



# America's *Good Life*

By Dinesh D'Souza

America provides an amazingly good life for the ordinary guy. Rich people live well everywhere, but what distinguishes America is that it provides a remarkably high standard of living for the “common man.” A country is not judged by how it treats its most affluent citizens but by how it treats the average citizen.

In much of the world today, the average citizen has a very hard life. In the Third World, people are struggling for their basic existence. It is not that they don't work hard. On the contrary, they labor incessantly and endure hardships that are almost unimaginable to people in America. In the villages of Asia and Africa, for example, a common sight is a farmer beating a pickaxe into the ground, women wobbling under heavy loads, children carrying stones. These people are performing arduous labor, but they are getting nowhere. The best they can hope for is to survive for another day. Their clothes are tattered, their teeth are rotten, and disease and death constantly loom over the horizon. For most poor people on the planet, life is characterized by squalor, indignity, and brevity.

Even middle-class people in the underdeveloped world endure hardships that make everyday life a strain. One problem is that the basic infrastructure of the Third World is abysmal: The roads are not properly paved, the water is not safe to drink, pollution in

the cities has reached hazardous levels, public transportation is overcrowded and unreliable, and there is a two-year waiting period to get a telephone. The poorly paid government officials are inevitably corrupt, which means that you must pay bribes to get things done. Most important, prospects for the children's future are dim.

In America, the immigrant immediately recognizes that things are different. The newcomer who sees America for the first time typically experiences emotions that alternate between wonder and delight. Here is a country where everything works: The roads are clean and paper-smooth; the highway signs are clear and accurate; the public toilets function properly; when you pick up the telephone, you get a dial tone; you can even buy things from the store and then take them back. For the Third World visitor, the American supermarket is a thing to behold: endless aisles of every imaginable product, 50 different types of cereal, and multiple flavors of ice cream. The place is full of countless unappreciated inventions: quilted toilet paper, fabric softener, cordless telephones, disposable diapers, roll-on luggage, deodorant. Some countries, even today, lack these conveniences.

Critics of America complain about the scandal of persistent poverty in a nation of plenty, but the immigrant cannot help noticing that the United States is a country where the poor



live comparatively well. This fact was dramatized in the 1980s when CBS television broadcast “People Like Us,” which was intended to show the miseries of the poor during an American recession. The Soviet Union also broadcast the documentary, probably with a view to embarrassing the Reagan Administration. But by the testimony of former Soviet leaders, it had the opposite effect. Ordinary people across the Soviet Union saw that the poorest Americans have television sets and microwave ovens and cars. They arrived at the same perception of America as a friend of mine from Mumbai who has been trying unsuccessfully to move to the United States for nearly a decade. Finally, I asked him, “Why are you so eager to come to America?” His reply: “Because I really want to move to a country where the poor people are fat.”

The moral triumph of America is that it has extended the benefits of comfort and affluence, traditionally enjoyed by a very few, to a large segment of society. Few people in America have to wonder where their next meal is coming from. Emergency medical care is available to everyone, even those without proper insurance. Every child has access to an education, and many have the chance to go to college.

Ordinary Americans enjoy not only security and dignity, but also comforts that other societies reserve for the elite. We live in a country where construction workers regularly pay \$4 for a nonfat latte, where maids drive rather nice cars, where plumbers and postal workers take their families on vacation in Europe or the Caribbean. As Irving Kristol once observed, there is virtually no restaurant in America to which a CEO can go to lunch with the absolute assurance that he will not find his secretary also dining there. Given the standard of living of the ordinary American, it is no wonder that socialist or revolutionary schemes have never found a wide constituency in the United States. As sociologist Werner

Sombart observed, all socialist utopias have come to grief in America on roast beef and apple pie.

As a result, people live longer, fuller lives in America. Although at trade meetings around the world protesters rail against the American version of technological capitalism, in reality, the American system has given citizens a much longer life expectancy and the means to live more intensely and actively. The average American can expect to live long enough to play with his or her grandchildren.

In 1900, the life expectancy in America was around 50 years; today, it is more than 75 years. Advances in medicine and agriculture are the main reasons. This increased life span is not merely a material gain; it is also a moral gain because it means a few years of leisure after a lifetime of work, more time to devote to a good cause, and more occasions to do things with the grandchildren. In many countries, people who are old seem to have nothing to do; they just wait to die. In America, the old are incredibly vigorous, and people in their seventies pursue the pleasures of life.

“Yes,” the critics carp, “but these benefits are only available to the rich.” Not so. Indeed, America’s system of technological capitalism has over time extended the life span of both rich and poor while narrowing the gap between the two. In 1900, for example, the rich person lived to 60 while the poor person died at 45. Today, the life expectancy of an affluent person in America is 78 years while that of the poor person is around 74. Thus, in one of the most important indicators of human well-being, the rich have advanced in America but the poor have advanced even more.

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