**Collections: Is the United States Exceptional?**

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It is the week of July 4th and so I hope that everyone will once again forgive me for taking a break from our normal fare to write out an argument that I’ve had brewing for quite some time. I especially beg the indulgence of all of my international readers since I am once again – in the proper tradition of my country – going to go on at some length about my country. It is, after all, what we do.

**For this year’s July 4th, I want to tackle the question of ‘Is the United States exceptional or great?’** Not because I think it is a difficult question, but because I think it is such a surprisingly easy question that I find myself repeatedly frustrated that it is, in some circles, considered an interesting question. Take for instance this this *Newsroom* clip from 2012 that seems to make the rounds online at least once a year [where the Aaron-Sorkin-hero dunks on a college sophomore by arguing](https://youtu.be/bIpKfw17-yY?t=173), “there is absolutely no evidence to support the statement that we’re [the United States] is the greatest country in the world.”

The diatribe that statement is treated by the visual language of the scene like a truth bomb, which is why it is so odd because Jeff Daniels’ character is not merely wrong, but (as I intend to show) laughably so. Indeed, he leads into this remark with a statement that “207 sovereign states in the world, like 180 of them have freedom,” a statement that is not now and has never in the whole sweep of recorded history ever been *remotely* true. 2005 was the best year on record for freedom globally according to [Freedom House](https://freedomhouse.org/reports/publication-archives) and in that year 89 countries were ‘free’ countries – 46% of the world’s countries and 45.97% of the world’s people. That was the highest year of freedom *ever* in *human history* and it comes just below *half* of the ‘truth bomb’s’ best guess at how common freedom is. The majority of humans on Earth have never, at any point in human history, lived in a free country. One should not take their geopolitics from Aaron Sorkin.

But I wanted to address the question more broadly: **to what degree can the United States be considered great, exceptional or ‘the greatest.’** But at the outset we need be very clear what we are measuring here: **we are not asking if the United States is the *best* country**. That’s an entirely subjective judgment; what the *best* of anything will be is going to depend mostly on what a person prefers. It is a matter of values and taste and *de gustibus non est disputandum* (“on taste, one must not argue”). **Likewise ‘great’ is not the superlative of ‘good’** (that, as a reminder, is ‘best’); I am not asking if the United States has had a positive impact on the world here (once again a deeply subjective question). **Instead ‘greatness’ is about extent, amount, ability, or eminence: great means ‘very big’ not ‘very good.’** Thus [Alexander](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_the_Great), [Catherine](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catherine_the_Great) and [Peter](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_the_Great) are all called ‘great’ but one may well argue if they were ‘good.’ And ‘exceptional’ also does not mean good; things can be exceptionally bad! The point of something being exceptional is merely that it is different in uncommon ways; **to be ‘great’ is to be exceptional specifically in scale**.

So again, **I am not asking if the United States is the ‘best’ country**; I rather like my country, but I understand it is not to everyone’s taste and that is fine: different people have different opinions and everyone in the world is entitled to their own opinion except for Aaron Sorkin. I certainly cannot fault anyone who likes their own country better than I like mine. Instead I want to explore a number of ways in which the United States might clearly be considered ‘great’ or even ‘the greatest’ (either now or ever) to make the case both that the United States is obviously and indisputably exceptional and that several of these exceptional facets provide quite a lot of evidence to support the contention that the United States is, *in those ways*, a great country.

## **Economics**

We should start with one observation that forms the basis for a number of others: **the United States is both the biggest rich country (that is, it is the largest high income country) and the richest big country (that is, it has the highest income per capita of any country with a large population or land area**) both now and at any other time in history. The largest country with a higher GDP per capita ([PPP adjusted](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_GDP_(PPP)_per_capita)) larger than the United States is the UAE with just 9.9m people to the United State’s 331m, while the richest country larger than the United States is China with a PPP adjusted GDP per capita of just $21,364 ($14k unadjusted) to the United States’ $76,027. To put it another way, the next biggest rich country (defined as a GDP per capita PPP adjusted above $45,000) is Japan at just 125m people, a bit more than a third of the USA’s population, while the next richest big country (population over 150 million; if we drop this much further we just end up comparing the USA with Japan again) is China with well under a third of the GDP per capita.

**In short then, the United States has no peer economies to which it can really be compared**. There are two countries which are much larger in population but also much poorer (China and India) and there are a small number of countries which are somewhat richer, but much, ***much*** smaller. Population size does matter for the comparison too because we’re taking averages and medians to generate these sorts of statistics **so it should be no surprise that countries that are, in effect, small sample sizes can produce greater outlier results; it is much harder to get on the thin end of the distribution with a very large sample set, yet the United States has clearly done this**. If one, for instance, compares the EU (far closer to the United States collectively in land area and population) rather than its exceptional[[1]](#footnote-1) smaller components the difference becomes obvious: the EU average GDP per capita – despite being a union made up almost entirely of developed countries – is still 30% lower than the United States.

Now one might complain about measuring GDP per capita on the grounds that inequality – and the United States has quite high inequality for a developed country – means that much of that wealth doesn’t filter down. Which is true, but besides the point as the [United States also has an uncommonly high median adult income, second in the OECD behind only tiny Luxembourg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Median_income).[[2]](#footnote-2) So while inequality in the United States remains high, its economy also delivers a very high economic[[3]](#footnote-3) standard of living to the general population; indeed, much higher than any country of remotely comparable size.

This is of course a product of the fact that the [United States is the largest economy in the world](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_GDP_(nominal)) measured by the absolute value of the goods produced (that is, nominal GDP).[[4]](#footnote-4) Now you can argue that literally tremendous economy also produces inequality, that it doesn’t fund the government services you want or that it is generally crass and morally undesierable in some way and that’s fine. What you can’t argue is that it isn’t exceptional or great. It is, indeed, in a literal sense, the most exceptional and greatest economy presently or ever; countries stuck around subsistence are very common. Countries with nominal GDPs above $25trillion – well that is literally only ever happened once.[[5]](#footnote-5) That is in part because US worker productivity is [very high](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_labour_productivity) (roughly equal with Germany) and in part because American companies have been remarkably successful. [Of the largest companies in the world by revenue](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_largest_companies_by_revenue), the United States has four in the top ten (including both the gold and bronze medals), eight in the top twenty, and 23 of the top fifty, handily beating out China, the runner-up (3 in the top 10, 5 in the top 20, 13 in the top 50).[[6]](#footnote-6) At the same time the combination of an outsized economy and a high median income (thus meaning that households have lots of disposable income) means that the United States is capable of doing very big things; it has a lot of ‘surplus’ production which can be channeled into this or that.

Consequently, the United States dominates the global economy in a way that no other country does and no other country has ever done; the British Empire at its height comes closest but it existed in a system of economic ‘great powers,’ whereas the United States has, at most, just one peer economy in China. Yet for the size of its economy, China lacks many of the structural economic advantages of the United States. The US dollar [remains the most commonly used international and reserve currency](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_use_of_the_U.S._dollar) in the world; it’s roughly 60% share of global currency reserves effectively unchanged since the fall of the Soviet Union. And either through direct dollarization, official pegs or de facto currency pegs, [the dollar serves as the currency or currency substitute of more countries than any other](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Currency_substitution) (though a number of countries have also anchored to the Euro). Meanwhile, because the United States hosts the largest financial center in the world (New York City) and its close allies host the next two most important (London and Tokyo), the United States with its allies (see below) is able to functionally set the rules for the global economy.

The United States is thus effectively unique: the only country to combine a large population with a very high per capita income. As implied in some of the comparisons above, the closest other candidates for ‘big countries with high income’ are Japan (125m people, $39.2k GDP per capita) and Germany (83m people, $51.86k GDP per capita) countries that are both smaller and poorer on average than the United States. And please note, poorer, not poor. Obviously both Germany and Japan are ‘rich’ countries. But that fact makes the United States’ economy both obviously **exceptional** and clearly **great**. Indeed, by absolute size, it is the **greatest** economy both now and at any point.

## **Knowledge**

I’ll be blunt: **the United States is the most technologically advanced country to have ever existed**. This is a tricky metric to average because it comes so many different fields and of course many countries excel in one field or another, but no country excels in anywhere near as many fields or on as many metrics as the United States does when it comes to technology or the production of knowledge.

We can start with universities. The United States makes up 4.25% of the world’s population but ***around half*** of its top research universities. Ranking universities is to a degree subjective but one may take an average of the rankings ([I’ll use this one](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_top_1000_universities_in_the_world)) to get at least a rough sense of the state of things; a merely rough sense will do because the disparity is so massive nothing more precise is required. Eight of the top ten universities worldwide are American; 13 of the top 20; 23 of the top 50; 38 of the top 100. That is, to put it bluntly, preposterous, and no other country’s university system compares (though of course there are many fine universities in other countries!). It is certainly exceptional. Indeed, anyone with even a passing familiarity with academic hiring in either the STEM or humanities fields will be well aware that it has been true for decades and remains true that the flow of top-tier academic talent is towards the United States rather than away and for good reason.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The same dominance is visible in the tech economy (indeed, the two go hand-in-hand). As [Forbes counts it](https://www.forbes.com/sites/jonathanponciano/2022/05/12/the-worlds-largest-technology-companies-in-2022-apple-still-dominates-as-brutal-market-selloff-wipes-trillions-in-market-value/?sh=5c2721353448), of the ten largest tech companies in the world, 7 are American; 13 of the top 20. That level of dominance too is preposterous. The obvious comparison point would be the EU – a collection of developed economies roughly the same size as the United States when put together – which has just two entries on the list.[[8]](#footnote-8) [Software in particular is astoundingly dominated by American firms](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_the_largest_software_companies) (though note that list excludes companies with substantial hardware interests); ‘internet’ companies are not quite as US dominated, [but the United States still makes up a simple majority of the largest companies](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_largest_Internet_companies). The point here of counting companies is that it provides at least some window into who is producing the most advanced and popular products worldwide.

Or take another way to measure the question: the COVID-19 pandemic essentially created a sudden dramatic test of the medical and bio-tech capabilities of every country in the world at essentially the same time to develop vaccines. The most effective vaccine to result from this effort was the Moderna vaccine, developed in the United States using an entirely new technology (vaccines using mRNA); essentially tied with it for effectiveness and speed of development was the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, also using mRNA, which was a United States (Pfizer) and Germany (BioNTech) collaboration. A third vaccine, the Johnson & Johnson (or Janssen) vaccine was developed [by a Dutch lab of a Belgian subsidiary of an American company](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Janssen_COVID-19_vaccine) (Johnson and Johnson) and so represents another EU-US joint venture.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The tricky thing, of course, with technology is that technological advancement is just that: it is about advancement,[[10]](#footnote-10) and so some other country might well sprint ahead tomorrow (or might have already sprinted ahead in ways that are difficult to see), but for now the United States appears to remain at the cutting edge of technological advancement and scholarly production.

## **Culture**

Last year we talked about how the culture of the United States was unusual: in a sea of nation-states the United States is unusual in [rejecting the nation as an organizing concept](https://acoup.blog/2021/07/02/collections-my-country-isnt-a-nation/); I’m hesitant to say this is a unique feature of the United States, but it certainly is unusual. The United States is already an uncommonly blended country (as discussed in the link above) and only becoming more so. And despite – or perhaps because of – the difficulties that often come with such a diverse population, the United States is also arguably the [world’s oldest functioning democracy](https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2016/jul/11/paul-ryan/paul-ryan-claims-us-oldest-democracy-world-he-righ/) and likewise [arguably has the world’s oldest still-used constitution](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constitution). All of which is clearly exceptional, even accounting for recent polarization and turmoil.

Despite the heterogeneity of the United States’ population, American culture is distinctive. In particular, by at least some measurements, the United States is [above and away the most individualist country in the world, an outlier even compared to other English-speaking countries (which also tend towards a strong individualist bent)](https://freakonomics.com/podcast/the-pros-and-cons-of-americas-extreme-individualism-ep-470-2/). The United States is also effectively alone as a high-income country which is also very religious, [both in terms of saying that religion is important](https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/03/12/how-do-americans-stand-out-from-the-rest-of-the-world/ft_15-03-10_religiousgdpscatter/) but also in [actual religious observance like daily prayer](https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/05/01/with-high-levels-of-prayer-u-s-is-an-outlier-among-wealthy-nations/ft_19-04-30_usprayer_scatter_new/). Of course not all exceptions are good; the United States is [unusually violent for a high income country](https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/homicide-rate-vs-gdp-pc). Interestingly in both religion and violence, the United States becomes much more typical if you look at all countries but is extremely exceptional as a high income country; it might well be argued that for better and for worse **one thing that seems to make the United States exceptional is that it became a rich country without adopting the normal behaviors and values of other rich countries**.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Or to put it another way, the United States is the country equivalent of a rich American that nevertheless continues to insist they’re just ‘middle class.’[[12]](#footnote-12)

**On the other hand, American culture and cultural products are pervasive in a way that no other culture has ever really been**. [English is the most spoken language in the world](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_languages_by_total_number_of_speakers) (including second language speakers, who make up a large majority of English speakers), though of course this is a consequence not merely of American influence but also a legacy of British power. On the other hand it has created an avenue for the startling pervasiveness of American culture. [Of the top grossing films worldwide](https://www.the-numbers.com/box-office-records/worldwide/all-movies/cumulative/all-time), American production companies are responsible for all of the top 29 before Skyfall (2012) finally gives us a non-American entry.[[13]](#footnote-13) Even if one takes merely the ‘[international](https://www.the-numbers.com/box-office-records/international/all-movies/cumulative/all-time)‘ (meaning non-American) box-office numbers, the top ten are still entirely American films, with Chang jin hu at 14[[14]](#footnote-14) at last breaking the American production or co-production sweep. To put that in perspective, only counting box office outside the United States, there are ***three*** movies featuring the character ‘Captain America’ as one of the primary heroes before the ***first*** fully non-American film on the list.

The positive impact this must have on US diplomacy seems obvious.

The point here isn’t to say that other countries don’t make good movies (they do) or that those movies aren’t successful locally (they often are), but that the **US film industry is alone in having a commanding presence in every media market where it isn’t actively banned by governments**. American products aren’t quite so dominant in other media – the United States [clearly shares the dominant position in gaming with Japan in terms of best-selling games worldwide](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_best-selling_video_games), for instance – but for one country to be so prominent everywhere culturally is certainly exceptional. US products [utterly dominate global brand recognition](https://www.forbes.com/the-worlds-most-valuable-brands/#524bfda2119c), for instance. In fact this level of global pervasiveness is entirely unique, a product of American cultural pervasiveness colliding with the first emergence of a truly globalized culture, itself made possible in part by information technologies invented in the United States. That has allowed the United States to project the kind of cultural hegemony that great powers might have enjoyed in their local regions, but to do so globally for the first time. **No country has ever been as culturally pervasive as the United States.** As a historian I can only wonder what future historians will make of the long-term impact of the American cultural moment in shaping an emerging global culture.[[15]](#footnote-15)

**It is a stunning and singular achievement and alone would be enough to mark the United States for greatness** (which again is not the same as ‘goodness’ – if you hate mass produced American films, that’s fine, the point is extent and amount, not subjective quality), **the signal achievement of a world historic state and culture**…were it not for the next thing.

## **Power**

The United States today is the most powerful country to have ever existed, by functionally every metric. Even as the diplomatic and security environment the United States faces becomes more challenging (in part by our own making), the position the United States occupies today is one no other country has ever occupied.

It is generally observed that the United States continues to have the most powerful military in the world. While the American edge in military power may have eroded since the 1990s, [absolutely massive U.S. military spending](https://www.statista.com/statistics/262742/countries-with-the-highest-military-spending/) continues to buy an incomparably massive amount of military power. The United States operates [half of the world’s active aircraft carriers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_aircraft_carriers), 11 of the top 11 for raw combat power (which mostly comes down to the size of their air wing). The United States has both the world’s largest air force (the United States Air Force) [and the world’s second largest air force](https://nationalinterest.org/feature/top-guns-the-most-lethal-air-forces-the-planet-11814) (the U.S. Navy).[[16]](#footnote-16) While American military equipment is not always the best (although it frequently is), the arsenal of the United States is in the top tier of essentially every class, while frequent military interventions have established a consistent track record of high performance from the men and women of the US armed forces (albeit a much more disappointing record from the decision and policy-makers of the US government).

Moreover, the sort of comparisons that get made counting tanks or soldiers often undersell the gap in capabilities, especially when it comes to power projection. France required US logistics and airlift support in order to operate in [Mali](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/natosource/the-role-of-the-us-air-force-in-the-french-mission-in-mali/) and [the broader Sahel](https://www.army.mil/article/217360/us_gives_lift_to_french_forces) (about 2,000 miles from Paris); Russian logistics was unable to cover the trip to Kyiv (about 450 miles); the United States, by contrast, has conducted major military operations in Kuwait (1991, 6,500 miles from Washington, D.C.), Iraq (2003-2017, roughly the same distance) and Afghanistan (2001-2021, c. 6,900 miles). No other country today is capable of global power projection on remotely the same scale, at least for now.

But raw military power (‘hard power’) isn’t the only kind of power. **Fortunately for the United States, it also leads in every other kind of power**. Normally due to balancing behavior, we’d expect a large coalition of allies to oppose U.S. interests, but instead the opposite is true: the United States leads the largest collection of peacetime allies in human history. The United States has essentially constructed a web of interlocking alliances with the USA at the center; NATO alone makes up a simple majority of global military spending before one even considers other treaty allies of the United States like Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand and at least notionally [*most of South America*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inter-American_Treaty_of_Reciprocal_Assistance). Of the ten largest economies in the world, the United States has mutual defense arrangements with seven of them (not counting itself, so eight of the ten are all on one side) and one more (India) is a ‘major defense partner’ but not a treaty ally. **It is an alliance system so expansive that effective global diplomatic balancing becomes impractical**; countries whose interests oppose the United States can contest American interests locally, but struggle to put together any kind of coherent anti-US bloc outside of symbolic votes in the UN.

**That diplomatic ‘soft’ power has in turn enabled the United States to consolidate tremendous amounts of institutional power.** The UN of course has its headquarters in New York and the United States and its close allies France and the United Kingdom collectively have a simple majority of the permanent members of the UN Security Council .[[17]](#footnote-17) The [World Bank](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Bank) is headquartered in Washington D.C. and the United States has the largest voting share in its governance (followed closely by US allies Japan, Germany, France and the UK); the [IMF](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Monetary_Fund) is likewise headquartered in D.C. and every single one of its first deputy managing directors has been an American, without exception (but Stanley Fischer had dual citizenship), while the managing directorship rotates. While the WTO is notionally more neutral, [once again the interests of the United States and its close allies dominate](https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-organization/article/abs/in-the-shadow-of-law-or-power-consensusbased-bargaining-and-outcomes-in-the-gattwto/495056DB0D41A7F53D07CAE4CDE182F7). The ironic success of all of this is that the United States created a bunch of international institutions – these are only some of them – for its own interests and then successfully convinced a critical mass of the rest of the world that these were true international institutions (a task in which the wide diffusion of American culture and thus America’s own positive self-image, played a major part).

The result is an international system where, without declaring war or instituting a blockade, the United States can, almost casually, organize a large coalition of countries to do things like [banishing the world’s 11th largest economy from global financial markets, forcing that country into default in just four months](https://www.npr.org/2022/07/01/1109033582/are-sanctions-actually-hurting-russias-economy-heres-what-you-need-to-know). Likewise the United States has spent the last fifteen years demonstrating [with some vividness the power that the United States can exert over Iran’s economy](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-48119109) (13th largest by GDP), crippling it almost at a whim.

**The result of all of this is the bizarre situation that the world’s foremost land power is also the world’s foremost naval power, which is also the world’s foremost diplomatic power, which is also the world’s foremost economic power, entrenched in the high ground of most of the world’s international institutions**. One may of course argue that this situation is changing, albeit slowly, but at the moment the contrast is startling: the sphere of Russian influence does quite reach Kyiv (about 150 miles from the Russian border) and the sphere of Chinese influence does not quite reach Taipei (about the same distance, but over water), but American influence evidently reaches both despite the former being 4,300 miles and the latter 6,500 miles away from American shores.

That has never happened before; it may well never happen again. We have seen regional hegemons similarly dominant in their local neighborhoods (the Roman Empire, the Han Dynasty, Achaemenid Persia, etc.) and to lack peers locally, but **the United States is the first and only country to have done this on a global scale and to lack true peer competitors anywhere**. Even as the ‘monopolar moment’ seems to be coming to an end, the United States’ position as ‘first among equals’ among the ‘great powers’ is historically unparalleled; no state has ever been so clearly without peers influence and power except for maybe – [wait for it](https://youtu.be/PqcVro-3f4I) – the Mongols.

Now one may well argue that countries shouldn’t aspire to this sort of greatness, that this kind of power-building is an old, outdated way of thinking. And that’s a fair argument! I push my own students on this point, asking them what does ‘greatness’ mean if Alexander of Macedon was ‘great’ and if they are comfortable with that definition of greatness. But it also seems inarguable that this definition of greatness, rooted in a country’s ability to project various forms of power abroad, is by far the most common definition of greatness applied to a country and **that in this oldest and most common definition of greatness the United States has succeeded and succeeded like no other state before it**. And it goes without saying that being the only ever global hegemon, the United States is exceptional.

## **Conclusions**

Now at the end of this you might be ready to argue (who am I kidding, no doubt at least someone stopped reading many paragraphs ago to angrily post this comment) that while yes the United States does excel by these measures, there are all sorts of other measures by which the United States does not. And you’re right! And that should hardly be surprising: **most things are tradeoffs where scarce resources can be directed to some things and thus not others**. This is why we are not debating what the ‘best’ country is: for someone who prefers the things that the United States traded away to get these exceptional outcomes, the United States must look like quite a terrible country.

And if I may editorialize for a moment, I think one can notice a pattern in these tradeoffs that unite many of the ways that the United States is unusual: a heady, devil-take-the-hindmost rush to the frontiers of possibility, a comfort with an ethos of (to borrow Facebook’s old motto), “[Move fast and break things](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Move_fast_and_break_things).” Individual liberty, expansive power (military and cultural), technological development, and economic growth end up prioritized in the United States above communal safety, domestic services or egalitarian educational or economic outcomes. **To put it simply then, the United States might be typified by an emphasis on achieving greatness (as traditionally defined) above almost everything else.**[[18]](#footnote-18) The very bigness is the goal, driving forward towards larger profits, newer technology, more clicks and views, greater military power, more allies[[19]](#footnote-19), damn the consequences. That’s not the only thing at the heart of America, but it is one of the things.

And on those terms it is hard not to conclude that the United States is a success, indeed, it is a country that has succeeded on those terms like no other country has ever succeeded. It has resulted in a country which is not merely exceptional, but ***exceptionally exceptional*** – that is, the United States is highly unusual in an unusually high number of ways. And, as I noted at the beginning, it is unusual in fairly obvious ways, evident enough that one has to accomplish some serious mental contortions not to notice what a strange, expansive and powerful country the United States is.

**The interesting question then is not if the United States is a great country** **but if it will be a good country**, if all of that vastness in wealth, technology, influence and power will be put towards some worthy aim, both judged against our ideals[[20]](#footnote-20) and against the historical behavior of other great powers.[[21]](#footnote-21) It’s a question that only Americans can really answer, in our doing. I strive and hope that we answer well.

Happy (belated) Fourth of July everyone. Next week we’re back to regular programming – we’re going to be looking at the nuts and bolts of keeping an army fed and moving on the march.

1. And they are exceptional – I am not slighting here the achievements of Norway or Ireland or Luxembourg or whoever! The thing about greatness and exceptionality is that it is possible for many people (or countries) to be great and exceptional in different ways. Again, the argument here is not that the USA is best, but that it is unusual in ways tending towards greatness in some sense. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Don’t worry Luxembourgers, you know we Lux you. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. An important word. Obviously there are many other factors in a country’s overall standard of living, many of which are difficult to quantify. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Why use nominal GDP here instead of a PPP adjusted statistic? PPP is great for measuring the actual standard of living an economy produces, but if we want to know the actual raw size we are better off looking at the market value of everything produced (nominal GDP). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A point which would not change with the inclusion of the EU economies all aggregated together. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This despite all but two of the Chinese companies on that list being state owned. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Now one may well argue that looking at other indicators of academic achievement that education in the United States is not as well distributed as in some other countries or that achievement in certain areas is not as high. And I agree! As with many things, this is a question of priorities and focus (with a dash of ‘big countries with diverse populations are harder to manage.’) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Though while we are noting exceptional countries here, Taiwan and South Korea both have two entries in the top 20. With 50m people, South Korea is thus about as well represented on the list per capita as the United States, while with 23m people Taiwan punches well above its weight, even compared to the USA. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. And as obvious from that, this is not to say other countries didn’t slow demonstrate prowess in vaccine development, merely to note that the United States was conspicuous at the forefront (but not that it was necessarily alone there). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. There is also the question of distribution – that is who has access to the technologies that exist. Here one may well admit that the United States does not do as well; [per capita broadband access in the USA is, for instance, higher than Japan but lower than Germany](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_number_of_broadband_Internet_subscriptions). Again I do not contend the United States is best in every category; indeed because I think many of the things here are necessarily tradeoffs, no country is likely to ever be best in every category. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. And of course this is a point where the issue of values becomes very clear. One could easily cast the ‘normal behaviors and values of other rich countries’ as either national maturity or godless complacency. I have no interest in litigating that debate (except to say that extremes of both positions are silly), but it is a point where one’s values are going to dictate what one thinks about the United States’ exceptional nature, but that doesn’t change the exceptionality of that nature. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. My better half is responsible for this joke. I am responsible for its poor delivery. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Though Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part II and The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King were both co-productions with non-American companies and based off of literary works from the UK, so there is some wiggle room here. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Or alternately, Harry Potter at 12; I am going here by film producers rather than actors to try to be consistent but this does create some obvious oddities with an American-produced adaptation of a famous novel from the United Kingdom. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Assuming we, as a species, make it that long. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Depending on how one counts, the Russian Federation can edge into second place ahead of the U.S. Navy. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Which in turn lets them force Russia and China into sometimes embarrassing self-protective vetos. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Though of course geography, chance and a hundred other factors play a huge role as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. As I write this, welcome Sweden and Finland to the club! Commemorative ‘We <3 NATO’ baseball caps will be Amazon’d as soon as all of the ratification is complete. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. A rather high bar. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. An extremely low bar. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)