

Great America

--Larry Robinson

America is a great country; not that we don't have our share of problems. We do. In fact our problems are great also. But the source of our greatness is greatly misunderstood.

Are we great because we can kick butt? Because our military machine - with a budget equal to that of the rest of the world combined - can successfully invade and conquer any third world nation we choose?

Are we great because we are capable of consuming the lion's share of the world's resources? Because we have more billionaires than any other country? Because we can choose among 300 television stations or buy anything we want at WalMart?

I don't think so. America's greatness derives from its people and its ideas. We are great because of people like Tom Paine and his vision of a self-governing populace free from the tyranny of kings, corporations and churches; people like Thomas Jefferson who insisted on a Bill of Rights in our Constitution to ensure those freedoms we too often take for granted - those very freedoms which our President and Attorney General now tell us we must surrender for our own safety.

We are great because of people like Sojourner Truth, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and countless others who fought for universal suffrage; people like Frederick Douglass, John Brown, Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. who held an enduring vision of the worth and dignity of all people.

We are great because of people like Dorothy Day, Bill Haywood, Phillip Randolph, John L. Lewis, Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta and the thousands of union organizers who fought for and gave us the forty-hour work week, an end to child labor, workers health and safety laws, the minimum wage and many other rights we now take for granted. These rights were not granted by benevolent corporations or by an altruistic government, but by the perseverance, suffering and deaths of so many forgotten working men and women.

We are great because of the hard work and risk-taking of generations of family farmers; because of the ingenuity and enterprise of small business owners and entrepreneurs; because of the blood, sweat and tears of millions of immigrants working for a better life. The wealth of this nation, which is being now being transferred - at an unprecedented rate - from the middle and working classes to the very wealthiest, derives ultimately from our abundant natural resources and from our own hard work.

We are great because of our faith in both individual ability and our collective capacity to solve our common problems and to work for the common good. We are great because of a long tradition of voluntary public service. Throughout this country, in every community there are those who give their time to school boards or planning commissions, to homeless shelters or services for the disadvantaged, to environmental causes or local arts councils. They give their time and money out of a commitment to a better world, not because they expect some private gain.

We are great because of our commitment to free education for all children; because of our tradition of free public libraries. We are willing to tax ourselves, even if we have no school-age children ourselves, to support the community good.

We are great because of our willingness to welcome newcomers who bring a vitality and enlivening richness to our cultural mix; because of our tolerance for differences and our openness to new ideas; because of our willingness to cooperate and our reluctance to take orders; because of our mistrust of authority, whether sacred or secular; because of our sense of fair play and our hatred of injustice and oppression.

These are real American values - even though we often fall short in practice - the spiritual current which has run through us to make a beacon of hope for the world.

But all things have a shadow. Indeed, the closer to the light an object is, the greater the shadow it casts. The shadow side of freedom, for instance, is license - the false belief that we are not subject to the consequences of our actions. Simply doing whatever you want whenever you want is a form of addiction, not true freedom. Forgetting that every right implies a responsibility, we can confuse rights with entitlement. In this we are diminished.

We are diminished by the use of military power to impose our will on other nations; by military and financial support for regimes which oppress and brutalize their own people; by overt and covert actions of our government to overthrow democratically elected governments in order to support commercial interests; by our failure to accord citizens of other countries the human rights we expect for ourselves.

We are diminished by the widening gap between the haves and the have-nots; by our tolerance of homelessness and unemployment; by the wholesale dismantling of our social safety net and of our public school system; by our growing private wealth at the expense of our commonwealth; by our commitment to getting more than we give; by our selfishness and our greed.

We are diminished by our apathy in the face of the corporate takeover of our political process and of our entire culture; by our willingness to overlook the exploitation of workers in third world countries so that we can buy cheaper consumer goods; by our failure to protest the hijacking of the American dream.

We are diminished by our fear of “the other”; by our intolerance for dissent or difference; by our retreat from community into our own isolated and gated worlds; by our passive acceptance of predigested opinions and our reluctance to question what we are fed by the corporate media.

We are diminished by every hungry child anywhere on earth; by every family who lacks adequate health care; by the continued existence of slavery; by every rape of a woman and every act of racial intolerance or violence; by the pollution of our air and waters; by our collusion in the destruction of this planet.

More than anything else, we are diminished by pride. Consider the bumper stickers “Proud To Be An American.” Some people have, indeed, worked hard to become Americans. But the rest of us didn’t do anything to become Americans; we simply had the great good fortune to be born here. Can you imagine someone saying “I’m so proud that I won the lottery”?

We have too often confused the effects of greatness with its causes and the gifts of fate with just desserts. Pride is the absence of gratitude.

Christianity, with good reason, has long considered pride to be the first of the seven deadly sins. In ancient Greece, the word for pride was hubris, which was associated with a dangerous arrogance and was, inevitably followed by nemesis, the great downfall.

Most, though by no means all, Americans have much to be grateful for. Yet our unquestioning assumption of privilege is arguably the greatest threat to our national security and well-being because it blinds us to our collusion in perpetuating the injustices which breed hatred, desperation and, ultimately, terrorism.

America's true greatness is still to be realized. We are living in a time where greed is glorified and power is worshipped as a god. Hubris temporarily reigns triumphant, but its triumph never lasts. More than at any other time in our history we are being called to embody those qualities which make us great so that this nation "of the people, by the people and for the people shall not perish from this earth."