

# When was America ever great?

When was America ever great is a question that has been posed many times over the past few years and I see it often. The answer, of course, depends on who you ask and that answer depends on how they view life and the world. Our opinions influence our perceptions as is often illustrated in the “Is the glass half empty or half-full? Both are correct.” paradox.

If one focuses on the negative, they will see things as negative and the inverse is true. However, if you ask someone who sees the “glass” as half full they will typically acknowledge and redundantly so, that there are, of course, negative things about it. They will also sympathize and understand the big picture and that there are those who will see the glass as half empty.



However, it is the nature of negativity – misery certainly loves its company – to be shallow in its depth and exclusive. Many people who see the proverbial glass as half-empty, will say things like “That’s just how things are.” or “I’m a realist.” or “I’m being objective.” They will have difficulty recognizing the positives, say that the negatives outweigh the positives or really struggle with acknowledging that there are millions of people that view that glass as half full.

So, who is right?

### **Preamble or Pre-Ramble?**

It's of my opinion, that it depends on how happy or unhappy you want to be. We not only form our own opinions, but all inherently view those biased opinions as the truth and objectiveness. We end up forming our own reality and wear "reality" goggles – a more sophisticated version of rose-colored glasses or beer goggles. People think that we don these rose-colored glasses or beer goggles at moments in our life, but in actuality, we wear them all the time. Our views, global paradigms, opinions, perceptions, etc. actually color the world we see.

The idea is not to wax philosophical or metaphysical but to illustrate the point that we actually **choose** how to see the world. We are not cyborgs with programming that can only see the world as we have been designed, but we actually can assign new programs in spite of the nature we have been born with and the programming, even indoctrination we've added as we age.

However, there's no telling someone your or my way of viewing the world is the correct one, but I will say that if you choose or accept your current "programming" and it is to see things in a negative light or a glass that is half empty, it will affect your mood, amount of happiness, sense of well-being, peace of mind, how you respond to events and occurrences and create new ones.



Like the half-empty, half-full paradox, whether you see the world in a negative or positive light, you will both be correct. If you see things with negative “colored” glasses you **will** find something negative in everything and inversely if you wear positive “colored” glasses you **will** find the positive in every situation or event.

Having said that, I try to find the positives in events and people and I am happier for it. I try to find a way to see the best in others no matter how horrible they are, I try to find the best parts about events in history, no matter how horrendous they are. It doesn't mean that those people and events are necessarily good, but life is often “gray” and what you focus on determines everything.

OK, enough with the digressions and trying to justify my decision to wear rose or positive colored glasses and return to the matter at hand.

### **The Meat and Potatoes**

When was America ever great? For those who say “never” no amount of mention of great moments in America's history will suffice for they will **always** spin or explain it away. This is not for them, since you can never convince them that the glass is half full so any attempt to do that is futile. I share this limited list of great moments in American history for those who already feel that America is great and has been great many

times in her history, but just curious about what they specifically are since they don't read history much.

A disclaimer: I find politics incredibly boring and incredibly divisive. I don't follow or watch CNN or FOX. In fact, I don't follow any American news. I am not a Republican, Democrat, Libertarian, Independent or, um...a Whig. Always thought that word was funny and wanted to use it in an article. I have lots of interests and politics isn't one of them = that doesn't mean I don't have any opinions on politics, it's just that I don't care what narrative, agenda, or "line" any party wants people to toe. I just observe everyone fighting over it and think it's all nonsense.



*Image credit: wildpixel (Getty Images)*

Even though I don't watch the news or follow politics, I am constantly around political conversations in everyday life. I've been accused of being a Republican or a Conservative for my stance on guns, the flag, veterans, police officers, and other things. Yet accused of being a Democrat or Liberal for my pro-choice, pro-LGBTQ rights, and humanist views. I've even

been called a “flip-flopper” for changing my opinions = what is called in the scientific community “Changing your position based on new data.” I guess, one is supposed to not only fall in line on either side but then expected to fight tooth or nail and push “I’m right, you’re wrong.” arguments and never budge.

No thanks.

So, when has America been great?

- As of January 2017, there are 417 National Parks – land specifically set aside to protect animals, habitats and ecosystems from becoming parking lots. Furthermore, as of 2015, there are 25,800 protected areas – one-tenth of the protected land area of the world – set aside by different federal, state, tribal and local level. That includes lands for Native Americans, reservations or areas called Indian Colonies to the tune of 49,933 square miles.

People can hike, camp, explore, hit that mental reset button, get perspective in life about how beautiful nature is and see animals in their natural habitat as opposed to let’s say in a zoo. A great way for individuals and families to reconnect with nature, or for families to reconnect with each other and for kids to learn to respect other forms of life and the environment.

- Assistance to low-income families through welfare, WIC, or food stamps helping feed kids who wouldn’t otherwise be able to eat, helping moms and dads through hardships and not be stuck on survive.

- The abolitionist movement to not only put an end to the Atlantic Slave Trade but set slaves in America free is a fine example of when America was great over and over again. While the movement is commonly associated with the American Civil War, it actually had its start before America was even

officially a nation through the likes of Samuel Groton and the giant local figure Roger Williams in the 1650s.



In the early 1680s, the Mennonites made public protests against slavery. These Germans (ironic considering how Germans are typically associated with Aryan Supremacy and Nazis today) that came to America would join forces with local Quakers and write the first formal protest against slavery in the United States.

*"There is a saying that we shall doe to all men like as we will be done ourselves; making no difference of what generation, descent or color they are. And those who steal or rob men, and those who buy or purchase them, are they not all alike? Here is liberty of conscience which is right and reasonable; here ought to be liberty of ye body, except of evil-doers, which is another case. But to bring men hither, or to rob and sell them against their will, we stand against."*

You can read the full document [here](#).

Over the next decades and centuries, many white Christians, Quakers, Conservatives and other denominations alike would

Speak out against the slave trade and slavery on the grounds of it being inhumane and un-Christian-like. At that time Conservatives could be considered the original progressives demonstrating that it is more a social movement than an aspect of a political party.

Abolitionist societies like the Society of Friends, Society for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage, the American Anti-Slavery Society, the New York Manumission Society, the Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women and other Americans would band together in protest to the entire idea of slavery, many members were not only white, but well-to-do even wealthy.

Some of the biggest names in history would attach themselves to the cause like thinker, political theorist, philosopher Thomas Paine, the legendary Benjamin Franklin, Susan B. Anthony, vice-president Aaron Burr, presidents Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson (who wrote strong anti-slavery language in the original draft of the Declaration of Independence), Angelina and Sarah Grimké among others. Many were slave owners but would have not only a change of heart but would spearhead or spur on the abolitionist movement and use their influence.



Vermont would be the first state to enact the abolition laws in 1777, and most states north of the Mason–Dixon would shortly follow. While Massachusetts has the infamous distinction of being the first colony to own slaves and being a major hub for the Atlantic slave trade, we didn't wait for the US to pass the 13th Amendment in 1865 abolishing slavery – we abolished it almost a hundred years earlier by the judiciary through case law.

Laws and ordinances like the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, Tallmadge Amendment, Lord Dunmore's Proclamation and others would deal crushing blows to slavery, and of course, the Emancipation Proclamation would be the coup de grace. To put this in perspective, slavery is still alive and well today in many middle eastern nations and even African nations. Certainly, there are segments of American society that would feel those nations are great, yet ours isn't.

- Out of the approximately 650,000 people – 20% of which were under the age of 18 – that died in the American Civil War, about 80,000 were slaves and 350,000 died in battle, through disease, starvation in POW camps, or succumbed to their injuries. 40,000 people in total were so obliterated as to be



unidentifiable and those families were never able to mourn over remains or a gravestone.

This was a massive sacrifice by many white Americans, many who fought right alongside their fellow black Americans. For all the wrongs that many white men in America have been fairly faulted for, they should also get credit for their sacrifices. I guarantee that many of them were still racist, but set aside their prejudices because they felt their values, humanity, and morality was more important. I know in this day of black and white – pardon the pun – it's hard to believe that a racist would make a sacrifice for black people, but it has and does happen.



I personally have and had racist friends – people who believe in the stereotypes prevalent today. Some of them were business owners and in spite of the prejudiced views, they never once made it known to not hire minorities or people of color, because they also had other values and felt that it would be

simply wrong to do that.

Curiously, Irene Triplett is still receiving a pension check today from the Department of Veterans Affairs because of her father Moses, a Confederate-turned-Union soldier, fought in the war.

- Extending that theme, countless white Americans fought right alongside black Americans during Jim Crow and the race riots in various parts of the country. They fought to change the government's unofficial policies through protests, making their opinions known and ironically using their white privilege: voting power.

An end would eventually come to the Jim Crow laws and staunch institutional racism altering the rights of African-Americans. Over time these changes would lead to the Voting Rights Act granting their right to vote, integrating them into the military, signing of the Civil Rights Act by President Lyndon B. Johnson, the Fair Housing Act, which ended discrimination in renting and selling homes,

The point with mentioning abolitionism, the Civil War and anti-Jim Crow sentiment is that not only does it show that when Americans join together they achieve **great** things, and make big changes for the better but this togetherness has been around since before the nation officially began, has always been a part of the nation and still is. Something that people in today's "soccer" style political climate of us vs. them can learn from.

- Along with changing rights for African-Americans and fighting to put an end to slavery, "toxic masculinity" and men's "privilege" was utilized to fight alongside women for their rights and this was not just limited to the suffrage movement that would eventually allow them to vote in elections.



There were a number of inequalities perpetuated for women besides not being able to vote, including not having the right to own property or in some cases needing permission from their husbands, or that they couldn't hold patents, practice law, run for high political office, equal pay for the same jobs, even – imagine this: be allowed by their husbands to keep their wages.

During this entire time, thousands of men also stood up, spoke up, and protested for women's rights. In 1848, a group of about 100 people led by a New York mother, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and famed abolitionist Lucretia Motta made a stand for women's rights. A third of the group were men that felt doing the right thing was more important than falling in line with the sexist Zeitgeist that ruled the day.

What started as a grassroots movement in small communities and grew to the state and national level from the 1840s until women were given the right to vote in 1920 still continues today. You'll find men and women joining forces to fight for what is right.

As with how America showed its greatness by ending slavery, many other less “great” nations especially in Muslim countries are still stuck in the 18th century or earlier when it comes to women’s rights. The mutilation of teenage girls’ clitorises, inability to work, vote, drive, dress the way they want, travel unchaperoned, get a license and many more other restrictions place them far behind America’s progress in that department.

Quelling women’s rights or promoting slavery was bad for humanity when it was Conservative Christians doing those things and it’s bad for humanity when modern Muslim Conservatives do those things in this modern era, if not worse so.

- In the 19th century, there were few laws on the books when it came to child labor. Not only were kids made dump school and instead work 10-12 hours days, often 6 days a week but they would do downright deadly jobs. In an era where, if you were lucky to successfully give birth – usually after multiple attempts – you then had to be “lucky” to make it to your third or fourth birthday. If you lived to be 9-10 years of age, you were then lucky enough to be forced to work. The more kids working the more income was coming in.



New Bedford and Fall River were like the rest of the nation with its child labor force. Because of all the textile mills, the child labor force was substantial. The nature of the machines meant that only kids could fit in between the machinery, pull something loose, or make a minor repair and usually that was done while the machines were running. There was no such thing as OSHA or safety shut-off switches. Children were often injured, maimed or killed and for a long time, nothing was done about it.

Until 1904 when The National Child Labor Committee started publicizing their plight and fighting for their rights. They wanted a lot of laws and restrictions put on the books that the best that happened over a 12-year fight was that they made it say kids could stay in school until they were 12-13 years old. Finally, they got Congress' and President Woodrow Wilson's attention in 1916 and that helped pass the Keating-Owen Act regulating some businesses that employed children under 14.

Sadly, the Supreme Court struck it down 2 years later. Congress decided to work around that and levy a tax on these

businesses that used underage kids...only to have that struck down by the Supreme Court in 1922. Man, kid's certainly had it rough and they had no voice.

In 1924 Congress tried to add a Child Labor Amendment to the Constitution protecting children up to 18 years of age. No one was interested and only 5 states voted for it initially. After years of back and forth between the Congress, the Supreme Court and the President, the Amendment was finally approved by 28 states by 1937, but 8 more were needed to ratify it. So, in 1938 the Fair Labor Standards Act was made to accomplish pretty much the same things wanted in the failed Amendment. There is no time limit. so perhaps it can still be voted on.

Children were of the many oppressed groups in America's history, but one that never had a voice and one that is never talked about. It took the greatness of adults to give them a voice – just like America and Americans have done time and time again.

### **Common everyday events**

How many times have we seen selfless acts of sacrifice by strangers like 50-year old Arland D. Williams Jr., one of six survivors of Air Florida 90 that crashed into the Potomac River that handed off the helicopter's lifeline that pulled people out of the freezing river. He died because he handed that lifeline off to others, so he beat the incredible odds by surviving the plane crash but didn't survive the rescue. When the woman could barely cling to the lifeline due to hyperthermia and the line began to slip out of her grasp bystander Lenny Skutnik took off his boots and coat and dove into the deadly cold waters to save a complete stranger and drag her to shore.



Those acts weren't of toxic masculinity or someone who cared about the political affiliation or gender of anyone – they just saw an American and did what must be done. Just another example of an American and America being great. Many groups forget that true sense of nationality these days.

America is great every time people of all ethnicities, color, sexual preferences, and political affiliations, unite to vote or assign firsts like the first black Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, black Senator Hiram Revels, first female African-American Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, first Muslim member of the U.S. Congress Keith Ellison, or our first black President Barack Obama and first black first lady Michelle Obama. The first gay bishop Gene Robinson, openly gay mayor Neil Giuliano, first transgender mayor Stu Rasmussen, and on and on and on.

I have no doubt that soon we'll have our first female, LGBTQ, Hindu or Muslim President. America is the land of opportunity, the land of dreaming big, and working hard enough that anything is possible. I don't doubt the capability of any of my fellow Americans to not let any obstacle stand in their way.



America is great when you look at its history from a comprehensive point of view: African-Americans gave the world Blues, Jazz and Hip-Hop, potato chips, blood banks (Charles Richard Drew), the fiber-optic cable, touch-tone telephone, portable fax (Shirley Jackson), CCTV (Marie Van Brittan Brown), chemical air filters and IBM computers (Otis Boykin), Temple's Harpoon Toggle (Lewis Temple) and without their contributions we wouldn't have computer animation, online video, the squirt gun, steam engines, railroads, gas masks, modern traffic lights, and so much more.



American women gave the world too many thing to list, some of which are fire escapes (Anna Connelly), car heaters (Margaret A. Wilcox), medical syringes (Letitia Geer), fridges (Florence Parpart), ice cream makers, life rafts, Kevlar (Stephanie Kwolek), computer software or the term "bug" (Dr Grace Murray Hopper).

The American gay community contributed, invented or gave us "America The Beautiful" (Katharine Lee Bates), the art of Andy Warhol and music of Aaron Copland, to lifting a ban by the US Government on employment of gay people (Barbara Gittings),



saving of millions by Sara Josephine Baker through her medical contributions and discoveries, first geomagnetic polarity time scale to Geology by Allan V. Cox, too many contributions to Astrophysics to name by Neil Divine and Jim Pollack, to name a few.

It was great when President Clinton apologized to African-Americans for the government's role in the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment, Slavery and Jim Crow, to Japanese Americans for WWII internment camps (still waiting for the apology to German Americans and Italian Americans for the same), to Jewish Americans for shielding "The Butcher of Lyon" Gestapo officer Klaus Barbie. For opening its doors to immigrants of all nations creating a melting pot like no other nation on earth, for fighting off the British Empire and forming a new nation on a different set of ideals, when Robert Carter went against the grain and freed all his slaves, when Jesse Owens boosted the spirit of America and gave Hitler the "F-You" by winning four gold medals, being the first to put a man on the moon, and far too many things invented, created, written, painted, said, and done by every race, color, shape and size of individual.

Outside of these events, there are lesser known historical events that are no less important because they are of the everyday kind. The countless charity and fundraising organizations, the coming together of Americans across racial and political lines in events like the Terrorist Attack of 9/11, the coat and food drives, the stream of volunteers for natural disasters all over the country and even the world, or the big-hearted people that start animal shelters, adopt a child, hold a door for a stranger, suspend a coffee, pay something forward, supporting someone's opinion even if it's an opposing one or one of my favorite, which is fighting for the underdog – the one whose can't fight back or afraid to speak up.

## Summary

What makes America great isn't necessarily this small list or any specific event but rather the principles it stands up for – ones that separated America from many other nations by its set of ideals. Many millions of men and women of all color fought, died and sacrificed to ensure that America has its liberties, freedoms and character and that set of ideals. To throw that away is to spit on their sacrifice. We make mistakes as all peoples and nations have done through history, but what matters is our effort to make it right and the only way to make it right is through the power of unity where true strength lies.



We can only fix it when we are **all** in the discussion and **not excluding** someone because of their race, gender, sexual preferences, religion, or political affiliation no matter how bad you think it is. That is something truly American and truly great. Nowhere in anything requiring excellence will demonizing someone ever be considered great.

America is and has been great because of her acts big and small. Standing up for each other, having a sense of unity, offering a free exchange and sharing of opinions and ideas, open discussion to all, fighting for the rights of other

Americans to voice their opinion even if you disagree with that opinion, and most importantly to right our wrongs is excellence and greatness. No nation on earth has that sort of character – they may have their moments, but this is an essential character of our nation – it's who we are, who we always have been and one which if we lose, we no longer have an identity or greatness.

This excellence or greatness is something ALIVE and changing with the times. It has the flexibility to vary, go left or right of center, adapt, progress and improve – we just have to be careful we don't stray too far from those ideals that gave our country her character and created her – the land of liberty, free speech, opportunity and the pursuit of happiness.

That last one is especially important...what has always made America great is its living pulse: Americans. We “the people” right our wrongs, we give, we love, we sacrifice for others, we fight for the underdog, we give a voice to the voiceless, we open our hearts to “...the tired, poor, huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”

The operative word is “WE.” Let's get back to that, shall WE?

