

The spirit of greatness

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Felipe Fernández-Armesto recognises the strength of the US is in its people

I have seen the future. It works. And the US continues to dominate it.

I saw it, improbably, in Greenville, North Carolina, where the University of East Carolina is celebrating its 100th birthday this year. The university is of a kind unthinkable outside America. It is an unpretentious place, dedicated to the service of a local and regional body of students, 27,000 strong. Most of them have modest means and choose to pay subsidised fees close to home rather than invest in the expensive prestige of some high-rolling private college.

But like all such institutions in the US, the university commands so much loyalty and gratitude from former students and so much pride and passion from local people that it attracts plenty of financial support. Almost any university in Europe would envy its well-tended greensward, its handily equipped classrooms, its formidable professional schools in medicine and applied arts, and its internationally celebrated programme in maritime studies. It has funds for bringing in special lecturers from all over the world. I met a former colleague from Oxford who was there as a visiting professor.

In short, the university exemplifies the great, enduring virtue of the US: the high priority that states and communities give to research and education. Europe will never outclass the US in knowledge and innovation while we remain benightedly stingy with our universities and restrict them to a fraction of the funds and a shadow of the independence that American institutions enjoy.

Beyond the campus of the university, I saw evidence of the durability of American greatness in the town of Greenville, and especially in the free local newspaper, lovingly produced by residents for fellow citizens, The Greenville Times. Civic-minded clubs and businesses support it with their advertising: the "authentic Italian" restaurant, the pooch parlour, the gardeners' co-operative, the college football team, the antiques shop, the golf-mad country club, the lunch counter that serves the renowned regional speciality, spare-ribs barbecued in vinegar.

Greenville epitomises small-town America. Students account for almost half the population of 60,000. In the old days, tobacco made the place prosperous. Today the elegant town houses of the early 20th-century nicotine barons still line the campus, but student fraternities now occupy them. There is no obvious outlet for Greenville's energies, apart from the university, now that tobacco has gone up in smoke.

The town's main advantages are its tranquillity and the presence of the university, which guarantees a modest level of employment and a stimulating level of cultural amusement. Lectures as well as musical and theatrical entertainment bring enthusiastic audiences to the campus.

In the absence of prosperous industries and natural resources, Greenville people rely on mutual help to see them through hard times. Our European image of the US as a Lone Ranger nation full of self-reliant individuals is mythical - based on John Wayne movies and Raymond Chandler novels. The idea that the dynamism of unrestrained capitalism makes America work is Republican Party propaganda.

My own observations, for what they are worth, reveal neighbourliness and solidarity as the essential US virtues. People know each other. They congregate and socialise in churches, clubs, colleges and baseball grounds. The heroes they most admire are not sociopaths such as Sylvester Stallone's character in Rambo or Paul Kersey, the vigilante-hero of the Death Wish movies, but "rich men living peaceably": philanthropists rich in civic munificence, who endow hospitals and universities and art galleries and orchestras. Gunslingers on Main Street and mavericks in the corrals are conspicuous in American history precisely because they were rare. Solid citizens preponderated in the collaborative worlds of wagon trains and stockades.

In The Greenville Times, I read about what matters in America. The annual Fishing Festival is due in mid-April, complete with orchestras and folk bands and a troupe of Mexican dancers (for Mexican migrants are now numerous in the region). Clowns will entertain the children. Local artists - most of them trained at the university - will exhibit their wares. The Environmental Department of the state Government will exhibit a scientific aquarium full of the fish the anglers crave. Several columns of the paper deal with a heroic dog who died rescuing his master, a victim of a bombing in Iraq. The town orchestra, we read, which is 40 years old this year, is to benefit from a dinner organised by local enthusiasts and eaten to the accompaniment of music of the 1950s of every kind, from reverential to rock. The university music school will perform Madame Butterfly. A report on the activities of the Keep Greenville Beautiful society praises a recently deceased pillar of the organisation, one Lorena Pruitt, whose faithful work for town and church will be celebrated in a commemorative garden, which her fellow members will plant in her honour.

This is the spirit that will keep America great. However disastrous the wars, however corrupt the politics, however iniquitous the excesses of Wall Street, however hopeless the economic crisis, while Lorena Pruitt has devotees and successors, and while universities such as East Carolina keep up their good work, the US will remain a superpower of sorts and a moral example to the world.

Postscript :

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