

Is America an Undeveloping Country?

By John Davidson

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One good way to see America is to leave it. My little experience with foreign travel has never failed to give me a fresher perspective about the country in which I have lived all my life.

So one objective of a recent four week trip to southern India was to see what impressions emerged in the midst of the impressions I have of America. My strategy was to travel by train and car to see the lay of the land away from the largest cities – to visit rural areas, villages, and schools, and to talk to people.

My preconception of India was colored by a single phrase – *developing country*. America is, of course, generally regarded to be a developed nation.

The United Nations Development Program has officially adopted this way of speaking about the relative status of countries in terms of developed, developing and underdeveloped. Known as the Human Development Index (HDI), this measure uses three very general criteria for classifying nations: life expectancy, education, and gross domestic product (GDP).

This simplistic approach is not without its critics, who point out, among many other limiting factors, that it fails to take into account ecological or spiritual values. One particular criticism is that the index compares nations one to another, rather than to a nation's own progress or regression.

Among the many impressions I brought home from India was a sense that America is admired by India, and that President

Obama is more admired and much the object of hope for a higher standard of world leadership. From my own perspective of what is happening in America, I saw the admiration of America itself as both naive and dangerous – dangerous in that it is underwriting an emulation of an American culture that is coming apart at the seams. This emulation is apparent in the vacuous television offerings – a central engine of globalization – found in India.

But the UN index is not about culture so much as it is about the numbers.

Let's look for a moment at America's life expectancy, the first HDI criteria. Over the last two decades, according to the UN reports, life expectancy has declined from 11th to 42nd in the world compared to 221 countries. Current reports in America suggest that life expectancy for children is dropping from that of adults, falling perhaps as much as five years.

In general, the bigger picture of health in America is clear. Health issues are on the increase in general, with the volume of chronic diseases overtaking the classic diseases of old age. America is experiencing much earlier onset of obesity and stress – well established markers for development of both chronic and classic disease. Particularly telling is the epidemic of childhood learning and autism spectrum disorders that continue to increase exponentially. These issues will likely implode the already stressed health care and educational systems within a few short years.

The more cynical view of life expectancy suggests that we have extended life by the intervention of extraordinary medical technology – heart surgeries, for example – with the ironic result that degenerative diseases such as Alzheimers have increased and begun to define the quality of those extended lives.

The HDI's second criteria is education. America is currently ranked as 12th in the world in this category. The HDI gives greater weight to literacy, with lesser weight to gross enrollment data. My question is whether anyone thinks that America's education system is working for those who are enrolled, whether literacy is causing very many people to read the labels on processed foods that they eat, whether high school graduates are prepared for work (50 to 70% are not prepared for college work) and whether schools are capable under any existing theory of handling the epidemic increase in "special needs" children. I would contend that my father's eighth grade education was far superior to my children's college educations in terms of preparing them for life. Certainly, the statistics are clear that the current generation of high school students – graduates and the persistent percentage of dropouts – will be less educated than their parents.

The UN's third HDI criteria is GDP (I'm not sure I can use three acronyms in one sentence with a straight face). Certainly, America leads in absolute terms here, but is 6th in per capita purchasing power and 9th in GDP per capita. On the other hand, our per capita exports are low, while we are the largest importer of goods in the world. Our economy is now classed as "postindustrial", with the service sector making up almost 68% of the GDP. What we manufacture most is chemical products, and we are the third largest producer of oil. America is the number one producer of electrical and nuclear energy, natural gas, sulfur, phosphates and salt, while the New York Stock Exchange accounts for the largest dollar volume in our economy. Coca-Cola and McDonalds's are the two most recognized brands in the world – the flagships of the processed food phenomenon that is central to the health epidemic we are

experiencing and exporting to the rest of the world.

Is there anything in that accounting that is reassuring, or that tells us we can stay the course, much less restore some form of “progress”?

Data from the U.S. Department of Commerce and the IRS indicate that income inequality has increased since the 1970's, after a decline during the mid 20th century. This has been accompanied by the meteoric rise of corporate income, the increasing involvement of corporations in the capture of governmental processes, and the increasing control of government by the wealthy. Meaningful participation in the politics of our nation now carries a clear price tag, and it is defined by dollar contributions – now absolutely validated by the recent U.S. Supreme Court decision on campaign financing.

Having worked in politics all my adult life, I now find myself marginalized to the point of no longer feeling that my voice or vote make a difference in the process to which I have previously devoted so much time and energy.

In India, the common feeling is that government is so corrupt that nothing can get accomplished. I have an Indian friend who lives in this country who says that America is just as corrupt, except that corruption here is legal.

While I was in India – similar to my experience in rural Peru – I never left sight of small farming plots. In America, agriculture now accounts for only 1% of the GDP. I don't know what proportion of India's GDP farming provides, but I doubt that GDP is the primary importance of family farming.

Government policy has had families streaming off American farms for decades in support of converting our agricultural economy to a big business approach. I'm told that India is following suit.

Off migration from farms has given rise to the invention of a processed foods industry that now targets the entire world. A friend in Peru points out the irony of seeing Peruvians buying American potato chips in a country that is the largest producer of potatoes in the world. Coca-Cola, of course, owns the primary water and soft drink distribution there. Another Peruvian acquaintance laughingly tells me that, when the hard times come, the Peruvians know how to grow food, implying that Americans have lost that know how. I didn't laugh.

As American families have left the farms and turned to the now dominant service industry or government work for employment, family structure itself has continued to struggle and decline. During this same time, rates of depression and stress have increased, also to epidemic proportions.

So, in a period of about six decades, America has dropped its industrial capacity, lost the capacity to grow its own food, become the primary consumer in the world, reversed a positive trend in life expectancy, become dependent upon foreign investment, poisoned itself with processed foods and the pollution that has accompanied an unregulated agricultural and energy economy, lost the capacity to educate its young despite the prodigious amounts spent, given ourselves over to the barons of technology, begun to raise our children fearfully and indoors, and given our rather understandable emotional responses over to the pharmaceutical industry, to name a few more indicators than those found in the over-simplistic HDI.

While I think there is little question why our children are getting sicker in larger numbers, it takes a willingness to take a look at our culture as a whole to see why this is happening. This is not a genetic issue. We can't blame a particular vaccine for autism. This is about a failure to see or attend to the unintended

consequences of using simplistic criteria like the HDI as measures of human progress or status.

Its not, finally, about the money. Its not about the quantity of life, but the quality. Its not about the size of government, but the governance of size. Big has overtaken small.

Leaving India, I began to see that America is quickly providing a good argument for a new status. America is now an undeveloping country, and no amount of deficit spending to maintain our status quo is going to change that.

You can read John's India Journal at his website:
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