

Driving Through Disneyland: *Part One*

by Bill Herbst

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This week's Commentary is a repost of an essay I wrote in 2005, when I sent out a monthly newsletter to subscribers via email. That was in the days of a younger internet, before it succumbed to complete commercialization. Back then, Amazon had only recently begun to sell more than books online.

Times have changed, of course. Back in 2005, warnings from science were more about Peak Oil than Catastrophic Climate Change. Worries about the possible extinction of humanity were limited to the threat of nuclear war. At that point, President George W. Bush — remember him? — had already declared victory in Iraq ("Mission Accomplished"), but that had quickly proven woefully premature. In 2005, the Housing Bubble was reaching its manic peak, just before the collapse of the toxic mortgage scam, and the subsequent meltdown of the Big Investment Banks that caused the Great Recession was still three years away.

In 2019, those same Wall Street Leviathans have "recovered" and are still gripped by the insane pursuit of ever-larger profits through derivatives and other hocus-pocus financial shenanigans. The stock market has soared to dizzying heights of bogus over-valuation, the great divide of wealth inequality has reached staggering extremes, and America is now effectively a caste society of Haves and Have Nots. The Haves own and run everything, and the Have Nots are kept at least minimally compliant with opiates, consumerism, and narrative mind control.

2005 — a mere 14 years ago — now seems in hindsight almost innocent, a time before smart phones and social media (Facebook and YouTube were mere babies, Twitter didn't exist, and Google had just gone public and wasn't yet a verb). That was before the invasion of the algorithms and the takeover of America by the surveillance state (both governmental and commercial). It was long before the Presidency of Donald Trump or even Barack Obama.

Of all the essays I've written, this is far and away my favorite. I think it's held up pretty well in presaging some of what we're now struggling through. I've restored some text that I edited out of the original newsletter, but I haven't added anything new or changed any wording. Because it's long, I'll post it in two installments, this week and next.

America will fool you. Because we are an image-based culture that leans heavily on myth and archetype, and especially because we are addicted to television, America is vulnerable to crude stereotyping, even among ourselves. Falling into the error of oversimplifying who we are as a nation is all too easy.

In reality, America — like most cultures, and certainly like all great nations — is more complex than simple, more contradictory than straightforward, more

paradoxical than logical, and chock full of ironies so dense and thick they couldn't be cut with a sharp knife.

America's heart pulses to many themes. Among these is the classic Road Trip. Throughout our history, America has been expansive and on the move. Daniel Boone needed elbow room. Gold rushers chased imaginary fortunes. Immigrant farmers trudged west behind Conestoga Wagons. Trees were felled, mountains cut, and roads criss-crossed the land. We tried railroads first, but we are not a mass-transit nation (not yet, anyway). In the single largest construction project ever undertaken by human beings, the Interstate Highway System was built in the 1950s. Interstate highways are the continental Church of the Internal Combustion Engine, a 75-mph-conveyor-belt altar to our worship of oil, for which we now risk everything.

People in other countries migrate when necessary. Americans go on road trips for any damned reason we can think up. Families on vacation. Twenty-somethings with kinetic wanderlust. Mid-lifers getting away from it all. Seniors RVing. Relocations for that hoped-for better life. Daddy's got a new job in California. Put the house on the market and go. *"So they loaded up the truck and moved to Beverly Hills, that is. Swimmin' pools and movie stars."*

Of course, anyone with half a brain and a modicum of cosmic good sense knows that America is struggling through a period of dreadful backlash. Like individuals, cultures can suffer psychological breakdowns, essentially going mad for a time. They can turn inward in their madness, as China did during the 1960s. Or they can strike outward, like Germany in the 1930s, threatening the world. Both of these manifestations of national illness are occurring in America. We are now the greatest single threat to the future of humanity.

Dark forces have been unleashed in this country over the past half century, and we have lost our collective mind. Half the population is hypnotized by the propaganda; the other half is horrified or enraged at what is happening to us. Because corporate money controls nearly all large institutions, including politics and the news media, very few of those in power speak to the hard reality of our disturbed soul.

I've received a number of emails over the past year from newsletter readers of a certain metaphysical leaning who feel that I am stirring up fear and thus making things worse by my public writing, but I strongly disagree. To use the famous 1st Amendment free speech example, if I were yelling "Fire!" in a crowded theatre, I could rightly be accused of inducing panic. From where I sit, the theatre actually IS on fire, so I'm merely sharing with my readers the need to be prepared to head for the exits.

We started out essentially pissed off, since the Europeans who invaded the continent were basically religious malcontents and other troublemakers who

didn't appreciate being dominated and badly used by the rich and powerful elites in their birth countries, but we were also appreciably more sane than most of the older and more "civilized" (but altogether loonier) cultures of Europe and Asia, whose stratification and social rigidity had unhinged them over time. Once past our revolution, Americans used the good fortune of bountiful resources and relative isolation to great advantage. Though young and somewhat brash, we were responsible in our first century for much of the social and industrial progress that influenced the world. The paradoxes we embodied — the wish for unfettered freedom to pursue material wealth versus a concern for equality and social fairness — came to a head for the first time in the Civil War, which exposed a dark rift in the American psyche that has never healed.

In our second century, from about 1870 to 1970, we stepped boldly onto the stage of world affairs. We continued to be intensely aggressive, steadily building an empire, first on our own continent and later around the world. American attitudes toward people of color (meaning anyone not of caucasian, European stock) have always been racist. Our treatment of native AmerIndians was tragic, and our conquest of the Phillipinos was brutal.

And yet, we also served as a beacon of hope for millions around the globe. In spite of our own arrogant mythology about "American exceptionalism" (we were, many believed, the "chosen" nation, the "shining city on the hill"), America did, in fact, promote a brand of internal liberty and social equality for many of her citizens that had never been seen before in all of human history. Our underbelly of bigotry was countered by a strong progressive commitment to reform human civilization for the better.

Decency and compassion were more than mere myth; they were often in evidence as part of the American social fabric. Justice was not always well-served, but it was at least POSSIBLE here in America, and that mattered, both materially and spiritually. Although many first-generation immigrants sacrificed intensely and some found their hopes and dreams dashed, the sons and daughters of those immigrants frequently did very well. Having a good life with adequate work, enough money to own a home, and the freedom to worship (or not) as one chose was literally more possible in America than elsewhere.

Americans pulled through the Great Depression and mobilized an astonishing industrial energy in World War II. Though we failed to appreciate the extraordinary, almost unbelievable sacrifice of the Russian people in defeating Nazi Germany, that victory could not have been achieved without our industrial might. Having completed our own revenge on Japan, we emerged from the war relatively unscathed as the dominant world power.

America is all Disneyland now. One great, encompassing fantasy theme park, from shore to teeming shore. The whole country is a giant Hollywood back-lot. Like eager beavers or colonies of ants, we modern humans are industrious

builders, but not for permanence. Other, older cultures necessarily built for the ages — the Pyramids of Egypt, the Coliseum in Rome, the Great Wall of China, Machu Picchu in Peru. Americans build for the moment, especially these days. Precious few of our most impressive works will stand the test of time. In a thousand years, our skyscrapers and buildings, highways and bridges, dams and towers all will decay, crack, and crumble to dust. Curiously, our engineering and construction feats most likely to endure are the massive caves and missile silos carved out for America's Cold War national defense. Rather than evidence of our flowering art or fruitful commerce, we will leave behind burrowed expressions of fear.

When I announced to my friends that I was leaving Minnesota and moving to Olympia, Washington, they all said the same thing with the echo of a Greek Chorus: "Billy, you've got a 14-year-old Saab that's held together with spit and bailing wire. Don't drive! Save yourself the wear and tear and the risk of the car breaking down, stranding you in Bug F—k, Idaho. Fly out to the west coast."

My friends, of course, were being perfectly logical and pragmatic. But something about their good advice didn't sit right with me. The idea of packing my stuff and shipping it off, then FLYING to the Pacific Northwest was just wrong somehow. You're in Minnesota. You get on a big commercial jet, and three hours later you land on a different planet. Bang! Sudden. Shocking. Dislocated.

No, I wanted to drive. Despite the 2,000 miles. Despite four grueling days alone in a car. Despite cheap motels and bad fast food. I wanted to feel the ground under my feet, to actually have the experience of "going somewhere" across half a continent rather than being beamed up like some character from Star Trek. I wanted time to think, to contemplate, time to assimilate the fact that I was, indeed, moving very far away, time to see the topography of the landscape shift and the climate change, time to meditate on American life and my life in particular.

I wanted to drive through the Badlands and Deadwood and stand on the Little Big Horn battlefield where Sitting Bull dreamt and Custer died. I wanted to stare up at Devil's Tower and drive through the breathtaking mountain cliffs of sidwinding Beartooth Pass. I couldn't do that last one, though, since the Beartooth Scenic Byway was closed until Memorial Day due to snow, so I settled for a slightly less spectacular portion of US Highway 212 that ascends up the eastern slope of the Rockies and that unbelievable stretch of I-90 from Missoula to Coeur d'Alene that barrels down hairpin turns through the snaking mountain passes of western Montana past the Continental Divide — an awesome engineering feat of sheer wonder set amidst the staggering beauty of steep mountain forests you can almost reach out and touch.

So I traded in my 14-year-old 1991 Saab 9000 with all its problems for a used 1999 Saab 9-5 SE SportWagon with (hopefully) no problems. Got rid of one

ridiculously expensive luxury touring car with 135,000 miles for another ridiculously expensive luxury touring car with "only" 71,000 miles. Perfect condition, though. Absolutely cherry. Owned by a guy who summered in Minnesota and wintered in Florida, so this Saab has never seen cold weather or snow. All service records, oil and filter changes every 5,000 miles, certified by an independent Saab dealer. And since Saabs depreciate like stones tossed into a pond, the \$38,000 sticker price new had shrunk to only \$11,000 at barely five years old, minus two grand for my trade.

No warranty, of course, although I could have purchased an aftermarket warranty if I'd wished. I didn't. Like many Americans who are not financially well-off, I rolled the dice. Even with a warranty, buying cars (new or used) is always a gamble. Karma rules, so to speak. If I'd wanted to play it safer, I could have bought a used Honda Accord. Stable, dependable, great cars, but boring. Nope. I went for my third idiosyncratic Saab in a row. For safety, for luxury, for the kick of driving an asymmetrically turbo-charged V6, plus it gets 30 miles to the gallon on the highway. That should come in handy when gas at the pump rises to \$5.00 a gallon (which may come to pass sooner than we realize, dear friends, despite Bush's imperial wars and drilling in Alaska).

After a month of packing and giving away stuff, I entrusted my remaining furniture and possessions to Allied Van Lines, cleaned my apartment, spent the last three days of my quarter-century life in Minnesota at the home of a beloved friend, then headed west in my spiffy new (used) Saab to see America.

[End Part One]