as Thoreau puts it, 'and be inevitably cashiered at last by our own opinion, as well as that of mankind.'"

With a passion for extending university research beyond the classroom walls, Lewis launched "End of Austin," an open-access graduate student project documenting the transformation of Austin's cultural landscape. Using the popular blog/social network Tumbler, the project documents the past,

present and future of Austin through a variety of mediums. By opening the project to the general public, Lewis hopes to broaden cultural awareness through creative research and digital art.

“We have a responsibility to make our commitments and enthusiasms known to a wider public, which not only foots the bill for much of this activity but also depends on us to inspire and improve the status quo in terms of politics, creativity or science,” Lewis says. “Our culture needs the university as a place for dreaming and reflection because, frankly, the status quo just isn’t good enough for most Americans.”

This year, the American Studies Department chose to revolve its lectures, courses and special events around one word, “Dream.” Considering the lack of dreamers in our modern society, the theme couldn’t be more fitting, Lewis notes.

“I’m currently teaching ‘Walden’ to my first-year students, and I tell them that Thoreau would be appalled by our reluctance to ‘dream big,’ whether individually or collectively,” Lewis says.

Of course, Thoreau would probably scorn much of what counts as “dreaming big” in American culture, Lewis notes. “If it means piling up wealth, garnering fame and building empires, citizens are distracting themselves from the quest for beauty, originality and simplicity for which Thoreau argues,” Lewis says.

Without dreamers — those who can imagine new and inventive ways to connect and inspire American society — our nation will continue to suffer from political and economic uncertainty, Suri says. But history shows us it doesn’t have to be this way.

“I’m a believer that every generation produces dreamers,” Suri says. “We are not at the end of our learning curve; we are still at the beginning. It’s morning in our society, and we’re still learning. Our citizens have the latent ability to dream big; we simply need to unleash it.”

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