

FIRST PLACE:

In Luck, in Love, in America

by Marcel Didier



Long before I knew America, we connected on the war-torn fields of my native land. American citizen-soldiers, serving their nation while freeing mine, made time to play with us kids in the snows of that awful winter of 1944-45. A fight for survival was gripping nervous GIs and frightened Europeans in the Ardennes forest, just north of my home in Luxembourg City. So close was the action that we could watch the risky air re-supply of the besieged 101st Airborne Division at Bastogne (Belgium). We were praying for their counter-offensive as our own survival from Nazi reprisals depended on it. And when they triumphantly marched through tiny Luxembourg, the citizens and especially this five-year old boy were awestruck by the friendliness, generosity, and compassion shown to us perfect strangers who had been occupied by enemy forces for almost four hellish years.

We played with the GIs who were guarding enemy soldiers in our neighborhood, relishing their chocolate snacks as if they were rare delicacies. Though we did not promise to keep in touch after peace and freedom were assured, God smiled upon my family when He guided us to a more intimate acquaintance just twelve years later when my family emigrated to the United States. For me, high school and college followed quickly while we became assimilated to the American way of life that we had admired from afar.

Appropriately, we settled in a dynamic industrial city where the automobile reigned supreme, the symbol of American success,

mobility, drive and can-do spirit. A crowning moment for dynamic Detroit, and for me also, came in 1963 when the Motor City was selected to represent America in the competition for the 1968 Olympic Games. This touched me directly as I became part of the competition in the function of interpreter for the Detroit Olympic Committee which included members of the Michigan who's who, i.e. such as Governor George Romney and Detroit Mayor Jerome Cavanaugh. Fate unfortunately intervened as Detroit lost the nomination to Mexico.

Though Detroit subsequently declined in status, America itself continued on the path of challenge, innovation, and prosperity, living the foundational principles of personal freedom, religious tolerance, property rights, and the rule of law. The auto industry became the vehicle that would drive me into a romantic love affair of lifelong proportions with the woman of my dreams in the land of my dreams. It led to the intersecting of our paths at the offices of Chrysler International. It was love at first sight for Joy and me that would bind us inexorably for life. I was overwhelmed by her Southern charm, beauty, and slightly accented manner of speech, making me swoon and blissfully engage the life of my dreams. My American life with my American spouse and American kids encompassed the perfect scenario hardly envisioned by this teenager during the weeklong ocean voyage to America in 1957.

While an international career took me to all corners of the world, my wife and children came to live and appreciate the uniqueness of this new world, which I viewed through an idealistic prism. I quickly learned that this new world was based on ideas stemming from the founders' encounter with the giants of the Age of Enlightenment and their religious faith. It created an unwritten feature known as "national exceptionalism," unique to America, a feature that was written into the Declaration of Independence and into the shortest and most comprehensive Constitution ever written in the history of nations. The constitutionally guaranteed freedoms of religion, press, speech, assembly, and petitioning of our government proved to be a simple yet all-encompassing set of principles, needing not much refinement, though uninspired forces constantly try to invent new and counterintuitive freedoms, rights, and guarantees.

The Christian faith has played a key cultural role in America since its founding. In the words of French scholar Alexis de Tocqueville (*Democracy in America*, 1834): “America is great because it is good...” Tocqueville frequently commented on the near-perfect harmony between the secular pursuits of earning a living and the practice of religious faith. It is no wonder then that our founders were influenced by the leaders of European Enlightenment: individualism, personal responsibility, and reason were the foundations of that movement and of the American experiment. Alas, today’s secular Europe tends to marginalize the notorious religiosity of a majority of Americans, seeking in fact to blame it for the ills of the world. Yet, those same negative forces cannot explain why Americans are the most generous people on earth. America has sacrificed its blood and treasure to defend Europe and other oppressed nations.

Have the critics of America ever liberated an oppressed nation with their blood and treasure? Quite the contrary. Colonialism has been rightfully vilified for Europe’s activities in foreign lands. America, even when accused of liberating nations like Iraq “for the oil,” has not benefited from its “conquests” and has not complained much about the blood and treasure expended for the gift of “democracy” to others. This is altruism at its finest. America has never demanded land, except enough of it to bury our fallen soldiers. My first American hero, General George S. Patton, I am proud to point out, is buried among thousands of selfless GIs in my native land.

When I was dating the beautiful and deeply spiritual young lady from Oklahoma, she would tell me the story of her dad’s service in the U.S. Army during WWII. He had to quit his protected job at a Kraft cheese factory so as to make himself eligible for the draft. He did not miss the war, being assigned to a signal ship that was part of the D-Day armada approaching the shores of France. Upon his return from Europe he would tell war stories that included his last mission of guarding enemy soldiers in my old neighborhood in Luxembourg during that brutal winter of 1944-45. Is it possible that at age five I played in the snow with my future father-in-law and that luck or providence would lead me to America, make me fall in love with it and with one lovely American woman, to live happily ever after?