

From afar, America resembles a 2nd-rate power

Hints of our diminished state can be seen in our paranoia, our swooning U.S. dollar and our untidy airports.

By Alan M. Webber

A not-so-funny thing happened last month while I was on a business trip to Austria and Sweden: My country started to resemble a second-rate power. I saw it in three different places — at an international conference at the Benedictine Abbey at Melk in Austria, at a quiet public square in Stockholm and at the Los Angeles International Airport, when I got home.

(Illustration by Web Bryant, USA TODAY)

At the Austria gathering, the Waldzell Institute held its annual meeting aimed at the spiritual development of society. The theme on the stage with the Dalai Lama was legacy, but the conversation among participants during breaks turned to America. The questions came not as accusations, but as laments: "What's the matter with your country?"

The Europeans who come to this conference are worldly people who track what's happening globally with an impartial eye. To them, China's growth and dynamism is the most compelling story of the 21st century. "Dynamism" was the sort of word people once used when talking about the United States. Now, they watch us like rubberneckers driving past a car wreck. "You used to be such a great country," they say. "Not even a country. What happened to the great *idea* that once defined America?"

Falling short, and falling apart

It's more than a fair question, and one that you can appreciate only when you are outside the bubble that passes for media and public discourse in the USA today. Because when you're outside the bubble, only then do you realize how far the United States has drifted from its promise, how large the gap is between what we profess and what we do. What is important is how far short we are falling and, in some important ways, falling apart. From afar, you see how closed our once-open society has become; how diminished our economic superiority has become; and how worn our once impeccable image has become.

We're becoming 'home blind'

The Danish have a saying that translates into "home blind," which is a malady that appears to be striking Americans.

Paranoia. To read newspapers, to listen to the radio or tune into TV, to scan the Web from afar, is to accept, almost unquestioningly, the overarching theme of the American Conversation: What do we do to make America safe? The sense that emanates from our country, almost like a bad smell, is a feeling of urgent defensiveness: They're all out to get us! Yet, this America-under-siege mentality seems unreal. Yes, there are bad people in the world who would seek to do harm to us, but there are still many more people who regard America as an ideal more than as the great Satan.

Yet we have come to see everyone as a threat. Try to come to the USA and you'll feel it, the people at the Waldzell meeting said. Just try to make it through the security screening. Yes, they say, you might thwart your enemy from attacking you, but you'll also prevent friends from supporting you.

Face value. The second time I saw the new-and-unimproved America, I was sitting down for a snack in a quiet, tree-lined square in Stockholm. There were four of us and we ordered a beer, three bottles of sparkling water and four salads. It was a lovely meal — until the check came. Thanks to America's fiscal policy, the Bush administration's deficit financing of the Iraq war and the popping of the housing bubble, the dollar is now a second-rate currency. The cost of our snack, denominated in new, nearly worthless dollars: more than \$100.

The U.S. dollar is now on a par with the Canadian dollar. And the euro is towering over the U.S. greenback in a way few imagined possible, and in a way that raises serious questions. America is already damaged goods by virtue of the Iraq war. What additional damage does the United States suffer when its currency becomes worth less and less? Is there a point where diminished prestige actually becomes diminished economic leadership? And just where is that point? As close as another interest rate cut?

Subpar facilities. And then there is the inevitable moment of re-entry into the USA, to familiar scenes and well-known realities. Like the process of clearing customs, dealing with security, claiming luggage. In this case, it happened to be LAX, but it could just as well have been JFK Airport or Chicago O'Hare or any other large U.S. port of entry.

It's worth describing the typical European airport, whether in Frankfurt, Vienna or Stockholm: Think of a handsome shopping mall where airplanes take off and land. The security screening process is decentralized, oftentimes with scanning taking place at the gate rather than the main terminal, which means there are rarely long lines. The facilities are clean. The people working at the gates are courteous. Sure, not every foreign airport sparkles, but compare that with the welcome that the United States extends: The facilities are poorly maintained, the screening process is an unpleasant grind and workers are often brusque. On top of that, our flights are rarely on time.

In America, it's business as usual. We've simply learned to accept this way of life, rather than confronting the reality of our decline. Maybe that's what happens to once-rich, once-powerful superpowers as they gradually decline: They lose track of their own standards. Perhaps, seen from the outside, the

USA is easier to see as it is. Perhaps we are wasting this moment in time, and risking squandering the future, by giving in to our paranoia, by accepting our devalued dollar, and by looking past our eroding public facilities and deteriorating infrastructure.

We are asking the wrong questions about our country's role in the world, and so we are getting the wrong answers about how to create the future we want. And in the bargain, we are settling for a devalued national currency, in every sense of the word.

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