

The United States' Riposte to European Cultural Hegemony: "DC and NYC"
Or, How I Spent My Summer Vacation

Excerpts from a travel journal
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Airplane to Baltimore, MA (22June04): A sunset viewed from 28,000 feet reveals a small, ever-changing world; to the west is lively light, the east brings streams of street lamps that artificially illuminate the approaching city, and in between are shades of light and dark more smooth than any painter has yet to accomplish. Surely I am blessed to exist in a period of technological development when such a view is possible.

(Slept in Baltimore Airport): Ah, a reasonable six hours of sleep; not bad for an airport. Wait... what time is it here? Oh, three hours of sleep.

At 3 a.m., a group of airport janitors screamed into a microphone, jarring myself and a few others awake, purely for their own amusement. The incident rallied the attention of an angry business man who had been among the former sleepers. He called the janitors "freaks," and spent an hour looking for their supervisor. I left, having given up on sweet, sweet unconsciousness. After realizing that I had consumed three, not six, hours of sleep, I felt a tinge of hate for these juvenile pranksters. Then I reminded myself that these people clean airports for a living.

Baltimore: Baltimore is not a city for poor travelers: no hostels, the YMCA claimed they were actually just a work-out center, and I was cautioned away from an inexpensive hotel because it was "too dangerous for you." Great. It's 10 a.m., off to DC!

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Washington DC: I glimpsed the White House (I hadn't given the required 6-months notice needed for a tour), and zoomed my camera in on the sniper-rifle bearing roof-top guards. I waved, but they didn't wave back. Senator Ron Wyden of Oregon brisked by me twice, but it didn't feel appropriate to ask him to give me a tour of Bush's crib. I went to Senator Gordon Smith's office (of Oregon) to try to get in the White House, but he wasn't there. While I was looking for the Book of Mormon in his office, I met an Oregon State University debate team friend of mine who now works for Sen. Smith. So, I got a personal tour from him of the US Capitol. Incidentally, the entire senate staff appears to be interns my age or younger.

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Ford's Theater: During Lincoln's time, it was not uncommon for a president to travel alone. Lincoln only had two boys as aids in the White House and he would fetch the paper himself each morning. On April 14th, 1865, he went to his fatal play unguarded. The theater manager had arranged a seat for Lincoln with a picture of George Washington set below the balcony, representing the Presidency. Upon learning that the "tyrannical" Lincoln was in town, actor John Wilkes Booth walked into the separate balcony where Lincoln sat and fired one bullet during the thunderous laughter accompanying an anticipated joke. Booth knew the laughter would muzzle the shot. The athletic assassin jumped from the upper balcony and ran to his waiting horse, only pausing to tell the audience that this was the fate of tyrants. The audience thought that the

theatrics were part of the show and so Booth managed to escape for 12 days before being shot to death in a barn. Lincoln lived 9 hours, dying in a bed across the street. The theater is still in operation today.

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If you stay out late enough, you'll encounter the strumpets who service the politicians and their surprisingly young (18?) and weak looking pimps. Business as usual includes constant cop cars and arrests. According to a well dressed and rather intelligent crack dealer named Jake, a girl can make upwards of \$1,000 a night; however, she may only get a small percentage if she works for a pimp. Apparently, pimps are necessary mostly to protect the girls from other girls. Jake reports making as much as \$5,000 a day in crack (and he looks it), but he's trying to get into the pimp business. Originally he just sold marijuana but once selling weed became a federal offense, like crack, he switched to cocaine because it provides more capital at the same risk... from the way he talked I thought he would do well as a market analyst.

I watched a chap steal a cigarette from a guy's hand at a DC café and run across traffic to get away... what a life.

Korean War Memorial: Cautions "Freedom is Not Free" and lists the US casualties as 54,246 dead, 103,284 wounded, 8,177 missing, and 7,140 captured.

Vietnam War Memorial: Two large telephone-book sized compilations list those who died. Only one Mellon died (or is missing): Michael O. Mellon. Many Smiths weren't so fortunate.

WWII Memorial: Four computers, housed on the side of a marble structure, provide access to a database of all the American military personnel who died during this war that claimed 50 million lives: 25 million of them Soviet and 400,000 American.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial: 100% wheelchair accessible and complete with waterfalls, statues, and historic remarks, this memorial presents the four terms of FDR's presidency and the era he represents in numerous outdoor rooms.

Washington Monument: 555 feet, 5 and 1/8 inches tall (2nd only to the Eiffel Tower in height), swaying as little as 1/8 of an inch, and equipped with an elevator that whisks lazy tourists to the top, this bold phallus reveals the conjurer's concealed insecurity, right Sigmund?

I came to Washington expecting that our monuments and museums would not rival Europe's and I think that expectation was largely fulfilled. However, the US is a competitor with Europe in memorials; the Jefferson and Lincoln Memorials, in combination with those mentioned above, unite to form a unique setting in the world. America doesn't have stone structures that reach as far back historically as Europe's, but the emotions our memorials inspire and the dynamic periods they represent certainly enthrall and reward the pilgrim.

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National Air and Space Museum (Smithsonian): I touched a piece of Mars and will probably regret it for the rest of my short, unknown-bacteria infested life. The original Wright Brothers' plane is on display here, but it requires a powerful imagination to envision it in flight –I'm surprised the Wright Brothers did. A large assortment of cool astronaut capsules and military

planes are exhibited, but –and I swear to Cronus and the Titans that this is true– I saw many similar rockets and planes lying in an unkempt field near NASA Ames Research Center in San Jose, CA, owned by a random dude who buys them for under a \$1000 each (I offered \$200 for a rocket as a conversation piece for my apartment, but he refused).

Pentagon: I wanted to take a picture of a sign that had a camera with a line drawn through it, but then I imagined the nearby heavily armed guard commandeering and destroying my film and kneecaps. Perhaps I do suffer from a lack of imagination because I had difficulty comprehending a 757 intentionally ravaging one side of the pentagon, killing 125 unsuspecting employees and all passengers on board. The reconstruction is complete –of the building.

Arlington National Cemetery, Virginia: An average of 24 burials occur each weekday, adding to the approximately 290,000 servicemen/women and family buried here. According to my tour guide, all confederate headstones in the US are pointed so Union soldiers couldn't sit down on them. I had the devilish thought of putting out President John F. Kennedy's eternal flame, not because I have anything against him, but just so I would secretly know that the flame isn't so eternal. The Changing of the Guard at the Tomb of the Unknowns was impressively fluid and precise, as were the guards who watch over this tomb 24/7/365. The advent of DNA identification technology has resulted in the exhumation of one soldier. The Iwo Jima statue (the one the 9/11 firefighter picture is reminiscent of) is the world's tallest bronze statue at 78 feet high (the Statue of Liberty is made of copper). It commemorates the successes and sacrifices of the Marine Corps. The retrieved mast of the USS Maine sits beside a mass grave of unfortunate and unknown sailors, and the Colombia and Challenger personnel are remembered in marble –all within this mammoth burial ground. A bus is necessary and provided to travel within the cemetery.

Final Thoughts on DC: Nearly every attraction in DC is free (that is, tax-payer supported), including everything I've mentioned above (besides the hookers). I left feeling like DC was the poster-child for the cliché: “a wonderful place to visit and a horrible place to live.” I encourage you to consider the first part of this adage.

New York City (30June04): The bus depot tossed me like garbage into Gotham city; a metropolis that strikes the tourist as fiercely unique. I checked the locks on my backpack and reached into my pocket for my old wallet with my “mugger's money” –\$20, an expired credit card, and an old ID to give to whomever asked. I would soon discover that every New Yorker raves about the improvements made in NYC from 15 years ago, and that I would probably live through my stay in the Big Apple.

I made my way to the World Trade Center where the corner stone of the “Freedom Tower” would soon arrive for the commencement of the world's tallest building's construction, at a coincidental 1,776 ft. Presently, the WTC is a 6-7 story hole in the ground that is guarded by machine-gun toting, helmet and body armor wearing cop-ish guys. I believe the function of these guards is not to protect the WTC hole, but to impress the countless streams of tourists. I overheard an older New Yorker discuss the misuse of the word “hero” in front of a large plaque with the names of the 9/11 dead. It seems some people want to make the word hero synonymous with “died in a tragic event”.

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Liberty Island: The 151 foot French gift of friendship stands upon a 10 story pedestal built by Americans with the help of Gustoff Eiffel (yes, that Eiffel). The pedestal stands upon the old star shaped Fort Wood, for a total of 305 feet in height (nearly a football field). The statue was carried in 70 box cars from Paris and made its way to America in 310 pieces. The once shiny copper

statue has developed a trademark green patina with no one interested in restoration. I imagine the psychoanalysts of the day were interested to hear that the face of Lady Liberty is modeled off of the designer's mother and the body after his mistress. Broken shackles are at her feet to symbolize an escape from tyranny, and the tablet she holds says July 4th, 1776. The seven rays of her crown symbolize the seven seas and continents, and her flame is meant to enlighten the world with truth and justice. The torch has been closed since 1917 after a German terrorist attack. During my visit the statue and fort were not open.

Ellis Island: It is a common misconception that all immigrants were processed at Ellis Island. In fact, only the 3rd class passengers who stayed below deck for the 3 week journey were processed; the well-to-do were unloaded directly into NYC. As one immigrant exclaimed, "I'll never be afraid of the gates of hell, I've been through Ellis Island." The remark stems not only from the indecent conditions of travel, but the Ellis Island guards who barked orders among 6-7 thousand people speaking roughly 40 different languages, in a building that some immigrants mistook for NYC.

China Town: In this plethora of small cash-only markets lining the streets, people inspect withering sea creatures as if they were fruit, and then toss them into paper bags to buy from the butcher who just splattered blood on my shirt. I felt compelled to douse the town in bleach and do a fly over with antibiotic bombs. I encountered some fruits (vegetables?) I'd never see before, and I'm taking a break from collecting sea-shells now that I've been confronted with the alien-like creatures that live in them.

On the back of every police car is the bumper-sticker "\$10,000 reward for arrest and conviction of anyone shooting a NYC police officer Call 1-800-COP-SHOT," with a bull's-eye for the O in SHOT.

Empire State Building: 1454 feet/102 stories –35 people have achieved a successful suicide since its construction in 1938.

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Perhaps the most memorable part of my trip was being captivated by the forceful operatic voice of the "angel in hell," the man requesting his student's love for "just one lifetime," and the man who ultimately realizes that he cannot force affection... The Phantom of the Opera's face first appears in a mirror causing the audience to look furtively for the real counterpart. That was one of many impressive feats produced by the stage designers. Although I heard the costumes are good, I'm glad I didn't choose the "Lion King."

Manhattan is surprisingly clean, particularly Central Park, a beautiful concoction of lakes, bridges, and endless picturesque trails juxtaposing well-manicured wilderness with the surrounding supreme metropolis. Also, if my observations during this trip are a valid basis to make claims, and they aren't, then there are no gas stations in Manhattan or inner DC.

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United Nations: The UN headquarters, established in 1945, is a sovereign entity in NYC and is owned by 191 nations. Only three nations are not part of the UN: the Vatican, the Cook Islands, and Niue (an island 1.5x the size of DC with 2,100 inhabitants). The 16 remaining colonies in the world are also non-members of the UN. The Security Council room is decked in 50's décor and maintains 5 permanent members with veto power: France, the UK, Russia, China, and the USA.

In the General Assembly each country gets one vote. The official languages of the UN (the ones spoken into the delegates' ear pieces) are: English, French, Spanish, Chinese-Mandarin, Russian, and Arabic. Some of its current missions include: clearing land mines (millions exist in over 70 countries with children and civilians the majority of the victims), monitoring elections, assisting in disarmament, military to civilian transitions, and humanitarian aid. A plaque in one of the five UN buildings notes that the world has spent \$780,000,000,000 dollars on military might. The mission of the UN is to:

“...help people live better lives, to eliminate poverty, diseases and illiteracy, to protect the environment and to promote respect for each other's rights and freedoms. All of these are conditions for a peaceful world.”

Odd UN facts: Pakistan provides the most troops to the UN; in 2001 the Nobel Peace Prize went to Kofi Annan and the UN; it operates on a 3 billion dollar budget (the US is 1 billion in debt to the UN) paid by members according to their respective country's GNP and per-capita income (the US is slated for 22%); Scandinavian countries give the most money for their size; and 60,000 employees operate the UN.

My travel book recommended that I take the 7-train through Queens to experience “the most diverse community on earth,” and that's what I did –stay on the train. Diverse maybe, but Queens... I'm glad I'm not you because you look awful.

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I returned to my hostel room one night and discovered that my older philosophical roommate had thrown out all my clothes, books, and various collected items but kept, and washed by hand, a pair of my underwear, socks, and a shirt. Later he threw out the socks and shirt, but kept the underwear. He was probably 280 lbs, in other words, without a chance of fitting into my underwear; our relationship had been cordial before and rather awkward thereafter...

The Brooklyn Bridge has a separate walking and biking path above the traffic that allows for a captivating sunset observatory upon the provided benches. Ah, New York.

Boston, MA: Like careening from museum to historic site to museum *ad nauseum* in Europe, I arrived in Boston and felt abruptly bored with American history and decided to just lounge and drink tea rather than learn about The Tea Party. I went into a small coffee shop named “Seattle's Best Coffee” and asked the owner if the store was named after Seattle, WA. He at first said no and then later recanted, after watching me sit down and make some unrelated notes in my notebook. The owner then nervously asked why I wanted to know and I said, truthfully, that I was just curious if Seattle was known for its coffee on the East Coast. When I was nearly a block away, the same owner chased me down and said with much anxiety, “Just one question: [pause] where are you from?” I lied and said, “Seattle.”

On my first night in Boston I went to have a night-cap with a friend (I swear I wasn't by myself), in the bar “Cheers,” the outside of which was used for the TV show. On the second night, at the same place, I *was* by myself with my beer half-empty, like my perspective of Boston. The fact that I normally don't drink, in conjunction with the campy Cheer's setting, made me suddenly ill and I made plans to visit a good Army buddy of mine named Clint...

Chatham, NH (and a small detour in **Maine**): All hail the joy of canoeing in a secluded lake off the backside of a scenic cabin with someone else's family –wonderful! While exploring an

endless swamp and unfortunately realizing that swamp gas actually exists, I surmised that since humans were so proficient in the field of animal extinction, why not target mosquitoes?

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I have no recollection of sitting down to dinner with my family while it was still equipped with a father. At dinner with Clint's family, I immensely enjoyed the presence of an intelligent grown man, "the dad," discussing his ideas regarding high school education, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the character of WWII German General Rommel. I left feeling, more than ever, left out of 20 years of an older male to learn from. On the brighter side perhaps, I've had the advantage of developing my own character from television.

Providence, RI (9July04): I stayed up all night and around 3 p.m. I encountered a middle-aged obese woman with swollen ankles and large scars up and down her knees. She was torturously meandering through town crying for a blanket (it was roughly 65-70° F outside). Usually when confronted with such people, I tell myself that I can do little for them, that they have survived this long without me and don't need me now, and that perhaps pain is relative. I could barely stand to watch her so, to alleviate *my* discomfort I gave her my thick cotton shirt, which is small for me. She laboriously put it on, which made her even more heart-wrenchingly pitiful. She continued to beg for a blanket from each passerby and told me her horrific but believable story. I assume her life is not unlike the billions of unfortunate others. For us privileged few, if we can just keep them out of our view, say in Africa or ghettos, then we won't have to do anything. Or, alternatively, I think some form of enhanced health care and expanded funding for mental hospitals would be a start.

Given the potential for misery in this world, were I given the chance to be a random person –even if it was a wealthy male American in this decade– I would heartily turn it down; I have had a fortunate life and each of you receiving this journal has helped make it that way. Thank you.