

America at 250: Still Dominating the World—and Here's Why the Left Won't Admit It

By Victor Davis Hanson

This year, on July Fourth, will be the [250th anniversary](#) of the founding of the United States, as exemplified in the ratification, signing of the Declaration of Independence. A lot of people ask ourselves, why are we so exceptional?

Are we exceptional, or is this just American braggadocio? Well, if you look at some major indicators, it's pretty clear that America stands like a colossus over the world today. Look at the economy. The U.S. economy is roughly a \$30 trillion nominal economy in goods and services. It's one-third larger than the Chinese economy. We hear a lot about Ascendant China, but it essentially means that one American is producing as many goods and services as four Chinese counterparts.



It's a third bigger than the EU, which has about 70 million more people than the United States. If you look at its

culture, if you look at Netflix, streaming entertainment, Hollywood, even in its decline, popular music, it accounts for about 75% of international box office receipts of all sorts.

Educationally, there's a lot of global indices and they usually have the United States with eight to nine out of the top 10 universities. That kind of mimics the same economic standards that show that, at the top 10 companies in terms of international market capitalization, I think eight of them now are American.

In the case of the educational surveys, it's usually Caltech, MIT, Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Stanford, etc., in the top 10. But at the top 50, 40 of them are American.

If you look at politics, the [U.S. Constitution](#) is the oldest surviving blueprint for democracy-republic. All the others have either faded or they come in and out of existence, but ours is that continuity of one particular consensual government, and its foundational document is unprecedented.

Finally, militarily, we have about 13,000 combat aircraft and their logistical support craft. That's larger than China, the EU, and India put together. We have 11 fleet carrier groups. China is struggling to get a third. No other country has a fleet-size carrier and a carrier group. They have smaller carriers.

But then, in addition to our 11, we have nine amphibious carriers that are about the same size as most other countries' fleet carriers. And we spend more money than most of the world combined in terms of defense budgetary.

Why did we enjoy all of this preeminence? Is it just because we have a continent-size country? Well, actually, Russia, then China, then Canada have larger territories than we do. Many countries have two oceans that border them. So it wasn't just that we have a large area and we have natural resources.

Other countries have as many or more than we do. There has to be a secret that explains this global preeminence, and one of them, as I mentioned, is the Constitution. No other country has been able to emulate successfully our Constitution. It's a very rare document.

It assumes that power will be collected in one particular person or one particular area, given human nature, and therefore it's gonna check the accumulation of inordinate power through the legislative and judicial branches as being separate, each with power over the other to stop their aggrandizement of authority and power.

It has a Bill of Rights. Very few countries have a bill of rights that protect individual liberty against the state, which is outlined in the Constitution proper—the state's authority—and then the Bill of Rights, refines or hones that in and gives precedence to the individual in terms of free expression, the sanctity of his home from search and seizure, freedom of religion, the right to bear arms, etc.

In addition to the Constitution, the United States is not founded on a class system. There are no dukes or earls, where you're born, who your parents were, how much land your grandfather had. That doesn't really matter very much, or at least as much as talent.

We are a meritocratic society, and we value someone, I suppose, based on their net worth more than we do their title. That sounds kind of plutocratic, but actually our system of rewarding individual success—measured by materialism or good works or philanthropy—is a much more effective barometer of talent than inherited privilege.

And so that, that lends a message to the people that anybody can make it in America in a way impossible in many of the European countries and, of course, elsewhere in the world.

We have, until recently, had a long tradition of the [melting-](#)

[pot, meritocratic immigration](#), and that meant that if you came legally and immigrants were diverse and they were of numbers of a size that could be assimilated and integrated, then it was a wonderful thing.

I mentioned the eight or nine companies in the top 10 by market capitalization. I should say that of those American eight or nine companies, four of them were founded by immigrants. So, it's been a great boom to the United States.

And finally, we have a can-do individual culture. There's two types of envy in the world: the envy of emulation—the good envy—and the bad envy of, anger or resentment that someone has more than you do.

The old morality tale that an American sees a Cadillac and asks somebody how he got it, rather than kicks in the tires or keys it like someone in another country would do in anger that someone has a nicer car than he does. But that does explain, encapsulate the American ethos of emulating people who are accessible rather than trying to tear them down.

We also are the largest really devout Western country in terms of the [Judeo-Christian tradition](#) that offers a brake on the appetites. When you have leisure and affluence that are the bounties of market capitalism and constitutional government, you can get decadent. You can get complacent.

In other words, our religious tradition—maybe emblemized by the Sermon on the Mount—says just because something is legal and just because somebody has the ability to do it, you should not necessarily do it because of moral and ethical considerations.

Are there dangers to this great American experiment of 250 years? Absolutely. An affluent and leisured society, unless it has familial or religious or community brakes upon the appetites, can become self-indulgent, lethargic—the lotus-eater syndrome—and fall into a slow decline.

We've seen that happen in Europe, the foundation of the Western tradition that is really descendant now in terms of economics, politics, culture, and its military.

Another great worry is fertility. The United States fertility rate has fallen just in 30 years from 2.1, the replacement rate, down to 1.6, as if life is too valuable, too fun, too enjoyable to waste it raising kids.

Any society that has a low fertility rate, the population ages, it shrinks, and it becomes risk-averse.

We also owe \$30 trillion in aggregate national debt. We are running \$1 trillion to \$2 trillion annual deficits and, until recently, a \$1 trillion trade deficit. These are unsustainable.

And they'll require, first of all, a major cutback in entitlements and unfunded liabilities. And how we do that when we have a bread-and-circuses attitude, that people think the government owes them something rather than they owe the government, I don't know, but it's something we're gonna have to deal with.

And finally, immigration's gone haywire. We traded in the successful centuries-long, melting pot for the salad bowl—DEI. We have reverted to tribalism.

If we continue down that pathway, that your superficial appearance determines who you are, that it's essential rather than just incidental to you, your identity as a human, then we're gonna end up like every tribal society, which is failure and pre-civilization reversion.

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