

## *What Makes America Great?*

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We all have dreams. I see it every day, in the eyes of each person I come across. Eyes gleaming with a sense of purpose, a deeply rooted yearning for happiness and freedom. Americans feeling that they are a vital part of the great experiment we call our democracy.

One summer afternoon, I was hit by the same exact feeling, but not from my own aspirations, instead, by the hopes of a young man, frozen in time. The caption underneath the old photo read 1997, as did the banner plastered on the wall behind him. His arms relaxed comfortably on his hip, his stance, strong and dignified, the gold wings, pinned securely to his uniform, glisten with the flash of the camera; his face adorned with a proud smile. Once again his eyes are what catch my attention. I can see his ambition and hopes within them, as if all that surrounds him, fuels his dream to become a Marine Naval Aviator. I smiled as I realized that this photo was of my father. A man who became an American citizen with the singular hope that he would be able to serve a country that provided him with a sense of belonging and purpose. A country that accepted him, not for where he came from or who he was, but who he might become.

My father, like many others, were and continue to be, driven by the American dream. The dream that allows each and every citizen the rights to democracy, liberty, and equality. As we sing, “Land of the Free, Home of the Brave”, our nation displays patriotism, which is made enduring and strong by the many diverse voices that sing it together. This patriotism is a fierce fire, whose flames burn stronger and higher through our motto ‘E Pluribus Unum’, out of many, one.

Our nation holds aloft a shining beacon of opportunity, the same one my father was drawn to all those years ago, the same one that attracts me now. So as I looked down at the photo of my father on that one afternoon, I was filled with a warm sensation of gratitude, for him and for what America gives us. Our country allowed him to dream, the essence of America allows us all to dream.

Perhaps that is what truly makes America great, the fact that we are constantly striving, striving to reach that dream. Our servicemen and women are the ultimate examples of this effort, as every day, they tirelessly put themselves on the front lines to defend our way of life. To many, this is why the United States is held in such high regard, as our society rests on pillars of self-reliance, independence and mutual respect for our fellow citizens.

However, greatness is often misconstrued with perfection, and the United States is far from a perfect place. The ideal is arguably unattainable, however, our society, the people within this society, have never stopped reaching for this paragon. It is the very beauty of our flaws, the difference in cultures and beliefs, which allows our country's spirit to persist. Diversity is inherently imperfect, but it is this exact quality that provides us with our strength. For the past 243 years of our republic, the United States has been a country where people from all corners of the earth, have been able to make their dreams a reality. If you look at any great institution in this country, it is evident that it has been built on the dreams of people striving for more, regardless of their origins. In the poignant words of our 40th president Ronald Reagan: "they came from different lands, but they shared the same values, the same dream."

Therefore, if we reevaluate the question: "What makes America great?" it is about more than just what meets the eye. Although our democracy and patriotism are instrumental to our greatness, they are simply a result of the people who produce it. Arguably our greatness is about the underlying ethos and creed of our nation. A nation that welcomes people from all lands and provides the opportunity and freedom that allows them to reach their fullest potential. It is the raw qualities and goodness of the people of the United States which makes America great, and it is my hope that one day, every citizen will realize this. When they do, the rest of the world will too.

***By Sienna Bertamini***