

What's Great About America

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In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, we heard a great deal about “why they hate us” and why America is so bad. In the meantime, we’ve endured lengthy lectures from multicultural activists about America’s history of slavery. Leftists continue to fulminate about American foreign policy, which they blame for most of the evils in the world. Cultural pessimists, some of them conservative, deplore the materialism of American life and the excesses and degradation of American culture. Clearly, anti-Americanism doesn’t just find support in cafes in Cairo, Tehran, and Paris; it is also a home-grown phenomenon. In the view of America’s critics, both domestic and foreign, America can do no right.

This indictment has the effect of undermining the patriotism of Americans at a time when America’s challenges in the world require the enduring patriotic attachment of its citizens. America’s critics are aiming their assault on America’s greatest weakness, which is not military vulnerability but a lack of moral self-confidence. Americans cannot effectively fight for their country without believing that their country is good and that they are fighting in a just cause. With Edmund Burke, Americans tend to believe that “to make us love our country, our country ought to be lovely.”

Is America worthy of a reflective patriotism that doesn’t mindlessly assert, “My country, right or wrong,” but rather examines the criticisms of America and finds them wanting? As an immigrant who has chosen to become an American citizen, I believe that it is. Having

studied the criticisms of America with care, my conclusion is that the critics have a narrow and distorted understanding of America. They exaggerate American faults, and they ignore what is good and even great about America.

The immigrant is in a good position to evaluate American society because he is able to apply a comparative perspective. Having grown up in a different society—in my case, Mumbai, India—I am able to identify aspects of America that are invisible to people who have always lived here. As a “person of color,” I am competent to address such questions as what it is like to be a nonwhite person in America, what this country owes its minority citizens, and whether immigrants can expect to be granted full membership in this society. While I take seriously the issues raised by the critics of America, I have also developed an understanding of what makes America great, and I have seen the greatness of America reflected in my life. Unlike many of America’s home-grown dissidents, I am also acutely conscious of the daily blessings that I enjoy in America.

Here, then, is my list of what makes America great.

AMERICA’S GOOD LIFE

America provides an amazingly good life for the ordinary guy. Rich people live well everywhere, but what distinguishes America is that it provides a remarkably high standard of living for the “common man.” A country is not judged by how it treats its most affluent citizens but by how it treats the average citizen.

In much of the world today, the average citizen has a very hard life. In the Third World, people are struggling for their basic existence. It is not that they don't work hard. On the contrary, they labor incessantly and endure hardships that are almost unimaginable to people in America. In the villages of Asia and Africa, for example, a common sight is a farmer beating a pickaxe into the ground, women wobbling under heavy loads, children carrying stones. These people are performing arduous labor, but they are getting nowhere. The best they can hope for is to survive for another day. Their clothes are tattered, their teeth are rotten, and disease and death constantly loom over the horizon. For most poor people on the planet, life is characterized by squalor, indignity, and brevity.

Even middle-class people in the underdeveloped world endure hardships that make everyday life a strain. One problem is that the basic infrastructure of the Third World is abysmal: The roads are not properly paved, the water is not safe to drink, pollution in the cities has reached hazardous levels, public transportation is overcrowded and unreliable, and there is a two-year waiting period to get a telephone. The poorly paid government officials are inevitably corrupt, which means that you must pay bribes to get things done. Most important, prospects for the children's future are dim.

In America, the immigrant immediately recognizes that things are different. The newcomer who sees America for the first time typically experiences emotions that alternate between wonder and delight. Here is a country where everything works: The roads are clean and paper-smooth; the highway signs are clear and accurate; the public toilets function properly; when you pick up the telephone, you get a dial tone; you can even buy things from the store and then take them back. For the Third World visitor, the American supermarket is a thing to behold: endless aisles of every imaginable product, 50 different types of cereal, and multiple flavors of ice cream. The place is full of countless unappreciated inventions: quilted toilet paper, fabric softener, cordless telephones, disposable

diapers, roll-on luggage, deodorant. Some countries, even today, lack these conveniences.

Critics of America complain about the scandal of persistent poverty in a nation of plenty, but the immigrant cannot help noticing that the United States is a country where the poor live comparatively well. This fact was dramatized in the 1980s when CBS television broadcast "People Like Us," which was intended to show the miseries of the poor during an American recession. The Soviet Union also broadcast the documentary, probably with a view to embarrassing the Reagan Administration. But by the testimony of former Soviet leaders, it had the opposite effect. Ordinary people across the Soviet Union saw that the poorest Americans have television sets and microwave ovens and cars. They arrived at the same perception of America as a friend of mine from Mumbai who has been trying unsuccessfully to move to the United States for nearly a decade. Finally, I asked him, "Why are you so eager to come to America?" His reply: "Because I really want to move to a country where the poor people are fat."

The moral triumph of America is that it has extended the benefits of comfort and affluence, traditionally enjoyed by a very few, to a large segment of society. Few people in America have to wonder where their next meal is coming from. Emergency medical care is available to everyone, even those without proper insurance. Every child has access to an education, and many have the chance to go to college.

Ordinary Americans enjoy not only security and dignity, but also comforts that other societies reserve for the elite. We live in a country where construction workers regularly pay \$4 for a nonfat latte, where maids drive rather nice cars, where plumbers and postal workers take their families on vacation in Europe or the Caribbean. As Irving Kristol once observed, there is virtually no restaurant in America to which a CEO can go to lunch with the absolute assurance that he will not find his secretary also dining there. Given the standard of living of the ordinary American, it is no wonder that socialist or revolutionary schemes have never found a wide constituency in the United States.

As sociologist Werner Sombart observed, all socialist utopias have come to grief in America on roast beef and apple pie.

As a result, people live longer, fuller lives in America. Although at trade meetings around the world protesters rail against the American version of technological capitalism, in reality, the American system has given citizens a much longer life expectancy and the means to live more intensely and actively. The average American can expect to live long enough to play with his or her grandchildren.

In 1900, the life expectancy in America was around 50 years; today, it is more than 75 years. Advances in medicine and agriculture are the main reasons. This increased life span is not merely a material gain; it is also a moral gain because it means a few years of leisure after a lifetime of work, more time to devote to a good cause, and more occasions to do things with the grandchildren. In many countries, people who are old seem to have nothing to do; they just wait to die. In America, the old are incredibly vigorous, and people in their seventies pursue the pleasures of life.

“Yes,” the critics carp, “but these benefits are only available to the rich.” Not so. Indeed, America’s system of technological capitalism has over time extended the life span of both rich and poor while narrowing the gap between the two. In 1900, for example, the rich person lived to 60 while the poor person died at 45. Today, the life expectancy of an affluent person in America is 78 years while that of the poor person is around 74. Thus, in one of the most important indicators of human well-being, the rich have advanced in America but the poor have advanced even more.

EQUALITY

Critics of America allege that the history of the United States is defined by a series of crimes—slavery, genocide—visited upon African-Americans and American Indians. Even today, they say, America is a racist society. The critics demand apologies for these historical offenses and seek financial reparations for minorities and African-Americans. But the truth is

that America has gone further than any society in establishing equality of rights.

Let’s begin by asking whether the white man was guilty of genocide against the native Indians. As a matter of fact, he was not. As William McNeill documents in *Plagues and Peoples*, great numbers of Indians did perish as a result of their contact with whites, but, for the most part, they died by contracting diseases—smallpox, measles, malaria, tuberculosis—for which they had not developed immunities. This is tragedy on a grand scale, but it is not genocide, which implies an intention to wipe out an entire population. McNeill points out that, a few centuries earlier, Europeans themselves contracted lethal diseases, including the bubonic plague, from Mongol invaders from the Asian steppes. The Europeans didn’t have immunities, and the plague decimated one-third of the population of Europe, and yet, despite the magnitude of deaths and suffering, no one calls this genocide.

So what about slavery? No one will deny that America practiced slavery, but America was hardly unique in this respect. Indeed, slavery is a universal institution that in some form has existed in all cultures. In his study *Slavery and Social Death*, the West Indian sociologist Orlando Patterson writes, “Slavery has existed from the dawn of human history, in the most primitive of human societies and in the most civilized. There is no region on earth that has not at some time harbored the institution.” The Sumerians and Babylonians practiced slavery, as did the ancient Egyptians. The Chinese, the Indians, and the Arabs all had slaves. Slavery was widespread in sub-Saharan Africa, and American Indians had slaves long before Columbus came to the New World.

What is distinctively Western is not slavery but the movement to end slavery. Abolition is a uniquely Western institution. The historian J. M. Roberts writes, “No civilization once dependent on slavery has ever been able to eradicate it, except the Western.” Of course, slaves in every society don’t want to be slaves. The history of slavery is full of incidents of runaways, slave revolts, and so on. But typically, slaves were captured

in warfare, and if they got away, they were perfectly happy to take other people as slaves.

Never in the history of the world, outside of the West, has a group of people eligible to be slave owners mobilized against slavery. This distinctive Western attitude is reflected by Abraham Lincoln: “As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master.” Lincoln doesn’t want to be a slave—that’s not surprising. But he doesn’t want to be a master either. He and many other people were willing to expend considerable treasure, and ultimately blood, to get rid of slavery not for themselves but for other people. The campaign to end slavery was much harder in the United States than in Europe for the simple reason that the practice of slavery had become so entrenched in the American South.

The uniqueness of Western abolition is confirmed by the little-known fact that African chiefs, who profited from the slave trade, sent delegations to the West to protest the abolition of slavery. And it is important to realize that the slaves were not in a position to secure their own freedom. The descendants of African slaves owe their freedom to the exertions of white strangers, not to the people in Africa who betrayed and sold them.

Surely, all of this is relevant to the reparations debate. A trenchant observation on the matter was offered years ago by Muhammad Ali shortly after his defeat of George Foreman for the heavyweight title. The fight was held in the African nation of Zaire. Upon returning to the United States, a reporter asked Ali, “Champ, what did you think of Africa?” Ali replied, “Thank God my grand-daddy got on that boat!” There is a mischievous pungency to Ali’s remark, but behind it is an important truth. Ali is saying that although slavery was oppressive for the people who lived under it, their descendants are in many ways better off today. The reason is that slavery proved to be the transmission belt that brought Africans into the orbit of Western prosperity and freedom. Blacks in America have a higher standard of living and more freedom than any comparable group of blacks on the continent of Africa.

But what about racism? Racism continues to exist in America, but it exists in a very different way than it did

in the past. Previously, racism was comprehensive or systematic; now it is more episodic. In a recent debate with the Reverend Jesse Jackson at Stanford University, I asked him to show me how racism today is potent enough to prevent his children or mine from achieving the American dream. “Where is that kind of racism?” I said. “Show it to me.” Jackson fired off a few of his famous rhyming sequences—“I may be well-dressed, but I’m still oppressed,” and so on—but conceded that he could not meet my challenge. He noted that just because there was no evidence of systematic racism, he could not conclude that it did not exist. Rather, he insisted, racism has gone underground; it is no longer overt but covert, and it continues to thwart African Americans and other minorities from claiming their share of the American dream.

In my view, this is complete nonsense. As a non-white immigrant, I am grateful to the activists of the civil rights movement for their efforts to open up doors that would otherwise have remained closed. But at the same time, I am struck by the ease with which Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement won its victories, and by the magnitude of white goodwill in this country. In a single decade, from the mid-fifties to the mid-sixties, America radically overhauled its laws through a series of landmark decisions: *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act, the Fair Housing Act. Through such measures, America established equality of rights under the law. Of course, the need to enforce nondiscrimination provisions continues, but for nearly half a century, blacks and other minorities have enjoyed the same legal rights as whites.

Actually, this is not strictly true. For a few decades now, blacks and some minorities have enjoyed *more* rights and privileges than whites. The reason is that America has implemented affirmative action policies that give legal preference to minority groups in university admissions, jobs, and government contracts. Such policies remain controversial, but the point is that they reflect the great lengths to which this country has gone to eradicate discrimination. It is extremely

unlikely that a racist society would grant its minority citizens legal preferences over members of the majority group. Some private discrimination continues to exist in America, but the only form of discrimination that can be legally practiced today benefits blacks more than whites.

The reality is that America has achieved greater social equality than any other society. True, there are large inequalities of income and wealth in America. In purely economic terms, Europe is more egalitarian. But Americans are socially more equal than any other people, and this is unaffected by economic disparities. Alexis de Tocqueville noticed this egalitarianism a century and a half ago, but it is, if anything, more prevalent today.

In other countries, if you are rich, you enjoy the pleasure of aristocracy, which is the pleasure of being a superior person. In India, for example, the rich enjoy the gratification of subservience, of seeing innumerable servants and toadies grovel before them and attend to their every need. In America, however, no amount of money can buy you the same kind of superiority.

Consider, for example, Bill Gates. If Gates were to walk the streets of America and stop people at random and say, "Here's a \$100 bill. I'll give it to you if you kiss both my feet," what would the typical American response be? Even the homeless guy would tell Gates to go to hell. The American view is that the rich guy may have more money, but he isn't fundamentally better than anyone else.

The American janitor or waiter sees himself as performing a service, but he doesn't see himself as inferior to those he serves. And neither do his customers see him that way: They are generally happy to show him respect and appreciation on a plane of equality. America is the only country in the world where we call the waiter "Sir," as if he were a knight.

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

America offers more opportunity and social mobility than any other country. In much of the world, even today, if your father is a bricklayer, you become

a bricklayer. Most societies offer limited opportunities for and little chance of true social mobility. Even in Europe, social mobility is relatively restricted. When you meet a rich person, chances are that person comes from a wealthy family. This is not to say that ordinary citizens cannot rise up and become successful in France and Germany, but such cases are atypical. Much more typical is the condescending attitude of the European "old rich" toward the self-made person, who is viewed as a bit of a vulgar interloper. In Europe, as in the rest of the world, the preferred path to wealth is through inheritance.

Not so in America. Success stories of people who have risen up from nothing are so common that they are unremarkable. Nobody bothers to notice that in the same family, one brother is a gas station attendant and the other is a vice president at Oracle. "Old money" carries no prestige in America—it is as likely to mean that a grandparent was a bootlegger or a robber baron. Rather, as the best-selling book *The Millionaire Next Door* documents, more than 80 percent of American millionaires are self-made.

Indeed, America is the only country that has created a population of "self-made tycoons." More than 50 percent of the Americans on the *Forbes* 400 "rich list" got there through their own efforts. Only in America could Pierre Omidyar, whose parents are Iranian and who grew up in Paris, have started a company like eBay. Only in America could Vinod Khosla, the son of an Indian army officer, become a leading venture capitalist, a shaper of the technology industry, and a billionaire to boot.

The critics complain that equal opportunity is a myth in America, but there is more opportunity in this country than anywhere else in the world. European countries may have better mass transit systems and more comprehensive health care coverage, but nowhere does the ordinary citizen have a better chance to climb up the ladder and to achieve success than in the United States.

What this means is that in America, destiny is not given but created. Not long ago I asked myself, what

would my life have been like if I had never come to the United States, if I had stayed in India? Materially, my life has improved, but not in a fundamental sense. I grew up in a middle-class family in Mumbai. My father was a chemical engineer; my mother, an office secretary. I was raised without great luxury, but neither did I lack for anything. My standard of living in America is higher, but it is not a radical difference. My life has changed far more dramatically in other ways.

If I had remained in India, I would probably have lived most of my life within a five-mile radius of where I was born. I would undoubtedly have married a woman of my identical religious, socioeconomic, and cultural background. I would almost certainly have become a medical doctor, an engineer, or a software programmer. I would have socialized within my ethnic community and had cordial relations but few friends outside this group. I would have had a whole set of opinions that could be predicted; indeed, they would not have been very different from what my father believed, or his father before him. In sum, my destiny would, to a large degree, have been given to me.

Let me illustrate with the example of my sister in India who got married several years ago. My parents began the process of planning my sister's wedding by conducting a comprehensive survey of all the eligible families in our neighborhood. First, they examined primary criteria, such as religion, socioeconomic position, and educational background. Then my parents investigated subtler issues: the social reputation of the family, the character of the boy in question, rumors of a lunatic uncle, and so on. Finally, my parents were down to a dozen or so eligible families, and they were invited to our home for dinner with suspicious regularity. My sister was, in the words of Milton Friedman, "free to choose." My sister knew about, and accepted, the arrangement: She is now happily married with two children. I am not quarreling with the outcome, but clearly, my sister's destiny was, to a considerable extent, choreographed by my parents.

By coming to America, I have broken free from those traditional confines. I came to Arizona as an exchange

student, but a year later, I was enrolled at Dartmouth College. There I fell in with a group of students who were actively involved in politics; soon I had switched my major from economics to English literature. My reading included books like Plutarch's *Moralia*, *The Federalist Papers*, and Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*; they transported me to places a long way from home and implanted in my mind ideas that I had never previously considered. By the time I graduated, I had decided to become a writer, which is something you can do in America but which is not easy to do in India.

After graduating from Dartmouth, I became managing editor of a magazine and began writing freelance articles in newspapers. Someone in the Reagan Administration was apparently impressed with my work, because I was called in for an interview and hired as a senior domestic policy analyst. I found it strange to be working at the White House, because at the time I was not a United States citizen. I am sure that such a thing would not happen in India or anywhere else in the world. I also met my future wife during that time. She was born in Louisiana and grew up in San Diego; her ancestry is English, French, Scottish-Irish, and German.

If there is a single phrase that encapsulates life in the Third World, it is that birth is destiny. I remember an incident years ago when my grandfather summoned my brother, my sister, and me and asked us if we knew how lucky we were. Was it because we were intelligent? Had lots of friends? Were blessed with a loving family? Each time, he shook his head and said, "No." We pressed him: Why did he consider us so lucky? And finally he revealed his answer: "Because you are Brahmins."

The Brahmin is the highest ranking in the Hindu caste system and is traditionally a member of the priestly class. Actually, my family has had nothing to do with the priesthood. Nor are we Hindu: My ancestors converted to Christianity many generations ago. Even so, my grandfather's point was that before we converted, hundreds of years ago, our family used to be Brahmins. How he knew this remains a mystery, but he was insis-

tent that nothing the three of us achieved in life could possibly mean more than our being Brahmins.

This may seem like an extreme example, only revealing my grandfather to be a very narrow fellow indeed, but the broader point is that traditional cultures attach a great deal of importance to data such as what tribe you come from, whether you are male or female, and whether you are the eldest son. Your fate and your happiness hinge on these things. If you are Bengali, you can count on other Bengalis to help you and on others to discriminate against you. If you are female, then certain forms of society and several professions are closed to you. And if you are the eldest son, you inherit the family house, and your siblings are expected to follow your direction. What this means is that once your tribe, caste, sex, and family position have been established at birth, your life takes a course that has been largely determined for you.

In America, by contrast, you get to write your own script. When American parents ask, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” the question is not merely rhetorical, for it is you who supplies the answer. The parents offer advice or try to influence your decision: “Have you considered law school?” “Why not become the first doctor in the family?” It would be very improper, however, for them to try to force their decision on you. Indeed, American parents typically send their children away to college, where they can live on their own and learn to be independent. This is part of the process of developing your mind, deciding your field of interest, and forming your identity. What to be, where to live, whom to love, whom to marry, what to believe, what religion to practice—these are decisions that Americans make for themselves.

In America, your destiny is not prescribed; it is constructed. Your life is like a blank sheet of paper, and you are the artist. The freedom to be the architect of your own destiny is the force behind America’s worldwide appeal. Young people, especially, find the prospect of authoring the narrative of their own lives irresistible. So the immigrant, too, soon discovers that America will permit him to break free of the constraints that

had held him captive while offering the future as a landscape of his own choosing.

If there is a single phrase that captures this, it is the “pursuit of happiness.” Nobel laureate V. S. Naipaul analyses it in this way:

It is an elastic idea; it fits all men. It implies a certain kind of society, a certain kind of awakened spirit. So much is contained in it: the idea of the individual, responsibility, choice, the life of the intellect, the idea of vocation and perfectibility and achievement. It is an immense human idea. It cannot be reduced to a fixed system. It cannot generate fanaticism. But it is known to exist; and because of that, other, more rigid, systems in the end blow away.

THE ETHICS OF WORK

Capitalism gives America a this-worldly focus in which death and the afterlife recede from everyday view. The gaze of the people is shifted from heavenly aspirations to earthly progress. As such, work and trade have always been important and respectable in America. This “lowering of the sights” convinces many critics that American capitalism is a base, degraded system and that the energies that drive it are crass and immoral.

Historically, most cultures have despised the merchant and the laborer, regarding the former as vile and corrupt and the latter as degraded and vulgar. This attitude persists today in the Third World, and it is even commonplace in Europe. Oscar Wilde spoke for many Europeans when he commented that to have to scrub floors and empty garbage cans is depressing enough; to take *pride* in such things is absolutely appalling.

These modern critiques draw on some very old prejudices. In the ancient world, labor was generally despised, and in some cases even ambition was seen as reprehensible. Think about the lines from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*: “The noble Brutus hath told you Caesar was ambitious.” And here you might expect

Mark Antony to say, “And what’s wrong with that?” But he goes on: “If it were so, it was a grievous fault.”

In the cultures of antiquity, Western as well as non-Western, the merchant and the trader were viewed as low-life scum. The Greeks looked down on their merchants, and the Spartans tried to stamp out the profession altogether. “The gentleman understands what is noble,” Confucius writes in his *Analects*. “The small man understands what is profitable.” In the Indian caste system, the *vaisya* or trader occupies nearly the lowest rung of the ladder—one step up from the despised untouchable. The Muslim historian Ibn Khaldun argues that gain by conquest is preferable to gain by trade because conquest embodies the virtues of courage and manliness. In these traditions, the honorable life is devoted to philosophy or the priesthood or military valor. “Making a living” was considered a necessary but undignified pursuit. As Khaldun would have it, far better to rout your adversary, kill the men, enslave the women and children, and make off with a bunch of loot than to improve your lot by buying and selling stuff.

In America, it is different, and the American Founders are responsible for the change. Drawing on the inspiration of modern philosophers like John Locke and Adam Smith, the American Founders altered the moral hierarchy of the ancient world. They argued that trade based on consent and mutual gain was preferable to plunder. The Founders established a regime in which the self-interest of entrepreneurs and workers would be directed toward serving the wants and needs of others. In this view, the ordinary life, devoted to production, serving the customer, and supporting a family, is a noble and dignified endeavor. Hard work, once considered a curse, now becomes socially acceptable, even honorable. Commerce, formerly a degraded thing, becomes a virtue.

Of course, the Founders recognized that, in both the private and the public spheres, greedy and ambitious people might pose a danger to the well-being of others. Instead of trying to outlaw these passions, the Founders attempted a different approach. As James

Madison put it in *Federalist* 51, “Ambition must be made to counteract ambition.” The argument is that in a free society, “the security for civil rights must be the same as that for religious rights. It consists in the one case in the multiplicity of interests, in the other in the multiplicity of sects.” The framers of the Constitution reasoned that by setting interests against each other, by making them compete, no single one could become strong enough to imperil the welfare of the whole.

In the public sphere, the Founders took special care to devise a system that would prevent, or at least minimize, the abuse of power. To this end, they established limited government in order that the power of the state would remain confined. They divided authority between the national and state governments. Within the national framework, they provided for separation of powers so that the legislature, executive, and judiciary would each have its own domain of power. They insisted upon checks and balances, to enhance accountability.

In general, the Founders adopted a “policy of supplying, by opposite and rival interests, the defect of better motives,” as Madison said. This is not to say that the Founders ignored the importance of virtue, but they knew that virtue is not always in abundant supply. The Greek philosophers held that virtue was the same thing as knowledge—that people do bad things because they are ignorant—but the American Founders did not agree. Their view was closer to that of St. Paul: “The good that I would, I do not. The evil that I would not, that I do.” According to Christianity, the problem of the bad person is that his will is corrupted, and this is a fault endemic to human nature. The American Founders knew they could not transform human nature, so they devised a system that would thwart the schemes of the wicked and channel the energies of flawed persons toward the public good.

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

America has found a solution to religious and ethnic conflict. In many countries today, people from different faiths or tribes are engaged in bloody conflict:

Serbs and Croatians, Sikhs and Hindus, Hindus and Muslims, Irish Catholics and Irish Protestants, Jews and Palestinians, Hutu and Tutsi—the list of religious and ethnic combatants goes on and on. Even in countries where ethnic or religious differences do not lead to extreme violence, there is generally no framework for people to coexist harmoniously. In France and Germany, for example, nonwhite immigrants have proved largely indigestible. They form an alien underclass within Europe, and Europeans seem divided about whether to subjugate them or to expel them. One option that is not available to the nonwhite immigrants is to become full citizens. They cannot “become French” or “become German” because being French and German is a function of blood and birth. You become French by having French parents.

In America, things are different. Consider the example of New York City. It is a tumultuous place, teeming with diversity. New York has black and white, rich and poor, immigrant and native. I have noticed two striking things about these people. They are energetic, hard-working, opportunistic: They want to succeed and believe there is a good chance they can. Second, for all their profound differences, they manage somehow to get along. This raises a question about New York and about America: How does it manage both to reconcile such fantastic ethnic and religious and socioeconomic diversity and give hope and inspiration to so many people from all over the world?

The credit, I believe, goes largely to the American Founders. The Founders were all too familiar with the history of the religious wars in Europe, specifically their legacy of havoc and destruction. They were determined to avoid that bloodshed in the New World. Not that the Founders were anti-religion. On the contrary, they were religious men (some Deist, some orthodox Christian) who insisted that political legitimacy and rights derive from God. The Declaration of Independence, for instance, insists that the source of our rights is “our Creator.” It is because rights come from God, and not us, that they are “inalienable.”

Despite the religious foundation for the American

system of government, the Founders were determined not to permit theological differences to become the basis for political conflict. The solution they came up with was as simple as it was unique: separation of religion and government. This is not the same thing as religious tolerance. Think about what tolerance means. If I *tolerate* you, that implies I believe you are wrong: I *object* to your views, but I will *put up* with you. England had enacted a series of acts of religious toleration, but England also had an official church. The American system went beyond toleration in refusing to establish a national church and in recognizing that all citizens, as a matter of right, were free to practice their religion. As America’s first President, George Washington, put it in his letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island, of August 1790:

It is now that tolerance is no more spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.

One reason that separation of religion and government worked is that colonial America was made up of numerous, mostly Protestant sects. The Puritans dominated in Massachusetts; the Anglicans, in Virginia; the Catholics were concentrated in Maryland; and so on. No group was strong enough to subdue the others, and so it was in every group’s interest to “live and let live.” The ingenuity of the American solution is evident in Voltaire’s remark that where there is one religion, you have tyranny; where there are two, you have civil conflict; but where they are many, you have freedom.

A second reason the American Founders were able to avoid religious oppression and conflict is that they found a way to channel people’s energies away from theological quarrels and into commercial activity. The

American system is founded on property rights and trade, and *The Federalist* tells us that the protection of the unequal faculties of obtaining property is “the first object of government.” The logic of this position is best expressed by Samuel Johnson’s remark: “there are few ways in which a man is so innocently occupied than in getting money.” The Founders reasoned that people who are working assiduously to better their condition, people who are planning to make an addition to their kitchen and who are saving up for a vacation, are not likely to go around spearing their neighbors.

America has found a similar solution to the problem of racial and ethnic division: Do not extend rights to ethnic groups, only to individuals; in this way, all are equal in the eyes of the law, opportunity is open to everyone who can take advantage of it, and everybody who embraces the law and the American way of life can “become American.”

Of course, Americans have not always lived by these principles, and there are exceptions, such as affirmative action. Such policies remain controversial because, in a sense, they are un-American. In general, however, America is the only country in the world that extends full membership to outsiders. The typical American could go to India and stay for 40 years, perhaps even taking Indian citizenship, but he could not “become Indian.” Indians would not consider such a person Indian, nor would it be possible for him to think of himself in that way. In America, by contrast, millions of people come from all over the world, and over time most of them come to think of themselves as Americans. Their experience suggests that becoming Americans is less a function of birth or blood and more a function of embracing a set of ideas and a way of life.

Today in America, we see how the experiment that the Founders embarked upon two centuries ago has turned out. In American cities like New York, for example, tribal and religious battles, such as we see in Lebanon, Mogadishu, Kashmir, and Belfast, are nowhere in evidence. In Manhattan restaurants, white and African-American secretaries have lunch together. In Silicon Valley, Americans of Jewish and Pales-

tinian descent collaborate on e-commerce solutions and play racquetball after work. Hindus and Muslims, Serbs and Croatians, Turks and Armenians all seem to have forgotten their ancestral differences and joined the vast and varied parade of New Yorkers. Everyone wants to “make it,” to “get ahead,” to “hit it big.” And even as they compete, people recognize that, somehow, they are all in this together in pursuit of some great, elusive American dream.

IDEALS AND INTERESTS

America has the kindest, gentlest foreign policy of any great power in world history. America’s enemies are likely to respond to this notion with sputtering outrage. Their view is that America’s influence has been, and continues to be, deeply destructive and wicked. Many European, Islamic, and Third World critics—as well as many American leftists—make the point that the United States uses the comforting language of morality while operating according to the ruthless norms of power politics. To these critics, America talks about democracy and human rights while supporting ruthless dictatorships around the world. In the 1980s, for example, the U.S. supported Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua, the Shah of Iran, Augusto Pinochet in Chile, and Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines. Today, America is allied with unelected regimes in the Muslim world such as Pervez Musharaff in Pakistan, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, and the royal family in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the critics charge that America’s actions abroad, such as in the Gulf War and Iraq, were not motivated by noble humanitarian ideals but by the crass desire to guarantee American access to oil.

These charges contain an element of truth. In his book *White House Years*, Henry Kissinger says that America has no permanent friends or enemies, only interests. It is indeed true that American foreign policy seeks to protect America’s self-interest, but what is wrong with this? All it means is that the American people have empowered their government to act on their behalf against their adversaries. They have not

asked their government to remain neutral when their interests and, say, the interests of the Ethiopians come in conflict. It is unreasonable to ask a nation to ignore its own interests, because that is tantamount to asking a nation to ignore the welfare of its own people. Asked why he once supported the Taliban regime and then joined the American effort to oust it, General Musharraf of Pakistan coolly replied, "Because our national interest has changed." When he said this, nobody thought to ask any further questions.

Critics of U.S. foreign policy judge it by a standard applied to no one else. They denounce America for protecting its self-interest while expecting other countries to protect theirs. Americans need not apologize for their country acting abroad in a way that is good for them. Why should it act in any other way? Indeed, Americans can feel immensely proud about how often their country has served them well while simultaneously promoting noble ideals and the welfare of others. So, yes, America did fight the Gulf War *partly* to protect its access to oil, but *also* to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi invasion. American interests did not taint American ideals; just the opposite is true: The ideals dignified the interests.

But what about the United States backing Latin American, Asian, and Middle Eastern dictators such as Somoza, Pinochet, Marcos, and the Shah? It should be noted that, in each of these cases, the United States eventually turned against these dictatorial regimes and actively aided in its ouster. In Chile and the Philippines, the outcomes were favorable: The Pinochet and Marcos regimes were replaced by democratic governments that have so far endured. In Nicaragua and Iran, however, one form of tyranny promptly gave way to another. Somoza was replaced by the Sandinistas, who suspended civil liberties and established a Marxist-style dictatorship, and the Shah of Iran was replaced by a harsh theocracy presided over by the Ayatollah Khomeini.

These outcomes help to highlight a crucial principle of foreign policy: the principle of the lesser evil. It means that one should not pursue a thing that seems

good if it is likely to result in something worse. A second implication of this doctrine is that one is usually justified in allying with a bad guy in order to oppose a regime that is even more terrible. The classic example of this was in World War II. The United States allied with a very bad man, Josef Stalin, in order to defeat someone who posed an even greater threat at the time: Adolf Hitler. Once the principle of the lesser evil is taken into account, many of America's alliances with tinpot dictators become defensible. America allied with these regimes to win the Cold War. If one accepts what is today almost a universal consensus—that the Soviet Union was an "evil empire"—then the United States was right to attach more importance to the fact that Marcos and Pinochet were reliably anti-Soviet than to the fact that they were autocratic thugs.

None of this is to excuse the blunders and mistakes that have characterized U.S. foreign policy over the decades. Unlike the old colonial powers—the British and the French—the Americans seem to have little aptitude for the nuances of international politics. Part of the problem is America's astonishing ignorance of the rest of the world. About this, the critics of the United States are correct. They have also played a constructive role in exposing America's misdoings. Here each person can develop his own list: longstanding U.S. support for a Latin American despot, or the unjust internment of the Japanese-Americans during World War II, or America's reluctance to impose sanctions on South Africa's apartheid regime. There is ongoing debate over whether the United States was right to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

However one feels about these cases, let us concede to the critics that America is not always in the right. What the critics completely ignore, however, is the other side of the ledger. Twice in the 20th century, the United States saved the world: first from the Nazi threat, then from Soviet totalitarianism. After destroying Germany and Japan in World War II, America proceeded to rebuild both nations, and today they are close allies. Now the United States is helping Afghanistan and Iraq on the path to political stability and eco-

conomic development. (What this tells us is that North Vietnam's misfortune was to win the war against the United States. If it had lost, it wouldn't be the impoverished country it is now, because America would have helped to rebuild it and to modernize it.)

Consider, too, how magnanimous the United States has been to the former Soviet Union since the Cold War. And even though the United States does not have a serious military rival in the world today, it has not acted in the manner of regimes that have historically occupied this enviable position. For the most part, America is an abstaining superpower: it shows no interest in conquering and subjugating the rest of the world. (Imagine how the Soviets would have acted if they had won the Cold War.) On occasion, the U.S. intervenes to overthrow a tyrannical regime or to halt massive human rights abuses in another country, but it never stays to rule that country. In Grenada and Haiti and Bosnia, the United States got in and then got out.

Moreover, when America does get into a war, it is supremely careful to avoid targeting civilians and to minimize collateral damage. During the military campaign against the Taliban, U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld met with theologians to make sure that America's actions were in strict conformity with "just war" principles; and even as America bombed the Taliban's infrastructure and hideouts, its planes dropped rations of food to avert hardship and starvation on the part of Afghan civilians. What other country does these things?

Jeane Kirkpatrick once said, "Americans need to face the truth about themselves, no matter how pleasant it is." The reason that many Americans don't feel this way is because they judge themselves by a higher standard than anyone else. Americans are a self-scrutinizing people: Even when they have acted well in a given situation, they are always willing to examine whether they could have acted better. At some subliminal level, everybody knows this. Thus, if the Chinese, the Arabs, or the sub-Saharan Africans slaughter 10,000 of their own people, the world utters a collective sigh and resumes its normal business. We sadly

expect the Chinese, the Arabs, and the sub-Saharan Africans to do these things. By contrast, if America, in the middle of a war, accidentally bombs a school or a hospital and kills 200 civilians, there is an immediate uproar followed by an investigation. What all this demonstrates, of course, is the evident moral superiority of American foreign policy.

AMERICA'S VIRTUE

America, the freest nation on earth, is also the most virtuous nation on earth. This point seems counterintuitive, given the amount of conspicuous vulgarity, vice, and immorality in America. Islamic critics of America, such as the Egyptian philosopher Sayyid Qutb, argue that America has descended into what he terms *jahiliyya*—a condition of social chaos, moral diversity, sexual promiscuity, polytheism, unbelief, and idolatry that supposedly characterized the Bedouin tribes before the advent of Islam.

Qutb attacks the American system at the roots. He insists that American institutions are fundamentally atheistic; that is, they are based on a clear rejection of divine authority. Qutb charges that American democracy is based on the presumption that the people, not God, should rule and that American capitalism is based on the premise that the market, not God, determines worth. Both democracy and capitalism are, in Qutb's view, forms of idol worship.

Qutb's alternative to this is Islamic theocracy—a society in which not only religious, but also economic, political, and civil rules are based on the Koran and the Islamic "holy law." Islam doesn't just regulate religious belief and practice; it covers such topics as the administration of the state, the conduct of war, the making of treaties, and the laws governing divorce and inheritance, as well as property rights and contracts. The Islamic way is the best way, according to Qutb, because it places human life in submission to the infallible authority of God.

It is easy to dismiss Qutb as an ideologue or a religious fanatic—he has been called "the brains behind Bin Laden"—but we should examine his claims

because behind the physical attacks of the terrorists is also an intellectual attack. Qutb's views help us to understand a powerful strand of radical Islam, and underlying Qutb's accusations is a powerful claim. America, he argues, is based on freedom, and freedom is often used badly. Islamic society, he says, is based on virtue. It may be imperfect, but here in the Islamic world, he claims, we are trying to implement the will of God, and that makes us morally superior to the United States.

This argument cannot be rebuked by insisting, as many American leaders and pundits have, that America is prosperous, America is pluralistic, America extends rights to women, and so on. The critics would concede all this but dismiss it as worthless trivia. The point is that of course America does those things, but they are not the most important things to do. The most important goal of a society is to develop the virtue or character of its citizens. For all its accomplishments, Qutb contends, America does not do that. The case against America is that it is materially prosperous but morally rotten.

The Islamic radicals' argument against America finds some corroboration in the claims of some cultural conservatives who worry that America used to be a good country but isn't one anymore. This is the implication of Robert Bork's *Slouching Toward Gomorrah*. The rhetoric of some cultural conservatives seems to suggest that Islamic critics of America have a point. "They are right about the degradation of American culture," one cultural conservative sighed. "If they agree to stop bombing our buildings in exchange for us sending them Jerry Springer to do with as they like, we should certainly make the trade."

If this were all there was to it, we should make the trade and throw in some of Springer's guests, but Islamic radicals are not just objecting to the excesses of American culture. They are objecting to the core principle of America: the idea of the self-directed life. The Islamic activists seek a society where the life of the citizen is directed by others, whereas American is a nation where the life of the citizen is largely self-directed.

In a sense, the argument of the Islamic radicals is substantially the same as the one made by Plato and other classical philosophers who argued that the best regime is devoted to inculcating virtue. Plato's point is that the ideal arrangement for a society is to have the wisest citizens rule. No one can be against this, especially in view of the alternative, which is rule of the unwise. And in Plato's view, the wisest people are the philosophers. Plato's case against democracy is that it mistakes quantity for quality; it prefers the choices of the uninformed multitude to those who really know what they are doing.

We have to concede that, in theory, Plato and the Islamic radicals are on to something. Every society should seek to be ruled by its best people; and to take the point further, who would make a better and more just ruler than an omniscient God? Moreover, it would be silly to insist that God issues laws or rules; better to let Him decide each case on its merits. Nor is there any question of God submitting to an election or popular referendum. Why should divine wisdom, which is infallible, be subject to the consent of the unwise?

But let us not be hasty in trying to implement these schemes. Even as we concede in principle the validity of the doctrine articulated by Plato, it cannot escape our notice that he has not given us a portrait of an actual city. Rather, his is a "city in speech," a utopia; even Plato does not expect to see it realized. There exist, however, Islamic theocracies. The Taliban had one in Afghanistan, and other Muslim countries, notably Iran, operate on the premise that they are being ruled by Allah's decrees. But far from being replicas of paradise on earth, these places seem to be characterized by widespread misery, discontent, tyranny, and inequality. Is God, then, such an incompetent ruler?

In reality, Iran is not ruled by God; it is ruled by politicians and mullahs who claim to act on God's behalf. Right away, we see the two problems with the Islamic radicals' doctrine. First, Allah's teaching must be divined or interpreted by man, and this raises the question of whether the revelation is authentic and the interpretation accurate. Second, people inevitably dis-

agree over what Allah meant, or about how his edict applies in a given situation, so there must be some human means of adjudicating the conflict. In some cases, people may even reject Allah, preferring the wisdom of the Christian God or of their own minds. What is to be done with them?

Islam's solution—like that of medieval Christianity—is one of compelling the dissidents and the non-believers to conform to religious authority, which is enforced by the ruling powers. Through an elaborate system of Koranic law, precedent, and tradition, Islamic societies seek to apply divine wisdom to a multitude of situations. Since no law, however detailed, can anticipate every human circumstance, in practice this approach places divine authority at the discretion of mullahs and other authorities who can use it to have people fined, jailed, flogged, dismembered, or killed. Such sentences are quite common in Islamic societies. As for religious dissenters and nonbelievers, Islamic societies have traditionally dealt with them with predictable severity. Islamic rulers required Christians and Jews to pay a special tax and agree to a whole set of religious and social restrictions that effectively made them second-class citizens. As for atheists, polytheists, and apostates, Islamic rulers gave them a simple choice: Accept Allah or be killed.

The American Founders were strongly opposed to these harsh "solutions"; indeed, they did not consider them to be solutions at all. In the Founders' view, there is no reason to assume that the rulers of a society will be any less self-interested or any more virtuous than the people. On the contrary, they are the ones who are most susceptible to being corrupted because power carries with it the temptation to abuse. Therefore, the American Founders emphasized not the regulation of public virtue but the limiting of the power of the rulers.

How did they do this? The Founders took special care to devise a system that would prevent, or at least minimize, the abuse of power. To this end, they established limited government in order that the power of the state would remain confined. They divided authority between the national and state governments. Within

the national framework, they provided for separation of powers so that the legislature, executive, and judiciary would each have its own domain of power. They insisted upon checks and balances to enhance accountability. In general, the Founders sought to limit the abuse of power by adopting a "policy of supplying, by opposite and rival interests, the defect of better motives."

Perhaps the Founders can be credited with effectively checking the power of rulers, but what of Sayyid Qutb and the Islamic radicals' contention that the American regime is indifferent to the virtue of its citizens? I wish to conclude by suggesting that this is the point on which the Islamic radicals are most decisively wrong. Not only is the American system conducive to producing more virtue than the Islamic regimes favored by the radicals, but virtue exists only in the kind of free society that we find in America. In theocratic and authoritarian societies, virtue is largely absent.

Let us concede at the outset that, in a free society, freedom will frequently be used badly. Freedom, by definition, includes freedom to do good or do evil, to act nobly or basely. Thus, we should not be surprised that there is a considerable amount of vice, licentiousness, and vulgarity in a free society. Given the warped timber of humanity, freedom is simply an expression of human flaws and weaknesses. The American Founders knew this.

But if freedom brings out the worst in people, it also brings out the best. The millions of Americans who live decent, praiseworthy lives deserve our highest admiration because they have opted for the good when the good is not the only available option. Even amid the temptations that a rich and free society offers, they have remained on the straight path. Their virtue has special luster because it is freely chosen. The free society does not guarantee virtue any more than it guarantees happiness. But it allows for the pursuit of both, a pursuit rendered all the more meaningful and profound because success is not guaranteed; it has to be won through personal striving.

By contrast, the externally directed life that Islamic fundamentalists seek undermines the possibility of

virtue. If the supply of virtue is insufficient in self-directed societies, it is almost nonexistent in externally directed societies because coerced virtues are not virtues at all. Consider the woman who is required to wear a veil. There is no modesty in this, because the woman is being compelled.

Compulsion cannot produce virtue; it can only produce the outward semblance of virtue. And once the reins of coercion are released, as they were for the terrorists who lived in the United States, the worst impulses of human nature break loose. Sure enough, the deeply religious terrorists spent their last days in gambling dens, bars, and strip clubs, sampling the licentious lifestyle they were about to strike out against. In this respect, they were like the Spartans, who—Plutarch tells us—were abstemious in public but privately coveted wealth and luxury. In externally directed societies such as Iran, the absence of freedom signals the absence of virtue. Thus, the free society is not simply richer, more varied, and more fun: It is also morally superior to the externally directed society.

My conclusion is that America is the greatest, freest, and most decent society in existence. It is an oasis of

goodness in a desert of cynicism and barbarism. This country, once an experiment unique in the world, is now the last best hope for the world. By making sacrifices for America and by our willingness to die for her, we bind ourselves by invisible cords to those great patriots who fought at Yorktown, Gettysburg, and Iwo Jima, and we prove ourselves worthy of the blessings of freedom. By defeating the terrorist threat posed by Islamic radicalism, we can protect the American way of life while once again redeeming humanity from a global menace. History will view America as a great gift to the world, a gift that Americans today must preserve and cherish.

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