

BLUEPRINT FOR A NEW AMERICA

Can We Save the World's
Most Admired Republic?

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Foreword:

Major Garrett

GO SANE. Those two words transfixed me as a child. GO SANE was the personalized California license plate of my best friend's father. Because my best friend, Steve Albrecht, was an only child and his parents had divorced, visits from his dad were a big deal. Whatever we did—play catch with a football or baseball, get something to eat or go to the park—I saw those two words as he drove up or drove away.

GO SANE. I first saw those words when I was twelve years old. I have never shaken them, or rather they continue to shake me. All children take cues from authority figures. My best friend's dad certainly was. Plus, he had a Ph.D. and was a member of Mensa. I didn't learn until much later in life what those two distinctions meant. As a child, I just knew my best friend's dad was really, really smart.

GO SANE. It sounded like an order. And a wish. Also a direction. When I was a teen, my father faced enormous mental health difficulties and suddenly GO SANE took on tender, aspirational, and heart-breaking qualities.

Karl Albrecht is my best friend's father. I have known him most of my life. Because of my work I have met presidents and prime ministers, foreign secretaries and finance ministers, scientists and theologians, lawyers and industrialists. Yet I met one of the most brilliant and accomplished people in my life at age eight. He was, and is, Karl Albrecht.

This book is not like others Karl has written. I haven't read all of his books, though I probably should have. But I know Karl's biggest works and they have been devoted to understanding how people think, why things happen and

how to make the unsatisfactory satisfactory. Karl studies systems and looks for logical and practical remedies.

But he's not only a practical thinker. By that I mean he is not conventional or constrained. He's imaginative and inquisitive – which means he will ask questions that shatter myths or suggest well-placed disdain for them. Sharp minds can be rude. In journalism the phrase “afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted” is now dangerously close to a cliché. For Karl, afflicting the illogical is first and second nature.

This book is a grand thought exercise about the American Republic. It is not in any way ideological, at least as we have come to understand the “left” and “right” axes of contemporary politics. It is not polemical either. Karl attacks neither party nor for any length of time any particular office holder. He actually attacks nothing other than our mindless federal go-about-ism.

I came to Washington in 1990 and started covering Congress and national politics. Over the decades I've noticed that, as the partisan volume has increased, idea generation has decreased. Ask yourself. Can you remember the last time you heard a federal politician of either party suggest a new idea or approach that stopped you in your tracks? I'm guessing not. Even ideas that pass for “big” in this campaign season—Medicare for All, the Green New deal, reciprocal trade, or breaking up Facebook and Google—piggyback on existing programs, seek to revive atrophied regulatory agencies or, reach back to 19th century economic dogmas.

Blueprint for a New America bristles with new questions; new ideas; new constructs and new remedies. It asks, and answers, questions about the fundamentals of this republic, our concept of liberty and cohesiveness, our purpose for one another, and our example to the world. It also is daringly practical about what isn't working and what fixes we should consider. The chapters on national defense, crime and punishment, immigration and taxation brim with useful data

and overflow with edgy ideas about better and more technologically coherent solutions.

I don't endorse these ideas. I endorse their existence. Trust me, Washington's biggest problem isn't corruption. By any historical standard of graft, vote-manipulation, party power-plays or venality, Washington is cleaner than it's ever been. *Washington's most desperate problem is the lack of imagination*; its absolute desert of ideas; its intellectual stasis. Ideologically, Washington is as loud as a chain saw cutting rebar. Intellectually, it is inert.

Blueprint for a New America isn't the first treatise about what ails our beloved country. But it is the first I have seen of its kind. It is not futuristic as much as it is "Hey, there's a future. Ought we not think about it?" *Thinking* is the key. *Blueprint for a New America* is concentrated originality. For those who disagree with its recommendations, I implore you to produce a second, a third, a fourth and a fifth blueprint.

What paralyzes Washington most now is not the presence of lobbyists but *the absence of radical structural imagination*. *Blueprint for a New America* refreshes as it challenges; invigorates as it punctures; and like America itself it does so with optimism and a brash sense that the future is ours to imagine, shape and improve.

GO SANE. Then as now a way forward. For me. For my best friend. Possibly now for our country.

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Preface:

Why I Wrote this Book

Imagine . . .

. . . an old house—one you’ve lived in for a long time. You grew up there. Your memories, your experiences, your joys, and your sorrows all connect to this comfortable—if slightly dilapidated—old homestead.

And now, you’ve inherited the old place. While you love it and cherish it, you also realize that it needs some improvements. Years of fixing and patching and painting and scrubbing and scraping have kept it habitable, but you know that the time has come to modernize it. It needs remodeling.

Now you face the very personal question: How can I modernize it and still keep its essential character—the things I love and value about it?

By analogy, that question confronts all Americans as we accept responsibility for the future of the Republic we’ve inherited. Do we content ourselves with continuing to live in the same old house, and neglect its upkeep? Or do we take seriously our responsibility for its future?

Let’s all acknowledge that we live in an *axial age*—a big-time turning point in the life of the great American Republic. We’ll get the republic we deserve, and we’ll bequeath whatever remains of it to our children and their children.

This book represents an attempt to set out, in a fairly organized way, the possibilities we can see for the New

America. I've chosen the metaphor of the blueprint, and the related metaphor of remodeling, to emphasize the crucial need to marry the old and the new in an organized, intelligent, and loving way.

We'll sketch the blueprint in terms of *ten key building blocks* that a successful republic needs. In each of these ten remodeling categories, I'll attempt to spell out the need for change and identify some interesting options for improving the way the Republic can meet the challenges.

As a management consultant with a thirty-year career in studying successful leaders and successful enterprises, I assess the main problem we face in rethinking our Republic as a basic and profound *lack of vision and imagination*. Without visionary leadership, I see us as collectively sleepwalking into a very dangerous future.

Our electoral process has given us a long parade of mediocre thinkers—with a few notable exceptions—who have occupied the White House and the Congress. We seem to systematically eliminate the people with the big ideas and bold solutions. We seem to prefer demagogues, charmers, hero figures, populists, and those who pander to our fears, phobias, and selfish interests.

Does my declaration sound a bit extreme? Good. In this book, *I invite you to think extremely*. I want you to look beyond the old thinking and the old cliches, and connect the dots that most others don't even see. George Bernard Shaw declared, "Some men see things as they are and ask, Why? I dream of things that never were and ask, Why not?" In this book, we take the second path.

Would you like a simple and telling example of this woeful lack of imagination in the way we operate our Republic? Try this one: Why, if we claim we want all citizens to vote in national elections, have we always held elections on a weekday—a Tuesday—when most employed people have to work at their jobs? Why don't we hold elections on a Saturday, for example, and make it a national holiday? The

reasons might have made sense 100 years ago, but they hardly make sense now. Why haven't we changed this rule? Because, collectively, *we just didn't bother to.*

I only ask that you, the reader, approach this journey with an open mind. As difficult as it can seem at certain times and certain points in this exploration, I ask you to suspend your judgment—*all the way to the end of the reading journey.*

Let's think of this journey into republic-building as a short course in *system thinking.*

As with any system, the various subsystems of the republic must fit together in a special way. Understanding how one solution works can depend on understanding how another one fits together with it. Please get the whole picture before you give in to the temptation to shoot down any one piece of it. Let's judge all of the innovations presented here against the perspective of the overall concept for the new Republic.

You'll discover, as you read, that I like to use our history as a starting point for thinking about our future. I have good company here: the ancient Chinese philosopher Confucius reportedly advised: "If you would divine your future, first study your past." And, brother Mark Twain offered, "History doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes."

So, in many cases, I'll offer a short flashback to the relevant stories, episodes, and events that have brought us to our present reality. I hope you'll find some of these little historical brain snacks interesting in their own way, and more importantly that you'll see how they might inform our understanding of the big questions in front of us.

We'll also make it a habit to zero in on the "mega-facts" of each dimension or issue—the defining truths that can help us frame our understanding and think creatively about new possibilities.

Enough talking. Let's roll up our sleeves and get to work.

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