

# What's Still Exceptional About *America*

*Why the  
United States  
is undervalued.*

BY CARL SCHRAMM AND AMAR BHIDÉ

**A**fter months and months of being battered by financial calamities, it is useful to examine what remains exceptionally positive about the United States—not from a potentially selfish, national point of view, but from the perspective of the rest of the world.

In our view, America remains exceptional in three ways that continue to be of utmost importance to the ability of the rest of the world to thrive. The first is the development and use of technology.

That may seem like a surprising judgment—given that Japan is widely seen as the land of robots, Germany as the paradise of engineers, and India has become a global software programming power. At the same time, a lot of those Japanese robots are under-employed. German engineering firms keep painting themselves into the luxury corner of their markets. And India focuses on software precisely because its creaky infrastructure still has considerable difficulty in moving any of the hard stuff around.

This is not to say that we Americans bring basic science to the rest of the world the way Prometheus brought fire. And

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"INTERNATIONAL  
ECONOMY

THE MAGAZINE OF INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC POLICY

888 16th Street, N.W., Suite 740  
Washington, D.C. 20006

Phone: 202-861-0791 • Fax: 202-861-0790  
www.international-economy.com

yet, if you want to see a place where folks regularly make up new gadgets that other people actually use, you probably want to start looking in the United States.

Whether it's new cell phone services, health procedures, housekeeping gadgets, or avionics, U.S. innovators keep spewing out new things. And the vast U.S. consumer market keeps ruthlessly culling them—until the survivors can compete anywhere.

That brings us to the second way in which the United States remains exceptional: American enterprise stands as an exception in the world. This judgment does not rely on any extravagant boasts about American creativity. Nor does it rely on puffery about U.S. levels of business competition—or the notion that the United States has cornered the global market on innovation or entrepreneurship. But it is hard to imagine a country that has more innovative entrepreneurs in more parts of the country, in more markets—and from more varied backgrounds.

In part, the success of U.S. innovators is a simple matter of supply rising to meet the demands of the increasingly maligned American consumer. Sure enough, we keep reading accounts of how this consumer—apparently fueled by a boozy mix of imaginary housing prices and delusional views of personal and national deficits—kept on buying and buying from the grim years of the dotcom implosion right through the discovery of terrorism in the western hemisphere, the invasion of Iraq, and now a credit squeeze.

The U.S. consumer, however, is not simply a mindless consumer of any and all goods and services. U.S. consumers routinely engage in a risky willingness to sample the new. And unlike, say, the Japanese, whose willingness to adopt new products drives their country's thriving market for consumer electronics, the venturesome consumption of U.S. households (and businesses) extends to a whole host

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of goods and services—from African pop music to Japanese hybrid cars, from Scandinavian furniture to Indian call centers.

What force produces these buyers—whose preferences serve to guide economies on the other side of

the planet to success? This question brings us to the third way that America remains usefully exceptional in the world. You may be surprised to hear that it's not about American democracy. Rather, it's about the the country's sheer cultural openness.

In most economies, social progress arises in part from intercultural competition with neighboring coun-

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tries. In the United States, it results from eclectic assimilation of all the world's cultures.

Without starting from a specific cultural point of view, the United States opens itself up as a sort of agnostic show room for all of the cultures of the world. Think of America as the first post-cultural society.

Some may think the term “post-cultural” describes America's lack of an identifiable, native culture. It's a familiar jibe—and one which we have all heard and read before.

Cliché aside, the argument misses the point. As best as we can tell, U.S. society learns from culture the way it consumes—not the way it competes.

Perhaps as a result, the mad-cap films that spool out of Hollywood and the dance and music fads that spill out of American clubs find ready audiences throughout the world—not because the world's youth want to celebrate American culture, but because they want to celebrate whatever bits of world culture their counterparts in the United States are celebrating.

This is what links America's openness to its role as a global exemplar of enterprise. That openness makes the U.S. consumer—or at least the U.S. consumer's wayward preferences—relevant to places as diverse as China, Eastern Europe, Africa, and Latin America. It is one direct benefit of the power and excitement of a society open to immigration. The United States, after all, is the world's first truly global society.

At the same time, we need to be keenly aware that, while we Americans still admire technology and still respect enterprise, we do not turn our collective back on what produced our country's remarkable openness in the first place. After all, one cannot stay strong while losing sight of one's underlying strengths. ◆