



The World Knows U.S. Is Special

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Whenever I need to hire a cab, I call my favorite driver, Hamad. He moved alone to the U.S. from Sudan 20 years ago to earn money to send back to his wife -- a common arrangement among American immigrants from poorer countries.

Hamad owns his own taxi and earns a good living, but he misses his wife and school-age children. Fortunately, he returns to see them for a few months every year. During a recent trip, he saw that people can now make a good living in Sudan, but there is no going back for Hamad -- America is home now.

Over many cab rides, our conversations usually wind toward politics, and then invariably toward religion. As a Christian who seeks to practice my faith with both conviction and compassion, I feel these talks with Hamad have helped me, because Hamad is a Muslim. I have found that the more I have learned about my friend's religion, the more I have understood my own. Hamad will never convince me that his faith is superior to mine -- and he doesn't try. Freedom to believe, converse -- and disagree -- is one of the main things that keeps Hamad in America.

We have often discussed stereotypes. Hamad has been deeply dismayed over radical Muslims who murderously target western and Islamic countries alike. He is also sad that his African friends dismiss the idea of "America the free," because they feel we discriminate against blacks at home and target Muslims abroad.

RECENTLY, THOUGH, he told me that his friends in Sudan had been calling him in disbelief and admiration about his adopted country. Many were awed, not just by

America's presidential election, but also by the peaceful transfer of power. Sen. John McCain's plea for his backers to support the new administration was something, Hamad agreed, that would rarely happen in even the healthiest democracies in Africa.

This was not a gloating conversation between two Obamaites -- neither of us knew which candidate the other had supported. Our point was that Obama's election had reminded the world that America is special.

Ironically, the people most reluctant to embrace that notion are Americans themselves. It seems that Americans tend toward two extremes -- either proudly boasting of exceptionalism and infallibility, or cynically denying any special history, moral standing, or distinctiveness.

Hamad and I agreed, though, that the recent election underscored that the world expects America to be unique. A British historian recently wrote of "the narrative that everyone wants to return to -- that America is the land of extraordinary opportunity and possibility, where miracles happen." That narrative and expectation are precisely why there is such outrage and disappointment when America falls short.

IF A SUDANESE taxi driver or some British scholar are not convincing commentators about America's special place in the world, then maybe Thomas Jefferson is. When he traveled to Paris in 1785, he wrote to his friend James Madison about how the new country of America looked from his vantage point across the Atlantic: "My god! How little do my countrymen know what precious blessings they are in possession of, and which no other people on earth enjoy. I confess I had no idea of it myself."

America has always stood for freedom and human dignity. Our periodic failings do not invalidate that heritage, any more than speed limits are useless just because some people ignore them. America aspires to greatness and goodness, and that makes us special. Americans may forget this, but people from other countries do not. Just ask them.

Hamad drove the route from the airport to my home by memory, and as I pulled out my wallet, he refused my payment. That had never happened before, and I insisted on paying. Hamad firmly refused, saying, "No, this one is free, my friend. Welcome home!"