More GEM, Less FEAR

Idea In Short

Judge a country by trends, not headlines. America's assets remain generosity, enterprise and diversity, while its liabilities are a loud few, entitlement, anger and resignation. Six years of self-assigned national homework came back mostly unfinished, so the work starts with individuals refusing resignation.

A Holiday for Reflection

July 4 is Independence Day in the United States, exactly the right time to reflect on what being American means and how America fits in the world. The holiday deserves more than fireworks, barbecue and swimming pools. Six years after publishing a list of next steps for the country, an honest review shows how little moved. Gross federal debt increased from 16.7 trillion dollars in 2013 to 21.4 trillion dollars in 2019.1 Political gridlock worsened into a hostile environment with low legislative productivity. Healthcare spending growth slowed only enough to match economic growth. Education appropriations inched from 65 to 71 billion dollars while infrastructure spending stayed essentially flat. Equitable immigration policy: no. Trust between diverse peoples: no. Reduced entitlement: no. Stewardship of natural resources for future generations: no. One genuine win: violent crime declined, helped by a strong economy. The report card motivates two acronyms, one for what is great and one for what is not.

G Is for Generous

The United States is a bountiful place, the breadbasket of the world and a net exporter of energy, education and technology. It is a land of immigrants, and honesty requires the caveat that the only people who fully deserve the label of original inhabitants are Native Americans, whom settlers devastated, as Howard Zinn's history documents. Americans are also massively philanthropic. The Giving Pledge gathers billionaires committing to give away more than half their wealth before death, and Americans crowd that list.2 Philanthropy thrives below the billionaire tier too, in churches, community foundations and individual checkbooks. Generosity is a national habit worth protecting.

E Is for Enterprising

America has always offered opportunity to immigrants and to anyone willing to learn, hustle, risk and sell. The country has benefited from inflowing human capital for a very long time, because ambitious people want to live here. However imperfect, the United States runs on market economics, which lets people specialize in what they do best, generally rewards effort and self-corrects over time. The system's flaws are real and its engine is also real. Enterprise remains the renewable resource underneath the national balance sheet.

M Is for Many

No country is more heterogeneous than the United States. This is not Sweden, Japan or Korea, where nearly everyone shares one heritage. Consider a single Atlanta street: the neighbor on the right traces to a homeland 9,300 kilometers away, the neighbor across the street 3,900 kilometers, the neighbor on the left 13,000 kilometers, and one's own parents 11,500 kilometers. Plurality is the everyday American condition, not an abstraction. The country was also built for the future rather than the past. The Declaration of Independence in 1776 served far more than the 2.5 million people then living in the budding country, and the Constitution of 1787 was a harbinger beyond the 3.9 million counted in the first census. Are there GEMs, generous, enterprising and many, in every state, income bracket, profession and political party? Yes. Is anyone a GEM all the time? No.

F Is for Few, E Is for Entitlement

The ugly side visible on the news all day begins with the few. A small number of people on both sides of the political aisle, nowhere near half the country, ruin things for everyone. Around-the-clock news and flooding social media amplify the noise, and vapid people with vitriol reliably gain audiences. Entitlement follows close behind, echoing through hundreds of interest and affinity groups. The register is always us versus them, we deserve this or that. A pluralist liberal democracy of 330 million people cannot run on that logic. If the game becomes atomizing everyone into polarized groups, there is not much of a country left.

A Is for Anger, R Is for Resignation

Anger explains itself. When citizens cannot hold civil discussions with nuance and sincere talk of trade-offs, everyone needs a remedial economics class, and perhaps our parents did a worse job than advertised. Resignation is subtler and possibly worse. Too much American talk assumes things cannot get better, as if giving up were the default setting. The record disagrees. Public education can be reset, as Success Academy demonstrates. Healthcare can be solved holistically, as Intermountain Healthcare shows. Are there fearful people, few, entitled, angry and resigned, in every political party? Of course. Does everyone hit emotional low spots and feel FEAR? Of course. The question is which acronym wins the week.

What Executives Can Take From This

Business leaders hold outsized leverage over the GEM-to-FEAR ratio, because workplaces are where most adults practice citizenship daily. Companies that hire for enterprise, promote across every background and give generously to their communities manufacture GEMs at scale. Leaders who reward civil disagreement in meetings train the muscle that public discourse has let atrophy. Conversely, organizations that run on blame, entitlement and factional politics export FEAR into every household on the payroll. The acronyms also work as a management diagnostic. Ask whether your own team is generous with credit, enterprising with problems and comfortable with its many differences, or whether a loud few, entitled silos, simmering anger and quiet resignation set the tone. Countries are hard to change. Teams change in a quarter.

What Lies Ahead

The world is a better, safer and fairer place than it has ever been. Readers of Hans Rosling's Factfulness or the Gates annual letters will find the evidence encouraging rather than naive.3 The prescription that follows is not complicated. Do great work, learn constantly and have fun doing it. National character is the sum of individual habits, which means the ratio of GEM to FEAR is not something citizens wait for. It is something they choose, daily and in public. Let's start.

- 1National debt of the United States
- 2The Giving Pledge
- 3Factfulness

Summary

The GEM and FEAR acronyms sort national character into assets and liabilities. Generosity, enterprise and plurality built a future-oriented country, while a loud few spread entitlement, anger and resignation. The world keeps improving by most measures. Do great work, learn and refuse to give up.