

# **MAKING AMERICA GREAT AGAIN**

## **PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE**

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It all started when I was very young. My father, who was born in United States, talked often about what a mistake it was for his family to leave the United States and come to Canada when he was nine or ten.

He also talked often about the remarkable contributions Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and others made to the development of democracy, politics, government, and governance in United States and other parts of the world. He was especially proud of the fact that he travelled to the United States many times when he was older to watch Grover Cleveland Alexander pitch, Ty Cobb steal bases, and Babe Ruth hit home runs.

He loved Vermont and New Hampshire, which explains why we spent most of our summer holidays there, as well as making many trips to this beautiful part of the world in the fall. We also took several trips to Washington, and always looped south to enjoy the Great Smoky Mountains and North Carolina. I looked forward to our summer holidays in the United States so much because they provided me with an opportunity to stock up on Hershey chocolate bars, Tootsie Rolls, and Reed's butterscotch and root beer candies for the year.

When I was older, we talked frequently about the United States, not only politics and sports, but also about economics, education, the sciences, international affairs, the arts, and a great deal else. Since my father had a keen interest in classical music, he purchased many records of performances by the New York Philharmonic, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, Paul Robeson singing "Old' Man River," and Marian Anderson singing "Ave Maria" and "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands." We also discussed world-class universities like Harvard, Princeton, Yale, and Berkley, famous museums and galleries such as the Smithsonian, Metropolitan Museum of

Art, and Art Institute of Chicago, and national parks like Yosemite and Yellowstone, as well as the seminal contributions Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Ansel Adams, John James Audubon, and Ferde Grofé made to activating and generating interest in the natural environment in the United States through their books, photographs, advocacy, and musical works like the Grand Canyon Suite.

Later in life, I found myself on the receiving end of a steady flow of American goods, ideas, and cultural products into Canada, much like all Canadians and people and countries in other parts of the world. There was hardly a week went by that I didn't watch several American movies and numerous television programs, see paintings by Andy Warhol and Jackson Pollock, read books by Mark Twain and Ernest Hemingway, enjoy poems by Robert Frost and Maya Angelou, enjoy songs by Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, and Dolly Parton, and listen to jazz performances by Ella Fitzgerald, Aretha Franklin, Louis Armstrong, and Duke Ellington.

I also found myself on the receiving end of a great deal of information about America's involvement in the two major world wars as well as the Korean and Vietnam wars, the success of many American companies and industrial, technological, and communications giants such as the Ford Motor Company, US Steel, Standard Oil, IBM, Exxon Mobil, Walmart, Microsoft, Apple, Amazon, and Facebook, as well as businessmen, entrepreneurs, and philanthropists like John Rockefeller, Cornelius Vanderbilt, Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and Warren Buffett. This information contributed to expanding my knowledge of the phenomenal growth of the American economy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially the early and last half of the twentieth century, as did the trips I took to many American cities, states, and historic sites. It was easy to see from these activities, and others, why the United States made such an incredible contribution to improving living standards and the quality of life for millions of Americans and billions of people in other parts of the world during this time, as well as making the world a better and safer place for all people, countries, and the world as a whole.

While these developments and contributions, like many others, were fueled by a variety of factors, most of them would not have been possible without a large, diverse, and constant flow of immigrants into United States from other parts of the

world. Starting from modest beginnings, some of these immigrants went on to become famous in the United States and other parts of the world, such as Bob Hope, Edward G. Robinson, Maureen O’Hara, Ayn Rand, Andrew Carnegie, Kahlil Gibran, and Audrey Hepburn in earlier times and Christiane Amanpour, Arianna Huffington, Elon Musk, and many others more recently.

What was true for immigrants in general was true for Jewish immigrants in particular. During the late nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century after experiencing the horrors of the Holocaust and being denied entry into the United States for many years, many Jewish immigrants were admitted into the United States and made the most of it. They assimilated well, and many of them or their descendants made important contributions to American culture and the American way of life, especially in the arts, sciences, television, and film. Included here would be Albert Einstein, Charlie Chaplin, Leonard Bernstein, George Gershwin, Irving Berlin, Richard Rodgers, and Aaron Copland with such musical favorites as West Side Story, American in Paris, “God Bless America,” “White Christmas,” The Sound of Music, Appalachian Spring, Billy the Kid, and Rodeo.

What strikes me most about these developments and contributions, and many others like them, when are added up and considered in totality is how profuse and imaginative they are, as well as how symbolic they are of American culture as a whole. Not only did they come from many different sectors of American society – young and old, rich and poor, male and female, and different ethnic and racial groups – but also most of them benefitted people and countries in other parts of the world and not just Americans and the United States.

No person has contributed more to our understanding of this than Ken Burns, the documentary filmmaker. He has demonstrated an uncanny knack for selecting people, events, achievements, and contributions that are not only significant in their own right, but also highly representative of American culture and the American way of life in all their diverse forms and manifestations. This is evident in all of his films, but most especially in films such as The Civil War, Baseball, The West, Jazz, Country Music, The Roosevelts, The Statue of Liberty, and The National Parks: America’s Best Idea.

It is impossible to watch these films, and others, without learning a great deal about United States in general and American culture in particular. They go right to the heart and soul of what United States and American culture are all about, as well as what they have contributed to the world. It is like reading an encyclopedia of “Who’s Who” and “What’s What” in the United States and the world.

It would be a mistake to conclude that there is only a positive side to this and not a negative side, which is true for all countries and peoples in the world. In the case of United States, there are the countless historical and contemporary injustices done to Indigenous and black people as well as other minority groups, as is the case in Canada as well, adverse experiences with rampant capitalism and the industrial-military complex, incredible inequalities in income and wealth, high rates of pollution and environmental abuse, and many others. However, on balance, there is no doubt that countries and people in other parts of the world have benefitted immensely from the multitude of contributions the United States, Americans, and American culture have made in the past – and are making at present - to other people, countries, and cultures in the world as well as the world at large.

With this in mind, you can imagine how anxious I was to watch the American presidential elections in 2016, especially when Donald Trump talked about “making American great again.” With all the different activities and achievements that made America great the first time, I was excited to hear what Trump had to say about making it great a second time. It seemed to me that this provided an ideal opportunity to take a long, hard look at what made America great the first time, and what could be learned from this that would make America great once more.

This was about far more than the American economy. While the American economy had (and has) a very valuable role to play in this, it was really about American culture as a whole or total way of life, and how this manifested itself in the world in the all-encompassing, holistic sense. This is because countless people and most countries in the world have been strongly influenced by American culture and the American way of life and wanted to be an integral part of this and personify it in some way. They wanted to sing like Frank Sinatra or Lady Gaga, play basketball like Michael Jordon and LeBron James, walk tall like John Wayne, act

like Clint Eastwood or Meryl Streep, compose adagios like Samuel Barber, dance like Ginger Rogers or Michael Jackson, laugh like David Letterman and the Smothers Brothers, and share Martin Luther King Junior's enticing dream. Living next door to the United States, I was fully aware of this. Like all Canadians, I was exposed to United States, American culture, and the American way of life daily and in every possible way.

I listened attentively to speech after speech and debate after debate during the 2016 presidential campaign to hear how America could be great again. All I heard, however, was that America could be great again by growing the American economy, increasing the rate of economic growth, and reestablishing America's presence as the number one economic powerhouse in the world. There was no mention that I heard of the indispensable role the arts, sciences, humanities, education, sports, recreation, and other activities played in making American great the first time and could also play a second time. It was to be achieved solely by focusing on the American economy, generating as much corporate, commercial, and financial activity as possible, creating countless employment and investment opportunities, curbing the rise of China as America's principal economic competitor in the world, preventing American companies from relocating in other parts of the world, and bringing an end to the practice of other countries exploiting the United States through unfair trading policies and not paying their fair share of the cost of maintaining the United Nations, World Bank, NATO, and other organizations.

I came away from the 2016 election campaign feeling that a unique opportunity had been lost to take a broader, deeper, and more all-encompassing approach to what was required to make America great again. While economics and growing the American economy were obviously a very fundamental part of this – they always are - many other factors had to be taken into account if America was to be great a second time, especially as many changes had taken place in the United States and the world since the previous presidential election was held.

My concern over this intensified when I heard virtually nothing said about climate change, global warming, and the environmental crisis during the 2016 election. What was most disturbing about this was the fact that a great deal of

empirical evidence and factual documentation had been assembled by the world's leading scientists and the International Panel on Climate Change that there really was an environmental crisis in the world and it was being driven by climate change and global warming. By then, this crisis was being experienced in the United States and not just in other parts of the world, as manifested in more frequent and severe hurricanes, floods, forest fires, tornadoes, and the sinking of coastal areas.

And this wasn't all. Empirical evidence and factual documentation was also accumulating rapidly with respect to the huge disparities that existed in income and wealth in United States and other parts of the world, growing shortages and higher prices for strategic natural resources, basic staples, and fundamental foodstuffs, and escalating tensions, hostilities, and open conflicts between people and countries with very different worldviews, values, customs, beliefs, and ways of life.

If United States wanted to be great again, I concluded it will have to deal with challenges as complex, immense, universal, and life-threatening as this, as will any country in the world with similar aspirations. It will also have to play a leadership and proactive role in the world. In specific and concrete terms, this will be required to:

- reduce climate change, global warming, and environmental devastation in the United States, as well as provide an evocative example in this area for people and countries in other parts of the world to follow;
- decrease the huge disparities that exist in income and wealth in the United States, and play a pivotal role in helping other people and other countries to deal with these disparities and inequalities as well; and
- improve relations between the diverse peoples in the United States and assist other countries, cultures, and civilizations in creating these relations as well.



What is most obvious about these challenges – which are looming larger and larger as three of the “greatest challenges of the twenty-first century”- is the fact that none of them can be dealt with effectively by taking an economic approach to them. This is because the economic approach is designed to produce goods, services, and material and monetary wealth, and is not designed to deal with challenges as vast, vital, complex, and multidimensional as this.

For this, a cultural approach is required. In the case of United States, this means seeing and dealing with American culture in the holistic sense and not a partial sense. Not only does this approach focus on American culture as a whole and therefore the need to achieve balanced and harmonious relationships between the parts of the whole – from economics, politics, industry, and technology to the arts, sciences, humanities, education, recreation, and a great deal else - but also it is concerned with making the changes in American values, lifestyles, and ways of life that are imperative to come to grips with these challenges. Interestingly, more and more people and organizations in the United States and around the world are embracing and applying this cultural approach. When they talk about the need to “change their culture” today, they mean they must prepare themselves for dealing with their greatest challenges and coming to grips with their most pressing problems.

Take the environmental crisis as the most obvious example of this. What is seldom recognized is the fact that during the entire time America was becoming great in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the natural environment was ignored. This can't be allowed to happen a second time, which is why a cultural approach must be taken to dealing with this dangerous and debilitating problem. The most important step in this regard is to admit that there is an environmental crisis in the United States and in the world, as well as the fact that the economy and the natural environment are not compatible. The more the American economy grows and the rate of economic growth increases, the more pollution is produced, the more resources are used up, and the more damage is done to the natural environment and the lives of people and other species. This is not a viable scenario for the future.

It follows from this that a fundamental change is required in American culture and the American way of life if the environmental crisis is to be dealt with

effectively. Exactly this same problem confronts Canada, Canadians, and people and countries in other parts of the world. Not only are Canada and United States two of the world's largest polluters on a per capita basis, but also they make one of the biggest ecological footprints on the world in per capita terms. This problem is compounded by the fact that both countries have had many environmental activists and pioneers over the course of their history, such as Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Muir, Theodore Roosevelt, Rachel Carson, James Lovelock, Al Gore, and Thomas Berry in the United States and Grey Owl, Jack Minor, Farley Mowat, Maurice Strong, David Suzuki, and several founders of Greenpeace International in Canada. Clearly it is time for these two countries to step up to the plate and make the changes in their cultures and ways of life that are necessary to deal with the environmental crisis successfully. There is a tradition to maintain.

What is needed in both countries in concrete terms to achieve this? First and foremost, they must devise and implement the panorama of preventions, protections, safeguards, and transformative techniques and technologies that are needed to reduce climate change, global warming, and resource depletion, develop clean, green, and shared economies, realize the balance that is required between the material and non-material dimension of development and life, and ensure ecological sustainability as a practical necessity rather than a theoretical ideal.

In order to do this, it is necessary to put a price on carbon, institute carbon taxes, and negotiate tough and rigorous agreements on carbon emissions; become carbon neutral as quickly as possible; phase out the use of fossil fuels; decrease greenhouse gases and toxic substances; capitalize fully on renewable energy sources such as wind, solar, and tidal power; shift to electric cars and trucks; exceed the targets established at the Paris Conference on Climate Change in 2016; and reduce the purchase of products that are high in material inputs and outputs and replace them with activities that are low in material inputs and outputs such as the arts, humanities, and spiritual pursuits. This can be achieved as United States and Canada have repeatedly demonstrated in the past by rising to the occasion and overcoming the major challenges that have confronted them, as well as manifesting a great deal more creativity, ingenuity, innovation, and determination in the future.



This same kind of response is needed with respect to the huge inequalities that exist in income and wealth in the United States and other countries in the world.

While this problem came to the attention of the world initially during the Occupy Wall Street movement that took place in Zuccotti Park in New York on September 17, 2011 – exactly 10 years and 6 days after the tragic bombings of 9/11/01 took down the Twin Towers in that city - many of the conflicts and protests that have occurred since that time in Iraq, Chile, Pakistan, Haiti, Ethiopia, Honduras, and many other countries have manifested a similar concern over income inequalities as well as other issues of fundamental importance to the world. There is a rapidly escalating fear among millions of low and middle-class families and wage earners in the United States and other countries in the world that they will not be able to “pay their bills” and cope with the huge debts racked up by their governments in recent years. When 1 percent of the population of the world has as much or more wealth as the 99 percent and this is increasing, it is a very unhealthy situation for all people, all countries, and the world as a whole going forward into the future.

If the United States is to deal effectively with this challenge and provide an evocative example for other countries to emulate, it will be necessary to use the full spectrum of policy tools and administrative vehicles that are necessary to do this at present and create many new ones in the future. This includes increasing the minimum wage substantially, creating many more income possibilities and financial opportunities for working-class people and poor families, investing more heavily in education and especially cooperative education, eliminating tax shelters for the rich, and, most emphatically, putting in place a much more progressive tax system. The biggest tragedy of all in this respect is that tax rates for those at the very top of the income pyramid have been declining while their share of income and wealth has been steadily increasing.

What is required most in this area is for all political systems and parties to take several bold and major steps to the left. This is needed to help millions of people in the United States and billions of people in other countries who are suffering and struggling to deal with increases in the cost of living and huge inequalities in income

and wealth that are threatening to escalate out of control. This would do more than anything else to provide people in the United States and elsewhere in the world with a much better break in terms of their oppressive tax loads and inadequate income-earning potential, as would the ability to write off a reasonable portion of their escalating accommodation, living, and health care expenses against their income. What a marvellous message this would send to the rest of the world if this badly needed political initiative and governmental breakthrough occurred first in the United States.

Finally, there is the challenge of improving relations between the diverse peoples of the United States and people and countries in other parts of the world. With all the intermingling going on between different peoples, races, religions, ethnic groups, and cultures today, this is a categorial imperative in the future. Without this, the world is destined to become a more volatile, unpredictable, and chaotic place rather than a safer, more secure, and stable place.

It would be a mistake to under-estimate the role artists, arts organizations, and the arts can play in addressing this final challenge. Not only do music, plays, paintings, literary works, and other artistic activities possess the potential to broaden, deepen, and intensify our awareness, understanding, appreciation, and acceptance of worldviews, values, value systems, and beliefs that are different than our own, but also they bring people from diverse cultures and civilizations together rather than splitting them apart. Over the last few centuries, artists and arts organizations in the United States have manifested an incredible ability for achieving this, as well as for assimilating people with very different origins, backgrounds and roots, thereby enabling them to enjoy artistic experiences that transcend their cultural differences.

Rather than cutting funding for artists, arts organizations, and the arts in the United States, it is time to increase it. This is where the programs, projects, and works will be created, produced, and presented that will enable Americans from a variety of cultures, classes, interest groups, and walks of life to achieve unity in diversity and live as one.

What is true for artists, arts organizations, and the arts is also true for educators and educational institutions throughout the United States. It is time for these individuals and institutions to create the courses, curriculums, audio-visual materials, and digital technologies that are needed to broaden, deepen, and intensify knowledge and understanding of American culture as a whole, as well as other cultures and civilizations in the holistic sense. With many of the most outstanding educational institutions in the world, United States possesses the historical and contemporary experiences and institutional capabilities that are required to achieve this. Not only would this make it possible for all people and all countries to learn much more about their own culture and the cultures and civilizations of others, but also it would make it possible for them to capitalize on the profuse benefits and opportunities that can be derived from this.

This is undoubtedly what Rabindranath Tagore, the great Indian cultural sage, had in mind when he said, “it is time for all the great cultures of the world to come together and give and take from each other. This is the keynote to the coming age.” This may also be the key to making America great again, especially if it is combined with building on the remarkable heritage and insights of past and present generations of American pioneers and activists as well as America’s well-known capacity for charitable contributions, generosity, and compassion when this is required.

What is most exciting about these matters in the United States at present and going forward in the future is the election of Joe Biden as President. It all started following the election with the inaugural ceremonies of 2021 and remarkable artistic performances by Lady Gaga, Jennifer Lopez, Garth Brooks, and Amanda Gorman that illustrated the “symbolic significance” of the arts and culture in American development, as well as the inspiring address provided by President Biden on the challenges confronting the country and its citizenry and how United States and Americans were capable of coming to grips with such difficult and life-threatening problems as the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous racial injustices, climate change and the environment crisis, bringing an end to polarization, and creating much more unity cooperation, and equality in the country. It continued in the days following the inaugural ceremonies with a series of tough legislative actions and enactments designed to deal effectively with these and other issues facing the country.

In order to deal with these problems and challenges, it will be necessary for Americans and American culture to open wide to the world rather than close off to the world. While United States has exhibited phenomenal economic capabilities, it has only scratched the surface of the rich potential American culture possesses to make far greater contributions to the world of the future in all fields of cultural endeavor. To do this may not only make American great again, but also achieve this at a very crucial and troubling time in the history of humanity and the world.

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