



# A More Exceptionally Perfect America

An Essay of Impertinent Thoughts

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Michael Konik

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# A More Exceptionally Perfect America

Experts on matters patriotic, including members of Congress and the corporate oligarchs for whom they toil, believe that those of us who are fortunate enough to live in the greatest country on Earth benefit from a magical phenomenon known as *American Exceptionalism*.

According to those who have made a kind of casual study of our glorious history, what that means, basically, is this: America is different than every other country on the planet. You know, exceptional.

Are we *better* than every other republic? That's not for modest Americans to say. All we wish to claim is our exceptionalism, our uniqueness.

And not just the obvious stuff: our ongoing experiment in democracy, our

astonishing standard of living, our avowed respect for abstract concepts like human rights, civil liberties and privacy. We're talking about the subtler things, the dozens of qualities and conventions that collectively comprise our national character, the traits that make us uniquely American.

If you're looking for them, they're easy to spot. Over a long July 4<sup>th</sup> weekend, I found signs of American Exceptionalism everywhere, confirming my unspoken (yet deeply longed for) hope that "American Exceptionalism" wasn't just an encouraging nostrum, a cynical excuse that politicians use as a blanket apology for whatever unilateral policy they wish to implement. No, American Exceptionalism is *real*.

I looked around and saw that Americans are genuinely exceptional in so many ways, some more obvious than others. Here's an easy one that even untrained observers notice: Americans are exceptionally fat.

## Living Large

Prior to the eight-year dynasty of Bush the Younger, my chief embarrassment about being an American abroad wasn't that we were a nation of belligerent, imperialist, arrogant bullies. It was that we were not "height-weight appropriate." Europe, Asia, wherever: American tourists were easy to identify, whether or not they wore fanny packs. The Americans, candid locals confessed, were usually the ones with their belly hanging over their elastic waistband and flabby flaps of flab flapping on the back of their arms.

"Why are you Americans so fat?" I would be asked. "Does everyone there eat too much?"

The short answer was (and is): yes.

After several trips to countries that organize their affairs much differently than we do in America, I recognized the direct connection between our cultural imperative to over-consume and our position in the world as Fatty-in-Chief. When every messenger is

constantly telling you to acquire more, to get more, to spend more, to have a life that is generally *more* than the sub-optimal one you presently have, eating more (and more) feels not only natural but necessary.

Plus, the Extra Value Meal, with two of everything and your choice of extra-large sugar water, only costs \$5.

The consequences? What consequences? Who has time to think about stuff like personal health and the environment and other abstract malarkey when so much of our energy and concentration has already been applied to getting and keeping that sweet new Lexus, the upgraded iPhone, the complete Season Four of “The Good Wife”?

Or just getting by.

Unfortunately, nature isn’t much interested in our cultural distractions. The human body hasn’t yet evolved to a point – or condition – where carrying around an extra 30- or 50- or 100-lbs is a cardiovascular advantage. Our fatness is no longer a shameful symbol of

our gluttony. It's an expression of our national death wish.

Actuaries will tell you about lost productivity and higher insurance premiums and the catastrophic net economic loss that our national obesity causes. \$300 billion a year, they say. And when you extrapolate the numbers into the future, it's even worse.

*The American Journal of Preventive Medicine* claims that more than two-out-of-five (42%) Americans will be "obese" by 2030. "Severely obese" is considered more than 100-lbs. over ideal weight; 80 extra lbs. is just, like, normal obese. By almost any measure, we're a bunch of grossly overfed, under-exercised piggies.

Our cute little piglets, weaned on high-fructose corn syrup, will likely outpace us. Nearly a third of our beloved offspring are already considered "overweight" or "obese" by the accommodating standards set by our own Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. This makes them nice and plump, just the way we like our pork chops. Cardiologists also find

them quite appealing. The medical costs associated with fat-related illnesses, according to those killjoy actuaries, is going to eventually rise to more than \$500 billion annually.

National healthcare, anyone?

Society, meaning every single one of us, bears the burden of bad choices. The healthy, disciplined, conscious folks pay for the diabetes, heart disease, and preventable cancers of the gluttonous or unconscious. We would seem to have a national emergency on our hands that requires drastic, corrective action.

But Americans don't like anyone – not least a damn *government* – telling them what they can put in their own damn mouth. (If you've forgotten this key fact, Kellogg's, Nestle, and MacDonald's will be glad to remind you.) Besides, attempting to legislate or tax our way out of fatness is too much to ask of a republic in which it's legal to sell the citizenry cigarettes, alcohol, and all manner of deep-fried, sugar-coated food-like substances, and where it's illegal to sell them a dried flower that makes

everyone feel better about living in a grotesquely diseased society.

Instead, we need to adjust our controlling paradigm. In place of a market-driven, consumption-dependent way of life, we need to make “good physical and mental health” synonymous with Good Quality of Life. That won’t be easy. Pernicious as it sounds, many American businesses, the healthcare industry chief among them, would prefer that we keep packing on the pounds. It’s undeniably good for their bottom line. Maybe our national obesity is the Works Progress Administration miracle we've been waiting for. New slogan: “Obesity Cause Jobs!”

If you think we can get our economy kick-started by a catalytic upturn in ambulance rides, emergency room visits and dialysis machines, there's a financially compelling reason to continue over-eating.

But if you think we’d all be better off getting by on less – fewer calories, fewer disposable dollars, fewer disposable products – then treating our food with the same oversight

we give to our drugs wouldn't be such a bad idea. Addicts need help, right?

Most folks who self-identify as real Americans, the ones who treasure liberty and personal responsibility and the freedom to be free to eat free things 'cause they're free, generally aren't too happy about being unwell. But at least they're not starving, and that, you see, is the whole point of living in a land of plenty.

So if you're a flat-belly who wants to modify the bad eating habits of everyone else, maybe you ought to try living in some socialist police state where they have socialized medicine and everyone is forced to take care of each other. Because we Americans certainly can take care of ourselves, even when we can't.

We're exceptional that way.

## **Violence Voyeurism**

We're exceptionally self-sufficient. We know how to do stuff like make our own fireworks. This is useful, because Americans are also exceptionally entertained by violence, simulated and actual, bombs bursting in air and rockets red glare.

*Outrageous. Horrifying. Disgusting.* These are some of our favorite adjectives when something violent happens in real life, yet we never look away. It's too entertaining.

When news broke that the former world champions of tackle football, the New Orleans Saints, for years had instituted a bounty system that rewarded their players for knocking opponents out of the game, Americans everywhere professed righteous horror. There was more: Players contributed to an in-house pool and collected \$1,000-\$1,500 when they scored a knockout. Hitting someone so hard that they required a stretcher or motorized cart to be removed from the field earned a special

commendation. We were duly mortified at the barbarity.

The National Football League, presenters of America's favorite gladiatorial spectacle, handed down sentences to the malefactors. The General Manager and an assistant coach were suspended without pay for about half the season. The head coach, Sean Payton, was banned for the entire year. And in a maneuver eerily reminiscent of the Soviet Gulag, the former defensive coordinator and alleged mastermind of the bounty program, Greg Williams, was suspended from the NFL "indefinitely," which might or might not mean forever.

We're betting on a sentence slightly shorter than forever.

We're also betting that, aside from dull-witted sportswriters and commentators who are paid to apotheosize the NFL and all the fine American values it represents, most of the Saints' fans are secretly quite proud of their boys, just as the average hockey fan tacitly approves of (and cheers for) their team's

“enforcer,” the largely unskilled brute who comes off the bench for the express purpose of fighting the other team’s brute. Indeed, folks who understand how battles are optimally conducted and football properly played can see the merit and virtue of adding incentives to beat the Other Guys unconscious. Knock the star quarterback out of the game and you’ve just increased your side’s chance of winning.

No one would be surprised if other teams had (or have) similar bounty pools. We’ve all assumed that’s always been pro football’s standard operating practice, an unwritten code, just like the “high-and-inside” brush-back ethos of baseball and the retaliatory hard foul in basketball.

"It's a violent game, it's a tough game. Just playing it normally, you're going to have injuries," John Madden, co-chair of the NFL's committee on player safety opined, sounding as though he were talking about joining the military. "The game has plenty of natural violence," Madden said, "you don't need to manufacture more."

If this is true, what do we make of the inspirational pre-game speeches – “Let’s go out there and make those guys sorry they came into our house!” -- and the tribal chants and warrior face paint, all of which are meant to get the boys “fired up,” to go out there and flatten someone in a different color uniform? More violence is precisely what the game and its fans require. That and winning.

The NFL, of course, can’t admit any of this. They’re in the business of providing a grand and glorious spectacle around which corporate America can market their automobiles, erection pills, and beer. Creating a televised “contact sport” is much less morally objectionable than “choreographed violence.” That kind of thing is for mixed martial arts. And the movies.

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How many millions of us have watched “The Hunger Games,” a film about pretty teenagers hunting and killing each other for the amusement of a depraved viewing audience in a fictional, futuristic society that – *tsk-tsk* –

quite enjoys the mortal mayhem? The movie, based on a popular book, includes frequent glimpses of the deadly action being broadcast on gigantic TV screens to salacious, bloodthirsty fans.

This is one of the oldest and most successful tricks in the pornographer's playbook: give large audiences the violence they crave but pretend to be making a film that portrays as evil a society that would subject pretty teenagers to a violent game.

*Outrageous. Horrifying. Disgusting.* It's not that the average ticket buyer to "The Hunger Games" isn't smart enough to understand the ruse, it's that she prefers the pretense because it conveniently excuses her compulsion to watch people kill each other – just as the fictional residents of Panem enjoy watching the Hunger Games in *their* society. Just as fans of the NFL enjoy their bone-shattering collisions to be all in good fun, not as a money-for-violence transaction. Just so long as it's all make-believe. A video game. A turbaned silhouette on a screen.

One of the movie's key conceits is that the teen killers are unwilling participants. They're reluctant murderers, forced to slay or be slayed. Unlike the New Orleans Saints, they didn't choose to hurt their opponents for monetary rewards. They're *victims*. It's the sicko voyeurs of Panem who are bad.

The moral depravity of this arrangement, strangely, doesn't register with us, the ticket-buying, NFL-loving audience. Unlike Katniss and friends, we have no such reluctance when it comes to viewing violence. We like it. Unashamedly.

This compulsion for brutal voyeurism could be filed away under "different strokes for different folks" and "everyone enjoys his own brand of pornography" if not for the stunning connection between our violent fantasies and our utter obliviousness to real-world violence. While millions of us are filling the multiplex to watch a movie about degenerates watching a TV screen broadcasting kids hunting each other with bows and arrows, millions of other young people are enduring *the real thing*.

Outrageous? Horrifying? Disgusting? Nah.  
Boring.

For more than a decade, the United States military, backed by the treasury of its violence-loving citizens, has been conducting an elaborate and expensive show in Afghanistan. Unlike “The Hunger Games,” this one isn’t very sexy, and its ratings would be an embarrassment to the NFL. Its participants won’t be memorialized on the cover of *People* magazine, nor will the countless victims, including Afghani civilians, many of them murder victims, many of them “unfortunate collateral damage.” How can we deny with a straight face that the overseas violence isn’t directly and inextricably tied to a bounty system of our own? Would any of our trained killers in uniform gladly fly to Kabul and destroy the Other Team if they weren’t paid? If their impulse for mayhem weren’t encouraged and celebrated in the popular culture?

When it comes to our appetite for violence, real and simulated, the future has

already arrived. It's not our Games that are hungry, it's us.

## **Next in Line at the Latrine**

We Americans are exceptionally hungry. And not just for greasy sweet comestibles. We have an insatiable appetite for almost everything. We consume an exceptionally disproportionate percentage of the planet's resources.

Unless you're from Oklahoma, a state whose citizens managed to elect (and re-elect) Senator James Inhofe, protector of oil concerns and denier of global warming -- which, in a statement that brought relief to the world's great religions, he deemed the "greatest hoax ever perpetrated upon the American people" -- you probably understand that we're killing our planet and most of the things that live on it.

If somehow you're still confused, watch the final three episodes of the BBC's landmark nature series, "Planet Earth." This coda, made by people who are, admittedly, fond of animals and plants, examines the probable future. Spoiler alert: It doesn't look good.

So once we stop bickering about whether or not Al Gore is a hypocrite for being chauffeured to screenings of "An Inconvenient Truth" and all the other irrelevant distractions obsessed about by reactionary radio hosts, we must ask ourselves: Is simply changing from warm and lovely incandescent light bulbs to cold and ugly fluorescents the answer? Trading in our Suburbans and Hummers for hybrids? Shutting off the air conditioner until it's 85-degrees inside the house? All these strategies will certainly stem the tide – literally and figuratively -- but they're not going to save the planet.

The main problem, exceptionally patriotic Americans will tell you, is that all them other guys who don't speak English right can't be trusted. Because, you know, they're not like us.

Take India. For much of the nation's existence, India has either been colonized by its European superiors or shackled with cuffs of poverty. Until recently, the average Indian endured squalor and neediness unimaginable

to those of us who expend our excess calories at cardio-striptease classes. Even today, as viewers of the urban fairy tale "Slumdog Millionaire" noted with appropriately alarmed disgust and outrage, millions of people there suffer the soul-crushing degradations of having far too little. Thanks to a go-go economy fixated on growth and modernization -- helped in some part by American willingness to employ millions of cheap laborers as our trusty customer service representatives in "call center" plantations -- India seems poised to be one of the Great Powers of the 21st Century.

With its fresh affluence enjoyed, as usual, by a relatively small percentage of privileged oligarchs enriched at the expense of countless others, India is quickly transforming itself into an automobile-owning society. The middle-class masses, the theory goes, will eventually enjoy a taste of the bounty stream as it "trickles down" to the slums. Per capita, private car ownership in India is low, as it is in most "developing" countries. But the leading manufacturer, Tata, is producing

unprecedented amounts of new cars, including a no-frills sedan that retails for around \$2,000. These cars are not hybrids or electric or capable of running on oxen dung. They're similar to the 20th Century carbon belchers that the United States of America once celebrated and now recognize as one of the major contributors to the spoiling of our environment.

Understandably, advocates of green living (indeed, anyone concerned about global warming) shudder at the prospect of millions of additional cars on the planet. Even if they're stuck in Mumbai and Delhi traffic, the pollution they emit will eventually impact all of us, even the conscientious Vermonter tending to her organic vegetable garden.

The same scenario is unfolding inside the borders of our financial benefactor China, whose thirst for fossil fuels will rapidly match our American rapaciousness. As in India, a dramatic rise in private Chinese auto ownership will hasten the depletion of planetary oil supplies and the disappearance of

the polar ice caps. Millions and millions of people will enjoy the convenience and liberty of having a car; unfortunately, their descendants will have to figure out how to operate those vehicles underwater.

Amid the justified hand-wringing over What Can Be Done?, a small but powerful clan of pundits, citing compelling science and computer-generated projections, are calling for strict limits to be imposed upon the emerging car consumers. The reasoning goes like this: *If we let the Indians and Chinese run amok, with the same blithe disregard for consequences the USA has shown for the past 100 years, our fair-skinned grandchildren will inherit a world rendered unlivable by ambitious Orientals whose dissatisfaction with peasantry and indentured servitude will probably prove terribly inconvenient to their former masters.*

This same sense of entitlement infects our official position on nuclear weaponry: It's OK for us to maintain the capacity for extinguishing the human species (and most

other species below us on the food chain) since we can be trusted, because, you know, we're morally superior and reliably benevolent compared to inscrutable Communists, Muslims, Hindus, and people who wear pajamas to business meetings. Since we are exceptional, we can excuse ourselves for imploring the rest of the world to do what we say, not as we do.

But how can the rest of the world take seriously our calls for temperance if everything about our way of life, particularly our obsession with hoarding and consumption, suggests that the American Way is the best and most fabulous way?

We've set a stirring example for millions of poor people. We've shown them what it takes to become the richest nation in the history of civilization. Our former servants have learned their lessons well. Now, unless we decide to make use of our dormant stockpile of atomic weaponry and cleanse the planet of unwanted Tata owners, it's time to make way for the next in line at the latrine. We can only hope,

however irrationally, that the new excreters won't befoul the planet as toxically as their industrialized forebears.

Given that they're consuming and digesting the same polluting commodities upon which we've grown fat and complacent, it's difficult to envision a result any less noxious.

## **A Modest Proposal: Saving the Planet for American Children**

Now, no matter where you stand on the moral dilemma of Man vs. Man (i.e., which members of the species are more important, deserving of God's love and the resources He provides, etc.) you cannot escape the sad conclusion that our planet, bountiful and rich as it is, doesn't contain or provide unlimited resources. At some point -- and that point appears to be arriving sooner than we would like -- there won't be enough fresh water, arable soil, and biological diversity to sustain life as we know it.

More than 6 billion people, most of them unimaginably poor and utterly bereft of hope for a "better" future, populate this planet. In less than 50 years, that number is expected to exceed 9 billion, most of them near-destitute and concentrated in anarchic, Boschian metropolises like Lagos, Mexico City, and Mumbai.

Even if you think a human being, the most gloriously intelligent of animals, is worthier of survival than a rare tree frog or African leopard or tropical orchid, the stark fact remains: these people will want to eat and drink -- not to mention procreate and aspire to the "good life" promised by consumerist paradises like the USA and Western Europe. To accomplish those aspirations, to fully serve the next generation of consumers, we're compelled to continue to wreck the planet. Or quickly adapt to eating and breathing saltwater.

If we're serious about preserving God's ineffably beautiful and complex creations -- Man and Earth -- we must immediately do one of two things: 1) Effect a complete ideological shift away from technologically advanced consumerism, in which the pursuit of bigger, better, faster, more, greater has replaced spiritual concerns, or 2) Start culling our population.

Despite the self-congratulatory noise one hears from many Christians, conservative politicians, and everyone else who despises

civil liberties, the concept of "family values" has little practical value when our societal behavior ensures that our children, grand-children, and their grand-children will live (if our species is lucky enough to still be around) in a horribly desecrated landscape in which Death trumps Life. So Solution #1 is probably not going to happen.

Negative population "growth" -- more like decay -- is our species' and our planet's best hope for survival. We mustn't slow development; we must reduce the overall population from 6 billion to, say, 1 billion. Big religious wars and medical disasters will help, but they won't be enough.

Practically speaking, we must voluntarily stop having children, or cap the number of offspring at One, after which both parents shall be sterilized.

Since better educated and intelligent members of the Human Family are more likely to comply voluntarily, running counter to the tenets of Natural Selection, for many generations our race will be more stupid than

the present one, difficult though it is to imagine.

But here's the upside: these not very bright progeny will be more likely to employ stockpiles of WMDs, which will get the culling trick done much more quickly than the slow hand of Nature. True, there will be far fewer slaves -- sorry, *laborers* -- to make all the stuff we putatively need, but there will also be much more food and water to go around, and we won't have to chop down the Amazon Basin to grow palm oil or graze our cows.

If all this sounds too Draconian, too radical an inconvenience for exceptional Americans, the Kings and Queens of the planet, rest assured that our species will be extinct eventually, just as millions of other species before us. Even if we destroy Earth on our way out, something will survive: a cockroach, a bacterium, or some kind of nuclear waste-resistant fish that can take advantage of everything being submerged.

Still, how much nicer for the beloved fruit of our loins to have a world to live in, even

if it's not as fabulous as the one we had! Let us resolve to save ourselves by limiting ourselves. The blessed land we live upon -- and all the other creatures in God's magic mosaic -- will be most appreciative.

## **Good Guys vs. Bad Guys**

The fireworks exploded in the sky over Los Angeles, reminding me for the millionth time that we Americans are exceptionally militaristic. We spend more on our war machine than the next 14 countries combined.

That's why our republic feels a frisson of spiritual uplift when a phalanx of American-made ordnance-delivery systems (airplanes) drop their payload of bombs on Islamic State targets in what used to be Syria and Iraq. When the bombs explode, they kill human beings (and anything else in the area) by either shredding their bodies with small projectiles or immolating them on the spot. You know, burning them alive.

That sounds unpleasant, doesn't it? Some might even call doing such a thing to another living creature, especially a fellow human being, "barbaric." But when you're avenging the death of a hostage, or an attack on your sovereign territory, the barbarism is always justified.

How? Hard to explain. Suffice to say the barbarism is justified in ways that it's *not* when black-masked jihadists douse a prisoner with lighter fluid and videotape his burning.

This is all clear, right? Certain acts that are clearly inexcusable, horrifying, disgusting, cowardly, and evil are sometimes heroic, satisfying, and triumphant when done by the right sort of people. The ones on our team, not theirs.

The United States of America tortures prisoners. Islamic State tortures prisoners. Choose which side is correct.

The United States of America attacks sovereign nations without any formal declaration of war. Islamic State attacks sovereign nations without any formal declaration of war. Choose which side is correct.

Islamic State teaches children to hate and exterminate [Americans, Israelis, the Other]. The United States of America teaches children to hate and exterminate [Islamic State

militants, certain Afghanis, certain Iraqis, certain Iranians, certain Yemenis, certain Somalis, certain Pakistanis, and the Other]. Choose which side is misleading their youth.

Islamic State vows to rewrite maps, exact vengeance and punish all who object. The United States of America...well, we would never do such things.

Here's the easiest way to keep things straight: Everything that our "enemies" do is unequivocally *wrong*, and everything we and our allies (for the time being) do is actually quite right. Now you don't have to worry your pretty little head about this anymore.

You're welcome. And may God bless the United States of America (and our current roster of "friends").

## **Why Terrorists Hate America and Why We Don't Negotiate**

We have many dear friends among the member states of the United Nations. They let us stash our weapons and trained killers on their land, and isn't that what dear friends are for?

Yet not everyone around the globe loves the USA. Difficult as it is to understand, some folks actually *hate* the USA. Why? Because we're exceptional? The most common explanation for why terrorists wish to kill and maim Americans is because *they hate our freedoms*. That's what's behind all the violence: *they hate our freedoms*. You can go ahead and enumerate all the freedoms the terrorists hate - - freedom to assemble publicly with unmarried members of the opposite sex; freedom to participate in an electoral charade; freedom to watch nudity on television. But it doesn't really matter which ones. The very *concept* of freedom is an affront to these heartless killers.

In the aftermath of the Boston Marathon bombs, we might have another reason worth considering, a reason that some unpatriotic thinkers have been suggesting since September 11, 2001.

Maybe terrorists don't hate our freedoms. Maybe they hate our policies.

The surviving suspect in Boston indicated that his brother and he were outraged at U.S. involvement in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Other captured evildoers have indicated that their terrorism was inspired by America's constant meddling in the Arab world and beyond.

We can no longer ask ourselves, "What is it that these terrorists really want?" We know what they want. The question now is, "Knowing what they want, how are we going to behave?"

The smart money says: "as we please." As we always have, enacting our customary role of the arrogantly swaggering bully, the superpower who will not and cannot be told what to do.

This will lead to more violence. That's for certain. But, hey, what are you going to do? Let some camel jockey with a Koran tell America what's up?

That's not going to happen for reasons that should be obvious. No one bosses the USA around, not even the people who own oil fields, and certainly not some radicalized jihadist with a pressure cooker and a bucket of nails. We don't negotiate with terrorists.

\*

Whenever the Enemy Who Hates Our Freedoms becomes especially unruly, crossing borders dreamed up by imperial empires, we view them as impudent weeds with AK-47s and machetes. Every time they impertinently raise their masked heads, taunting us, braying slogans at us, slashing American throats, luring the big bad bully into yet another unwinnable war, we know it's time to mow the grass.

Here we go. Again.

It's been 15 years since the Bad Guys got our attention and, barely trying, won the War on Terror. They left us terrified and flummoxed

and hysterical, perfectly prepared to plunder our treasury in exchange for the delusional belief that we would be more secure; that somehow – and this would all work itself out, we were assured – our drones and bombs and torture camps would eliminate the threat, not increase it.

Well, reader, you and your neighbors have spent trillions to feel better. You and your family are safer today than ever before, right?

Is the Islamic State an existential threat to the United States of America? No. Our homeland is not currently under attack, despite the blowsy rhetoric issuing forth from the caliphate, mimicking American slogans like “we will destroy you,” “we will pursue you to the gates of Hell. They cannot hurt us. We have the TSA on our side.

Is the Islamic State a new and unforeseen mutation in the world of extremism? No. Before “emerging,” they had been murdering their fellow Muslims for more than a year, while our state-of-the-art

surveillance network reported dutifully and watched approvingly.

Is the Islamic State the latest iteration of a distant, inscrutable villain whose motives are so mysterious that we peace-loving Americans understand them to be Pure Evil? Yes.

At least that's the standard portrayal.

Except their motives aren't really mysterious. And they're not Pure Evil – unless you wish to lump anyone who uses violence to achieve their goals, which would include the world's largest purveyor of violence, us nice folks who live in America.

You're probably aware that We Don't Negotiate With Terrorists. And if you're like most Americans, you understand and support that noble and patriotic stance. We can all agree that if you negotiate with a terrorist they'll get the funny idea that their terrorism is helping them “win.” So, for the sake of our grandchildren and all that's sacred, *we can't talk to these people*. It sends the wrong message.

Plus – and this is the really dangerous part – if we “negotiated” with the terrorists, we might find out what it is they truly want. Israel discovered this recently with Hamas. It’s a problem, because whatever they truly want is always absolutely completely totally unacceptable. So it’s better to try to kill them all before they kill us.

And they’ll try, you know. Wouldn’t you? Wouldn’t you if you knew in advance that the only way you could get what you desperately need/want/deserve is to kill for it? When compromise has been preemptively dismissed as impossible, a non-starter, the unheard voice seeks the loudest megaphone at his disposal. Our We Don’t Negotiate With Terrorists policy leads inexorably to more terrorism.

Which maybe isn’t so bad. It keeps the War Machine running, and so long as the banks aren’t stealing too much the economy will always have a reliable engine driving the juggernaut.

What’s most reassuring about our latest foray into the Middle East is how *easy* it’s

going to be this time around.

*Islamic State*. This time it's not an amorphous, dynamic target. It's a tangible, knowable *State*, a State that happens to currently occupy land in two other States, Iraq and Syria. This Statehood is helpful. As soon as we can get all the terrorists in the world to gather in one place – as well as their offspring and various others who might mistakenly view them as martyrs -- we can simply use our superior weaponry and finish them off, once and for all. A couple of well-placed nukes – boom, there's the end of your terrorist threat.

No more weed-whacking. No more demure trimming around the edges. This time we re-sod the desert.

When we eliminate Islamic State, just as we eliminated Al Qaeda, foreign terrorism will be a thing of the past. No one will hate our freedoms anymore. Back home, in our fortress, all the disaffected malcontents who once sympathized with *ihadists* suddenly will feel rootless and directionless. Our homegrown

terrorists will no longer have role models,  
except their own government.

\*

Let's just say we go ahead and  
capitulate to their unreasonable and  
unacceptable demands. They're not going to be  
satisfied; they're never satisfied.

Even if we agreed to help them wipe  
Israel off the map and establish a thriving  
Palestinian state, they still wouldn't be happy.  
That's the way these terrorists are: constantly  
unhappy and dissatisfied. Nothing cheers  
them, except when Americans suffer.

So, yes, they want something. We're not  
about to give it to them.

The roadmap to the future is clear.  
They're going to terrorize us with homemade  
explosives and suicide pilots and what have  
you. We will punish the bad guys, perhaps even  
torture them. Others will take their place,  
continuing the hatred of our policies, which  
will lead them to additional acts of terrorism.  
Which will accomplish nothing, because you

*don't negotiate with a terrorist*, particularly when there's nothing to discuss.

To demonstrate exceptional global leadership, we must never revise our policy. We need to reaffirm our unwillingness to communicate. Since the results of this mindset are highly predictable, we have two choices: 1) accept regular and devastating terrorist attacks against Americans, or, 2) kill all the terrorists before they can kill us.

What's it going to be? The value-conscious will point out that our nuclear warheads are already bought and paid for; we might as well use them before some treaty outlaws them. The pragmatic will point out that the TSA and other branches of Homeland Security (but particularly the highly professional screeners at the airport) have done a stellar job of protecting us from harm. The optimistic will point out that once-a-superpower doesn't necessarily mean "never-again-a-superpower."

Or – and this is admittedly absurd, almost comical – we could reexamine our diplomatic strategies.

## **Zombies Are Blameless and So Are We**

The main problem with a dramatic overhaul of our national thinking is that it would require a lot of thinking. That's tiring.

We're exceptionally busy. When is there *not* a new show, a photo to be liked, an emoticon to be acknowledged with another emoticon?

When you're as preoccupied as most Americans, you really don't have time to notice esoteric stuff, like what's happening in the world. Fortunately, thanks to our superior native intelligence, Americans have learned to be vaguely aware of intolerable situations yet remain utterly oblivious to their consequences. It's an evolutionary advantage move that makes the intolerable somehow tolerable.

If you voluntarily buy burritos from Chipotle or pay for TV programs owned by Discovery, companies where the CEO earns 1,000-times more than the average employee, then you probably don't have any qualms with wealth and income inequality. You're certainly

not going to have a problem with all the other corporations, like, for instance, Disney, where the Executives-to-Workers ratio is in the mere hundreds. Indeed, you recognize that corporations do so much good for the world in their relentless pursuit of profit and growth that you're willing to overlook the naked greed of the (mostly white) men siphoning off millions in profits for themselves and their precious families while everyone else does the actual work. On you shop, not exactly oblivious but more-or-less unbothered.

If you love America, then you believe in capitalism. If you love capitalism, there's never been a better time to be alive. You're presently in a state of something akin to modern nirvana. The machine is working perfectly. The worthiest, most valuable members of our society are being rewarded lavishly for the greatness they refract among the rest of us. Money is flowing upward – and has been for decades – the way it's supposed to in a system that operates outside of the Laws of Nature.

Money wins. Capital triumphs. Industry vanquishes sloth.

For many of us, the truth about how we've allowed ourselves to be organized is too painful. We can't look at our beloved husband or daughter or grandson and see a hog at the trough. We can't look ourselves in the mirror and cop to the fact that we participate every day in a society that systematically relegates many of our brothers and sisters to a life of indentured servitude and second-class citizenry.

So we watch zombie shows. We tweet about zombie shows. We like someone's comment about themselves watching a zombie show, appended to an IG selfie, *Can't tell who the real zombies r anymore! #couchspud*

We fill the holes in our soul with triple-stuffed-nacho-burger-wings (and "organic" burritos that make fellows in an office very rich and some customers very sick.) We scream at the television when the sub-literate genetic freak drops the ball and "our" team fails to be the best. We vacation somewhere fabulous,

where the locals are exotic and grateful for American consumption. We “relax.” We take care of ourselves, because lord knows the American healthcare gulag won’t.

On some level we kinda sorta understand that all the money we spend on weapons of mass mayhem could be spent on other things, like education and healthcare. But on another level we feel a vague sense of relief that there’s a productive use for all the bad students not smart enough to sit at a desk and issue directives.

Are things exceptionally perfect? Not quite. But we must acknowledge that no one on Wall Street is breaking any laws. (OK, at least no one is going to jail for it). Everyone is playing by the rules. And the rules say that our society is built like a pyramid. We all need to find two or more people below us so we (and our dear children) can own more possessions than the losers who stir the beans at Chipotle.

## **More Work + Less Money = Progress**

In 2014, the United States economy officially recovered all of the jobs lost during the Great Wall Street Recession and Bank Heist.

But here's the even better news: The newly created jobs pay an average of 23% less than the ones lost in the "downsizing." According to a report issued by the United States Conference of Mayors based on 2012 Census data, higher-paying jobs in the construction and manufacturing sectors have been replaced by jobs in the lower-paying sectors of healthcare and hospitality.

It gets better. From 2005 to 2012, the analysis shows, the top 20% of earners were responsible for more than 60% of all income gains in our fine and fair republic. The bottom 40% enjoyed a 6.5% increase.

You can call it "income inequality," or whatever other whiny euphemism you prefer. Most Americans call it "economic justice." You see, the members of our society who are the

most important – the people who don't actually do physical labor – deserve to be rewarded with the most money. That's how our system works, of course. The most valuable among us get more of everything. The less valuable get less. What's so hard to understand about that? Instead of complaining, those of us far from the top ought to thank our betters for creating so many jobs.

You can invoke “all men are created equal” and other outmoded philosophies, but we all tacitly understand that life is a [insert your preferred metaphor here] war/game/race, and not everyone can win. Some of us are losers, and maybe we'd all be better off if everyone just accepted it.

I don't mean to suggest that a wider disparity in income between winners and losers is necessarily a good idea. If things get too out-of-whack – when the peasantry realizes they'll never have a fraction of what their superiors own – the mob could be lulled out of its waking slumber to some sort of horribly unpleasant action, like voting. Or striking.

Better to keep things the way they are, more or less. Let the chasm widen slowly, almost imperceptibly. It's harder to notice the ever-increasing distance that way, and by the time the uneducated and untalented and lazy come to their senses there will be a new zombie show to binge-watch, and everyone will feel better.

The banks are bigger than ever. CEOs earn more than ever. Corporate profits are at historic highs, as are many stock market indices. The system is working. And so is America (for 23% less income than before, but let's not quibble). More folks than ever are learning to say, "Hi, my name is [name] and I'll be your server today," and, really, isn't helping others what our capitalist system is all about?

## **More People in Cages = A Better America**

The new rankings just came out. We win again!

Of all the nations on Earth, the United States of America incarcerates the largest percentage of its population. Out of every 100,000 people, we put 716 in some kind of jail. No other civilized country is even close.

Nor are the uncivilized ones. Almost 25% of the entire world's behind-bars population is housed in an American *corrections facility* – so named because we're correct to warehouse unwanted blacks, druggies, and other assorted losers in human zoos.

Let's be clear: We don't have the world's largest prison population because America is a nation of criminals. It's not that we have more bad people than they do in other places. It's just that we're exceptionally better at apprehending, convicting, and sentencing our bad people than everywhere else.

This is something to be proud of. Just when it seemed no one could take America seriously anymore -- what with our hypocritical doublespeak on Syria, our inability to bully other countries into handing over our political enemies, and the general creeping suspicion that people in Brazil and other “developing nations” might soon have as much buying power (and all the cool stuff that come with it) as us -- the prison results came in.

The winner, by a mile, was a beautiful country known by the moniker "the land of the free."

Hooray and huzzah.

Other nations try to pass themselves off as havens of civility, places where Law and Order is a way of life, not a television program. China, Russia, various Central American dictatorships – they all claim to respect the Rule of Law. But none of them have built entire industries out of storing away undesirable citizens. They bandy about the honorific “police state,” but they haven’t really earned it.

We have. Rwanda (527 per 100K) is nipping at our heels. But they simply don't possess America's exceptional wealth. They may have plenty of naughty citizens in need of jailing, but Rwanda just can't construct as many prisons as us. Plus, they're busy rebuilding their nation after a couple of genocides, so we forgive them if they don't show as much devotion to law enforcement as America.

The Cayman Islands, what's their excuse? At only 382 per 100K (good enough to sneak into the top-20), this little Caribbean nation might want to tighten up their notoriously loose banking laws. That is, if they want their governmental authority to be taken seriously.

Bowing to pressure from the increasingly powerful Cannabis Lobby, then Attorney General Eric Holder, addressing the American Bar Association, announced plans for drug-sentencing reform. Holder, who previously could be counted on to raid state-approved medical marijuana dispensaries,

sounded as though he might be playing for another team: "We need to ensure that incarceration is used to punish, deter and rehabilitate - not merely to convict, warehouse and forget," Holder said. "Although incarceration has a role to play in our justice system, widespread incarceration at the federal, state and local levels is both ineffective and unsustainable. It imposes a significant economic burden -- totaling \$80 billion in 2010 alone -- and it comes with human and moral costs that are impossible to calculate."

Impossible to calculate? If we had a dollar for every sweet child sleeping safely in the security of their parents' home, able to dream sweet dreams and awake without the threat of violence from some violent marijuana user – well, then we would be very rich, indeed.

Some radical provocative types discern a nefarious link between a nation with the world's largest military budget, the world's largest prison population, and a dual justice system for rich and poor. I don't. What I see is a country that realizes the more people you put

in metal cages, the better off everyone who isn't in a metal cage will be.

If you're an American who cares about American Values, the question you've got to ask yourself is: Do you want to be a winner, or do you want to be a loser (loser being defined as anything that's not a winner, winner being defined as first place)? Do you want America to be a nation where drug users are free to walk the streets, as though they were upstanding bankers or politicians?

Or do you want America to be a place that knows where to throw its filth?

## Where the Money Is

Serving others. Service industry. Financial services. One weekend, take a walk around your city's downtown. Look at the skyline. Note the names on the tallest buildings. See who has the wealth.

In Los Angeles, almost all the skyscrapers bear the names of corporations that handle money: banks, accounting firms, insurance companies.

This seems about right. These organizations, one reckons, ought to have lots of money because, well, they have lots of money, even if it's mostly other people's money. Get past the fact that these super-rich cartels construct their towering edifices with wealth created almost magically, alchemically, accumulated either by selling our money back to us at prices hundreds-of-percent above what they pay for it (banking), pooling our money and amortizing the risk while skimming off the vigorish, like an old-time bookie (insurance), or

counting and recounting it in creative ways (accounting).

Never mind. These enormously profitable concerns announce their spectacular success with tangible evidence poking into the clouds. Their wealth is real. They have *real* estate to prove it.

Depending on your politics and sense of history, the fact that financial firms dominate your downtown skyline is either a testament to the elegance of capitalism or a dismally ironic commentary on our collective capacity to be bamboozled by so many Harold Hills in pinstriped suits.

No, they're not selling us trombones and band uniforms. But like the Music Man they are selling happy illusions. As the world's most successful religions have amply demonstrated, charging premium prices for imaginary products tends to be a splendid business.

Money is a mythical concept, a theory that almost all of us agree to. Just as art transforms a rectangle of painted muslin into something of perceived value, printing

numbers and presidential busts on paper makes those (smaller) rectangles of paper suddenly worth a lot more than if they were merely used to jot down someone's phone message. It's a \$5 bill because we understand the theory behind money. An authentic Jackson Pollock is worth more than an expertly forged Pollock because we understand the theory behind art. Money exists only because we agree that it does. The financial conglomerates that own the tallest buildings exist because we agree that we need them to referee the game of capitalism.

The rich corporations that handle money certainly provide some kind of service, the importance of which is reflected in their jillion-dollar towers. Just like the gaudy casinos that line Las Vegas Boulevard -- in a city that functions like a colony of hyperactive banks, insurers, and accountancies -- the prime properties near the civic center of your city are owned by firms that got rich by merely handling money. They produce nothing other than monthly statements. They create nothing

other than new financial "instruments" for folks to bet on. They don't really *do* anything, other than pass the money back and forth, bleeding off a few cents with each transaction, like a slot machine. But we seem to need them to preserve and enhance our way of life. How can one buy homes and cars and other expensive stuff without loans and collision coverage and someone to keep track of how much we're winning and losing?

The miraculous part is the transformation: at some point, the firms that have nothing but fingers on everyone else's wealth eventually have everyone else's wealth in their pocket, collected and stacked neatly in their 72-story monuments to entrepreneurship.

## We're Not Broke

Not that I'm complaining. I prefer to look on the bright side. Everyone else, all they want to talk about is the gap between the so-called 1% and all the rest of us. They're so rich; we're so not. Make sad face here.

I say: Great news, America: Despite decades of war fighting and tax cutting, and despite a national deficit of nearly \$1 trillion, we're not broke!

We are *not* broke.

Well, *we*, the citizenry and its treasury, are collectively broke. But we, *the collective earning power we*, are most definitely not broke.

American corporations, those paragons of civic virtue and societal responsibility, acting with our best interests at heart, have collectively stashed \$1.7 trillion overseas. It's safer there.

Apple, the greatest company ever, has about \$150 billion in cash on hand, \$102 billion of it parked in foreign banks.

There's an excellent reason our very best companies have all their money sitting overseas instead of here in America, where it might give the national economy a nice boost. By parking it in places like Ireland, rich corporations such as Apple – and Google, and just about all the rest of the biggies – avoid paying American taxes!

They're very clever, these great companies. Good thing they have inspiring corporate mottoes, like Google's "Don't be evil." Because with all their smartness, they could probably do some rather evil things – you know, like stealing from those less fortunate.

Transfer pricing, cost-sharing agreements, tax treaties – oh, it's all so complex and mathematical, and we're just glad that super smart lawyers understand all this stuff so Apple and its peers can continue to wow us with their amazing slave-assembled products *and* their fantastic ability to figure out the best ways to hoard more cash.

We're profoundly impressed with Apple's ability to earn profits and not pay taxes on them. It's the American Way, and we salute them. We also thank them for being such powerful job creators in the United States. You guys are awesome.

And now we humbly ask Apple and General Electric and Exxon-Mobil and all the rest, if it's not too terrible of a bother, would you mind repatriating all the exiled dollars?

That would be really terrific of you. Maybe this is crazy talk, but if we the people didn't feel like we were broke all the time perhaps we wouldn't have to continue to cut essential services. And maybe – and this really is crazy – we could afford national healthcare.

Oops. That was probably going too far. That would be, like, socialism.

What Americans want is pure capitalism, the brilliant kind. The kind where you earn billions and billions and billions, pay foreign labor a pittance, pay yourself a fortune, and stash the excess where none of the undeserving can get their filthy hands on it.

## **Nacirema**

What's your vision of a more exceptionally perfect America?

When I was a child, one of my grade school teachers passed out a Social Studies article about a faraway country called Nacirema. This crazy place was inhabited by natives with strange grooming habits and fanciful modes of transportation and peculiar foods -- or at least it seemed that way based on the descriptions. Eventually, we children learned that Nacirema was our very own America, only backwards. Whoa, intense!

Scanning the newspapers on any random day provides plenty of Nacirema moments. The evolved, modern, advanced republic we like to think we inhabit seems at times to be slipping ever closer to the primordial muck of our pre-Cambrian ancestors, as though thousands of years of art and science, religion and government, has undone civilization, not formed it. Our utopian instincts have been replaced by a semi-

functional dystopia, where, Nacirema-like, everything is backwards.

To wit: A United States senator is caught in a Minnesota toilet stall soliciting sex (from another man). The nation, aghast, calls for his head. Members of his party -- Republican -- loudly professing an unwillingness to judge their fellow man, judge the senator to be unworthy of his office and call for his immediate resignation and banishment to Idaho, the state that produced the depraved creature, who, per his Party's line, has railed against homosexuality in the usual biblical terms (abomination; contrary to God's will; etc., etc.).

While most commentators obsess about the senator's hypocrisy, almost no one in Nacirema asks why the great state of Minnesota is devoting a penny of tax payer dollars to have an undercover officer sit in airport toilet stalls and entrap closeted homosexuals in search of consensual liaisons. The senator neither exposed himself in public nor consummated any sort of private act. He

merely made a signal to someone else he thought was looking for a hook-up -- something that happens at airport bars hundreds of times a day, mostly between heterosexuals. In Nacirema, though, having different sexual preferences is still worthy of ridicule and punishment.

To wit: A new film comes out involving sex and espionage among attractive Asians. Although the folks who run the movie studios assure honest Naciremans that the movie, directed by an Asian fellow who happened to win the Academy Award for his last picture -- about gay cowboys -- is NOT pornography, the folks who look out for the easily scandalized award the film a NC-17 rating. After all, it portrays adults having sex.

Meanwhile, the same week, nearly a dozen movies are released that portray a menagerie of characters being shot, slashed, decapitated, crushed, suffocated, and disemboweled. Half of these movies are awarded a PG-13 rating, meaning a young resident of Nacirema is supposed to have a

parent accompanying him to explain that it's all just imaginary. The other half of the movies earn an R. None garner an NC-17 -- because that's reserved for the really sick stuff. The lovemaking stuff.

To wit: An additional 30,000 young citizens of Nacirema are sent to a faraway land called Qari, where they are employed as underpaid police officers in an anarchic nation of religious zealots. The leadership of Nacirema calls these sacrificial lambs "heroes" and denounces as unpatriotic anyone who would dare suggest that there is nothing heroic about being treated like a disposable bomb-and-bullet absorber. Those crazy Naciremans! They don't support the war, but they "support the troops."

Of course they do. Someone has got to make the sacrifices so that all the other zany residents of Nacirema can continue to enjoy their comical, backwards lifestyle. Like, you know, they drive around in enormous tank-like conveyances called sVUS, staring into their hands.

## **Get on Board or Get Left Behind**

Driving while texting is certainly a special skill; alas, it's not unique to the USA or Nacirema. Besides, highly practiced behaviors aren't what distinguish us from everyone who isn't us. It's what's inside.

My list of innately American qualities that help define our exceptionalism is long. Spend an entire holiday weekend, or spend just one day, contemplating our blessed independence from the tyrant King, and you'll realize how America managed to get so far in so little time.

We Americans are exceptionally strategic, exceptionally Machiavellian.

We're exceptionally addicted to comfort and convenience.

We're exceptionally reliant on the benefits of slave labor, whether from Mississippi cotton plantations or Bangladeshi stitching factories.

And we're exceptionally invested in delineating the omnipresent differences

between Us and Them, even when they don't exist.

As the last sparkler fizzled in the sky and the band struck up the obligatory Sousa march, it occurred to me that everything everywhere would be even more perfect and we'd all be better off if every other country in the world stopped complaining and started *cooperating*, gracefully accepting the mysterious but transformative benefits of our homegrown American Exceptionalism.

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