



JAMES A.
MICHENER

THIS
NOBLE
LAND

My Vision for America

*James A.
Michener*

*This
Noble
Land*

*My Vision
for America*

Copyright © 1996 by James A. Michener

All rights reserved under International and
Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Published in the
United States by Random House, Inc., New York,
and simultaneously in Canada by Random House
of Canada Limited, Toronto.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Michener, James A. (James Albert)

This noble land : my vision for America / James Michener.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-679-45152-8

1. United States--Civilization--1970-- 2. Social values--United
States. I. Title.

E169.12.M497 1996

973.92--DC20 96-17912

Random House website address: <http://www.randomhouse.com/>

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

24689753

FIRST EDITION

Book design by Carole Lowenstein

BOOKS BY
JAMES A. MICHENER

Tales of the South Pacific
The Fires of Spring
Return to Paradise
The Voice of Asia
The Bridges at Toko-Ri
Sayonara
The Floating World
The Bridge at Andau
Hawaii
Report of the County Chairman
Caravans
The Source
Iberia
Presidential Lottery
The Quality of Life
Kent State: What Happened and Why
The Drifters
A Michener Miscellany: 1950-1970
Centennial
Sports in America
Chesapeake
The Covenant
Space
Poland
Texas
Legacy
Alaska
Journey
Caribbean
The Eagle and the Raven
Pilgrimage
The Novel
The World Is My Home: A Memoir
James A. Michener's Writer's Handbook
Mexico
Creatures of the Kingdom
My Lost Mexico
Literary Reflections
Recessional
Miracle in Seville
This Noble Land: My Vision for America

with A. Grove Day
Rascals in Paradise

with John Kings
Six Days in Havana

This Noble Land

*My Vision
for America*



Random House • New York

*This book is dedicated to
Random House's inspired editor
Kate Medina,
who first proposed this book to me
six years ago and who
kept encouraging me to write it.*

Acknowledgments

For the statistical research in this manuscript I am indebted to three young assistants who worked closely under my supervision. They are all from the University of Texas at Austin and are John Kings, my longtime assistant; Debbie Brothers, my equally longtime secretary; and Susan Dillon, who volunteered to join me as a research and computer expert. Their contributions occur on many pages in this book.

Contents

	<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
ONE	<i>My Qualifications for Judging My Homeland</i>	3
TWO	<i>Defining a Noble Land</i>	11
THREE	<i>The Distribution of America's Wealth</i>	27
FOUR	<i>Our Racial Time Bomb</i>	47
FIVE	<i>Producers versus Consumers</i>	77
SIX	<i>Our Educational System Must Be Revived</i>	93
SEVEN	<i>The Family Under Fire</i>	113
EIGHT	<i>Health Care in a Time of Triage</i>	139
NINE	<i>Our Macho Society</i>	163
TEN	<i>Art in Society</i>	191
ELEVEN	<i>The Young Colonels</i>	211
	<i>Looking Ahead</i>	235
	<i>Index</i>	241

*This
Noble
Land*

*My Vision
for America*

One

*My
Qualifications
for Judging
My
Homeland*

Sitting in my Texas garden as I approach my ninetieth birthday, I often reflect upon my life in the United States, enjoying what the nation offers now but shuddering at the pitfalls that threaten us in the years ahead. Since this report is an evaluation of life in my homeland, I had better begin with justifying why I consider myself qualified to brave making some judgments about America.

Foremost is my dedication to the United States. It began in the earliest years of my life. In a Presbyterian Sunday school I was taught that God had elected our country as His favorite land and all that our leaders did was in obedience to His loving care. Devoutly I believed that we were His special charges.

Each morning at our public school, which I attended from age six to eighteen, we opened the day with school prayer, the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance and, on many mornings, the bel-
lowing of a song that we sang in unison:

'O beautiful for spacious skies,
For amber waves of grain,
For purple mountain majesties
Above the fruited plain!
America! America!
God shed His grace on thee

And crown thy good with brotherhood
From sea to shining sea!

Each time I sang these words in my usual off-key voice, I was convinced that a universal brotherhood did exist in my noble homeland.

In those days the indoctrination of children with a love of their homeland began at age six and continued daily for the next twelve years. I have often thought back on that simpler time and concluded that it is better for a child to have some strong moral and social beliefs rather than none at all, even though his indoctrination may have been chauvinistic, muddled or even erroneous. Later he can correct error, but if he has allegiance to nothing he has nothing to work on in his later reeducation.

At an early age I began to know our country well, for at fourteen I hitchhiked north and south, and some years later I probed far to the west. In adult life I lived for extended periods in scattered states: Pennsylvania, Colorado, Massachusetts, New York, Hawaii, Maryland, Florida, Texas, Maine and Alaska. I spent shorter six-month periods in Virginia and Ohio, and I made enlightening visits of some length researching in the American islands of Samoa, Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico and Guam.

From these travels I acquired an appreciation of the fact that we are a country with unique blessings. Our land territory stretches from ocean to ocean, so we did not have to worry about our neighboring nations east or west; there were only those north and south, which, by great good fortune, were friendly nations: Canada and Mexico. True, we did have skirmishes with Canada, but we quickly backed off, and we did have far more serious wars with Mexico, from whom we acquired—or perhaps stole would be a better word—an amazingly rich southern tier of states that had belonged to her: Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Cal-



ifornia, with extensions reaching into states like Colorado. But in general our neighbors' amicability allowed us freedom to develop peacefully inside our spacious borders. We owe much to Canada and Mexico.

Within our boundaries we have almost unimaginable riches: agricultural land capable of providing much of the rest of the world with wheat, corn, beef and other foods. We also have spectacular natural beauty: our vast prairies, our towering mountains, our deep canyons, our vital rivers. We are a land truly blessed, for beneath this beauty lie immense deposits of petroleum and the precious minerals gold and silver.

I established in seven of the big states what amounted to permanent homes and participated in the social, economic and political life of the areas. Thus I became familiar with eastern seaboard traditions, the radically different patterns in the Far West, the rigid values of New England, the seductive charm of the South, the unique character of life in Texas, the allure of Hawaii and the frozen wonders of Alaska, where I spent extended time one winter in total darkness north of the Arctic Circle. And on the islands—Pacific and Caribbean—I witnessed how our nation operated as a colonial power.

The reason I was deficient in my knowledge of the West Coast states was a somewhat complicated one. I married an American woman of Japanese descent, whose birth in the United States automatically made her an American citizen. But when we were catapulted into World War II by the Japanese sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, public opinion in California became so inflamed that my future wife's family was given two days to liquidate all their holdings and was moved into an American-style concentration camp that used the stables at the Santa Anita Racetrack as living quarters. In later years my wife boasted humorously: 'Our family occupied the stall of the great horse Equipoise.'



Despite her ability to make light of what had happened to her, she rebelled when I attempted in the 1960s to move our headquarters to California so that I could write what I hoped would be a strong novel on that state. She said: 'I could not sleep easily in California. Remembering how they abused my mother and me would be too painful!' So I lost the opportunity to live in one of our mightiest states and write what might have been one of my better books.

However, in our later years she became forgiving: 'True, we were thrown into concentration camps, mine was in Colorado, but they must not be compared with Hitler's terrible death camps. None of us was killed or tortured, and last year the government did compensate us for our losses—if only ten cents on the dollar—as a kind of apology for what they had done.' Then she laughed: 'By sending us to strange areas they forced us to leave what might later have developed into a Japanese ghetto in California. We scattered to places like New England, Utah, Oklahoma and, in my case, to a good life in Chicago, where I met you.'

I too would experience how difficult and sometimes cruel life in America can be, for I was born a foundling, reared in genteel poverty, and was occasionally brought to the local poorhouse when family funds diminished. My life till age fourteen was a struggle with deprivation, and when I had worked my way out of poverty—I was constantly employed from age eleven—I was faced by the Great Depression and the ravages of World War I.

I watched the brutal way in which American capitalism waged battle against labor unions and the tricks by which blacks were deprived of their rights in the South. I also came out strongly against the death penalty, for I saw that it was imposed primarily upon the unfortunates in our society, seldom against the well-to-do, whose high-priced lawyers could be trusted to find a compassionate judge and a jury of middle-class conservatives to set them free.