

America Is Still the Greatest, Hiccups and All

Written by Jack Sparacino

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"Lately, most Americans, regardless of their political leanings, have been asking themselves some version of the same question: How did we get here? How did the world's greatest democracy and economy become a land of crumbling roads, galloping income inequality, bitter polarization and dysfunctional government?"

. . . Although the U.S. remains the world's richest country, it has the third highest poverty rate among the 35 nations in the Organization for Economic Cooperation, behind only Turkey and Israel. Nearly 1 in 5 American children lives in a household that the government classifies as 'food insecure,' meaning they are without 'access to enough food for active, healthy living.'"

– Steven Brill, **Time** magazine, "How My Generation Broke America," 5/28/18

Well that's one way to look at it, Mr. Brill. Yet we live in the greatest country ever conceived, we Americans. No, we're not perfect. Not yet and I don't expect to live to see it. Regarding former PA congressman Charlie Dent's comment that "freedom does not come without a price," just don't tell me with each and every school massacre that those—usually children's—deaths are the price of gun ownership freedom or some other second amendment nonsense. Who thinks George Washington, John Adams and the rest of the Founding Fathers would abide by the regular drumbeat of school shooting deaths in America. No, not in Britain, not in France, not Greece or Norway or Canada or . . .

As for writer Alveda King opining that racism is alive and well in America, please allow me to make a confession. Shortly after being discharged from Beaufort Memorial's ER recently, I saw a young man asleep on a seat near the window. He was mid-20s perhaps, long blond hair, filthy and disheveled, bad complexion. White kid. What to do? He looked like he needed help so I alerted the front desk and was informed that he had been there all night after being discharged. She and a security fellow talked to this young man at some length, asking him if he had somewhere to go, where were his parents, etc., during which time I came over and gave him 25

bucks, for which he said he was most grateful. I nodded and left.

Jane picked me up and we headed for lunch. Arriving at the restaurant, we came upon a 40-ish, somewhat disheveled black man holding a clear plastic bag of odds and ends, maybe some socks, toiletries and a map—a bunch of small stuff. He asked me for five dollars, which I had and then some. Without thinking (like with the white kid) I said “not today, buddy” and he walked off. Over our lunch, which ran a whopping \$65, I wondered if my different reactions to the two men was racially based. Not consciously, little doubt about that, but the specter of race was staring me in the face with raised eyebrows and a quizzical look. “So, Jack, you’re not racist, are you? Maybe give that a little more thought.” OK, I’m still a work in progress.

Where was I? Oh yeah, we’re the greatest if still evolving. Here are some specific reasons for that, nothing to do with my helping a banged-up white kid. In no particular order:

1. The landscape and geography. Our national parks. Yes there are lovely countries aside from the U.S., such as France, Italy and Spain. But for sheer magnificence, our landscapes and parks are spectacular. From Central Park in Manhattan to the Golden Gate Bridge we’ve got it all, right here. I would encourage everyone with a little time and money to spare to get in their car, family dogs and all, and drive across this country. You’ll meet astounding people while your eyes bulge from your head as you take in the Grand Canyon, Mount Rushmore, and so much more. And no, you don’t need to ever settle for fast food or a lumpy mattress should you so choose.

2. Religious freedom. As a non-denominational spiritual person, I have grown ever more thankful that our country is as religiously diverse as it is. The sweet spot for me is a rocking choir in a Baptist church, but almost nowhere in America does one need to go very far without coming across a church that welcomes everyone that wants to attend a service. No pressure either way, just as our founding fathers envisioned.

3. Freedom of speech. This one is very personal to me, especially as a columnist encouraged to write about anything that interests me that our readers may likewise find engaging. Writing criticisms of our current president, in a red state no less, is a special privilege. It’s difficult to even imagine America without this basic freedom.

4. American music, food and movies. Well, not all movies, even those that win prizes. Like “The Shape of Water.” We just saw it, with high expectations, and were sorely disappointed. It was contrived, creepy, and lacking in sympathetic characters—including lizard man and his mute girlfriend. Sorry, girlfriend. But then we have great blues and rock artists like Sonny Landreth and Buddy Guy. As for food, you can get anything in this country, from perfect gumbo to stuffed lobster to prime rib. Who’s hungry?

5. American universities. We have the best, as proven by students coming here from all over the world. I myself was fortunate enough to go to one of the top ten universities in the

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world. Was it fun? Not so much but they taught me one heck of a lot of larnin'.

6. **The American dream.** We're still good here but it's taken a whale of a beating in recent years. Income disparities continue to deepen and being born to non-college educated parents puts a child at a lifelong disadvantage. The ladder is still there, though some of the steps have broken or fallen away. According to the *New York Times* and other sources, the richest 1 percent in the United States now own more wealth than the bottom 90 percent. Even worse perhaps, the lower-income 50 percent of the American population owned about 1.1 percent of the total wealth, while the 1 percent top-earners were in possession of about 35.5 percent of the wealth.

7. **Free elections.** The United States can boast perhaps the longest string of free and fair elections compared to any other nation. The Russian attack on our 2016 presidential election, however, is a wakeup call to everyone who cares about our democracy. No, it is not fake news thanks to Mr. Putin.

8. **Our never ending inventions and cures.** Silicon Valley, the Mayo Clinic, Dana Farber Cancer Institute, Sloan Kettering, the Cleveland Clinic, are just a sample of our stellar factories of excellence. How are you enjoying your smart phone? Your life after external beam radiation therapy for prostate cancer?

9. **The military.** We remain the undisputed international leader in military might. *The United States Navy, for example*

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has approximately 480
ships

in both active service and the reserve fleet, with approximately 70 more in either the planning and ordering. The advanced technology incorporated into their design is staggering.

10. **The rule of law.** Our court system and legal structure are essentially as strong as ever. Law enforcement continues to improve as police chiefs know where their opportunities lie.

Yes, there are times when tuning out the news is the best thing one can do to maintain mental well-being. But from 40,000 feet, we're still the champs. Take that, Russia and China. *Pow!*