

Greatness
By
Daniel E. White June 23, 2025

Between 1430 and 1550, Portugal was among the most active countries in the world to sail the seas. Promoted and supported by Prince Henry the Navigator during his lifetime, Portuguese ships ventured down the west coast of Africa, then around the Cape of Good Hope, on to the Indian subcontinent, then later circumnavigating the globe.

Their importance in the world of the 15th century was such that they were one of two powers involved in the Pope's drawing the Line of Demarcation, the act that "awarded" 50% of the globe to Spain and 50% to Portugal. That's how Brazil became a Portuguese colony and the rest of South American Spanish ones.

There is no record, of which I am aware, of the Portuguese media, whatever form it might have taken, claiming Portugal to be the Greatest Sea Power of All Time, though they probably regarded themselves as pretty good.

A few centuries later, "the sun never set on the British Empire." England was the pre-eminent sea power by this point. They established colonies on every continent that wasn't just ice. We have better records of what the British thought of themselves: a lot. There is little evidence, though, of the British media claiming Britain to be "the greatest ever" because there was in the British mind, no reason to think that any other nation ever measured up.

I know very little about Chinese history. I know there are records of adventuresome Chinese sailors reaching Africa, but they didn't stay. The Chinese response to the rest of the world seemed to be indifference, because they KNEW that no other civilization could match theirs, so why bother? Superiors often pay lessers no mind.

Is the obsession with greatness uniquely American? It's the idea of GOAT that's gotten my goat. 21st century media, covering many areas of modern culture, have raced to debate who or what is the Greatest of All Time, or GOAT. When I was growing up, being a goat had a different, far more negative connotation. The goat was responsible for failure. Those promoting GOAT do so without the slightest trace of irony.

Try reading sports sections from recent years without finding serious discussion about whether Jordan, James, Bryant, or Chamberlain is the GOAT in professional basketball. Who is the G- GOAT (golf) or the T-GOAT (tennis)?

How about actors, writers, Presidents, business collapses and so on? This fixation on trying to rank, of course, minimizes such things as historical context, changes in technology, changes in accepted behavior, etc. The comparisons are usually based on data, whatever statistical information the raters feel important.

There is something **blindingly unhumble** about regarding what exists today as the measure by which all else from the past ought to be judged.

In any performance, wouldn't results be only one measure? Would will, determination, courage, etc., things that are unmeasurable, be important, perhaps even decisive?

Is there any agreement about what it means to be great?

"Make American Great Again" is hardly the first political slogan to stir the hearts of voters. People of a Certain Age, we are old enough to remember the promise of "The Great Society." The "New Frontier" was invented in an attempt to re-ignite the frontier spirit of the 19th century when visions of land ownership, the wealth of precious metals, coal, oil, and other gifts of the land were the stimuli for growth and adventure. "The New Frontier" included space as well.

The "New Deal" suggested that there were better ways than some "Old Deal" and Wilson's "New Freedom" suggested that freedom needed to be revived, (except, of course, for women and minorities).

Slogans are invented to stir voters who are dissatisfied with the status quo. The words slogans employed have seldom been very sharply defined and, as long as they attracted votes, haven't needed to be. So, who would not want a New Deal in the third year of the Depression or wish for a society that was Great?

MAGA has the same allure for the dissatisfied. Never mind that there is widespread disagreement about what America is, whether great refers to being a champion of ideals and values or just the statistical front-runner, or when America might have been great before having misplaced that greatness somehow.

What seems obvious is that there is no agreement about what it means to be great, or what constitutes "new," or how we define freedom? So, maybe we should stop chasing greatness and get back to some basics.

If we must measure things, and goodness knows we seem to live in a time where everything is measured, what about the Golden Rule as a measure? Or Rotary's "Four Way Test" which begins with "Is it the Truth" and "Is it Fair to All Concerned?" Or judge matters on some scale of human kindness?

We have all heard folks say that "good is the enemy of great." Maybe that is the opposite of what is true. Maybe we could strive to claim a foothold in just being and doing good and not worry about the GOAT.

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