

## What Makes America Great

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I stumbled into the ice rink at 5:30 AM, and as the first skater there, it was dead silent. Pushing through another door, I heard a triumphant voice blaring from the television. I had walked in at the perfect time to hear a broadcast of 100 year-old WWII veteran Robert McClintock proudly singing the national anthem at the National Hockey League's Military Appreciation Night. The pride heard in his voluminous voice could not be hindered by his age, and as the anthem came to a close, the last eleven words continued ringing in my ears: "The land of the free, and the home of the brave." There was a certain power in McClintock's voice that I couldn't and still cannot shake. Perhaps the emotion behind McClintock's serenade overtook me, or perhaps it was the meaning behind those true words that forced me to reflect what an honor it was to be an American. We are free, not only because God ordained it to be or that our founding fathers desired it so, but because we host honorable, brave veterans who are willing to defend their nation, which provides peace and opportunity to so many.

Ask anyone around the world, 'What makes America so special?' The answers you receive will almost always include the words freedom and equality. The world is not wrong; America indeed is unique because of the freedom and equality it promises its citizens. Our founding fathers recognized that it's not one's riches or family name in which a person's value is derived; we are valuable because we are made in the image of God and they built an exceptional democratic system where the government's primary role was to protect the unalienable human rights of every American citizen. American equality is everyone starting on a level playing field; we are all granted the same, basic human right of pursuing happiness. America empowers individuals to pursue their dreams through opportunities presented by the freedom of choice. Ladies and Gentlemen, the American dream is not a myth. If you hold a dream, you yourself have the power to accomplish that dream. In America, I can determine my future. Here, I can pursue my dreams. America is special because no matter where you come from or what your backstory is, as an American citizen, you are granted equal human rights to pursue life, liberty, and happiness.

No one can deny that America is a thriving nation, but we also are not a stagnant one. As stated in the Preamble of the Constitution, we are a nation that is constantly seeking to form "a more perfect union." Certainly, America has made some mistakes; we have a history associated with slavery, misogyny, and racism. But America is unique because the story doesn't stop there. America is set apart by its ability to overcome its wrongs, thanks to our amendment system and bill of rights that allowed politicians and the people to speak up against the wrongs that did exist in our nation. America continues to move forward in a constant pursuit of a more perfect union, and they do this through the voices of the people; it's not a secret society of politicians that decide the direction of our nation. The voices of the American citizens from all different backgrounds and ethnicities matter in our democracy because our founding fathers recognized that every individual is valuable. So, why is America so great? America is great because no one can silence my voice; we are all leaders in determining America's great future.

I have to remind myself what a privilege it is to be an American citizen. But our veterans recognize this privilege better than anyone as they sacrifice their lives so that others can seek out their dreams. Not only have our veterans fought for us, but they also fight for the liberties of individuals across seas. After WWII, the spread of communism was rampant and the freedoms of foreign people were at risk. Our brave veterans sought to spread democracy and protect personal freedoms of people around the world. So, again I ask what makes America Great? It's truly the people, and particularly the veterans, that care for their fellow Americans along with the world. As a great military power, America has experienced countless victories, yet we do not exploit the nations we fight with; instead, we take victories as opportunities to spread world peace and democracy. Experiencing the great privilege that come with living in this great country, we desire that all people can experience the freedom and equality that they deserve as human beings.

Everytime I hear our beloved National Anthem, I can't help but smile. I smile for the privileges of freedom and equality, that our distinguished veterans refused to let go of. America is great, but I think the better term is exceptional.