

The Greatest Country on Earth

by Bill Herbst

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In 2003, during the second U.S. war with Iraq, after the American military had entered Baghdad, I saw a brief interview on television with a young U.S. Marine private who was part of the occupation forces. I think I saw this on CNN, but it might have been any of the major news networks. The reporter asked the Marine — who was standing next to an Abrams tank holding his M-16 rifle — what he thought of Baghdad. The soldier, who appeared to be about 19 years old, thought for a minute, then replied: *"This is such a weird place. They don't even have MacDonald's here!"*

I thought, *"How telling."* This soldier was essentially just a kid who knew nothing about the cultural diversity of the world. His only experience was with the place he grew up — Idaho, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, Texas, Mississippi, or somewhere else in America, each of which once had reflected a distinct and recognizable regional flavor, but all of which had been effectively homogenized by the mass-market commercialization of modern America into a kind of ersatz sameness. It really didn't matter where he was from, because MacDonald's is a ubiquitous presence in every strip mall and miracle mile throughout the entire country. In earlier epochs of American history, people used the phrase *"as American as baseball and apple pie."* Now we might as well say, *"as American as MacDonald's."* That young soldier apparently knew next to nothing about any culture but his own.

I got another, stronger dose of that kind of limited perspective last year from President Trump, less than 24 hours after his meeting in Singapore with North Korea's Supreme Leader Kim Joon Un. When Trump was asked in the post-meeting press conference about possible future prospects that might be of benefit for North Korea, the President's response focused on economic improvement and included the following statements:

"As an example, they [North Korea] have great beaches. You see that whenever they're exploding their cannons into the ocean, right? So I said, 'Boy, look at that beach! Wouldn't that make a great condo behind?' And I explained and said [presumably to Kim Joon Un], 'You know, instead of doing that [firing cannons], you could have the best hotels in the world right there.' Think of it from a real estate perspective: You have South Korea, you have China, and they [North Korea] own the land in the middle. How bad is that, right? It's great!"

Ah yes. Trump the craven real estate developer and flinger of superlatives. The mogul of fake-gold-plated everything. Supplier to the rich of faux luxury that confirms their privilege, wealth, and status. Trump sees a beautiful beach and thinks immediately of the financial possibilities (and nothing else). What money-making deals he could cut on that!

I accept that we all react to life through the filters of our own individual experience. We may have many other thoughts and feelings about whatever life holds up to us, but we always connect back to our most basic perspectives. That's natural.

It's not too surprising that a 19-year-old Marine grunt might have a limited, parochial view of global culture. After all, he's essentially a baby, just a high school graduate who then joined up and went right into the military. It's more disconcerting, however, when the 71-year-old President of the United States (now 72) turns out to have a perspective that is, in its own way, equally parochial and even more limited.

Our presumption takes its most extreme, judgmental, encompassing, and (in my view) ridiculous form in the phrase "*America is the greatest country on earth.*"

I've heard that phrase uttered thousands of times since my childhood. I suppose I believed it when I was being indoctrinated as a middle-class white suburb kid in elementary school, but by the time of my late adolescence, when I was radicalized by the war in Vietnam, I stopped believing it and began to feel aggravated whenever I heard it. People kept saying it, however. They still do. And I feel more aggravated than ever each time I hear it.

It's not a question of whether the phrase is true or not. It's an opinion, not a fact, couched in the crudest possible rhetoric of American Exceptionalism.

Granted, it's standard that Presidents refer to the United States as "*the greatest country on earth.*" That's expected, and every President complies. But it's not just Presidents and other politicians that do it. It's everyone. Well, maybe not *everyone*, since many Americans aren't thrilled with this country for any number of reasons, from personal grievances to humanitarian concerns. But hardly a day passes when I don't see and hear some talking head on TV haul out that tawdry, shopworn phrase: "*America is the greatest country on earth.*"

I suppose this is the patriotic, national variant of the "We're Number One!" chant of territorial allegiance that infects sports fans, a kind of tribal bonding in feigned superiority, even though the celebration of ultimate victory is always temporary. It's like Queen's iconic and ironic pop song, "We are the Champions." Yes, it feels great to be a winner, but Life is about losing as much as (and actually much more than) winning. There is no spiritual maturity in lording it over others.

Throughout the 69 years of my lifetime, America has been undeniably the most *powerful* country on earth, and the case can be made that the U.S. has been overwhelmingly the dominant culture in the world. Especially during our first two centuries, America was The Promised Land, where the streets were paved with gold. Our country was envied by people around the globe for what we had — safety, freedom, wealth (although in truth, only some of us had those). OK, I get the idealism.

But *greatest*? The way Americans use that word in the phrase "*greatest country on earth*" doesn't mean just happy to be who we are. No, it means that we think we're the *best* — literally, *better* than any other country or people. And that strikes me as conceited, not to mention just plain silly. It's one thing to love your country. It's quite another thing to presume that it's the best.

Celebrating what we love about our country is understandable, and affirming what we believe to be good about it is also fine, but calling America "*the greatest country on earth*" is cringeworthy and downright unbecoming. Let others praise us. Doing so ourselves shrieks of a peculiarly American combination of unsophisticated naiveté, ego-based arrogance, and callow ignorance, making all too plain just how little so many Americans know about the diversity of culture and the world, as well as their own country, its history, and its actions. No wonder other countries tend to regard Americans as ugly rubes.

I'm not suggesting that the phrase be retired. That's not going to happen. Americans have said it for centuries and will continue to say it. My only real point is that it pains me every time I hear it, and I'm getting damned tired of that.