Once Upon a Time in America

by Kwame Amuah

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Indigo Kulani group

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Feb. 25—There is a melody that knows the country's heart. It drifts through the granite canyons of Manhattan, whispers through the wheat of the great plains, and echoes in the skeletal silence of Rust Belt factories. It is a sad song, this "Deborah's Theme" by the Italian maestro Ennio Morricone—a song of memory, of loss, of a beauty that flickers like a dying candle in a vast, dark ballroom. It is the soundtrack to a ghost.

Once upon a time in America, the ghost was hope.

That America was not merely a place on a map, but a place in the mind. It was a shimmering idea, a radical wager against the old world's weary cynicism. It was the America of the Founders' dream: a bold experiment in liberty, not conceived as a license for cruelty or brute force, but as the very air required for human dignity to breathe. It was an America of broad avenues and small-town porches, of bustling ports and quiet valleys. It was a land where the immigrant—from Ghana, from Ireland, from Italy—could arrive with nothing but the dust of the old country on his shoes and believe, truly believe, that his children would stand taller than he did.

That America had a rhythm. It was the clang of the hammer on the transcontinental railroad, the hum of the assembly line, the crackle of a radio bringing a vast nation together in a single story. It was a collective endeavor, an audacious trust written in the ink of the Constitution and sealed, at such great cost, with the blood of a Civil War. It was, of course, an imperfect dream—often betrayed by the very men who swore to uphold it, stained by the original sin of slavery and the broken promises to its first peoples. And yet, the dream itself remained a north star. It was the quiet, persistent note of decency in Morricone's theme—the part of the melody that refuses to be swallowed by the darker chords.

But listen closely. The music is changing. The strings are being overtaken by a harsher brass. The elegant waltz has become a war chant.

Guest Editorial

In President Donald Trump's America, the melody has fractured. The once-upon-a-time has curdled into a bitter argument over what never was and what will never be. The public square, once an arena for the clash of ideas, has devolved into a coliseum for the clash of identities. We no longer look at each other across the aisle; we glare across a chasm, our faces illuminated by the cold blue light of screens that feed us a steady diet of performative contempt.

The idea of America as a shared project has been replaced by a zero-sum game. Every victory for one tribe is presumed a theft from another. The national anthem is now played not to unite us in a moment of reflection, but to draw a line in the sand. We argue not about how to perfect the Union, but about whether the Union itself is worth saving. The air is thick with grievance, and the language of leadership has shed the cadence of the statesman for the snarl of the schoolyard bully. The promise of a "more perfect union" has been traded for the demand for total victory. In this new order, sovereignty is dismissed as an obstacle, and the tools of statecraft are reduced to coercion—

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whether it is the kidnapping of a political leader who dares to dissent or the bombing of a nation that refuses to submit.

We lament this. We lament the loss of a certain grace in public life, a certain faith that our differences, so long as they are bounded by a common creed, are our strength and not our weakness. We mourn the replacement of the Founders' vision of ordered liberty—where freedom is tempered by virtue and responsibility—with a chaotic, transactional view of power. We have forgotten the quiet dignity of public service and replaced it with the loud theatre of public spectacle. The America that built the Hoover Dam, that liberated a continent, and that walked on the Moon feels like a distant memory, a sepia-toned photograph of ancestors we no longer recognize.

But a lament, in music, is not an ending. It is a passage, a necessary darkness before a potential resolution. The saddest songs often contain the most potent call to action. They remind us, in their aching beauty, of what we are in danger of losing forever.

And so, we must call for the return of the dream. Not the nostalgic dream of a past that never truly was, but the prophetic dream of a future that could still be ours. We must call for the America the Founders dared to imagine: a bold, audacious experiment in self-governance rooted in the belief that freedom and virtue are inseparable. An America where "We the People" is not a political slogan, but a binding covenant.

Let us call for an America that remembers that liberty requires a love of something larger than the self or the next deal. An America where the pursuit of happiness is not a license for greed, but a journey toward fulfillment, shared in common with our neighbors. An America where the grand, aching beauty of its landscapes is matched by the grandeur and beauty of its civic life. An America where the dignity of work is respected, where merit is honored, where the thirst for knowledge is celebrated, and where the stranger is welcomed—for we were all once strangers here.

The music of "Deborah's Theme" will always carry a note of sadness. It bears the weight of all that has been lost, all the innocence that has faded. But as the final notes hang in the air, they are not a dirge. They are a question. They are a challenge. They are a prayer: that America will, once more, be great—not through dominance, but through decency; not through division, but through a renewed covenant of liberty, tolerance, and shared destiny.

Can we, like the lone figure in the empty ballroom, find the courage to waltz again? Can we hear, beneath the noise and the fury, the faint but persistent melody of the Founders' dream? Can we make America, once upon a time, a time that is now?