

# The myth of America being the 'greatest' USA

By M. Shahid Alam

*Dawn*  
1-5-04

**I**N 1955, according to a Gallup survey, 66 per cent Americans polled believed that "The United States is the greatest country in the world, better than all other countries in every possible way (emphasis added)." In 1991, mercifully, this percentage had declined to 37 per cent; five years later, it held steady at 37 per cent.

But there is a fly in the ointment. In response to a slightly altered question, 55 per cent Americans agree that "the United States is the greatest country in the world, better than all others." On the worse reading, then, a clear majority of Americans still subscribe to the thesis of American uniqueness; though that majority is down to 55 per cent from 66 per cent. Shall we take comfort from this decline in the proportion of hyper-patriots in the US since 1955?

Perhaps the United States is distinct because of the intensity of its nationalist claims. The standard political rhetoric maintains that the US is the "greatest in the world," "the greatest ever," or "the greatest in the history of mankind." It stands at the top of the food chain. Some older nations — that have survived many cycles of history — might think this strange. Are these upstarts trying to compensate for their late arrival on history's stage? Arguably, older nations have the self-assurance of a long and often distinguished history behind them and, therefore, do not feel compelled to stake out exaggerated claims of national greatness.

I will examine whether the United States is indeed "the greatest country in the world, better than all other countries in every possible way?"

By the most widely accepted criterion, America's economic lead looks quite secure. Measured in terms of dollars with comparable purchasing power, the US had a per capita income of \$35,080 in 2002, one of the highest in the world. Only two other countries had higher per capita incomes; Luxembourg at \$51,060 and Norway at \$37,850. But these are small countries, with 444,000 and 5 million people respectively; and the per capita income of the richest 444,000 or 5 million Americans would easily exceed the per capita income of Luxembourg and Norway respectively. In other words, Americans can take just pride in their country's economic preeminence: the United States is the world's richest country.

The United States also commands the world's largest economy, though only by a narrow margin. Measured in terms of dollars with comparable purchasing power, the US gross national income adds up to \$10,110

32nd, behind Hungary, Jamaica, Benin and East Timor. To make matters worse, American-occupied Iraq, only recently 'liberated' from the grip of a tyrant, ranked 135th. There is one consolation: US-occupied Iraq is ahead of Saudi Arabia, America's closest ally in the Islamic world.

In many situations, it may be useful to look upon the rates of incarceration as an important indicator of un-freedom and racism in a country. For many years, USSR, 'the Evil Empire,' led the world in this field with its Siberian gulags. More recently, the United States has taken the lead with the highest rate of incarceration per capita: 6.41 per thousand in 1999. Russia, the successor to USSR, remains in hot contest, with an incarceration rate of 6.37 per thousand. If we add the prisoners the Bush-Ashcroft regime has taken recently under the Patriot Act inside the United States, those held in Guantanamo Bay, in Iraq and Afghanistan, and those captured at the US behest (under 'extraordinary rendition') by torture-friendly regimes, our leading position looks quite secure. The racial composition of those incarcerated tell their own story. Consider the percentage shares, in the table below, of African-Americans in the prison and total populations of four US states in 1996. This disproportion is common to many states.

In his first inaugural address in 1993, President Clinton spoke of the United States as the "world's oldest democracy." Is it? Presumably, this history starts the clock of democracy in 1787 when the Constitution was ratified. But many would consider this problematic, since this Constitution excluded as much as a sixth of the country's population — its slave population — from any of the rights of citizenship. Can we then start the clock of democracy in 1865 when slavery was abolished, or in 1868 when the

countries.

The total funds allocated by the United States to 'foreign aid' amounted to 0.11 per cent (note the position of the decimal) of its gross national income. That is easily the lowest ratio for the twenty-four members of Development Assistance Committee of the OECD. On the ground, matters are much worse. Nearly one-third of this aid goes as grants (no obligation to pay back) to another developed country, Israel, to buy the most advanced weaponry in the US arsenal.

So the United States is not the greatest country in the world, better than all other countries in every possible way. Why have I laboured to establish this rather obvious result? There is a deep, two-way connection between these claims of superiority, of uniqueness, and the efforts by the American establishment to obfuscate the inequities inside the United States and to justify the inequities it helps to create and sustain outside its borders. Every time America's 'leaders' speak of the "world's greatest country," behind the backs of their constituents, many, perhaps most of them are scheming to build more prisons and fewer schools, to hire more policemen and fewer teachers, to train more secret agents and fewer scientists, to fund more WMDs and fewer life-saving drugs; they are being wine and dined by Corporations which are monopolizing the media, denuding our rights, placing their profits before our lives, our children, our safety, and the natural beauty of the world we live in. In their myopic pursuit of power, these politicians would rather build the "world's greatest country" (if only they could) but populated with an impoverished, uneducated and unhealthy population, supine and undemanding of their rights.

Every time America's 'leaders' boast of the "world's oldest democracy," and of exporting democracy to the world, I can see peasants expropriated; workers shot, tortured and jailed; people's revolutions overthrown, crushed by American force, guile and lucre all across the Periphery; all to protect the unrestrained right of American Corporations to make money.

Every time these mandarins proclaim that the United States is the "last great hope of earth," people all across the Periphery take cover, for they know that these words will be followed, as they have been in the past, by napalm bombs, by landmines, by cruise missiles, by daisy cutters, by shards of steel planted in their children's eyes. The people of the Periphery are all too familiar with the rhetoric of the "world's

The United States is not the greatest country in the world, better than all other countries in every possible way. There is a deep, two-way connection between the claims of superiority and the efforts by the American establishment to obfuscate the inequities inside the United States and to justify the inequities it helps to

billion, a little more than a fifth of the global income. The European Union comes a very close second with a combined gross national income of \$9,520 billion. With its rapidly expanding membership, the European Union may soon outpace the US as the world's largest economy. China places third in the world league of major economies, with a gross national income of \$5,807 billion. At its present stellar growth rate, China could outstrip both the US and the European Union within two decades if not sooner.

The United States commands the largest lead where it matters most — in military power. At \$396.1 billion in fiscal year 2003, US military spending exceeds the combined military budget of the next twenty countries. In 2002, the US outspent the seven "rogue" states (Iran, Iraq, Libya, North Korea, Sudan, Syria and Cuba) by a factor of thirty-seven. With Iraq under occupation since April 2003, and Libya air-freighting the components of its would-be WMDs to the United States, the ratio by which the US outspends the remaining "rogue" states must have risen still higher. Given these gaps in destructive capabilities, the United States should feel safer than any empire in recent memory. So why doesn't it?

In personal freedom, most Americans confidently place their country at the top. In a Gallup poll taken in August 1995, Americans were asked, "how far up or down on a 10-point scale [10 being highest] would you rate each of the following nations in terms of the individual freedom granted to its citizens?" The US came out first, with 74 per cent of the respondents giving it a 'high' rating (10-9.8). Canada and Britain ranked a distant second and third, with only 63 and 46 per cent giving it a 'high' rating.

Experts view the freedom rankings a bit differently. The Freedom House, a conservative organization based in New York, publishes an annual report, *Freedom in the World*, that relies on opinions of experts to rank countries by various indicators of freedom. According to their index of civil and political liberties compiled for 2000-2001, the United States received the highest score of six (on a scale of one to seven), but this was an honour that it shared with fourteen other countries, including Portugal and Uruguay. Britain ranked 34th, well after Poland and Panama. Israel, the world's most touted 'democracy,' ranked 41st, after Bolivia and Benin.

Is the United States the world leader, then, in press freedom? That too is misconception. In October 2003, Reporters Without Borders published its *Second World Press Freedom Ranking*, compiled from a questionnaire with "53 criteria for assessing the state of press freedom in each country." The United States ranked

create outside its borders. Every time America's 'leaders' speak of the "world's greatest country," many are scheming to build more prisons, to hire more policemen and to train more secret agents.

Confederate states re-entered the Union with a commitment (in their state constitutions) to equal rights for all citizens? That too is dubious.

For another hundred years, the United States was not a democracy for all its citizens. At first through terrorist methods, and, later, starting in the 1890s, through amendments in the state constitution, the Southern states pressed ahead in their effort to exclude blacks from the political process. This resulted in "the disfranchisement of nearly all black citizens and the removal from office of nearly all black legislators in the former Confederate states by 1910."

Arguably, we might start the clock in the 1960s, when the blacks launched the civil rights movement to regain their political rights. However, this process is far from complete. Under felony disenfranchisement laws, still on the books since the days of segregation, some 4.7 million Americans are denied their voting rights.

We arrive finally at the compassion derby. In a recent speech, President Bush declared, "We are a compassionate country, and we are generous toward our fellow citizens." It is a favourite pitch with American politicians in both parties. But this just won't wash. In its *Human Development Report*, 2003, the UNDP measures a Human Poverty Index (HPI) for seventeen developed countries; it measures deprivations in four dimensions. On this index of human poverty, the US ranked dead last out of seventeen countries. If we measure compassion "toward fellow citizens" in terms of income inequality — conventionally measured by the Gini index — we get the same result. The US has the largest value for the Gini index amongst developed countries. By what available metric is the American political system "generous" to weaker segments of its own society?

In measuring US compassion towards other countries, I will take the more lenient view, not listing the invasions launched, regimes changed, the bombs dropped, coups instigated or sanctions imposed against the 'salt of the earth.' Instead, I will compare the funds allocated to 'foreign aid,' the index by which Americans most often measure their generosity towards poor

oldest democracy." They will not be deceived.

So the United States is not the greatest country in the world, better than all other countries in every possible way. What if this carefully guarded secret were to spill out? What if Dan Rather, America's favourite news anchor, were to open the CBS Evening News tonight with the announcement that some great think tank in Washington, preferably a conservative think tank, after years of carefully investigation, involving the best brains in the social sciences, had discovered that the United States "isn't after all the greatest country in the world, better than all other countries in every possible way?" Would this be another devastating blow to America's self-confidence, greater than that caused by the carnage of 9-11?

Would Americans show up for work the next day or the day after? Why bother if you are not living in the "world's greatest country?" How would the president respond to this national catastrophe? What would he do to restore American confidence in their greatness? Invade Canada? Colonize Antarctica? Or perhaps, ship the entire population of the Northeast to Mars?

Most Americans may well be relieved at this revelation. It was what they had suspected all along, but could never gather the pluck to tell the corporate lackeys — masquerading as leaders — who kept telling them otherwise. And now that this ruse had been exposed, perhaps, Americans will start asking the tough questions, start reclaiming their lost rights, and start rebuilding a democracy of all the people, for all the people and by all the people. Once this questioning starts, perhaps Americans will also start looking into all the ways in which their country — especially their government and corporations — impoverish their neighbours around the world, neighbours they, as Christians, should love, not reduce to poverty, dependency and misery.

When the United States, an admirable country in many respects, collectively aspires to inclusiveness, both inside and outside its borders; when the United States places people — people everywhere — before the profits of its corporations; when the United States aspires to be the best country — under a scale of humane values — not merely the greatest; when the people of the United States want for the world what they want for themselves; then, and only then, will the world embrace Americans as their own, a good people, even a generous people, contributing more than their share to the human struggle to make our world a better place for everyone. ■

*The writer is professor of economic at Northeastern University, US.*