

THE BYSTANDER —★—

That MAGA Thing---the problem is *Again*

Published in the Shepherdstown *Observer*, March, 2019

Walking towards my departure gate at Reagan airport last October, I passed a kiosk selling merchandise items sporting the MAGA slogan. The shop was closed for the evening, so I took advantage of the empty airport terminal to peruse the wares, wondering who still buys wearables blaring a political slogan nearly two years after its campaign ended.

It's that word *again* in the MAGA phrase that stimulates my gag reflex. It's been used as a slogan before, but this time it's an existential matter of definition; just exactly what is the meaning of *again*? It implies that a *something* once existed, now ceases to exist, and needs to be resurrected.

The proliferation of MAGA garb makes me wish that those who wear it be required to take a history class. They need to learn about us; who we were in the past, are now, and could be in the future. They should start with comparing the demographics of American society and track the past 50, 100, or 150 years, graphing statistics in categories like life expectancy, wage increases, pollution levels, banking safety, fire departments, indoor plumbing, and disposable income ratio. Then they could determine precisely what era they would choose to compare the present with the past.

Obviously, what was the Golden Age in America depends on your race, gender and religion. The Plantation economy was on a roll before the Civil War, but only because slavery was legal. The 1890's were good for the Robber Barons but there was no minimum wage, child labor laws or 40-hour work weeks. Oklahoma pioneers farmed cheap government land, and then, with no environmental protections, watched the Dust Bowl blow their profits across a million acres.

Labor Unions hit their peak during the 1940's but then politicians tamed them, stagnating livable wages for the working class and giving CEO's more profits. Christian theology dominated the spirit of the law until the early 1960's when the protection of "the right to privacy" was deemed a

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Constitutional right, kicking off the Golden Age for women, making it legal to have contraceptives and credit cards. For Black Americans, there was *one* Golden Day; the day Obama was elected President---but then they had to witness the strongest backlash to racial equality since the Jim Crow era. Meanwhile, Caucasians feel their Golden Age is waning; 55% of white Americans now believe that they are being discriminated against, but give no examples of legislation denying them any of the rights they've denied to others.

Ask anyone on the street what MAG-*Again* refers to and you'll likely get the party line that our decline in manufacturing, steel in particular, has cost us our position of strength in the world. You'll hear the concern that perhaps we're not still "number one" in military might. What you won't get is any facts with those answers. Fortunately, economic and military strength are both easily measurable, as is manufacturing. We still export at a healthy rate, and we still have at least the second largest army on the globe. True, we don't manufacture and export the same muscular products that made us wealthy. But we still have a monopoly on many lucrative commodities that are sold to almost every country in the world.

For example, the United States manufactures and exports 89% of the world's pornography. Unfortunately, a big slice of profit is lost to overseas markets through hackers, pirates and home-made smut. Earnings are hard to quantify because, as quoted by the Associate Dean of the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism, "pornography is an industry where they exaggerate the size of everything." And with 428,000,000 porn website hosting pages, the US leads the world by a longshot.

In addition to being the top exporters of obscenity, we are also the top exporters of obesity, in the form of global consumption of sugar, particularly in soft drinks. We ship soda to every country in the world except North Korea and Cuba. The American company that produces and bottles Coke and Pepsi, according to their website, is the "worlds' most valuable brand associated with happiness." The sugar they pump into their products are known causes of obesity, a world-wide health epidemic that contributes to

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diabetes and heart disease as well as orthopedic disabilities, with people struggling to carry all that extra weight on their backs and knees.

We still keep our top dog position in the manufacture and sale of arms, especially to Saudi Arabia, our biggest customer. We sold weapons to at least 98 countries between 2013-2017, even countries where rebel forces such as ISIS and the Taliban use those weapons to fight against us when they get the opportunity. According to a 2016 Department of Defense audit, half of the 1.5 million weapons we supplied to Iraqi and Afghan military forces since 2002 ended up “missing” due to inadequate security, poor record-keeping and lack of regulations.

And let’s talk about our military, which I served in for over seven years. Are we still the strongest and the smartest? Chinas’ military is almost twice as large, but we’re still considered “the best” in terms of training. That may not last for long; of today’s population aged 17-24, 71% are not qualified for enlistment due to criminal convictions, drug use, obesity, medical problems, mental health diagnoses, low aptitude test scores, or lack of physical fitness.

Of the 29% who are qualified, only a few, less than 1%, have expressed any interest in joining, according to the US Army Recruiting Command. With such an overwhelmingly small pool of potential candidates, it’s especially ironic that anyone would think it vital to bar a few transgender people from taking the oath to guard our country. Ironically, those disqualifying factors are highest in rural areas of the south, where MAGA-wear is still very much in style. According to a 2010 article in the Military Times, “Overall, one in six military service members takes at least one type of psychiatric drug. The numbers are probably higher than estimated, since troops are also known to share and trade prescription drugs with each other, even while in combat zones.” Those outdated percentages are higher than the general population; as of 2014, nearly 13% of American teens take anti-depressant prescription drugs, not to mention additional medications for ADHD and anxiety disorders. As a country, we use more anti-depressants than anyone in the world.

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Not surprisingly, pharmaceuticals are also one of our largest exports.

So we're still great, if not the greatest; we're just making and selling different products. Plus, we use them ourselves; we're drinking our own Kool-Aid. That's our other most marketable product---delusion. Voters are made to think that we need to be great *again*, then convince the rest of the world to be like us, and then need a wall to keep them out.

But reality is a much harder hat to wear, because if you really want to make America great, you have to start with you. It's not more steel we need to forge; it's more people with backbones of steel, with the work ethic to go the distance. Instead, we provide our children lives of leisure before they've even earned one, playing video games on consoles made in China to escape the real life they haven't even experienced yet. And it's obvious that our education system isn't working if people lack the logic to see through the con of a billionaire real estate developer.

But back to the airport kiosk display cabinet.... stacked neatly right next to the MAGA shirt for \$9.99 was a similar product; a shirt with the Obama campaign image, selling for \$12.99.

Citing the free-market law of supply and demand, I'd say that proves that there are a lot of us who are still willing to pay an extra premium for "Hope and Change."

Again.