

CULTURE

# Falling Out of Love With America

For visitors, the decline is palpable.

Opening day ceremony after the 1980s restoration of Union Station, Washington, D.C. ([Library of Congress/Wikimedia Commons](#))

After I visited the USA for the first time, in 1977, I could not sleep properly for a month. As soon as I got home, I wanted to go back, probably for good, but I couldn't. And this was something of a surprise to me because, as a fairly standard English snob and left-winger, I had expected to despise America. Then, for the rest of my life, I didn't. This change had much to do with the providential way I got there. I actually won a competition, in (of all places) the *Economist*, and so was able to go, in some style, to a country most British people seldom saw in those days, when England was much more English and America much more American.

The *Economist* provided me with two return tickets to Washington, D.C., on the supersonic Concorde (in those days it was not allowed to fly to New York City), and a week in a hotel overlooking Central Park in Manhattan. I also persuaded them to send us between the two cities by train. We also managed a couple of nights in one of the loveliest hotels in North America, the Tabard Inn. This was so much the opposite of everything I had expected America to be that it did much to change my prejudiced mind. There was no television, lots of character, a strong feeling that the past was present—the Civil War had only recently ended and the Indian Wars might still be taking place a thousand miles to the West.

Our actual arrival at Dulles Airport, floating on a cloud of airline Dom Perignon, would be impossible now. We were in a state of exhilaration, having been invited on to the flight deck to observe things most people will never see—the curve of the earth's surface and the unimagined, thrilling dark blue of the sky at 60,000 feet. The Dulles entry procedure did nothing to dispel this euphoria, as it would now. We were wafted past uncrowded immigration desks in minutes. I possessed at that time an easily-obtained multi-entry U.S. visa whose validity period was misspelled as “indefinetly” (I used it without problems for many years afterwards, until the era of “security” overwhelmed us).



But 46 years ago, nobody was especially interested in it anyway. The whole apparatus of suspicion and fingerprints which now besets the arriving visitor did not even exist. The main problem lay in getting there at all. British visitors to America were in those days greatly restricted by our own government's refusal to let us spend scarce hard currency abroad. There was a special page in your passport to record how much money you had taken with you. Thus English visitors in America were so rare that I was repeatedly and bafflingly asked if I was Australian. I

grasped after a while that this was because I did not speak American properly, and there may in those days have been more Australian visitors to the USA than British ones.

As we rode into Washington on a silver bus which in those days went through Langley, Virginia, I had the great delight of seeing the letters “CIA” actually marking a right-turn lane. Here was the difference between our two nations beautifully encapsulated. Coming from a country which still pretended it did not even have a spy service, the sight was thrilling and shocking. Poor, earnest Jimmy Carter was in the White House, and Ronald Reagan still some way off, but it all still seemed hugely rich and powerful to me.

Even my first American train ride, from the largely boarded-up Union Station in D.C. to the sweaty basement of Penn Station in Manhattan, was thrilling. As we pulled out of the capital, our northbound Metroliner crept past a last ghost of real American rail travel, a train in the lush green and gold livery of the Southern Railway, through whose windows I could see white-jacketed waiters serving mint juleps in the diner to stately gentlemen bound for New Orleans.

I later worried that this must have been a mirage, and it still seems as if it must have been, but the internet allowed me to check the dates. That day was one of the very last times I could have seen such a sight, before the Southern was swallowed up in Amtrak and became just like all the rest. Later, somewhere in New Jersey, we also passed an antique train of cars from the Erie and Lackawanna Railroad, ornate and peeling, a ghost out of the era of Warren Harding.

On another occasion, at a tiny station in Massachusetts I followed the instructions in my Amtrak timetable, and stepped into the middle of the tracks to flag down the oncoming express, which responded by flashing its headlight fiercely at me and hooting wildly, sights and sounds unknown back home. I held my nerve. When the train pulled in the crew were all but weeping with laughter. The requirement to flag the train down had been abolished months before, and they had been wondering what this madman thought he was doing. But why wouldn't I do this? Trains were America to me (and in a way always will be). To parody Stephen Vincent Benet, “I have fallen in love with American trains, the huge trains that never go fast....” I had seen America

in the movies and on TV since I had been a tiny child, and had been left with an impression of a country in which (let us simplify a bit) Monument Valley began where the suburbs of Chicago ended, and where vast continental trains rolled into minuscule wayside towns, so that the hero could step on or off them.

Then, after the obvious sights, we were embraced by the matchless hospitality of Americans. My wife's Swiss-German uncle, a veteran of the Spanish Civil War, had married into a Boston family who treated us, cashless, ignorant nobodies from a poor and faraway country, as honored guests. It was hugely moving, and still is, as was our introduction to New England, long days of unlooked-for beauty with frequent intervals for lobster. How could we not fall in love with it? The supersonic journey home, despite the luxury and the champagne, was an unwelcome plunge back into gloom (at supersonic speed, flying east, the evening came on so fast that it was like being smothered).

Well, I went again as soon as I could, and again, and again. I liked it so much that after a posting in Moscow I came to live in D.C. in 1993, in that era an especially exhilarating place to be—or so I then thought, with the Cold War won and the world on the brink of a new birth of liberty. I arrived direct from Siberia via the Bering Strait, a thrilling leap from one planet to another, as it were. We loved almost everything, the heartbreakingly wistful autumn skies in the North-East in the weeks after Labor Day, the neighbors on our shady street who welcomed us and our children without hesitation or reservation, the local volunteer rescue squad, the radio station we helped raise funds for, the local hardware store with its huge axes and storm lanterns, all ready for a hurricane to strike, the glorious ease of travel to anywhere.

The Washington Metro, clean and new, running through its majestic, vaulted stations, seemed to destroy the idea, until then fixed in my mind, that Americans had chosen private affluence at the price of public squalor. We liked the giant bookstores, the food, the different cadence of the language, the children's books born from a different civilization (especially one called *Blueberries for Sal*), the local swim team, the thrilling closeness, in time and space, of the Civil War battlefields and the Founding Fathers. I think Monticello is still my ideal of what a house should

be like. We were in love and when, for reasons beyond our control, we had to leave, we felt bereft and perplexed as we watched Manhattan sink below the horizon from the stern of the Cunard liner that took us home.

At that time it would not have taken us much to call America home instead. We had packed our entire life into a container, and the sight of it arriving from Baltimore docks at our Bethesda house had been an unexpected shock. Was this irrevocable? Would we ever go back? (In fact it was not, and we would.) On many visits afterwards I would fret that it might be the last time, and would look wistfully at the Blue Ridge (where we had gone to cut down our own Christmas trees) as the aircraft taxied out on the Dulles runway.

And then it all changed. It was of course 9/11 that signaled the alteration and darkened the sky, the growing mistrust, the boot-faced bureaucracy. This was bad enough for Americans, but perhaps even more dismaying for foreign admirers. Bit by bit, the glitter came off. There were actual crashes on the D.C. Metro. Washington became enormous, sprawling forever into Northern Virginia and Maryland. I felt increasingly as if it was somewhere else, unlike the optimistic, spacious America I thought I knew. Travel round the country, once so relaxed and spacious, became tedious with excessive security, more spartan and more crowded. I know these are only impressions, but what else do I have? The trains grew worse, and Amtrak began serving its breakfasts (once superb) on plates made out of some ersatz composition instead of proper china.

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On my last visit a change of planes at a major mid-western hub was so dingy and exhausting, and the airport itself so tired, crowded, and unwelcoming, that the experience was almost as bad as that Mach 2 plunge into twilight back in 1977. Everywhere there were long lines of dispirited people, looking like a defeated army. Even some years ago the growing state-sponsored squalor of San Francisco was becoming evident in some parts of the city. Now I dread to go back at all. But behind it lay a feeling of a country in decline. I do not just mean that the country seems poorer and shabbier, a sensation that has grown stronger and stronger since the Iraq War. I no longer have that sensation of sunny liberation I had back in the 1970s and 1980s whenever I set foot there. Some years ago I wrote a little optimistically about how the first sight of Cape Race in Newfoundland (the first American landfall for those arriving by sea from Europe) lifted my spirits because the continent beyond was mostly under the rule of law and protected by jury trial and the Bill of Rights. Now I think it is suffering a new birth of unfreedom, in which these safeguards grow weaker every day.

I do also have to confess that my feelings about Washington, D.C., itself have altered since my late brother's death. For many years I had visited him in his beautiful apartment just opposite the Russian consulate, looking down on the statue of General McLellan. And now he wasn't there and wouldn't be again. It is just a huge city in which I have no roots and no stake, and the exaltation I felt there as the Cold War ended, and as Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev moved together in a sort of celestial glow of hope and reason, has utterly dissipated.

The last few times I have been, I have been glad to depart, despite the kindness and hospitality I have received. And when people ask me to visit, as they still sometimes do, I think for a minute and then decline. I have fallen out of love with America.

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