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United States, by and large, is still No. 1

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THERE HAS BEEN a lot of talk lately about the relative position of the United States in the world. Are we still number one? Are the Russians stronger? Are the Japanese overtaking us? Are the West Germans and the Scandinavians living better than we are? Many people fear that our posture and the quality of life are declining, particularly in comparison with strong countries like Japan and Germany. Others find such an idea intolerable.

Out of curiosity, I recently updated my rusty knowledge of the question: Where do we stand in the rankings?

The most general measure of economic strength is the Gross National Product; 1978 was the last year for which I found figures for all relevant countries. At that time, our GNP was \$1.972 trillion. The Soviet Union was a distant second with a GNP only slightly over half ours - \$1.17 trillion. Japan, so often said to be on the verge of overtaking us as an industrial giant, had a GNP about one-third ours - \$731 trillion.

True, on a per capita basis some countries are now wealthier than we are. But these are mostly islands of affluence that cannot fairly be compared with a vast continental society such as ours. In 1978, American per capita GNP was \$9,002. Switzerland's was \$10,121, Sweden's \$9,575. Belgium, Denmark, Iceland and Norway, were also slightly ahead of us, as was one midsize country - West Germany - with a per capita GNP of \$9,056. As to Japan, its per capita GNP was still a mere \$6,360, while that of the Soviet Union was \$4,481.

Thus we only look "bad" by comparison with some small pockets of wealth in Western Europe. But there are regions in the United States that are far larger and with a higher per capita income than any European country, for example the New England-Mid-Atlantic region, and the West Coast, each 10 times the size and population of Switzerland or Denmark.

As most people know, our agriculture remains one of the wonders of the world. Three percent of our labor force feeds the remaining 97 percent plus millions of others overseas. Here are some facts: The world's annual wheat production is currently about 445 million tons. In 1980, our share was 65 million tons, second only to the Soviet Union's 98 million. However, wheat is the USSR's all-purpose staple crop, whereas we produce and consume many other types of grains as well. For example, out of the 392 million tons of corn produced in the world in 1980, our yield was 169 million tons, or nearly half (Russia's corn production was an insignificant 9 million tons).

In 1980 world meat production was 104 million tons. Our share was nearly 18 million tons, again followed by the Soviet Union with 13 million tons.

America remains number one in most other areas of consumption as well. We produce more energy than any other country - the equivalent of 2.09 trillion tons of coal per year. Our per capita energy consumption is the highest - twice that of the Soviet Union and three times Japan's. We account for half of the world's civilian flights (4 billion miles per year), one third of the cars (135 million) and nearly half the telephones (170 million). The list could go on with pieces of mail per capita, TV sets, refrigerators, etc.

As to quality of life indicators, we do not always outshine the rest of the world, although we come close: Life expectancy in this country is 73 years. It is exceeded by a number of countries, including Japan (76), Holland (75) and Australia (74). Similarly, our infant mortality rate of 12 per 1,000 is inferior to Japan's (8 per 1,000), Holland's (9), France's (10) and Australia's (11), among others.

However, the total amount of money we spend on education still far exceeds the sums spent by any other country: America's annual education bill is about \$121 billion, for 46 million youngsters kindergarten through the 12th grade plus 12 million college students. Far behind us is the Soviet Union, spending \$47 billion on 44 million primary and secondary students plus 5 million higher education students. Japan is third, spending \$56 billion on a total of 24 million students.

Tragically, the world currently spends .6 trillion dollars per year on the military, or \$135 for every man, woman and child, or 5.4 percent of its total GNP. We in the United States account for about \$150 billion of the total, or \$600 per person and 5 percent of our GNP. The Soviets spend considerably more, namely nearly \$200 billion, or \$750 per person and 13 percent of their GNP.

Other rich industrialized nations have much smaller military budgets (\$10 billion in Japan and \$20 billion in Germany), and these take up much smaller bites out of their national wealth - from 1 percent in Japan, or \$75 per person, to around 3.5 percent for most NATO countries, or \$250 per person.

In general, the countries that spend the most devastating amounts of their resources on the military are Third World and Communist countries. The only Western country that has a very large military budget is the United States. However, due to our great size and wealth, we still spend less of our GNP on the military (5 percent) than does the world as a whole (5.4 percent).

As to who is militarily Number One, that debate remains to be settled, and this is not the place to do it. Suffice it to say that military strength results from both quantity and quality. The Russians and Chinese have both far more men in uniform and more military ships than we do. The Soviet Union has 4.8 million soldiers, China has 4.5 million and we only have 2.1 million. The USSR has 2,845 ships, China has 2,299 and we have 2,148. But surely no one would argue, for instance, that China is a stronger military nation than the U.S.

Russian submarines outnumber ours 482 to 157, but we have 23 aircraft carriers to their 5. In fact, we have over half of all the world's carriers - 23 out of 40.

The Soviet Union's nuclear capability exceeds ours in several categories. Their total nuclear destructive force is over twice ours and their 2,384 strategic launchers outnumber our 1,628. However, we still have more nuclear warheads, namely 9,480 to 8,040. The USSR's ferocious drive for nuclear supremacy is certainly the most worrisome aspect of global comparisons. Nevertheless, the quality and accuracy of our weapons probably make up some of the numerical imbalance. Witness the success of American weapons against Russian ones in last summer's confrontation between Israel and Syria.

A final set of data is of interest: From 1945 to 1980, America has given \$213 billion in foreign aid (grants and credits) to other countries. In 1980 alone, the figure was \$11 billion.

Of all post-war foreign aid, \$25 billion went to Western Europe, including nearly \$6 billion to Britain, \$4 billion to France and \$3 billion to Germany.

Also, since World War II, \$3 billion of American foreign aid has gone to Eastern Europe, including \$1.4 billion to Poland and \$700 million to the Soviet Union.

Asia and the Pacific have received \$74 billion from us, including \$2 billion going to Japan. In 1980, that region received \$5.5 billion.

The Western Hemisphere has received \$14 billion since 1945, including \$700 million in 1980. Other major beneficiaries of American largesse include Israel, which has received \$11 billion, and Iran, to whom we gave \$1 billion.

To summarize, it is true that on a per capita basis, Americans are no longer invariably the most blessed people, particularly with regard to quality of life indicators (we do not live quite as long and we are not quite as healthy as people in some other countries).

However, in many forms of consumption we remain unquestionably far better off than most or indeed all of the world.

Whether or not the USSR has more nuclear launchers or submarines, the combination of America's considerable military muscle and its economic and technological superiority over the Soviet

Union makes it clear that this country is not about to be eclipsed by anyone - be it a military dictatorship such as Russia or an industrial colossus with feet of clay such as Japan.

In addition, America has also been number one in generosity, distributing foreign aid by the hundreds of billions.

The 20th century has been the American' Century. This country has provided the world with benevolent help, leadership, stability and. with a shining example of the successful combination of power and freedom. The world remains indebted to this truly remarkable and. unique civilization. And the good news is that the American Century is not about to come to an end.