The Washington Times

Is America the best country in the world?

By Danny Huizinga – July 8th, 2013

Is America really the best country in the world? With Independence Day fresh in our minds, it's a question worth asking.

Some Americans don't think so. In the pilot episode of HBO's *The Newsroom*, main character Will McAvoy (Jeff Daniels) unleashes a tirade of depressing statistics, claiming, "There is absolutely no evidence to support the statement that we're the greatest country in the world."

By the statistics, that statement seems true. We are outranked in education, with various studies praising the systems in Finland and South Korea as the world's best. We rank 51st in life expectancy, which suggests that our healthcare system is woefully inadequate compared to the rest of the industrialized world.

But look before jumping to a conclusion. "Facts are stubborn things, but statistics are more pliable," cautioned Mark Twain. There are different ways to look at the above indicators.

Test score comparisons between countries can be extremely misleading. Some American students do as well (or better) as anybody in the world. International comparisons measure different populations, and compare small, homogeneous Finland against the U.S., a country whose schools include huge numbers of immigrant students who scarcely speak English.

The comparisons falsely suggest that America was, at one time, the leader in test scores and has since fallen. Instead, according to the Cato Institute, scores in the United States have been remarkably constant over the last 40 years.

The life expectancy statistic also suggests the wrong conclusions. When measuring life expectancy, statisticians calculate an arithmetic mean to determine how many years a person can be expected to live at birth. However, if we truly want to measure the quality of a healthcare system, we should exclude those with fatal injuries from the statistic to control for the crime rate.

If this is done, America is actually *first* in life expectancy among OECD nations (rich countries). Further supporting this claim is the evidence from health economists Robert L. Ohsfeldt and John E. Schneider. They conclude that the United States leads in five-year cancer survival rates.

What about the philosophical argument? In McAvoy's *Newsroom* speech, he argues that we *used* to be the greatest country in the world. "We stood up for what was right ... we sacrificed, we cared about our neighbors, we put our money where our mouths were, and we never beat our chest."

It's an easy mistake for him to make, assuming the citizens that went before us did not have similar societal problems or political disagreements.

Yet this is an idealized view of history. We tend to look at the past through rose-colored glasses. Back then, just as today, we were still likely to "identify ourselves by who we voted for in the last election." If you read historical accounts of America's past elections, you can still see the vitriol, the false accusations, and the corruption present in many aspects of American life today.

Looking at this through statistics misses the point, confusing greatness and goodness with wealth and with power. Doing it through the prism of history leaves us unanchored, looking at greatness as a function of historical stories and preference.

What really makes us special? We are a nation founded on the principle of natural rights. We believe a government should have the consent of the governed. There is a collective understanding of something never before tried, a new experiment in government that has shattered expectations and improved the quality of life for millions of people in ways we never could have imagined.

It has brought material wealth and power, but those have never been the point of our national experiment. We strive always to do better. Throughout the many trials of our past, we have endured.

America is not perfect, nor have we ever been. But going forward, former presidential candidate Herman Cain best sums it up: "If this is not the greatest country in the world, leave!"