

FROM A IMMIGRANT 10 Things to Celebrate about being an American

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America is under attack as never before -- not only from terrorists but also from people who provide a justification for terrorism. Islamic fundamentalists declare America the Great Satan. Europeans rail against American capitalism and American culture. South American activists denounce the United States for "neocolonialism" and oppression.

Anti-Americanism from abroad would not be such a problem if Americans were united in standing up for their own country. But in this country itself, there are those who blame America for most of the evils in the world. On the political left, many fault the United States for a history of slavery, and for continuing inequality and racism. Even on the right, traditionally the home of patriotism, we hear influential figures say that America has become so decadent that we are "slouching towards Gomorrah."

If these critics are right, then America should be destroyed. And who can dispute some of their particulars? This country did have a history of slavery and today, some racism continues to exist. There is much in our culture that is vulgar and decadent. But the critics are wrong about America, because they are missing the big picture. In their indignation over the sins of America, they ignore what is unique and good about American civilization.

As an immigrant who has chosen to become an American citizen, I feel especially qualified to say what is special about America. Having grown up in a different society -- in my case, Bombay, India -- I am not only able to identify aspects of America that are invisible to the natives, but I am acutely conscious of the daily blessings that I enjoy in America. Here, then, is my list of the 10 great things about America.

-- America provides an amazingly good life for the ordinary guy. Rich people live well everywhere. But what distinguishes America is that it provides an impressively high standard of living for the "common man." We now live in a country where construction workers regularly pay \$4 for a nonfat latte, where maids drive nice cars and where plumbers take their families on vacation to Europe.

Indeed, newcomers to the United States are struck by the amenities enjoyed by "poor" people. This fact was dramatized in the 1980s when CBS television broadcast a documentary, "People Like Us," intended to show the miseries of the poor during an ongoing recession. The Soviet Union also broadcast the documentary, 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 TV sets, microwave ovens and cars. They arrived at the same perception that I witnessed in an acquaintance of mine from Bombay who has been unsuccessfully trying to move to the United States. I asked him, "Why are you so eager to come to America?" He replied, "I really want to live in a country where the poor people are fat."

-- America offers more opportunity and social mobility than any other country, including the countries of Europe. America is the only country that has created a population of "self-made tycoons." 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, the shaper of the technology industry, and a billionaire to boot. Admittedly tycoons are not typical, but no country has created a better ladder than America for people to ascend from modest circumstances to success.

-- Work and trade are respectable in America. Historically most cultures have despised the merchant and the laborer, regarding the former as vile and corrupt and the latter as degraded and vulgar. Some cultures, such as that of ancient Greece and medieval Islam, even held that it is better to acquire things through plunder than through trade or contract labor. But the American founders altered this moral hierarchy. They established a society in which the life of the businessman, and of the people who worked for him, would be a noble calling. In the American view, there is nothing vile or degraded about serving your customers either as a CEO or as a

waiter. The ordinary life of production and supporting a family is more highly valued in the United States than in any other country. America is the only country in the world where we call the waiter "sir," as if he were a knight.

-- 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 and it is, if anything, more prevalent today. For all his riches, Bill Gates could not approach the typical American and say, "Here's a \$100 bill. I'll give it to you if you kiss my feet." Most likely, the person would tell Gates to go to hell! The American view is that the rich guy may have more money, but he isn't in any fundamental sense better than anyone else.

-- People live longer, fuller lives in America. Although protesters rail against the American version of technological capitalism at trade meetings around the world, in reality the American system has given citizens many more years of life, and the means to live more intensely and actively. In 1900, the life expectancy in America was around 50 years; today, it is more than 75 years. Advances in medicine and agriculture are mainly responsible for the change. This extension of the life span means more years to enjoy life, more free 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, including remarriage and sexual gratification, with a zeal that I find unnerving.

-- In America the destiny of the young is not given to them, but created by them. 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 remained in India, I would probably have lived my whole life within a five-mile radius of where I was born. I would undoubtedly have married a woman of my identical religious and socioeconomic background. I would almost certainly have become a medical doctor, or an engineer, or a computer programmer. I would have socialized entirely within my ethnic community. I would have a whole set of opinions that could be predicted in advance; indeed, they would not be 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.

In America, I have seen my life take a radically different course. In college I became interested in literature and politics, and I resolved to make a career as a writer. I married a woman whose ancestry is English, French, Scotch-Irish, German and American Indian. In my twenties I found myself working as a policy analyst in the White House, even though I was not an American citizen. No other country, I am sure, would have permitted a foreigner to work in its inner citadel of government.

In most countries in the world, your fate and your identity are handed to you; in America, you determine them for yourself. America is a country where you get to write the script of your own life. Your life is like a blank sheet of paper, and you are the artist. This notion of being the architect of your own destiny is the incredibly powerful idea that is behind the worldwide appeal of America. Young people especially find irresistible the prospect of authoring the narrative of their own lives.

-- America has gone further than any other society in establishing equality of rights. There is nothing distinctively American about slavery or bigotry. Slavery has existed in virtually every culture, and xenophobia, prejudice and discrimination are worldwide phenomena. Western civilization is the only civilization to mount a principled campaign against slavery; no country expended more treasure and blood to get rid of slavery than the United States. While racism remains a problem, this country has made strenuous efforts to eradicate discrimination, even to the extent of enacting policies that give legal preference in university admissions, jobs, and government contracts to members of minority groups. Such policies remain controversial, but the point is that it is extremely unlikely that a racist society would have permitted such policies in the first place. And surely

African Americans like Jesse Jackson are vastly better off living in America than they would be if they were to live in, say, Ethiopia or Somalia.

-- America has found a solution to the problem of religious and ethnic conflict that continues to divide and terrorize much of the world. Visitors to places like New York are amazed to see the way in which Serbs and Croats, Sikhs and Hindus, Irish Catholics and Irish Protestants, Jews and Palestinians, all seem to work and live together in harmony. How is this possible when these same groups are spearing each other and burning each other's homes in so many places in the world?

The American answer is twofold. First, separate the spheres of religion and government so that no religion is given official preference but all are free to practice their faith as they wish. Second, do not extend rights to racial or ethnic groups but only to individuals; in this way, all are equal in the eyes of the law, opportunity is open to anyone who can take advantage of it, and everybody who embraces the American way of life can "become American."

Of course there are exceptions to these core principles, even in America. Racial preferences are one such exception, which explains why they are controversial. But in general, America is the only country in the world that extends full membership to outsiders. The typical American could come to India, live for 40 years, and take Indian citizenship. But he could not "become Indian." He wouldn't see himself that way, nor would most Indians see him that way. In America, by contrast, hundreds of millions have come from far-flung shores and over time they, or at least their children, have in a profound and full sense "become American."

-- America has the kindest, gentlest foreign policy of any great power in world history. Critics of the United States are likely to react to this truth with sputtering outrage. They will point to long-standing American support for a Latin or Middle Eastern despot, or the unjust internment of the Japanese during World War II, or America's reluctance to impose sanctions on South Africa's apartheid regime. However one feels about these particular cases, let us concede to the critics the point that America is not always in the right.

What the critics leave out 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. What would have been the world's fate if America had not existed? After destroying Germany and Japan in World War II, the United States proceeded to rebuild both countries, and today they are American allies. Now we are doing the same thing in Afghanistan and Iraq. Consider, too, how magnanimous the United States has been to the former Soviet Union after its victory in the Cold War. For the most part America is an abstaining superpower; it shows no real 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 United States 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, Haiti and Bosnia, the United States got in and then it got out. Moreover, when America does get into a war, as in Iraq, its troops are supremely careful to avoid targeting civilians and to minimize collateral damage. Even as America bombed the Taliban infrastructure and hideouts, U.S. planes dropped food to avert hardship and starvation of Afghan civilians. What other country does these things?

-- 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. Some Islamic fundamentalists argue that their regimes are morally superior to the United States because they seek to foster virtue among the citizens. Virtue, these fundamentalists argue, is a higher principle than liberty. Indeed it is. And let us admit that in a free society, freedom will frequently be used badly. Freedom, by definition, includes the freedom to do good or evil, to act nobly or basely. 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 of a rich and free society, they have remained on the straight path. Their virtue has special luster because it is freely chosen.

By contrast, the societies that many Islamic fundamentalists seek would eliminate the possibility of virtue. If the supply of virtue is insufficient in a free society like America, it is almost nonexistent in an unfree society like Iran's. The reason is that coerced virtues are not virtues at all. Consider the woman who is required to wear a veil. There is no modesty in this, because she is being compelled. Compulsion cannot produce virtue, it can only produce the outward semblance of virtue. Thus a free society like America's is not merely more prosperous, more varied, more peaceful, and more tolerant -- it is also morally superior to the theocratic and authoritarian regimes that America's enemies advocate.

"To make us love our country," Edmund Burke once said, "our country ought to be lovely." Burke's point is that we should love our country not just because it is ours, but also because it is good. America is far from perfect, and there is lots of room for improvement. In spite of its flaws, however, American life as it is lived today is the best life that our world has to offer. Ultimately America is worthy of our love and sacrifice because, more than any other society, it makes possible the good life, and the life that is good.

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