

One Lap of America

5 January 2009

Last year I met a European traveler in Argentina who spent six weeks in the United States a few years earlier. His six week visit gave him, in his opinion, total understanding of the U.S.A., its culture, its customs, its history, its flaws and, especially, its people.

We just returned to South America after spending seven weeks back in the United States for the holidays. Our trip consisted of a seven week lap of America, starting in New York City, looping across the upper Midwest, a dip down to the south, out to southern California, and back across to Miami. Along the way, I sampled local media, had lots of conversations and cast a view upon the society from a different perspective, a deeply ingrained and highly familiar, but nonetheless “outside-looking-in” external perspective.

Having spent 49 of my 52 years living in the U.S., I probably have an advantage over the European traveler and his six weeks sample set conclusions. Nonetheless, I also came away with some distinct impressions of my home country, impressions perhaps only possible after living outside the U.S. for a time.

It is, after all, almost impossible to have a valid perspective on the fish bowl when you are swimming around inside it. Only by moving outside the fish bowl can you accurately describe some aspects about it.

Here are some of my thoughts about the current fish bowl of America, and the fish swimming inside it.

In my view, today's America is:

Over-stimulated

With the exception of the library, every single public space and every single private home was dominated by stimulation. Television was the prevalent form of stimulation, more rarely radio, and always, the ever-present cellular phones and Blackberrys (using the generic form of the term). The young text, the older email, the older still talk on their phones and they are all bombarded from all sides by stimulation, all day, every day, interrupted only by a few hours of fitful sleep during which their over-stimulated brains struggle to assimilate and process it all. Then they wake up and reach for some caffeine to begin the stimulation anew.

Over-regulated

One thing you don't notice or appreciate until it is removed from your life is the suffocating amount of regulation associated with daily life, commerce and business in America. Everything has stacks of regulations, certifications and compliances hidden behind the scenes. From dinner forks to golf clubs, nothing happens or is utilized in the U.S. without countless bureaucratic check-offs, approvals and licenses.

Indoctrinated

Truly independent thought, voice and action are the rarest of human attributes and experiences. They are nowhere rarer than in the current day U.S. Like their counterparts in Western Europe, the population is nearly completely indoctrinated to a few narrow viewpoints and accepted paths of thought, expression, activity and action. What passes for innovative, independent and creative alternatives are more often variations on the same core themes; expressed more colloquially, same song—different verse.

Materialistic

The people of the U.S. have yet to discover they can never be satiated by material goods; they have yet to realize the material acquisition itch can never be fully scratched. In the U.S., the acquisition of material goods isn't the most important thing; it is the only thing, as evidenced by the trampling death of a store worker opening the doors for the shopping rush on Black Friday. Black Friday, indeed.

Abdicated

The people of the United States have abdicated teaching their children morals, ethics and acceptable behavior to Hollywood; instilling and imposing rules of right and wrong behavior to their children to the schools; role models for their children to narcissistic and shallow celebrities; and even more tragically, governance of their localities, states and the country to a small, inbred and corrupt ruling class. What do the American people do instead of parenting their children and governing their society? They watch TV.

Polarized

The first victim of war is the truth and the first victim of partisanship is the national interest. There is so little of the national interest left alive, it would be a miracle if it could be resuscitated. The last three decades of polarized partisanship have elevated seekers of naked power and notoriety to the peaks of opinion and thought leadership. Celebrity now masquerades for credibility, and stoking the flames of blind partisan loyalty is the only requirement for political leadership. Almost no one speaks of what is good for the nation; what is good for their party and bad for the hated opposition is all that matters.

Obese

According to the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) most recent study (2005-2006), more than 34 percent of Americans, more than 72 million people, are obese. The prevalence of obesity has more than doubled since 1980. Since 1994 the number of people morbidly obese has doubled from three to six percent. In May 2008 the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reported 32 percent of American children were obese, with 11 percent morbidly obese. (While correlation does not equal causality, it is noteworthy that U.S. consumption rates of high fructose corn syrup (HFCS) strongly correlate with the rise in obesity over these same time periods.)

Post-developed

Humans are hard-wired for drama, as in "Honey, the saber-toothed tiger ate the kids," and for the existential struggle for survival. When life gets easy—as in flip the switch and the lights come on, turn the faucet and clean, safe water comes out—we replace those life-and-death elements with substitutes to fill those needs in our bodies and brains for the drama and struggle. People in developed nations tend to use proxies of false drama (television, sports, celebrities, gossip, etc.) and acquisition of material goods to fill those hard-wired needs of drama and struggle. The proxies are an inadequate substitute, so developed societies are filled with anxiety, neurosis and many unhappy people spending their lives seeking fulfillment via routes and methods that will never succeed. America is the poster child for this phenomenon.

Coastal

The business, media, popular culture, entertainment, and power structures of the U.S.A. are dominated by the coasts. Residents of the coasts often consider themselves a higher form of life, a more evolved human, than people from the "fly-over" states. Little do the coasties know that the "fly-over" states contain all that remains of what once constituted the ideals, character and culture of the country, of what formed and created the many forms of bountiful wealth that the coasties enjoy and believe they are entitled to. It is true that compared to television, Hollywood and Wall Street the "fly-over" states don't seem to have much that matters in today's America. But perhaps that comparison deserves a fresh look.

Blameless

While back in the states I read an article in the New York Times that identified the cause and responsibility of the financial and economic crisis—it is all the fault of the Chinese. After all, the article claimed, if the Chinese hadn't been willing to buy all those U.S. government bonds, thereby funding America's spendthrift ways, we never would have had a negative savings rate, purchased homes we couldn't afford, or run up galactic scale personal and national debt. That one story was the microcosm of one of the most important defining attributes of modern American culture: blamelessness. If an American walks up to a stranger on the street and shoots the stranger between the eyes, it is not the American's fault. There is always someone or something else to blame. In America's eyes, it is not the individual who is ever responsible for anything, it is always some external cause, person or entity that is to blame. Modern Americans are, above all else, personally and as a society, faultless, guiltless and blameless.

Financially Clueless

Every 24 hours the U.S.A. spends over \$2 billion more than it takes in. Every 24 hours the U.S.A. sends over \$914 million dollars overseas to buy oil. According to the U.S. Treasury, as of 30 January 2009 the U.S.A. had a public debt of \$10,632,005,246,736.97. That's more than \$10 trillion, with a t.

Broken

As a percentage of GNP, the U.S.A. spends more than any other industrialized nation on healthcare yet falls significantly short on many measures of public health, such as having a higher infant mortality rate than Cuba. In 2000 there was one lawyer for every 264 people in the U.S.A., yet the country faces society-survival level challenges that can only be solved by science and engineering, not litigation. In 2004 the U.S.A.'s K-12 education systems cost more than \$500 billion, 4.5 percent of GDP, yet our student's performance and knowledge compared to other industrialized countries continues to fall. In 2005, more than 25% of American eighth graders scored "below basic" in reading and more than 20% scored "below basic" in math. The 2008 presidential election cycle is estimated to have cost the country more than \$5.3 billion, yet we expect our elected leaders to act in the citizens' best interest rather than in the interests of those who paid that \$5.3 billion to win the reigns of power, influence and patronage. Many of the fundamental systems and structures of the U.S.A. are simply broken, and tinkering around the edges of the issues will not solve the problem.

Reactive

If I had to pick one characteristic that best describes America I would choose over-compensation. America does not plan ahead or act proactively. America reacts. And when America reacts, it almost always over reacts and over compensates. This is reflected in its tombstone model of governance—nothing happens until a bunch of tombstones pop up. Then it's Katy bar the door, we'll do whatever it takes to "ensure this never happens again." It's challenging to live, manage and govern in a modern world when, as a society, it is impossible to think or plan beyond the next day, week, month, or at the very limits, quarter.

Guideless

We happened to return to the states just after the terrorist attacks in Mumbai, India. To learn more about the attacks, I read a New York Times newspaper. Its coverage of the still fresh events consisted of one news story and a half-page reprint of blog posts on the topic. What once passed for journalism in America is dead, having been replaced by news-celebrities on television and the blogosphere, where credibility and loyalty is created by fervency and how bombastic the blogger is, not by facts. It is the ultimate irony that in an era where more Americans have access to more information than at any time in human history, they are very poorly informed and nearly entirely guideless when it comes to credible, fact-based, non-skewed, unfiltered information.

Self-absorbed

We get asked a lot out here why Americans seem so self-absorbed and out of touch with the world outside its borders. We patiently explain that the U.S. is so vast geographically you can spend a lifetime exploring its beauty and never run out of new places. We describe how the U.S. offers so much economic opportunity you can spend a career building businesses to serve unmet needs in the marketplace and never run out of unfilled niches. We enlighten them regarding the very limited amount of vacation time the average American enjoys, and how that limits their opportunities to explore the world. And lastly we point out that because in percentage terms almost no Americans experience the world first hand, Americans' world view is actually a media view. We show that Americans' perspectives and opinions about the world are essentially 100% a result of what someone else told them, not derived from direct evidence or personal experience. This filtered, packaged view of the world is how most Americans can be so tragically misinformed and indoctrinated about things ranging from religions to cultures to natural resources to energy to geopolitical agendas.

Unappreciated

It is a fundamental rule of human nature that you cannot miss what you never had. By the same token, it is impossible to fully appreciate what you've always had. The essential elements that make the U.S. the most desired life destination on the planet: liberty, freedom and opportunity, are simply incapable of being appreciated by almost every native born citizen. People who were born in the U.S. since WWII and have never spent any time in more repressive countries lack the ability to appreciate what they enjoy as basic elements of their existence. They consider them entitlements rather than privileges that must be earned and protected.

Inventive

Somewhere between seven and eight out of every 10 health care innovations, inventions and discoveries in the last 70 years came from America. American innovation and inventiveness didn't stop with the airplane, the light bulb or the mass produced automobile. Americans remain a creative people, constantly thinking up new ways to solve new problems. This is a good thing, because the challenges of the next few decades will need every bit of Yankee ingenuity we've got.

Unique

The United States of America remains a singular place, a unique nation on the planet Earth. There is no other nation that combines its republic form of government, constitution and bill of rights along with its society of immigrants. There is no other nation whose most important strengths and attributes arise from the combination of people from all over the world coming to one place and relishing its freedoms and seeking its opportunities. Everywhere we go in the world people express a desire to come to America. We've yet to meet anyone who wanted to live in China, Russia or even Europe. They all, every single one of them, wanted to come to America. They want to come and live, if even for only a moment, in a place where they are free to speak, free to worship, free to associate, free to seek opportunity and free to seek happiness. It is an irony that the uniqueness of America, the incredible, irreplaceable treasure that is America, is so blatantly obvious to everyone on the planet except most Americans.

We only had seven weeks back in the states to soak it in and compare the current reality with our lifetime of memories and experiences there. We only had seven weeks to form opinions and observations. And as with the European traveler I met in Argentina, six or seven weeks will never be long enough to learn everything, or in his tragic case, much of anything. But, in my case at least, it was long enough to learn enough about what the country is today.

Most fortunately, Americans are a very resilient, adaptive and inventive people. Other than perhaps their own potentially fatal myopia, I don't think there is a single challenge that they cannot overcome.

One Lap of America



Photo by Jorge Valdes

Douglas and Stephanie Hackney, a son and daughter of America, are on a two to three year global overland expedition.

You can learn more about their travels at: <http://www.hackneys.com/travel>