

Book Review: What's So Great About America

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D'Souza, Dinesh. *What's So Great About America*.
New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2002. 218 pp.
\$15.00 (paper).

What's So Great About America is a defense and analysis of America's role in the world in the aftermath of 11 September 2001. It is written from the perspective and insights of an immigrant from a Third World country, an immigrant who attributes his success to a country that to him is a model for the world. Obviously the product of much research and personal reflection, this book is thought-provoking and challenging.

In the preamble, D'Souza endeavors to put America into historical perspective by comparing this nation to the ancient Athenians who were a model for "civilized peoples everywhere." The Athenians were not only "a freedom-loving society" but functioned "within the bounds of the law." Athens was a commercial civilization whose people had access across state boundaries and who traded freely with their neighbors. Athenians, however, were not immune from the attacks of enemies; Pericles characterized these adversaries as "leaner, hungrier, and hardier." The Athenians, therefore, were not only enjoined to consider Athens' greatness, but also to be willing to make sacrifices "to preserve Athenian liberty and the Athenian way of life." America today is in a similar position, facing enemies, but it must determine the "source of the conflict" and "the nature of the enemy."

Chapter 1 focuses on America's enemies and why they hate this nation. The author asserts that arguments for and against America "play out" in his life; moreover, he claims that over the years he has seen "the greatness of America reflected in" his experience here. He says that he does not take lightly what critics have to say about this country, but he categorically states that critics are wrong since "they are missing something of great significance about Western civilization and about the American way of life." His attacks are directed at "terrorists," "the European school" represented by the French, "the Asian school," "the Islamic school," "the political Left" in the USA, and the "political movement called multiculturalism." Multiculturalists, he claims, are powerful and are an influence in high school and colleges. They are opposed to immigrants assimilating to the American mainstream, since by doing so immigrants would lose their identity and give in to racism.

Chapter 2 is devoted to colonialism and how the West prevailed. The author denounces current views, particularly multiculturalism, that he claims teach students to "despise"

Western civilization and put it at the same level as other civilizations. Ethnocentrism, colonialism, and slavery are concomitant with the history of the West, but the author downplays the negative characterization applied to them by America's critics and suggests that these are not distinctively Western in origin. At the end of this chapter he makes the assertion that the success of the West is due to the interaction between science, democracy, and capitalism. It is capitalism, the author notes, that has "produced the great wealth and strength and success of Western civilization." Therefore, it is wrong to claim that the West grew rich from robbing Asia, Africa, and Latin America "because the West created its own wealth, and still does."

Chapter 3 is about "becoming American and why the American idea is unique," and interwoven into this chapter is a reflection of the author's reasons for wanting to come to the United States. Being from a middle-class background, the author was more privileged than those from poor backgrounds, but his destiny would have been determined more or less by the traditions of his culture had he not emigrated. He maintains that America provides great scope and opportunities for immigrants, but some immigrants cannot handle these freedoms without some ambivalence. And becoming an American is risky because one is likely to become alienated from one's culture. The process of assimilation is what concerns the author even though he considers it a good thing. He notes that, "when second-generation Asian-Americans become fully assimilated, they don't study as hard and their test scores fall." He mentions, with some ambivalence, that he is "quite willing to let his daughter date and choose the person she wants to marry, as long as the process begins at the age of thirty." Notwithstanding, he believes in the "melting pot" concept and decries the idea of it being considered racist.

Chapter 4 addresses what D'Souza terms the thorny subject of "reparations" which is directed specifically at African-Americans. Apparently the author has debated Jesse Jackson and others on this issue. Blacks, in particular, claim that America is oppressive and denies freedom and opportunity to minorities because it is racist and has always been. The author does not dispute the fact that racism does exist; one can find many instances of it. In debating this issue, reference is made to the fact that a distinction exists between the views of "indigenous" people of color (African-Americans and Native-Americans) and those of immigrants considered people of color. The author believes that the notion that old immigrants could easily pass for white is wrong because prejudice and hostility against earlier gen-

erations of Europeans immigrants were far greater than what Asian, African, and Latin American immigrants experience. Reference is made to the fact that Black leaders and scholars think that “societal racism is responsible for the current problems of blacks.” This viewpoint the author attempts to diffuse by pointing out that Black immigrants are not prevented by racism from being successful in the United States. They are in reality following the strategy of Booker T. Washington. Washington argued that African-Americans faced racism and cultural disadvantage; he also said that “black crime rates were too high, black savings too low, [and] blacks did not have enough respect for educational achievement.” The cultural problems facing Blacks nevertheless needed attention; if they were not addressed, “they would help racism by giving it an empirical foundation,” Washington warned. Evidence supporting immigrant success points to “assimilating to the cultural strategies of success.” D’Souza notes that:

The immigrants know that racism today is not systematic, it is episodic, and they are able to find ways to navigate around its obstacles. Even immigrants who start out at the very bottom are making rapid gains, surging ahead of African-Americans and claiming the American dream for themselves. West Indians, for instance, have established a strong business and professional community, and have nearly achieved income parity with whites.

And he argues that this is possible because:

The immigrants don’t spend a lot of time contemplating the hardships of the past; their gaze is firmly fixed on the future. They recognize that education and entrepreneurship are the fastest ladders to success in America. They push their children to study, so that they will be admitted to Berkeley and MIT, and that they can pool their resources and set up small businesses, so that they can make some money and move to the suburbs. There are plenty of hurdles along the way, but the immigrant is sustained by the hope that he, or his children, will be able to break the chain of necessity and pursue the American dream.

This reality does not detract from the fact that Black Americans have contributed much to the United States by forcing the country to live up to its highest principles. Consequently, immigrants:

owe a tremendous debt to the black civil rights movement for opening up doors that would otherwise have remained closed. All Americans have a lot to learn from African-Americans about suffering, about dignity, about creativity, and about charm. But it is also a fact that the black leadership can learn a lot from the immigrants, especially

black immigrants. African-Americans can move up faster if they focus less on manufacturing representation and more on building intellectual and economic skills. In this way blacks can achieve a level of competitive success that is ultimately the best, and final, refutation of “rumors of inferiority.”

Martin Luther King is cited for stating that we are responsible for what we do with our rights, what we do with our lives.

Chapter 5, titled “When Freedom Loses All Her Loveliness,” is concerned with freedom and its abuses. The author makes reference to the fact that the most serious accusation against America is that it is immoral. According to Muslim fundamentalists, the United States and the West, although materially advanced, are morally depraved. The view that the West is immoral is supported by the perceptions of critics within the United States and Europe. The blame for this is generally placed on technology and capitalism, but according to D’Souza, this is not the complete story. In the 1960s and 1970s, the United States experienced a moral revolution, a rebellion against society the author attributes to the philosopher Rousseau. Prior to Rousseau, no one believed that each person should follow his or her own unique “moral course, nor did anyone think of giving the inner self—the voice of nature within us—final authority in determining that course.” Both Augustine and Rousseau held that the “counsel of inwardness” was the means to arriving at the truth, but for Rousseau, self determines goodness. For Augustine, however, “the inward journey is merely a pathway to the Creator. The inner light is controlled by an outer source, and that source is God.” In other words, there is a moral order in the universe and that moral order is distinct from us. This moral framework, says D’Souza, was taken for granted by the majority of Americans in the 1950s, but it changed in the 1960s:

For the first time many people, especially young people, began to find the external rules arbitrary, senseless, and oppressive. The counterculture did not reject morality; it was passionately concerned with morality. But it substituted Rousseau’s conception of the inner compass for the rules of obligation. Getting in touch with one’s feelings and being true to oneself were now more important than conforming to the preexisting moral consensus of society. By embracing the new morality, the children of the 1960s became incomprehensible to their parents. And as this new generation inherited the reins of power, its ethos entered the mainstream. As a consequence of this change, America became a different country.

The author holds that our freedom and autonomy are valuable “commodities,” but the inner self needs a “compass” to direct it, and therefore the role of “conservatives” is to “steer the American ethic of authenticity to its highest mani-

festation and to ennoble freedom by showing it the path to virtue.” Why only conservatives are invoked is somewhat puzzling.

Chapter 6, “America the Beautiful,” explores American “exceptionalism and American universalism,” characteristics that have come under the onslaught of America’s enemies. At stake is the United States’ foreign policy, which the author defends, while, in part, recognizing the fact that mistakes have been made. Next, in the discussion, is the United States’ “evident moral superiority” which the author mentions is refuted by “leftist intellectuals,” here and abroad; by “American multiculturalists,” and “Islamic fundamentalists.” In denouncing cultural relativism, a concept attributed to multiculturalists, the writer attempts to explain what he means by American superiority by linking it to the right to free speech and people achieving shared objectives. The notion of the success of American ideas and culture, as far as the international marketplace is concerned and the fact that most immigrants from around the world prefer to come to the United States, is inconsequential to some cultures. In one country, a person’s life can be controlled by others, while in another, a person’s life can to a great extent be self-directed. In a free society, however, freedom includes the option to do what is good or what is evil. This freedom to choose is what the United States receives blame for. D’Souza says Muslim fundamentalists “don’t just object to the excesses of American liberty; they object to liberty itself.” But, in effect, virtue can be chosen freely whereas compulsion cannot produce virtue.

The author concludes this chapter by declaring that the American founders were aware that:

America is a new kind of society that produces a new kind of human being. That human being—confident, self-reliant, tolerant, generous, future

oriented—is a vast improvement over the wretched, servile, fatalistic, and intolerant human being that traditional societies have always produced, and that Islamic societies produce now. In America, the life we are given is not as important as the life we make.

In addition, he makes the claim that:

America is the greatest, freest, and most decent society in existence. It is an oasis of goodness in a desert of cynicism and barbarism. This country, once an experiment unique in the world, is now the last best hope for the world.

This claim is one that is bound to cause controversy, particularly in light of the writer’s expressed feelings about nations, personalities, and institutions he considers critics and enemies of the United States.

This text is fast-paced, written in readable, lucid, and straightforward language. It draws on research as well as on the author’s experiences and reflections. (Notes at the end of the text list research sources used). D’Souza attempts to define both the character and historical import of the United States in an engaging and challenging way. This book is apt to appeal to a broad political readership. Some or much of the discussion might be controversial to some readers, but it is worthwhile reading and can contribute to the reinforcement of one’s negative, positive, or ambivalent attitudes toward the United States of America. Two possible questions emerge from my analysis of the text. Does the author present strong and convincing arguments? Is the United States what the author perceives it to be? Answers to these questions will of course reflect each reader’s point of view.

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