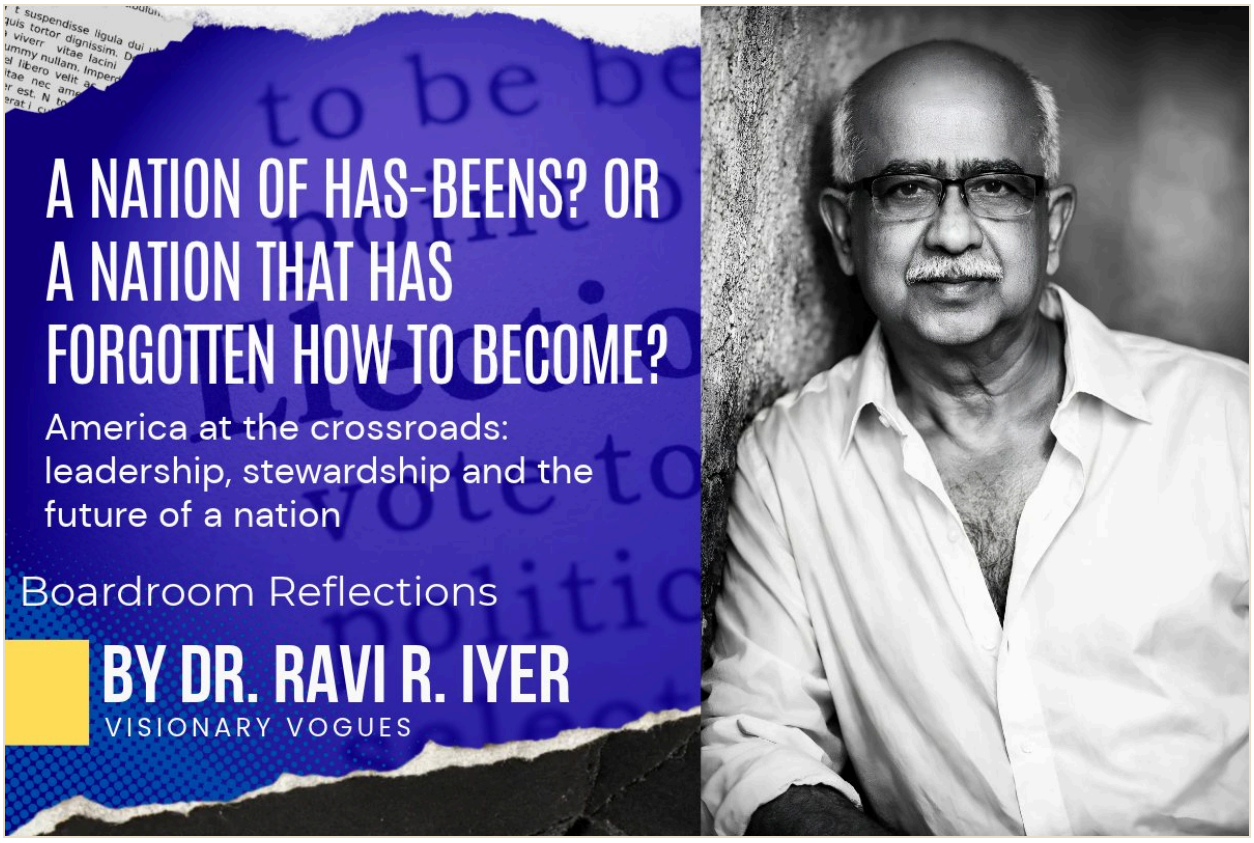
PUBLISHED IN **Visionary Vogues** · Magazine column · web
PUBLISHED 29 October 2026
AUTHOR Ravi R. Iyer, MD
SOURCE https://visionaryvogues.com/boardroom-reflections-american-stewardship-2026
RECORDED 23 November 2026 · record AR-2026-10-003

ELECTION AMERICA 2026 · PART 3

A Nation of Has-Beens? Or a Nation That Has Forgotten How to Become?

America at the crossroads: leadership, stewardship and the future of a nation.

By **Ravi R. Iyer, MD**



Key art as published by Visionary Vogues. Retained as part of the record of how the piece appeared.

An Australian Holds Up a Mirror to America

A provocative post circulating across social media, titled “The Australian Response to President Trump Regarding Greenland,” has attracted attention for its blistering response to President Donald Trump's ambitions concerning Greenland.

It is not a diplomatic response. It is an indictment.

The writer asks, in effect, how the leader of the world's wealthiest and most powerful nation can lecture other countries about governance while so many of his own citizens struggle with homelessness, medical debt, financial insecurity, and the escalating costs of everyday life.

The post points to Americans unable to meet modest financial emergencies, patients struggling to afford essential medications, the enormous, incarcerated population, and the troubling disparity between American healthcare expenditure and American health outcomes.

It also challenges the apparent disregard for America's allies, reminding readers that NATO invoked its collective-defense provisions following September 11 and that Australia, although not a NATO member, stood alongside American forces in Afghanistan for two decades.

The language is deliberately abrasive. At times, insulting.

Some of its statistics are outdated, oversimplified, or misleading. And its authorship as an official Australian response is unverified. It should be understood as a viral commentary, not a statement from the Australian government.

But dismissing the post because of its inflammatory rhetoric would be a mistake.

Because beneath the invective lies a question of extraordinary importance.

What happens when the most powerful country in the world becomes increasingly unable to deliver the quality of life that its power was supposed to make possible?

And perhaps an even more uncomfortable question:

- Has America become so consumed with demonstrating its
- greatness to the rest of the world that it has neglected to
- examine what greatness means to the people living within its
- borders?
- I find this particularly compelling because I am one of the
- millions of people who came to America drawn by its
- extraordinary promise.

I have spent decades building a career, practicing medicine, creating businesses, and participating in institutions that could scarcely have existed in the same form without the freedoms and opportunities this country provided.

I am not an outsider looking for reasons to diminish America.

I am a beneficiary of the American experiment asking whether the experiment is still delivering on its founding proposition.

And that distinction matters.

This is not an argument about Donald Trump alone. Nor is it an attempt to assign the failures of a complex civilization to one political party, one administration, or one ideological movement.

The forces shaping America's current predicament have been developing over decades, under Republican and Democratic administrations alike.

They involve economic choices, institutional incentives, cultural assumptions, and deeply embedded philosophies about the relationship between individual achievement and collective prosperity.

They involve the ways corporations define success, governments exercise power, communities sustain themselves, and citizens understand their responsibilities to one another.

- And they raise a question far more consequential than who
- controls Greenland.

Is America still creating the conditions that made the American Dream possible? Or has it become a nation increasingly living off the achievements, institutions, and intellectual capital of generations that came before?

The Greenland Question Is Not Really About Greenland

- There is something profoundly unsettling about watching the
- most powerful nation in human history argue over the
- acquisition of Greenland.

Not because Greenland lacks strategic importance. It possesses enormous geopolitical significance, sitting astride emerging Arctic shipping routes, mineral resources, and the security architecture of the North Atlantic.

- Nor because great powers have suddenly stopped pursuing
- territorial or economic advantage. They never have.

What is unsettling is what the conversation reveals about the American conception of greatness.

When President Donald Trump renewed his ambitions regarding Greenland, the response from America's allies was revealing. Australia, one of America's closest strategic partners, publicly reaffirmed that Greenland's sovereignty was a matter for Greenland and Denmark, while opposing the use of tariffs to pressure countries resisting Washington's ambitions.

The Australian response offers a useful point of departure for a much larger conversation.

- When did American greatness become something that needed
- to be demonstrated through the acquisition of territory, the
- coercion of allies, or the public performance of dominance?

And when did a nation that once inspired the world through the possibilities it created begin appearing so preoccupied with the power it could exercise?

There is a difference between being powerful and being great.

> Power is the capacity to compel.
> Greatness is the capacity to inspire.

A nation can possess the former long after it has begun losing the latter.

This raises a question that Americans, particularly those of us who have benefited enormously from the opportunities this country has offered, ought to confront without defensiveness or ideological reflex.

- Has America become a nation of has-beens?
- Are its best years behind it?
- Or is something more complicated happening?

Perhaps America has not exhausted its capacity for greatness.

Perhaps it has simply become confused about what greatness means.

The America That Was Promised

- The extraordinary achievement of the American experiment was
- never merely its economic size, military capability, or
- technological sophistication.

It was an idea.

- An idea so radical in its implications that generations of people
- crossed oceans, abandoned familiar worlds, and endured
- extraordinary hardships to participate in it.

The proposition was deceptively simple:

- Your future need not be determined by your past.
- Your ancestry need not define your destiny.
- Your circumstances need not permanently limit your
- possibilities.
- You could arrive with very little and build something
- extraordinary.

Of course, the American promise was never distributed equally. Slavery, racial exclusion, dispossession, discrimination, and entrenched economic privilege were not incidental blemishes on an otherwise perfect historical record. They were fundamental contradictions within the experiment itself.

But the genius of the American ideal lay partly in its capacity to expose those contradictions.

The Declaration of Independence established a standard against which the nation itself could be judged.

America's greatest reform movements did not need to invent an entirely new moral language. They could demand that America honor the language it had already declared.

- That is an extraordinary feature of a national identity. Its
- founding promise could be used to challenge its failures.
- And for much of its history, however imperfectly, America
- demonstrated an unusual capacity to reinvent itself.

It built industries that transformed the world. It established universities and research institutions that became magnets for global talent. It generated enormous scientific and technological breakthroughs. It helped create a middle class whose expectations of homeownership, education, upward mobility, and retirement security became a model of prosperity. And it offered immigrants like me something that cannot easily be quantified. The possibility of becoming someone we might never have become elsewhere.

But there is an important distinction between a promise that attracts people and a promise that is actually delivered. And that distinction brings us to the America of today.

The Great American Disconnect: A Rich Nation and an Insecure Population

Consider the remarkable paradox.

America remains one of the wealthiest, most innovative, and most productive societies in human history. Its universities, research institutions, capital markets, entrepreneurs, and technology companies continue to shape the future of civilization. Its ability to attract ambitious people from around the world remains a formidable competitive advantage. And yet, an increasing number of Americans experience their own country not as a land of expanding possibility, but as an environment of escalating insecurity.

The evidence is difficult to dismiss.

60% — Say their income is insufficient for the life they want. 53% — Lack emergency savings sufficient for three months of expenses. 27% — Cannot pay some monthly bills in full. 17% — Trust Washington to do what is right most or nearly all the time.

Source attribution in original manuscript: Pew Research Center (October 14, 2026; December 2025). Figures should be rechecked against the primary releases before publication.

These numbers describe something more consequential than economic hardship. They describe a crisis of confidence in the American proposition.

For generations, the implicit social contract was that education, effort, discipline, and responsible behavior would produce a reasonable expectation of economic security and advancement.

- Not guaranteed wealth. Not freedom from adversity. But a
- credible opportunity to build a better life. Today, for many
- Americans, the arithmetic of that proposition is becoming
- increasingly difficult to reconcile.

A household can have two working adults and still struggle to afford housing.

- A college education can open doors while simultaneously
- creating decades of debt.

A medical diagnosis can threaten the financial stability of an otherwise responsible family.

A person can work productively for forty years and approach retirement with considerable uncertainty.

And young adults can find themselves earning more in nominal dollars than their parents while feeling less capable of achieving the milestones their parents took for granted.

What is eroding is not merely purchasing power. It is the perceived relationship between effort and reward. When people no longer believe that responsible choices will predictably improve their circumstances, something fundamental begins to change in the psychology of a society. They become less trusting. Less optimistic. More susceptible to resentment. More willing to believe that someone, somewhere, has stolen the future they were promised. And increasingly receptive to leaders who promise to restore that future by identifying an enemy.

When National Prosperity Stops Translating Into Human Flourishing

- A particularly revealing analysis published by the Brookings
- Institution in October 2026 examined an uncomfortable

American paradox. Despite decades of substantial economic growth, measures of American well-being— including life satisfaction, hope, social trust, and self-reported health— have deteriorated. In other words, the country has become economically richer without becoming correspondingly happier.

- That should trouble every economist, corporate executive,
- policymaker, and citizen. Because it suggests that we have
- confused the performance of our systems with the purpose of
- those systems.

Gross domestic product is a measure of economic production. It is not a measure of whether a mother can afford childcare.

Stock market capitalization is a measure of corporate value. It is not a measure of whether employees can retire with dignity.

- Healthcare expenditure measures the resources consumed by
- medicine. It does not measure how healthy the population
- actually is.

Indeed, a 2026 Commonwealth Fund analysis found that the United States continues to spend more on healthcare than peer nations while achieving comparatively poor life expectancy and affordability outcomes.

Consider the absurdity of that proposition.

We can lead the world in the amount of money spent treating disease while trailing other wealthy nations in the number of years our citizens can expect to live.

- We can build extraordinarily sophisticated financial markets
- while millions of households struggle with basic financial
- resilience.

- We can create artificial intelligence capable of transforming
- entire industries while failing to provide large portions of our
- population with confidence in their own future.

We have become extraordinarily sophisticated at measuring what our institutions produce. But remarkably unsophisticated at measuring what their production actually does for human beings.

We have mistaken the scoreboard for the game.

- And perhaps that is the most important philosophical error
- underlying the American predicament.

The Philosophical Roots of a Nation's Decline

Civilizations rarely decline because they suddenly lose all their capabilities.

More often, they decline because the principles that originally generated their success become distorted by the very success they created.

What begins as a virtue becomes an excess.

What begins as a productive organizing principle becomes an unquestioned ideology.

- And what begins as an instrument of human advancement
- gradually becomes an end in itself.

I believe several philosophical transformations are at work in contemporary America.

1. From individualism to atomization

American individualism was once an extraordinary engine of human possibility.

It celebrated personal responsibility, initiative, self-reliance, and the freedom to pursue one's ambitions.

But individualism becomes destructive when it evolves into the belief that every human outcome is exclusively the responsibility of the individual experiencing it.

The struggling worker must simply work harder.

The financially insecure family must manage its money better.

The chronically ill patient must make better lifestyle choices.

The unemployed professional must acquire new skills.

There is truth in the importance of personal responsibility.

But there is also a profound intellectual dishonesty in pretending that individual behavior operates independently of the systems within which individuals must function.

- A person cannot exercise their way out of an inaccessible
- healthcare system.
- A worker cannot budget their way out of a housing market
- whose costs consistently outpace their earning capacity.
- A child cannot demonstrate personal responsibility for the
- quality of the school into which they were born.
- Individual agency matters enormously.

But so does the architecture of opportunity.

- A society that celebrates individual achievement while
- neglecting the conditions that make achievement possible
- eventually converts opportunity into a privilege masquerading
- as a virtue.

1. From capitalism as an engine of prosperity to capitalism as an instrument of extraction

Capitalism is among the most powerful systems ever developed for coordinating human ingenuity, capital, labor, and enterprise.

Its capacity to generate innovation and prosperity is undeniable.

> But capitalism is a mechanism.
> It is not a moral philosophy.

It does not independently determine what constitutes a good society.

That responsibility belongs to the human beings who design, regulate, manage, and participate in it.

Somewhere along the way, a dangerous conceptual substitution occurred.

- Shareholder value, originally a measure of business performance,
- increasingly became treated as the overriding purpose of
- business.

The distinction matters.

- A corporation can improve its financial performance by
- developing better products, increasing productivity, investing in
- its employees, and serving customers more effectively.

It can also improve its financial performance by suppressing wages, transferring risk to employees, reducing product quality, exploiting information asymmetries, or extracting increasingly larger payments from customers with limited alternatives.

- Both approaches may produce attractive quarterly financial
- results.
- But they have radically different consequences for the society in
- which the enterprise operates.
- One creates prosperity.

The other redistributes value toward those already possessing the greatest economic leverage.

Neither capitalism nor profit is inherently the problem.

- The problem arises when the pursuit of profit becomes
- detached from the creation of genuine human value.

An economy can become extraordinarily efficient at extracting value while becoming progressively less effective at creating lives worth living.

And when enough businesses behave this way, the cumulative consequences become national.

1 From citizenship to consumption

- A citizen is a participant in a shared political and social
- enterprise.

> A consumer is a purchaser of goods and services.
> These are not interchangeable identities.

- Citizenship implies responsibility for something larger than
- oneself.

- It requires participation, compromise, stewardship, and a
- willingness to invest in institutions whose benefits may not be
- immediately personal.

Consumerism operates on a different proposition.

- What can I obtain?
- What am I entitled to receive?
- How quickly can my preferences be satisfied?
- What is the immediate return on my investment?

As consumer logic increasingly colonizes civic life, public institutions begin to be evaluated through the lens of personal transactions rather than collective purpose.

Education becomes merely a credential purchased for future earnings.

Healthcare becomes a commercial transaction rather than an essential social capability.

Political leadership becomes a product marketed to competing audiences.

- And citizenship becomes less about what we are building
- together than what we can demand for ourselves.
- The result is a society rich in individual preferences but
- increasingly impoverished in shared purpose.

1 From stewardship to spectacle

This brings us back to Greenland.

- There are legitimate strategic questions concerning Arctic
- security, mineral resources, shipping routes, and the balance of
- power among nations.
- Reasonable people can debate the appropriate American
- response.

But there is a deeper distinction between exercising leadership and staging a demonstration of power.

- Leadership creates durable relationships.
- Spectacle creates temporary attention.
- Leadership depends upon credibility.
- Spectacle depends upon visibility.

Leadership asks what outcome can be achieved through the coordinated participation of others.

Spectacle asks who can dominate the moment.

The temptation to confuse the two is not unique to President Trump or to any political party.

It is increasingly visible throughout American public life.

> Political communication rewards provocation.
> Social media rewards emotional intensity.

Corporate leadership sometimes rewards charismatic certainty over disciplined judgment.

- And the news economy frequently rewards conflict more
- generously than resolution.

We have built an attention economy in which the performance of leadership can become more valuable than the practice of leadership.

The danger is that the institutions responsible for managing our collective future gradually begin behaving like contestants in a competition for public attention.

A nation cannot sustain greatness if its leaders become more invested in being seen to win than in creating conditions under which its people can succeed.

When a Nation's Winning Formula Stops Working

- There is another dimension to this problem that I find
- particularly compelling.

Human beings, organizations, and nations develop what I call a winning formula. It is the underlying contextual framework through which they interpret the world, identify opportunities, respond to threats, and make decisions.

- Often, this formula is not consciously recognized. It simply
- becomes the way things are done.

For much of the twentieth century, America's winning formula was extraordinarily effective. A combination of industrial capacity, technological innovation, abundant resources, entrepreneurial freedom, institutional stability, immigration, military strength, and expanding consumer markets generated unprecedented prosperity.

- That success created a particular understanding of reality.
- American leadership was natural. American economic
- dominance was sustainable. American institutions were
- fundamentally resilient. And the next generation could
- reasonably expect to inherit a better life.
- But every winning formula contains the seeds of its own
- obsolescence. The circumstances that make a particular strategy
- successful eventually change. Other nations acquire
- technological capabilities. Manufacturing migrates.

Capital becomes increasingly mobile. Digital platforms transform labor markets. Global competition changes the distribution of economic opportunity. And the institutions designed for an earlier environment become increasingly misaligned with the realities they are expected to manage.

The danger comes when a nation mistakes its historically successful formula for an eternal truth. It begins trying to restore the conditions of yesterday rather than developing the capabilities required for tomorrow. It seeks to recover industries rather than reimagine work. It seeks to reassert dominance rather than renew competitiveness.

- It celebrates historical achievements rather than confront
- contemporary inadequacies. And it becomes increasingly

- invested in proving that it remains great instead of asking what
- greatness now requires.

A winning formula becomes a losing formula the moment its guardians become more committed to preserving it than to understanding the world that has changed around it.

That is as true of a corporation as it is of a civilization.

Has America Actually Passed Its Peak?

We should be careful not to confuse dissatisfaction with decline, or nostalgia with historical analysis.

The America of the past was not an uncomplicated golden age. The prosperity of the postwar decades coexisted with racial segregation, gender discrimination, environmental degradation, and considerable social exclusion.

Nor is contemporary America devoid of extraordinary strengths. Its capacity for innovation remains formidable. Its scientific infrastructure remains among the world's finest. Its entrepreneurs continue to create entirely new industries. Its universities and research institutions remain globally influential. And its capacity to absorb talent from across the world remains a source of competitive advantage.

- Even in the realm of human well-being, the picture is not
- uniformly negative. American life expectancy rose to 79.0 years
- in 2024, its highest recorded level, although it remained
- approximately 3.7 years below the average of comparable
- wealthy nations.54

Peterson-KFF Health System Tracker

The evidence does not establish that America's best years are irretrievably behind it. It establishes something more nuanced.

America remains extraordinarily capable of generating wealth and innovation, but increasingly struggles to translate those capabilities into broadly experienced security, trust, and well-being.

That is a different diagnosis. And it suggests a different remedy.

The question is not whether America possesses the resources to create a better future. It plainly does. The question is whether it possesses the institutional imagination, political maturity, and collective will to deploy those resources toward that purpose.

Which brings us to the people who may have considerably more influence over the answer than they realize.

The Stewards of Industry: You Are Not Innocent Bystanders

It is convenient for business leaders to regard the condition of the nation as principally the responsibility of elected officials. After all, corporations do not write the Constitution. Executives do not command the armed forces. Boards of directors do not determine foreign policy.

But this interpretation dramatically understates the influence of industry over the lived experience of a population.

Businesses determine how millions of Americans spend most of their waking hours. They influence the relationship between productivity and compensation. They shape the availability and affordability of essential goods and services. They determine whether technological advances empower workers or displace them without meaningful alternatives. They influence the quality of communities through investment, employment, procurement, and philanthropy. And through lobbying, campaign financing, and public advocacy, they exert substantial influence over the political and regulatory environments in which they operate.

The cumulative effect of these decisions is enormous. A society is not simply the product of its laws. It is also the aggregate consequence of millions of decisions made by people exercising authority within institutions. Which means that corporate leaders cannot plausibly celebrate their influence over markets while disclaiming responsibility for the societies those markets create.

If you possess the power to shape the conditions under which other human beings live, you are already participating in the governance of society, whether you acknowledge that responsibility or not. The question is what you choose to do with that power.

Six Choices That Could Change the American Trajectory

I do not believe that business leaders need to become politicians or transform their corporations into instruments of ideological advocacy. Indeed, doing so may simply reproduce the polarization that has already damaged public trust. What they can do is considerably more practical. They can begin exercising stewardship within the spheres they already control.

First: Redefine the purpose of enterprise

The purpose of a successful enterprise cannot be reduced to maximizing the financial return to its owners at every possible moment.

Profitability is indispensable. Without it, businesses cannot sustain employment, attract capital, invest in innovation, or survive. But profitability should be understood as a necessary condition for sustainable enterprise, not the complete definition of its purpose.

The better question is: What human condition becomes meaningfully better because this enterprise exists? For a healthcare organization, the answer ought to involve healthier people. For an educational institution, more capable human beings. For a technology company, greater human capability. For a financial institution, greater economic security and productive capital allocation. For an employer, an enterprise that creates value while enabling its people to build worthwhile lives.

- This does not require abandoning commercial discipline. It
- requires restoring the relationship between commercial
- performance and human outcomes.

Second: Reconnect productivity with shared prosperity

When employees contribute to greater organizational productivity, they should have a credible opportunity to participate in the prosperity that productivity generates. That does not mean every employee must receive the same compensation or that financial rewards should be disconnected from performance. It means that leaders should examine whether the benefits of innovation and

growth are being distributed in ways that sustain the long-term health of the enterprise and its workforce.

Profit-sharing, employee ownership, performance-linked compensation, retirement contributions, internal advancement, and meaningful investment in professional development are not acts of charity. They are mechanisms through which an organization can align individual success with institutional success.

- The objective should not merely be to create more productive
- workers. It should be to create more economically resilient
- human beings.

Third: Make human development a strategic responsibility

Artificial intelligence is accelerating a transformation of work whose consequences we are only beginning to understand. Businesses will understandably seek to capture the productivity advantages of automation. But there is a profound difference between using technology to eliminate human beings from the economic equation and using technology to expand what human beings are capable of accomplishing.

Every executive contemplating large-scale automation should confront three questions.

What new capabilities will this technology create? What opportunities will become available to the people whose existing work it changes? And what responsibility does the enterprise have to help those people make the transition?

The answer cannot always be that every existing job must be preserved. Economic progress has never worked that way. But neither should the answer be that the human consequences of technological transformation are someone else's problem. A company that celebrates the intelligence of its machines while neglecting the development of its people is not demonstrating superior leadership. It is revealing an impoverished understanding of progress.

- Fourth: Restore institutional trust through observable
- conduct
- Trust cannot be manufactured through branding. It cannot be
- restored through advertising campaigns. And it cannot be
- demanded from employees, customers, or communities.

Trust is the accumulated consequence of promises kept. This is particularly important in an age when artificial intelligence can generate persuasive language, images, and performances of sincerity at almost negligible cost.

The distinction between what an institution says and what it consistently does becomes more important than ever.

Organizations should make fewer promises and become more rigorous about honoring them.

- Compensation commitments.
- Product claims.
- Customer service standards.
- Employee development.
- Community investment.
- Ethical conduct.

- The objective is not to appear trustworthy. It is to become
- predictably trustworthy. And predictability is established
- through repeated behavior over time.

Fifth: Invest in the communities that sustain enterprise

- No successful business exists independently of the social
- infrastructure surrounding it. It depends upon educated
- workers, functioning transportation systems, safe
- neighborhoods, reliable public institutions, healthy families, and
- stable communities.

Yet corporate decision-making often treats these conditions as externalities, resources to be consumed rather than capabilities to be maintained. A more sophisticated philosophy of stewardship recognizes that community investment is not simply philanthropy. It is investment in the productive ecosystem upon which the enterprise itself depends.

- Support local education.
- Develop apprenticeship programs.
- Partner with community colleges.
- Strengthen regional suppliers.
- Invest in workforce health.
- Create pathways for people who have historically been excluded
- from economic opportunity.
- And measure the results.

The Tata Group's long tradition of institutional stewardship offers an instructive example of how an enterprise can regard employee welfare and community development as integral to its identity rather than peripheral charitable activities.

American corporations need not imitate any particular foreign model.

But they would benefit from recovering an understanding that many of their own great industrial founders once possessed: The durability of an enterprise is inseparable from the vitality of the society that surrounds it.

Sixth: Change what the boardroom measures

- Organizations become remarkably good at producing the
- outcomes their leaders choose to measure. If the only measures
- of success are revenue growth, margins, market share, and
- shareholder returns, leadership attention will naturally
- concentrate on those outcomes.

But imagine a boardroom in which the financial dashboard was accompanied by a human prosperity dashboard.

> Not as a public relations exercise.
> As a genuine instrument of governance.

The Stewardship Scorecard

A practical framework for corporate boards to evaluate whether organizational success is creating durable human value.

These measures need not replace financial performance indicators. They should complement them. Because the purpose is not to make business less accountable. It is to make business accountable for more of the consequences it actually creates.

But What About the Rest of Us?

It would be easy to end this discussion with an appeal to corporate leaders. But that would reproduce the very error I am attempting to challenge. The assumption that responsibility for our collective future belongs primarily to someone else.

- Politicians.
- Billionaires.
- Corporate boards.
- The government.
- The media.

Someone with more money, more authority, more influence, or a larger audience.

Certainly, power is distributed unequally. A corporate chief executive possesses opportunities to influence outcomes that an hourly employee may not. A political leader can make decisions whose consequences extend across generations. A billionaire can mobilize resources unavailable to most citizens. It would be intellectually dishonest to pretend otherwise.

But influence is not an all-or-nothing proposition. It exists along a continuum. And every one of us exercises some measure of it. We exercise influence through what we purchase. Through the organizations we support. Through the people we hire and promote. Through the way we educate our children. Through the information we choose to believe and circulate. Through the standards of conduct we tolerate. Through our willingness to participate in civic life. Through the promises we make. And through the promises we keep.

- The difficulty is that we tend to regard these decisions as
- individually insignificant.

One vote. One purchase. One conversation. One hiring decision. One act of integrity.

- What difference could it possibly make? But institutions are not
- abstract entities floating above human behavior. They are
- accumulated patterns of human choices.

Culture is what people repeatedly do. An organization is what its members collectively permit. A nation is what its citizens, leaders, and institutions continuously create. And therefore, the future is not simply something that happens to us. It is something in which we are participating, whether consciously or otherwise.

The Most Dangerous American Illusion

- Perhaps the most dangerous belief a successful nation can

develop is that its greatness is somehow guaranteed.

That because it once led the world, it will always lead the world. That because its institutions once demonstrated extraordinary resilience, they will necessarily continue to do so. That because previous generations overcame formidable challenges, future generations will automatically inherit the same capacity.

History offers no such guarantees. Civilizations are not protected from decline by the magnitude of their previous achievements. Indeed, those achievements can become an obstacle when they generate complacency, entitlement, and an unwillingness to reconsider inherited assumptions.

The Roman Empire did not lack engineering sophistication. The British Empire did not lack global commercial reach. And the great industrial corporations displaced by technological change were not necessarily lacking in talent, capital, or experience. They often possessed extraordinary resources. What they lacked was the ability to recognize when the context that had made them successful was fundamentally changing.

That is the challenge facing America. Not the absence of capability. But the possibility that its enormous capabilities remain organized around assumptions that no longer produce the outcomes its people require. The solution cannot simply be to recreate an idealized past. Nor can it be to discard the extraordinary principles that made the American experiment possible. It must be to reinterpret those principles for the realities of the present. Individual liberty must be accompanied by genuine opportunity.

Economic innovation must translate into broadly experienced prosperity.

National security must coexist with international credibility.

Corporate profitability must be accompanied by institutional stewardship.

- And political leadership must be judged not merely by the
- intensity of its promises, but by the human consequences of its
- performance.

The Choice Between Being Great and Becoming Great

- I return to the question with which I began. Has America
- become a nation of has-beens? I do not believe so. But I do
- believe it is possible for a nation to become so enamored of its
- historical greatness that it begins living off the intellectual,
- institutional, and moral capital accumulated by previous
- generations.
- It celebrates achievements it did not create. It consumes
- resources it has not replenished. It invokes principles it no longer
- consistently practices. And it demands recognition for a

That is not yet the same as becoming a has-been. But it is how the process can begin.

- The greatest danger to America is not that another country
- might become more powerful. It is that America might become
- less capable of fulfilling the promise that made its power

meaningful in the first place.

And the answer will not be found in Greenland. It will not be

found in another military base, another trade confrontation,

another spectacular political performance, or another

declaration that America is already great.

It will be found in the daily experiences of its people. Can a young person imagine a future more promising than the present? Can a family build economic security through productive work? Can an elderly person approach the final decades of life with dignity rather than dread? Can an entrepreneur succeed without needing to exploit the vulnerabilities of others? Can institutions regain the confidence of the people they exist to serve? Can those entrusted with power understand that its highest purpose is not to demonstrate their superiority, but to expand the possibilities available to others?

And perhaps most importantly: Can we stop waiting for

someone else to create the country we claim to want?

Because that is where the question becomes personal.

The business leader must decide what kind of enterprise to build. The physician must decide what kind of care to deliver. The educator must decide what kind of human capability to develop. The investor must decide what kind of value to reward. The politician must decide whether to pursue the next election or the next generation. And the citizen must decide whether to remain a spectator of national decline or become a participant in national renewal. None of us controls the entire outcome. But each of us controls something. And the cumulative consequence of those choices is what we eventually call history.

There is a profound difference between a country that was great and a country that is committed to becoming great.

The first lives in the past. The second accepts responsibility for the future. One demands that the world recognize what it has accomplished. The other creates something the world cannot help but recognize.

America's best years are not necessarily behind it. But they will be if we continue to confuse the inheritance of greatness with the responsibility of creating it.

The American promise was never that greatness would be

permanently bestowed upon us. It was that we would possess

the freedom, and accept the responsibility, to build it.

Generation after generation. Choice after choice. Promise after promise. And that, ultimately, is the only way a nation becomes great again.

Not by declaring it.

By delivering it.

Ravi R. Iyer, MD | Boardroom Reflections

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ravi R. Iyer, MD , is a physician-scientist, entrepreneur, author, and 5x TEDx speaker who has spent four decades exploring a deceptively simple question: What makes human beings, and the organizations they create, perform at their best? A Harvard-trained physician, corporate strategist, and the founder of multiple healthcare and performance ventures, he is the creator of Neuroalignment, a framework for building high-performance

organizations around the realities of human cognitive diversity. His work sits at the intersection of biology, leadership, technology, and human behavior. Boardroom Reflections is where those worlds meet.

Election 2026 Reflections is a three-part series of independent commentary examining political leadership, institutional stewardship, and the challenges confronting American democracy.

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