

An Anti Imperialist Ponders the 4th of July and Its Meaning for His Newborn Child

On his newborn daughter's first July 4th holiday, an anti-imperialist writer ponders what he hopes for her to come to understand about her nation of birth.

By [Matt McKenna](#)

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Gabriela, you are part of the [four percent](#) of the world's population that celebrates today, July 4th, as Independence Day. We are in the extreme minority of the earth's inhabitants that claim citizenship within the belly of the beast of the global empire, the United States.

Today, many Americans will attend parades, barbecues, and fireworks shows wearing apparel donned with the patriotic red, white, and blue. This holiday is generally a happy occasion to see family and friends for an early summer celebration. However, rarely is the cause for this celebration inspected.

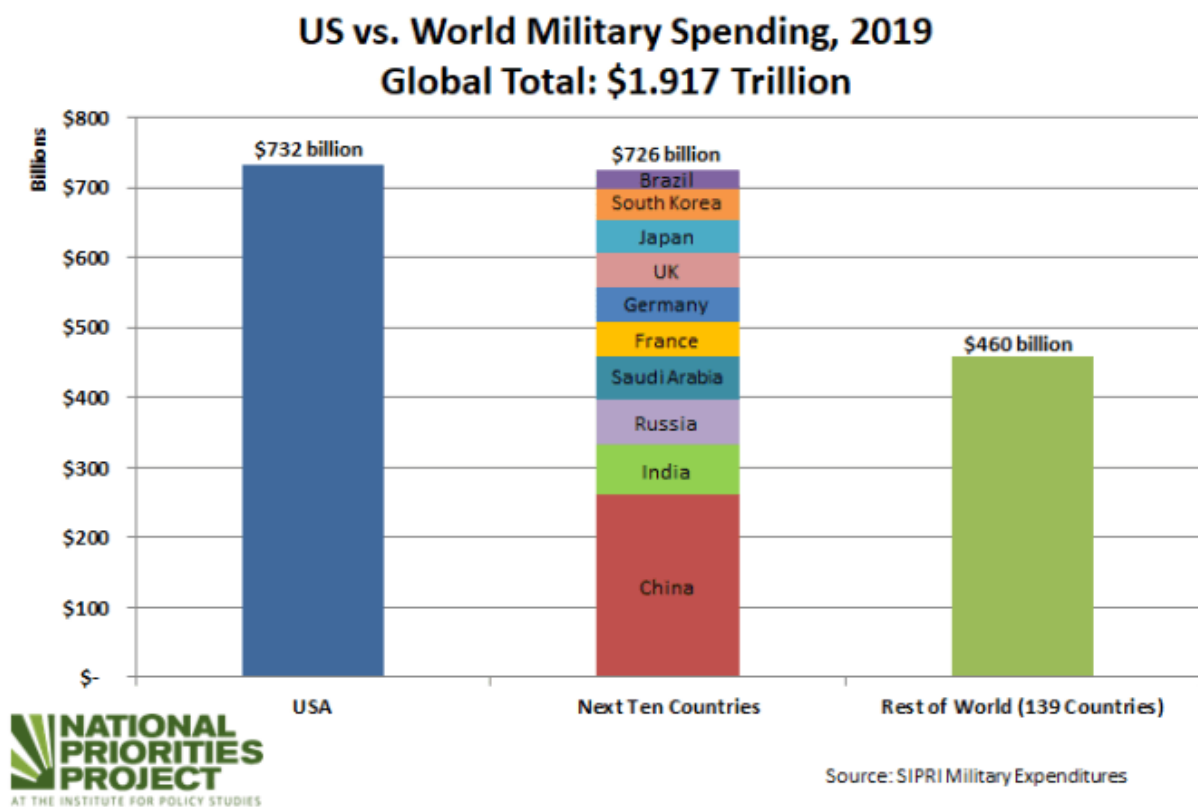
Questions that usually go unasked on this day include: Why are we celebrating this nation? What, if any, benefits have been brought to the world by the existence of the United States?

My hope is that as you age you consider these questions and investigate some of the assumptions many Americans hold about their nation. This day can be an opportunity to make an honest assessment of this country's past and present, with the goal of working toward a more humane future. During this reflection, your father hopes that you take into account the following considerations.

You have been born into an empire with asymmetric power!

Gabriela, your incidental birth within the United States means you are part of a citizenry that has a collective proverbial gun pointed at the people of the rest of the world. You are a member of a nation that holds unprecedented military and economic power on the global stage. This understanding should serve as a framework for all exploration into your nation's relationship with the global community.

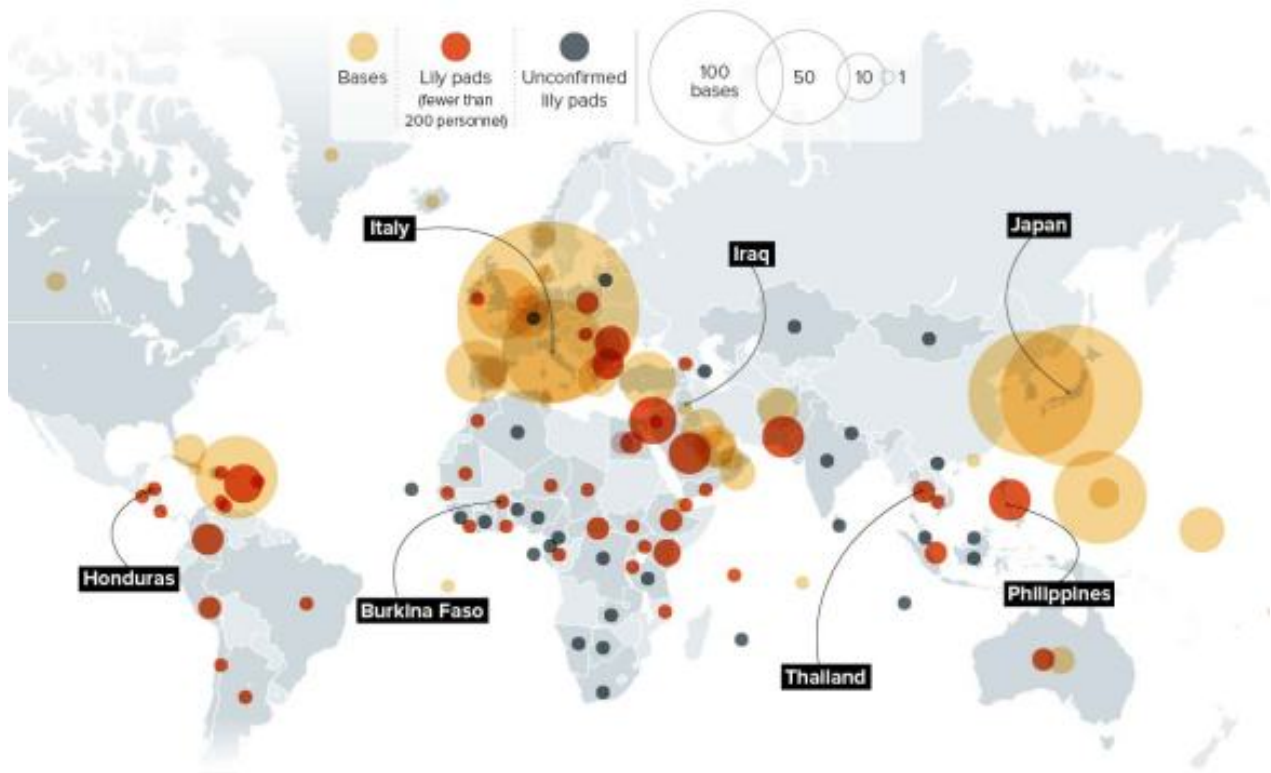
The statistics speak for themselves. The United States's annual near \$800 billion military budget is more than the [next 10 nations' military spending combined](#). The next highest funded armed forces, China's, spends [less than one-third](#) of what the U.S. does.



The United States spends more than the next ten highest spenders combined on power projection through military force [Source: nationalpriorities.org]

Comparing the U.S. military budget to other supposed rivals becomes almost comical, with [Russia](#) spending just over \$60 billion, [Iran](#) spending \$15 billion, and North Korea's budget remaining lower than that of the [New York City police department](#) at \$4 billion. Further illustrating this asymmetric power in the globe are the 800 foreign military bases possessed by the U.S. compared to a combined 70 possessed by the rest of the world's nations.

A quick glance at a map of where the bases are should remove all doubt as to which country maintains hegemony over the world's people. U.S. military bases and installations threateningly surround every alleged adversary from Iran, to China, to Russia. Of course, the U.S. would never permit those aforementioned adversaries to place their bases anywhere near the U.S. border.

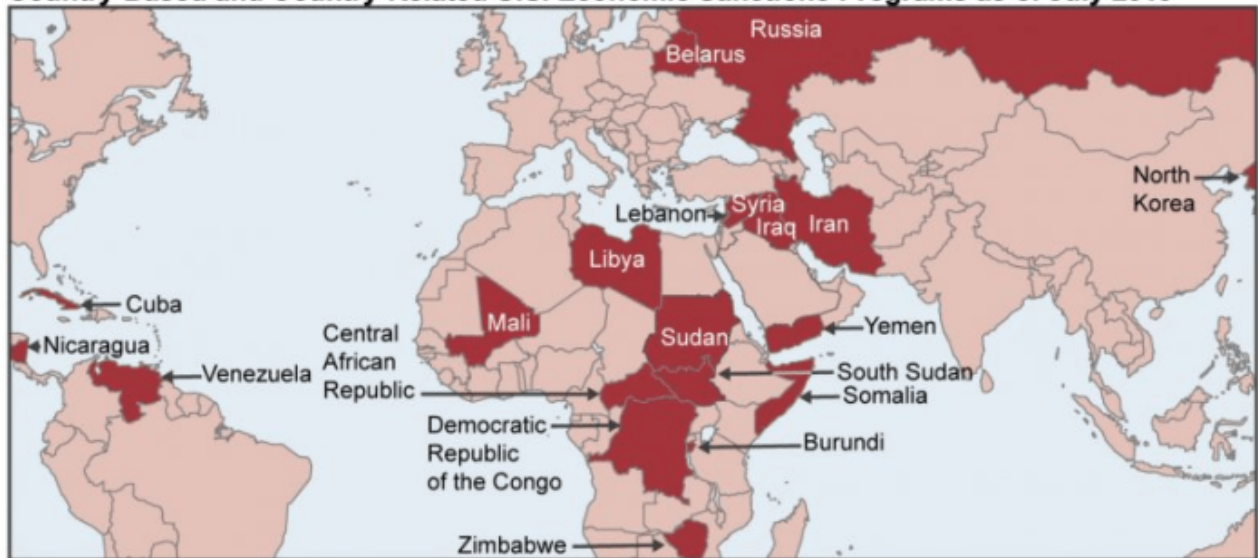


Map of U.S. overseas military bases, 2016. [Source: geographicalimagination.com]

Lastly, only the United States approaches the world with a mindset so imperial in nature that it divides the earth's regions into different "commands" for its military to police. These include U.S. Southern Command, which "presides" over Central and South America, Central Command (Centcom) for the Middle East, and Africa Command (Africom) which, with echoes from the 19th century Berlin Conference, claims jurisdiction in Africa. Contrastingly, other nations possess neither the will nor the capability of setting up similar patrols of the earth's surface.

Economically the United States's treasure wields the power to cripple the economies of entire societies through sanctions. The citizens of [Cuba](#), [Nicaragua](#), [Iran](#), [Venezuela](#) and [Syria](#) are quite familiar with this destructive capability of the global superpower. The economic sanctions leveled on these nations by the U.S. disproportionately harm the most vulnerable, and the deprivation they cause has devastated the lives of millions in just the past few years. Conversely, no nation is capable of instituting an economic war on the U.S. that would cause proportionate levels of suffering among the populace.

Country-Based and Country-Related U.S. Economic Sanctions Programs as of July 2019



Source: GAO presentation of Department of the Treasury and Department of State information. | GAO-20-145

The United States levels crippling economic sanctions on a significant portion of the world's population. No nation has the ability to inflict similar levels of suffering on the U.S. (Source: [newsweek.com](https://www.newsweek.com))

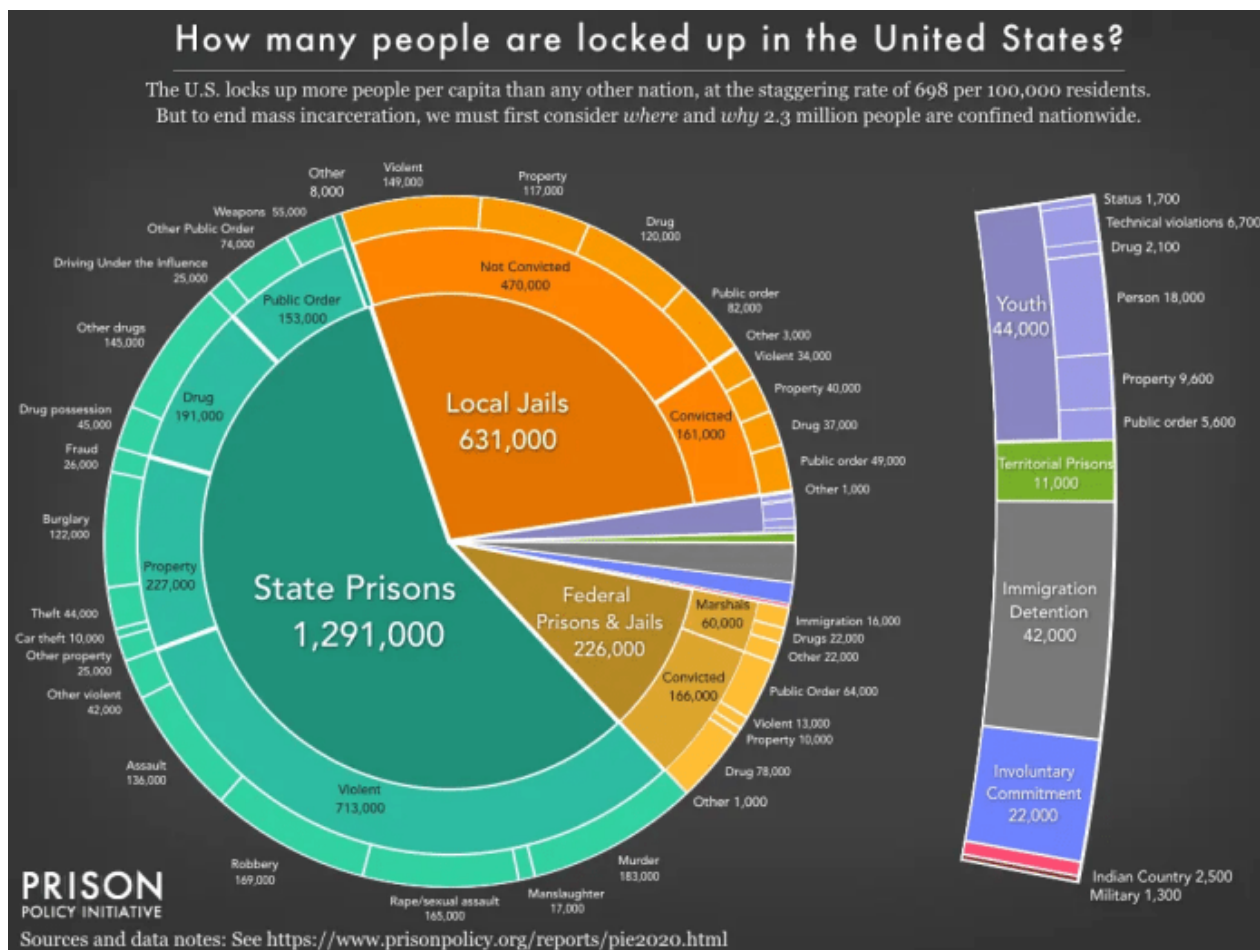
An acknowledgment of this asymmetry in power between the U.S. and all other nations should underscore the importance of maintaining a critical interpretation of this nation's historical and current affairs. Given the enormity of its potential for violence, this nation is in desperate need of being restrained from within.

Exceptional? No. We are extreme! Our "normal" is radical by global and historical standards

Gabriela, I hope you can understand that here in the U.S., what we consider to be normal is extreme in both the international and historical sense. The challenge here is reminiscent of the popular phrase, "not being able to see the forest for the trees." Recognizing the extreme nature of the "forest" we live in is challenging because, as Americans, we are able to live amongst the trees, mostly incurious about the larger context of the world or history. Taking a wider view, it becomes clear that our society exists in a radical departure from global and historical norms. Understanding this can be useful in catalyzing resistance to our nation's behavior.

And how are we extreme? Well, aside from the above-discussed military and economic power, other actions and policies of the U.S. are also unparalleled in the global community. One distinguishing aspect of America is that our nation has the ignominious title of the world's largest carceral state, imprisoning some [2.3 million people](#). This would seem to run counter to the narrative of freedom that on this July 4th we are led to believe is such a deeply ingrained American value.

Of those millions denied basic freedom, some [80,000, at any one time, are subjected to solitary confinement](#), a practice the United Nations has determined to be a [form of torture](#). Furthermore, as a testament to the vindictive rather than restorative nature of the criminal justice system, our country remains in the minority of nations that maintain the death penalty.



The United States is by far the largest penal colony in the world, contradicting the notion that this is “the land of the free.” [Source: [prisonpolicy.org](https://www.prisonpolicy.org)]

Even the “free” population of the U.S. is subject to extreme policies. The United States is alone in the industrialized world in the fact that its citizens are [not guaranteed health care](#).

Adding to this absurdity is the fact that Americans spend far more than other wealthy nations on medical care, yet have [far worse health outcomes](#). U.S. life expectancy is lower and infant mortality rates are higher than its international counterparts.

Another aspect of our “normal” includes being the only advanced nation to [deny new parents paid family leave](#) after the birth of a child. In that same vein of sacrificing basic needs in the interests of capitalist profiteering is the fact that the United States, unlike its industrialized counterparts, does not [guarantee paid sick leave](#). Indeed, the status quo in this nation is anti worker, anti-family, and fundamentally callous toward the large majority of the domestic population.

The “normal” behavior of the U.S. in the international arena is even more extreme. Even an examination of U.S. foreign policy limited to your parents’ lifetimes is revealing in this regard. Just since your mother and father’s births in the mid-1980s, the United States has invaded, conducted airstrikes, and engaged in destabilizing covert operations in dozens of other nations.

A non-exhaustive list of nations victimized by U.S. violence in the last four decades would include [Iraq](#), [Panama](#), [Afghanistan](#), [Serbia](#), [Yemen](#), [Syria](#), [Somalia](#), [Libya](#), and [Pakistan](#). Needless to say, all of these actions have been in direct violation of the targeted nation’s

sovereignty and [international law](#).

Reciprocally, in that same period of time, no nation has engaged in international aggression even approaching the standard set by the U.S. China, an alleged U.S. enemy, has not engaged in a war since [1979](#) (a war [supported by the U.S.](#) against communist Vietnam).

Russia has engaged in comparatively few military conflicts in the same period of time, fighting several small wars in bordering states, and coming to the aid of (and at the invitation of) the Syrian government in that Arab nation's civil war.

Also setting the United States apart from the normative behavior for nations in the global community is its conduct toward and within international institutions. The U.S. is consistently in the extreme minority in its votes in the United Nations.

The global superpower weaponized its permanent seat on the Security Council to uphold injustices such as [Israeli](#) and [South African apartheid](#)s, and its [Cuba embargo](#) against overwhelming global opposition to these policies. Also at the UN, America has revealed itself to be in the extreme minority by opposing seemingly obvious policies that would serve to decrease human suffering. This has included Uncle Sam's refusal to sign onto the [Convention on Cluster Munitions](#), and being the only nation to vote "no" on a [UN resolution to make food a human right](#).

America's unique intransigence extends to other global institutions. This has included ignoring decrees by the [International Court of Justice](#) and a refusal to ratify the International Criminal Court. When a nation's criminality is extreme in the global sense, it should not be surprising that it would go to extreme measures to avoid accountability for its behavior.

The screenshot shows the top of The Guardian website. At the top, there's a dark blue header with the text "Support the Guardian" and "Available for everyone, funded by readers". Below this are two yellow buttons: "Contribute" and "Subscribe". To the right, the Guardian logo is visible with "For 200 years" underneath. Below the header is a navigation bar with links for "News", "Opinion", "Sport", "Culture", "Lifestyle", and "More". Under "News", there are sub-links for "US", "World", "Environment", "Soccer", "US Politics", "Business", "Tech", "Science", and "Newsletters". The main content area shows a news article. On the left, there's a sidebar with the text "US news" and a profile for "Martin Cleaver and Mark Tran" with a Twitter handle "@marktran" and a timestamp "Sat 28 Jun 1986 06:34 EDT". The main article title is "US dismisses World Court ruling on contras". The text of the article begins: "The International Court of Justice yesterday ruled that US support to the contras in Nicaragua is illegal, and demanded that the US pay reparations to the Sandinistas." It continues: "Nicaragua intends to sue the US for more than dollars 1 billion in damages in US domestic courts as a result of yesterday's World Court ruling, a legal counsel for the Managua Government said yesterday in Washington." The next paragraph states: "In a 16-point ruling on a complaint lodged by Nicaragua, the judges rejected American claims of collective self-defence and found the US guilty of breaches of international law and the 1956 treaty of friendship between the two countries." The final paragraph mentions: "Three judges submitted dissenting opinions: Judge Oda (Japan), Judge [unclear] and Sir Robert Jennings (Britain)." At the bottom left of the screenshot, there is a small text string: "Waiting for securepubads.g.doubleclick.net..."

The United States infamously refused to honor a ruling by the International Court of Justice ruling that dictated that the U.S. should be held accountable for the 1980s dirty war on Nicaragua. [Source: theguardian.com]

Indeed, as the most powerful empire in human history, our nation holds many shamefully distinctive qualities. These also include the facts that the U.S. is the only nation to ever target a civilian population with nuclear weapons, that the U.S. has engaged in [foreign election interference](#) significantly more than any other nation, and that the U.S. operates international programs of kidnapping, torture, and assassination.

The fact that this extreme behavior can persist is an indication that it is acceded to, tolerated, and often supported by U.S. citizens. It demands a reconsideration of our perception of our “exceptionalism” that alleges our superiority as a nation. We need a serious reconciliation with the ignominious aspects of our society that actually do render us unique. Only then can we move toward a more humane “normal.”

Violence begets violence: You live in a nation birthed in barbarism and ensconced in violence

Gabriela, sadly another tragic feature for us in the United States is rampant gun violence. Naturally, occasions of mass shootings evoke emotional responses from much of the American public. Atrocities like the Sandy Hook shooting of 2012 or the Parkland shooting of 2018 correctly shock the conscience of most Americans. However, tragically such occasions seem less out of the ordinary when considering that this is a nation for which violence has been a foundational and consistent element of its history.

This nation was born out of the violence of genocide and race-based chattel slavery. Pre-dating the founding of the nation, the land that would become the 13 colonies and eventually the United States was taken by force by European conquerors, and utilized to build profits of elites through the exploitation of free labor.

Our foundational accounts often sanitize this legacy. For instance, while our Thanksgiving narrative points to a harmonious 17th century feast shared between the Indigenous peoples and white colonists, the reality is much harsher. In the same New England colony in which the legendary November feast took place, the white settlers carried out a campaign of extermination against the native inhabitants.

Emblematic of the brutality of this policy was the Pequot War, which saw the forebears of American society burn hundreds of Indigenous women and children alive in an attack on Fort Mystic, Connecticut.

A participant in the massacre and eventual governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, William Bradford, [described](#) the barbarity: “It was a fearful sight to see them thus frying in the fire ... and horrible was the stink ... but the victory seemed a sweet sacrifice, and they gave the praise thereof to God.” Such a statement makes apparent the level of acceptance of industrial-scale violence against innocents that is ingrained into the very origins of this nation.



White settlers slaying the Pequot in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. [Source: [britannica.com](https://www.britannica.com)]

During the American Revolution, the Iroquois tribe along with many other Indigenous nations, recognized the imperial ambitions of the American colonists, and thus sided with Great Britain. This decision drew the ire of white colonists, who had already developed a racist disdain for the original inhabitants of North America.

A general in the Continental Army [directed](#) his subordinates to conduct a genocidal war on the Iroquois, demanding the “total destruction and devastation of their settlements.” He also demanded that the army ruin “their crops now in the ground and prevent their planting more.”

The campaign that proceeded was [described](#) by historian Page Smith as “the most ruthless application of scorched-earth policy in U.S. history.”

The general who ordered this violence has become appropriately known as “town destroyer” by surviving Iroquois. Simultaneously, the large majority of Americans know this same individual as the man to whom monuments are dedicated, roads and bridges are named after, and whose face graces currency: the first president of the United States, George Washington.



These signs memorialize the Iroquois victims of America's war for independence (Source: onondaganation.org)

That the supposed heroes in this nation's war for independence engaged in such sadism toward Native Americans would foreshadow the violent nature of the United States.

The century that followed the nation's birth saw the new republic expand across the continent using methods similar to Washington's during the revolution. "Manifest destiny" was accomplished by employing genocidal violence against the indigenous nations to ethnically cleanse them from lands coveted by white Americans. The "Sea to Shining Sea" continent-spanning behemoth we live in today was also attained through armed seizure of half of Mexico.

By the turn of the 20th century, the conquest of the continent had apparently not satiated the United States's appetite for violence. To this end, the budding superpower exported atrocity to the Philippines, [killing up to a million people](#) in another blatant war of conquest.

The decades that followed would see American savagery visited on Vietnam, Indonesia, Laos, Cambodia, Nicaragua, and many more nations. History shows us that war—the purest expression of violence—is as American as apple pie. The U.S. has been at war [nearly every year of its existence](#), including the year of your birth and the 20 years that preceded it.

I would ask that you consider the horror of domestic shootings within the context of a nation that engages in industrial-scale massacres as policy. Place these horrific events within the larger canon of a nation that perpetrates drone strikes on civilian gatherings such as weddings and funerals, bombs densely populated cities, and implements economic sanctions that kill hundreds of thousands. These atrocities hardly register as news in the United States, even as they inflict exponentially more suffering than the aforementioned

mass shootings.

This inconsistency in attention paid to some instances of violence but not to others is at the heart of the understanding that I hope you gain about this country.

This is a nation that Martin Luther King, Jr., accurately characterized in his 1967 [Beyond Vietnam](#) speech as “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world.”

Such a label was preceded by King considering the inconsistency of denouncing acts of violence committed by individuals within the United States, while the United States government was simultaneously conducting a war of extermination in Vietnam.

To call attention to the sadistic nature of U.S. policies does not serve to obfuscate or minimize the suffering of victims of violence at home. Rather, this approach calls for global empathy, a recognition of the equality, common humanity, and equal potential for suffering of all the earth’s peoples within the U.S. borders or outside of them.

Indeed, a visiting Martian would likely find it obvious that a nation whose foundation was based in slavery and genocide, whose proceeding three centuries have been defined by perpetual war, who devotes so much of its resources toward its armed forces, and remains the largest arms dealer on earth, is a nation with violence deeply embedded in its DNA.

The scourge of mass shootings are but a symptom of a deranged and sick society. If we wish to most effectively address this symptom, it starts with the correct diagnosis of our nation as a pathologically violent society.

The real privilege of being an American

On July 4th, along with many days on the calendar, you will be besieged by the patriotic fervor of U.S. politicians and citizens stating how proud they are to be an American. You may even be met with demands from nationalistic types that you admit how “lucky” you are to be here. (This is especially likely if you voice any of the aforementioned critiques of this nation.) The reality, though, is we are actually quite fortunate to be U.S. citizens, albeit for reasons entirely different than an American chauvinist would claim.

One of the greatest benefits of being an American citizen is that we are (mostly) shielded from the horrors inflicted by our government abroad. American wars are fought on other people’s territory, destroy foreign cities, and upend the lives of non-Americans. U.S. citizens are generally spared the agony created by their government’s foreign policies. There are of course caveats to this, including the many ways that [U.S. wars come home](#) but, nonetheless, Americans suffer comparatively less than those in the nations targeted by our government. One could cynically argue that this is a “blessing” for U.S. citizens.

This wall of protection is also a curse: As U.S. citizens, we have become so detached from the imperial behavior of our government that it has created a total misunderstanding of other nations and historical events.

The devastation inflicted by our government has no parallel in similar American experience. For instance, after the American revolution, the U.S. was not invaded by 16 foreign nations attempting to destroy the new nation, as was the Soviet Union upon its formation.

America has never endured a [genocidal aerial bombing campaign](#) that killed millions, and

leveled every major city, as North Korea suffered at the hands of the U.S. Our government has never been overthrown by a foreign power's intelligence agency, which then installed a repressive regime to rule over Americans, as the U.S. has done dozens of times to other nations.

In the U.S., our weddings and religious gatherings are not turned into massacres by Hellfire missiles launched by Predator drones. The same cannot be said for Pakistanis and Afghans in recent years.

There has never been a scourge of hundreds of thousands of American babies dying due to the economic warfare of a foreign power, the exact punishment that the U.S. has inflicted on Iraq and Yemen in recent years.

In short, our government creates life-altering trauma for people the world over, but Americans remain blissfully detached and unempathetic to those on the receiving end of U.S. imperialism.

This detachment is, of course, all too convenient for the managers of the empire. The American populace's ignorance of the suffering of their targeted populations is necessary to perpetuate the imperial project.

However, Gabriela, this collective apathy is not in OUR interests. The future of humanity will depend on global empathy and cooperation to combat the greatest challenges of our time, including nuclear proliferation, world hunger, and climate change.

U.S. imperialism presents a huge barrier to such cooperation. Of course, understanding that we are isolated from the effects of our nation's violence is not sufficient alone. From there it is incumbent on us to find resources to challenge the American exceptionalist and imperialist narrative.

We already have the other side of the story! In fact, we are bombarded with it!

Gabriela, as you grow older and form your own opinions, you may read this letter and conclude that it presents a gratuitously critical perspective on the United States, its history, and its current place in the world. However, I encourage you to take stock of the sheer weight of the uncritical pro-America message we are bombarded with on a daily basis.

All of our major sporting events begin with the National Anthem. Those same events almost always are accompanied by blind worship of militarism with time devoted to "support the troops," often accompanied by a flyover of fighter jets (as the crowd undoubtedly cheers).



Worship of militarism has become the norm at sporting events. [Source: bracingviews.com]

Popular entertainment in the form of feature [films](#), [television shows](#), and [video games](#) all contribute to an uncritical patriotic narrative, as imperial institutions such as the [CIA](#) and Pentagon wield tremendous influence over production of these media.

Our mainstream news media are often an instrument of imperial militaristic propaganda as well. With just [six corporations owning 90% of media](#), the [spectrum of opinion](#) presented is extremely limited to what a small group of oligarchs considers acceptable. These same outlets are over reliant on narratives of the [intelligence agencies](#), military, and [corporate funded think tanks](#), rather than alternative sources of criticism such as activists or real investigative journalists.

Lastly, just take stock of the everyday features of your life, such as faces on our currency, the namesakes of major cities and infrastructure, and the commemorative statues you'll find in municipalities around this nation. Here you'll find that the message communicated is one of reverence not for those who challenged power but, rather, for the slave owners, militarists, and managers of an internally and externally repressive American empire.

I am stressing the importance of rejecting traditional American exceptionalist narratives because (at the risk of sounding cliché) you are the future. In spite of the injustices perpetrated by this nation historically and currently, there have been moments of hope whereby progress toward a more just world was accomplished. Positive change, however, has rarely been the result of the actions of leadership, but rather the result of bottom-up activism.

The abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, civil rights legislation, labor protections, and the end of South African apartheid was made possible, not because of top-down edicts, but because of the collective actions of grassroots movements.

Historically, agents of change have never been satisfied with the aggrandizing narratives about their nation, and looked upon their society and found it wanting in terms of equality

and justice.

If a United States that is actually a force for good in the world is possible, it is only because your generation and those that follow will make it so. Each July 4th that passes is an occasion to reflect honestly on what this nation is. From there, we can direct our actions toward creating a society worthy of celebration.

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Matt McKenna is a teacher in Bergen County New Jersey and teaches AP United States History. Prior to that job, he was a teacher for a decade in the Bronx (2007-2017). He can be reached at: mckenna6@gmail.com

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