

The way we were and are

I have many friends (believe it or not) overseas - people who know me and who know America. Many of them have been here several times during the last 40 years or so and have visited our big cities, our small towns and our fruited plains. Most of the visits occurred in the 70s, 80s or 90s, but some friends have traveled here right up to the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic. These are worldly, educated people. Most had few if any preconceived negative notions about America and most of them loved what they saw when they pressed the flesh of our countrymen, ate in their diners and even worshipped in their churches. In short, my friends were open to new experiences and were careful not to make snap judgments but tried to put all of these experiences into a broader context of a very diverse country.

That's one of the things we all shared - an open and inquisitive mind. For nearly 25 years I lived overseas and only came back to the states once a year, if that. In a strange way, I viewed my own country through a foreigner's eyes (albeit with a long personal history of experiences). Every absence and every reunion with the USA was different. Many things had changed, sometimes in almost imperceptible ways, but they had changed. It took a while for me to catch up, but when I did I was usually left with more questions as to how and why these changes took place.

When it came time for me to retire and move back, 16 years ago, I became a kind of 'native born immigrant' to my own country. And while I didn't have the cultural or ethnic baggage that so many immigrants to the U.S. have, one thing I had in common with all the foreigners who've moved here was my encounters with other cultures, living in several foreign lands. It's that aspect of life that gives immigrants a distinct advantage over Americans who've never lived overseas. Immigrants tend to make comparisons to just about everything they encounter in their new home. Fairly or unfairly these comparisons begin to change our outlook and they help reinforce some of our preconceived notions - and dispel others.

Everything changes over time. We all know that, but I didn't really expect the America I knew and loved would have changed THAT much since I first left in 1974 for four years and then again in 1984 for 20 years. George W. Bush was President and 9/11 was in our rear-view mirror in 2004. America had come through a tumultuous period of terror and war and the pro-war/anti-war, pro-Bush/anti-Bush camps were clearly evident and vocal. My friends overseas were curious about how I felt about the changing America, and the only thing I could tell them was that I was both confused and sad. They understood the confusion part, but weren't sure why I was sad.

I explained that my sadness stemmed partly from my confusion and that I couldn't quite reconcile the anger I was feeling with the disappearing and tolerant America I remembered from years past. After I thought more about it, I concluded that in my 24-year absence, the country had been politically and ideologically torn asunder by a contentious foreign policy, a hotly disputed Presidential Election, an academic brainwashing of our younger generation along with growing class warfare. Digging deeper I found that many Americans were fleeing their cities and seeking the safety of friendly communities that shared their political views. This was changing America's map and its social, cultural and economic mix of residents...and not all of this was for the better.

There were now real true Blue and ruby Red States that represented a kind of new Mason-Dixon Line, philosophically, and these transplants were choosing new local leaders who were influencing their communities' laws and policies. All of a sudden you could cross state or municipality lines and feel like you were in a totally different environment. When I related this to my foreign friends, several of them said they had also noticed that some big changes had taken place, especially in America's larger cities. They didn't feel safe any longer and avoided many of them like the plague. This was especially true of certain Midwest, East coast and West coast cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco, Detroit, Chicago and even New York.

Instead, those of my friends who were traveling to the U.S. were making pilgrimages to our National Parks in lieu of those more traditional, populated destinations. In short, many had given up on our cities just as we had. It had seemed that the U.S. had lost its caché as a friendly, welcoming nation with one people who always treated foreigners well. Now you had to really dig down into the Fodor travel guidebook or head to the Internet to see which parts of the country you needed to avoid when planning your trips.

When we discussed this situation I found that some of my more pro-U.S. friends also felt sad. Many had expressed to me that "America's best days were behind her" and that the *Golden Age of America* had passed, BUT they were grateful they had the chance to see it before its decline. This made me immediately defensive and I wanted to dispute their claims, but after looking at the statistics about poverty, illiteracy, crime, etc. I had to stop myself from responding to them in the way I initially wanted. I felt that maybe they were right. We are no longer the way we were. We have taken a sharp about face from the path of our traditional American values of personal responsibility, fairness and forgiveness. We have gone 'tribal' and adopted *victimhood* as a result of the Left's identity politics push.

Our younger generations have bought into the myth of 'America the evil' and are bent on destroying the last vestiges of a once great country's institutions and beliefs. They have taken, as Shakespeare said, "...arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing, end them." I'm convinced that their 'end' will be OUR end if we allow our 240-year history to be revised, reconstructed and "built back better" in what the Democrats are calling, *the great reset*. I'm now conflicted as to what to tell my friends about my country. Do I agree with them and say that our golden age has passed? Do I acknowledge our difficulties and use the excuse that *America is an idea - a work in progress* - and that any grand idea will always have its nay-sayers or enemies? Should I tell them that not all Americans are crazed ideologues that believe in socialism, income redistribution, infanticide, open borders and amnesty for criminals?

At this point, two weeks after a hotly contested Presidential Election that has further exacerbated the American schism, I just don't know how to explain where we are as a nation, so I'll guess I'll defer to Alexis de Tocqueville's 1835 writings on 'Democracy in America' and what he felt we needed to do to live up to our potential; "Without common ideas, there is no common action, and without common action men still exist, but a social body does not. Thus in order that there be society, and all the more, that this society prosper, it is necessary that all the minds of the citizens always be brought together and held together by some principle ideas."

AdT was definitely a wise and prescient man. Would that we Americans were as savvy about the foundation and underpinnings of our own country...and were keenly aware of the danger in forgetting them.

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