



# IPS INSIGHTS

Perspectives On the Issues Shaping Policy

## America at 250: Gains and Losses

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Two hundred and fifty years ago, the United States of America came into existence. A century later, a statue was erected in New York Harbor with the following words inscribed at its feet:

*“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”*

Through this message, America was presented as the “Land of Opportunity” for all. This vision was reaffirmed during the nation’s bicentennial celebrations by President Gerald Ford in 1976, and by President Ronald Reagan upon assuming office in 1981.

But does America remain true to this promise today? In this context, it is important to examine what the US has gained and lost over its 250-year journey.

### American Achievements

#### 1. *Constitutional Supremacy*

The US Constitution is the world’s oldest written constitution still in force. Despite civil war, two world wars, and severe political crises, the nation has maintained constitutional continuity and has never postponed elections.

#### 2. *Strength of the Federation*

In 1776, the US consisted of thirteen states; today, it is a strong federation of fifty states. While the British Empire contracted and the Soviet Union collapsed, the American federation has endured.

#### 3. *Separation of Powers and Checks and Balances*

The President, Congress, and the Supreme Court exercise effective oversight over one another. As a result, even the most powerful president remains accountable before the judiciary.

#### 4. *Strength Derived from Immigration*

America’s real strength is not its military or economy but its ability to attract talented people from across the world and provide them with opportunities. From

Nobel Prize-winning scientists to the founders of Silicon Valley, a large number are immigrants or descendants of immigrants.

#### 5. *Scientific and Technological Leadership*

From landing humans on the moon to pioneering the internet, artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and modern medicine, the US has played a leading role in shaping global scientific and technological progress.

#### 6. *Freedom of Expression*

Despite intense political disagreements, freedom of expression remains a defining characteristic of American society.

#### 7. *Economic Power*

The US dollar became the foundation of global trade, Wall Street emerged as the center of international finance, and America became the world’s largest economy.

#### 8. *Capacity for Social Reform*

America abolished slavery, granted women the right to vote, and advanced the civil rights movement, demonstrating a capacity for social reform.

### American Failures

#### 1. *The Dark Legacy of Slavery*

Slavery persisted for nearly a century after independence. Even after its abolition, racial segregation continued for several decades.

#### 2. *Devastation of Native Americans*

The expansion of the American state came at the expense of Native American peoples, whose lands, cultures, and populations suffered severe devastation.

#### 3. *Global Military Interventions*

American interventions in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, Latin America, Libya, and elsewhere have raised the question of whether military power is an appropriate solution to every international problem.

#### 4. *Double Standards on Democracy*

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America supported democracy where electoral outcomes aligned with its interests, while raising reservations where they did not. Iran (1953), Algeria (1991), Palestine (2006), Tunisia, and Egypt (2013) are examples of this approach. Military coup in Chile, government change in El Salvador, sanctions on North Korea, occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the Venezuelan president's abduction are also instances of this discrepancy.

#### 5. *Economic Inequality*

Despite being the world's largest economy, wealth has become increasingly concentrated, while homelessness and food insecurity continue to affect segments of the population.

#### 6. *Political Polarization*

The ideological divide between Republicans and Democrats has widened to the extent that achieving national consensus has become increasingly difficult.

#### 7. *Right-Wing Nationalism*

Political debates surrounding immigration, race, and identity have challenged America's traditional "melting pot" identity.

#### 8. *Declining Public Trust in Institutions*

Public confidence in Congress, the media, universities, and even the judiciary has declined compared to previous decades.

#### 9. *Social Media and the Crisis of Truth*

The abundance of information has made access to truth both easier and more difficult. Conspiracy theories and misinformation have emerged as new challenges to democracy.

#### 10. *Decline of Moral Leadership*

America was once described as the "Leader of the Free World." Today, in light of developments concerning Russia, China, Gaza, Ukraine, and other international conflicts, questions are increasingly being raised about its moral credibility.

#### 11. *Crisis of Political Ethics*

Personal character and ethical standards were once considered important benchmarks in American politics. In recent years, however, this perception has weakened. President Donald Trump was found civilly liable in a case involving sexual abuse and defamation, although he was not criminally convicted.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, his political popularity remained intact. This raises the question of whether personal character has become a less important consideration among American voters' priorities.

#### 12. *Public Confidence in the Electoral System*

America's strength has long rested on public trust in its institutions. However, following the 2020 presidential election, persistent questions regarding electoral transparency, unsubstantiated allegations of fraud, and the events of January 6, 2021, sparked renewed global debate about American democracy. Although courts and federal as well as state election officials found no evidence of widespread electoral fraud, a significant segment of American society continues to regard the election as disputed. This may itself constitute one of the greatest internal challenges facing American democracy.

#### 13. *The Relationship Between Wealth and Political Power*

The US has long championed free-market capitalism, yet an important question has become increasingly prominent: Has the relationship between wealth and political power grown stronger than before? The significant increase in President Trump's personal wealth in recent years has reinforced this debate over whether high political office can truly remain separate from personal financial interests. According to *Forbes* and other financial institutions, his wealth has increased by more than one billion dollars in recent years.

#### **Conclusion**

America's true strength has never been its defense budget, its military, or even its economy. Rather, its real strength lies in its constitutional principles, strong institutions, and open society, which have inspired people from around the world to seek opportunity there. If these foundations weaken, America risks losing its most valuable asset.

After 250 years, the central question before the US is not whether it remains the world's greatest military or economic power. The more fundamental question is whether this is still the same America that once promised hope to the world's weary and oppressed through the Statue of Liberty's message. Will America remain merely a symbol of power, or will it continue to stand as a beacon of hope as well?

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<sup>2</sup> In the case brought by E. Jean Carroll, the court found Donald Trump civilly liable; he was not convicted in a criminal court.