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They Hate US 'Cause They Ain't US!

Functional Illiteracy in America



Dumped TV, Lost Hills, California. Photo: Jeffrey St. Clair.

During a recent trip to Boston, I saw this delusional expression screaming at me in large red, white, and blue letters from the side of a passing cement truck. For the uninitiated, it's a US cultural reference that has been metamorphosed into a bellicose nationalistic war cry

replete with t-shirts sold on Amazon. After throwing up in my mouth a little, I chuckled. Here we go again, I thought, “the greatest nation on earth,” voluminous and damning evidence to the contrary, admonitions of love it or leave it, chants of USA, USA, USA!

It reminded me of what President George W. Bush aka Baby Bush said in a speech to a Joint Session of Congress nine days after the 9-11 attacks. “They hate our freedoms – our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.” Yeah, as if.

While naturally condemning the terrorists’ heinous acts of mass murder, other more thoughtful voices of reason in that period of hysteria and bloodlust reflected on why young men would sacrifice their lives while slinging a few stones at the empire, taking thousands of innocents with them. It certainly wasn’t the aforementioned “freedoms” that motivated them to commit such acts of terror, nor was it the 72 virgins waiting for them in paradise, or the fact their countries aren’t US.

The cold, unforgiving reality, impossible for the true believers to accept, is that there are myriad compelling and legitimate reasons why non-US Americans dislike or even hate the US grounded in a violent reality at the hands of US soldiers, Hellfire missile drone strikes, or old-fashioned bombs falling from the stratosphere with one unyielding goal in mind, the destruction of everyone and everything located near ground zero. Whoever thinks that people who hate the US are green with envy live in a fantasy world, know nothing about history and current events and, frankly, don’t get out much.

This fantasy enables those who believe in the political Santa Claus of US nationalism to live happily in a state of denial about the problems facing their country and the reasons for a higher quality of life in other countries that could serve as positive role models for the US if only there were eyes to see and ears to hear. Their citizens have a high level of literacy because of a superior education system, have a healthier diet and lifestyle, access to affordable healthcare, low levels of personal debt, a safe, gun-free environment, a high personal savings rate, and enjoy a more equitable distribution of income and wealth, among other advantages.

Another piece of the nationalistic puzzle is the prevailing view that the US means well and is well-intentioned, even when “mistakes are made.” *The Vietnam War*, the 2017 documentary produced by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, begins with this familiar message: “America’s involvement in Vietnam ... was begun in good faith, by decent people, out of fateful misunderstandings.” The 3.8 million Vietnamese who were killed as a direct result of the war in their country would beg to differ if they could speak from the

grave. As Chris Hedges wrote in *The Lie of American Innocence*, “U.S. hypocrisy on war crimes makes a rules-based world, one that abides by international law, impossible.”

US vs. Them

So, what is it about the US that “they” hate because they ain’t US? Not much, in most cases. It is a country that does not compare favorably to its peers in a number of key categories, all of which affect quality of life. In alphabetical order, here are a few that come to mind and that I observe with sadness during each trip. Non-US Americans who choose not to expend the negative energy required to hate likely look on with pity, schadenfreude, sadness, or indifference.

FreeDumb

It was deliciously ironic that I had to submit a negative COVID test result as a precondition for boarding a flight to the country that is #1 in the number of coronavirus infections and deaths. I religiously wore my fashionable black mask on flights, a requirement on Japan Airlines but not American Airlines, in airports, and in other public places, including a conference with 6,500 attendees. (Thankfully, the organizer required everyone to “mask up.”)

Miracle of miracles, I wasn’t infected during the month-long trip. What I observed as a participant-observer was ubiquitous evidence that “freedumb” reigns supreme in the self-proclaimed land of the free. It was like I missed the breaking news that COVID had been eradicated in the US. I estimate that about 5% of the people I saw were wearing a mask. My interior monologue identified them as the smart ones. The 95% sans mask not so much.

Freedumb is just another word for my rights trump your rights, unbridled individualism and, by extension, narcissism. It’s all about me and, beyond its national borders, it’s all about US(A).

Functional Illiteracy

This nationwide scourge explains a lot about the current state of disunion. 54% of US adults between the ages of 16 and 74 lack proficiency in literacy. This shocking reality check is based on a report *Assessing the Economic Gains of Eradicating Illiteracy Nationally and Regionally in the United States* (PDF download) by Jonathan Rothwell, Principal Economist, Gallup, and Nonresident Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution, Metropolitan Policy Program published in 2020 by the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy.

In a nutshell, people who are functionally illiterate cannot use reading, writing, and calculation skills for their own and the community's development. This is one of the reasons why so many US Americans think Africa is a country and can't identify their own country on a map.

Many of the legion of functionally illiterate are the same people who believe all of the crazy conspiracy theories floating around, including the notion that Donald Trump won the 2020 election. This level of ignorance is apparent in many interactions and conversations with people from different walks of life.

In general, the functionally illiterate in the US are overrepresented in the Electoral College and the larger political system. Under the current system both California, with a population of 40 million, and Wyoming, with 579,000 residents, get two senators. It is estimated that 40% of all US Americans will live in five states by 2040, which means half of the US states will be represented by 18 senators and the other half by 82.

It's not a stretch to conclude that functional illiteracy is one of the reasons why US democracy, such as it is, is hanging by a very thin thread. It was H.L. Mencken, the US journalist, essayist, satirist, and cultural critic, who referred to his fellow citizens as the "boobocracy."

In 1916, he wrote, "As democracy is perfected, the office represents, more and more closely, the inner soul of the people. We move toward a lofty ideal. On some great and glorious day the plain folks of the land will reach their heart's desire at last, and the White House will be adorned by a downright moron." Mencken's prediction has come true more than once since he penned those prophetic words, most recently from 2016-2020 and perhaps again in 2024 and beyond.

A TikTok channel called Project Better asks US Americans, mostly young people, questions about geography, simple arithmetic, and current events. After watching a few of these videos, you start out laughing because the answers are so pathetic and the people so stupid. Then, a certain sadness sets in and spoils the mood, realizing that this is not a joke and knowing stupid is as stupid says and does. Here are five memorable examples:

Q1: What is the biggest city in the world? A: Asia, Europe

Q2: Who was the first person to land on the sun? A: Lance Armstrong

Q3: What country is Venice, Italy located in? (with an offer of \$100 for the correct answer) A: I'm gonna be a teacher so I should know this. Paris?

Q4: Where is Queen Elizabeth from? A: Egypt, Brazil

Q5: What language do they speak in Australia? A: Austrian, British?

In a society in which a closed mind is considered a badge of honor, a bumper sticker in Maine proclaimed, “A Closed Mind is a Wonderful Thing to Lose.” The discovery of the truth is pure liberation accompanied by the slamming of doors darkness that will forever remain closed. Sadly, most remain mired in darkness and either don’t care or are proud of the fact.

Gun Violence

The US has the distinction of recording more than 400 mass shootings this year, according to the nonprofit Gun Violence Archive (GVA), which defines these incidents as those in which at least four people are shot, not including the shooter. That’s a daily average of 1.75. Mass shootings this year are on track to approach the 692 recorded in 2021, which was the highest figure since GVA began tracking shootings in 2014. The US is number one among its peer countries in this most unenviable category. There are over 400 million guns floating around in a population of just over 330 million.

In case you’re counting, so far in 2022, some 12,272 people nationwide have died due to firearms—including intentional and accidental killings but not suicides. At the current rate, this year’s total could approach the 2021 number of 20,944, a seven-year high, and exceed 2020’s 19,518 deaths.

In a press conference after the April 2022 subway shooting in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, New York City Mayor Eric Adams referred to the epidemic of violence as an American problem, noting that “It is going to take the entire nation to speak out and push back against a cult of death that has taken hold in this nation. A cult that allows innocence to be sacrificed on a daily basis.”

This cult of death and glorification of violence predates the founding of the republic to the days when my settler-colonizer ancestors launched their campaign of terror and attrition in the name of their God and “progress” to rid their New World of Native Americans in the early 17th century. A Vietnam War slogan, “Killing is our business, and business is good,” sums up much of US history since the early years of British Colonial America.

Incarcerated Citizens

The US is number one in another depressing category. It has the highest number of incarcerated individuals in the world, with almost 2.3 million people in prison in a population of just over 330 million, according to the Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality. It is followed by China, Brazil, India, and Russia to round out the top five.

According to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) the US spends over \$80 billion each year on incarceration. Local, state, and federal governments spend \$20,000 to

\$50,000 a year to keep people in prison. If you're a person of color, your chances of ending up behind bars for the same offense committed by someone who looks like me are exponentially higher. Blacks are imprisoned for drug offenses at a rate 10 times greater than that of whites even though they both use drugs at about the same rates.

Obesity

One thing that stands out about US society and that you notice the moment you step off the plane and begin to make your way to the baggage claim is how overweight most people are. It's both appalling and sad. In Vietnam, as in other countries, there's no sugarcoating this physical description, no euphemisms. We use the word "fat" as in, "I'm a little fat but am determined to lose weight" or "You look fatter." George Carlin, the comedian and social critic, once described US Americans' favorite pastimes, as only he could: "shoppin' and eatin', especially eatin', lumbering through the malls like a fleet of interstate buses."

According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Land of the Fat had an obesity rate of 41.9% in March 2020, an increase of 11.4% in just three years, making it number one in a most unhealthy category among its peer countries. The obesity rate in England, by comparison, is 28%. Another 36.2% of adults are overweight but not obese.

Bigger is better and nowhere is that truer than ever in the nation's restaurants, which is why I eat appetizers and split entrées. I save money and my health. When your server asks you if you're still "working" on your meal, hoping to get the check and usher in the next round of paying customers, by God, does she mean it!

The implications for health, healthy life expectancy, and overall life expectancy are obvious. The illnesses associated with obesity include heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, and certain forms of cancer. A 2019 *New York Times* op-ed piece co-authored by Dariush Mozaffarian, then dean of the Tufts Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy and Dan Glickman, secretary of agriculture from 1995 to 2001, reported that "Poor diet is the leading cause of mortality in the United States, causing more than half a million (500,000) deaths per year."

Poverty, Debt, and Economic Inequality

During a recent trip to my home state of Delaware, I noticed a sign outside a McDonald's that was recruiting workers for up to \$15 an hour. That's over twice as much as the US federal minimum wage, which stands at a paltry \$7.25 per hour. While that is akin to modern-day slavery, the maximum wage offered by Micky Dees is still exploitation,

unless you're a young person living with Mom and Dad with few expenses. Working 40 hours a week at \$15 an hour amounts to \$31,200 a year – before taxes – flipping burgers, frying fries, and pouring liquid sugar without a vacation. It doesn't buy you much in most places in the US of 2022.

The official US poverty rate was 11.4% in 2020, up 1% from 2019. Federal guidelines consider citizens to be “poor” if they are earning the following amounts per year: \$12,880 (1 person), \$17,240 (2), \$21,960 (3), and \$26,500 (4). The US has one of the highest child poverty rates among OECD countries. About one in six children are classified as poor using the conservative income threshold of \$26,500 a year for a family of four.

A 2016 article *Addressing Child Poverty: How Does the United States Compare With Other Nations?*, published by Academic Pediatrics, notes that “For some five decades now, the United States has been a clear and constant outlier in the child poverty league. As a nation, it does less to help children and their families than any of the other rich countries and therefore finds itself with the highest child poverty rates and the least upward mobility for poor children.”

Knowing the cost of living in much of the country, it's clear that millions who earn more than a poverty wage are among the working poor living paycheck to paycheck with a dismally low savings rate. As of July 2022, 203 million Americans (61%) were living paycheck to paycheck, according to the latest LendingClub survey. In only one of the last four decades did most workers see any positive wage growth, i.e., in the late 1990s and the from 2014-2019. The main culprits are globalization, economic inequality, and wage stagnation.

In April 2022, the US personal savings rate was an anemic 4.4%. In fact, most US Americans have little to no savings. (In contrast, the personal savings rate in Vietnam is about 25%. 38% of Vietnamese actually increased their savings during the pandemic because of reduced spending on non-essentials such as travel, leisure, and eating out.) In a 2019 Survey of Consumer Finances by the US Federal Reserve, the median savings account balance, including checking, savings, money market, and prepaid debit cards, was only \$5,300.

This dire situation has been exacerbated by a high inflation rate. From May 2021 to May 2022, the consumer price index (CPI) for all urban consumers jumped 8.6%, the largest one-year increase since December 1981.

National and personal debt levels are now over \$30 trillion and \$16 trillion, respectively. Yes, that's t-r-i-l-l-i-o-n, a million million, i.e., 1,000,000,000,000 or 10^{12} . Carlin was

spot-on when he said that US Americans “are efficient, professional, compulsive consumers. Shopping – it’s their civic duty. Consumption – it’s the new national pasttime. Fuck baseball. The only true lasting American value that’s left is buyin’ things. People spending money they don’t have on things that they don’t need,” which also applies to their government. This was the same “civic duty” that George Bush called on his fellow citizens to embrace after 9/11, a rhetorical gift to many late-night comedians.

In a country in which 10% of citizens owned 89% of stocks and mutual funds in the first quarter of 2021 while the bottom 50% of US households own around 0.5%, and where three men, Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, and Bill Gates, are worth more than the bottom half of all US Americans, the American Dream is moribund.

Nationalism is US(A)

At least a simple majority of US citizens still view their country as “the greatest nation on earth.” The false consciousness that holds sway among most of my fellow citizens, regardless of race, gender, social class, and party affiliation, is the irrational belief that everything in the Homeland is better. The stultifying union of cultural mythology and national superiority is a time-honored barrier for people who lack quality education, cross-cultural experience, and therefore insights to enlightenment and real progress that benefits everyone.

One of the most lucid explanations ever offered about US cultural mythology rooted in nationalism comes from George Carlin: “Bullshit is the glue that binds us as a nation. Where would we be without our safe, familiar, American bullshit? Land of the free. Home of the brave. The American dream. All men are equal. Justice is blind. The press is free. Your vote counts. Business is honest. The good guys win. The police are on your side. God is watching you. Your standard of living will never decline. Everything is going to be just fine.” The icing on this towering cake of bullshit is that “This country was founded by a group of slave owners who told us, ‘All men are created equal,’” referring to people like themselves.

Every country has greatness and goodness, along with shortcomings and flaws. Some possess the latter in much greater abundance than the former. The more powerful a severely flawed country is, the more its citizens and non-citizens on the receiving end of unwanted attention suffer. This is especially true if the country in question has a Messiah complex.

Stephanie Bice, a US Congresswoman from Oklahoma, recently engaged in a moment of wishful thinking by asserting that, “We must keep our presence known on the world

stage. Countries look to the U.S. as a country that protects democracy and freedom abroad,” an assertion not borne out by current or historical reality. In a pre-primary election Tweet, Liz Cheney, the US Congressional representative from Wyoming, wrote “We live in the greatest nation God has ever created...” Such is the alternate reality that most US Americans and their political leaders (of both mainstream parties) have carved out for themselves.

Instead of trying to call the shots in all four corners of the earth, the US would be well-advised to get its own house in order and worry about what’s left of its fragile representative democracy in a system that is essentially an oligarchy hurtling towards authoritarianism and Christofascism.

Ignorance is not bliss but rather a clear and present danger; its prevalence is contributing to the decline, both at home and abroad, of the US. Nationalism – as distinct from patriotism – is a stumbling block to societal progress.

While I was born and raised in the US, I have lived nearly half of my adult life outside of its borders. I was never a nationalist but was once a patriot in the dictionary sense of the word. I have long since self-identified as a global citizen without national affiliation. Living proof that we are all works in progress, my ties to the country gradually dissolved, the result of education, life experience, and intellectual evolution.

Having lived in Vietnam for 17 years, I always return to the country of my birth and coming of age as an interested ethnographic researcher, mental notepad always at the ready. Even before my self-imposed exile, I felt very much like an outsider, in that isolated and surreal world but not of it.

The American Dream: You Have to Be Asleep to Believe It

This famous George Carlin quote tells you everything you need to know about the much-vaunted American Dream. While there are exceptions to the rule, this is a dream that is unattainable for most US Americans. Beyond the country’s borders, including in Vietnam, cultural mythology has yet to be replaced by an increasingly dark reality. Perceptions are likely to change in the coming years as people around the world learn more about life in the US. The horse is slowly but surely leaving the red, white, and blue barn.

Sadly, but predictably, so much of the US of 2022 is “Third World.” A recent Vietnamese immigrant, comparing Asia with the US, sighed, “Everything (in the US) looks old.” Commenting on the recent flooding in Kentucky, a professor of civil and environmental engineering at Vanderbilt University noted that “the combination of climate change and

the country's aging and neglected infrastructure are putting millions of people at risk of severe flooding.”

After a 2017 visit to the US, Professor Philip Alston, United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, wrote about American exceptionalism as a “constant theme in my conversations. But instead of realizing its founders’ admirable commitments, today’s United States has proved itself to be exceptional in far more problematic ways that are shockingly at odds with its immense wealth and its founding commitment to human rights. As a result, contrasts between private wealth and public squalor abound.”

In a discussion about human rights, described without a hint of irony by the US State Department as a “foundation stone in the establishment of the United States over 200 years ago, Alston points out the obvious: “In practice, the United States is alone among developed countries in insisting that while human rights are of fundamental importance, they do not include rights that guard against dying of hunger, dying from a lack of access to affordable healthcare, or growing up in a context of total deprivation.” In other words, the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are only available to those who can afford them.

One faint ray of hope is that younger US Americans are more likely than older adults to say that there are other countries better than the US, according to a 2021 Pew Research Center survey. This recognition, combined with a knowledge of history and the global state of affairs, is the key to solving many of the USA’s most urgent societal problems. The downside is that these individuals are unlikely to ever hold positions of political power.

The US government and a majority of its people have at least one thing in common: their ongoing obsession with external enemies, most imagined. Their most formidable foes are at home, if not looking back at them in the mirror. It’s one of a long list of reasons why this is the Asian Century.

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