

## **Storytelling for Social Change - PATRIOTISM CRISIS**

I've had the good fortune to travel the globe for decades.

One of my most memorable trips abroad, and closest to my heart, is Normandy, France - specifically the United States military cemetery at Omaha Beach.

My first visit there many years ago transformed how I feel about my country.

A perfect blue sky, steep majestic cliffs, and the choppy Atlantic ocean before me.

But behind me, thousands of white crosses for each young American buried there.

What's also moving is that the French meticulously care for this sacred ground. It's impeccably clean, the grass kept to one inch exactly, and local school children plant flowers each year. The French say they're eternally grateful to the troops that liberated their country.

Amid such stunning natural beauty it's hard to imagine the death, blood and devastation that covered Omaha Beach in 1944 —when American troops landed to help France and Europe battle the Nazis.

Standing on those cliffs you feel the terror of those young men, bravely swimming in the rough ocean, facing bullets and artillery fire — and if they made it past all that, scaling the massive cliffs, knowing they were likely about to die — painfully and alone in a foreign land.

The average age of the Americans who died in Normandy and throughout Europe during World War Two was 21 years old - the Gen Z'ers of their day.

So why do I share this story? A new trend among young Americans pains me. Many apparently feel ashamed of our country which makes me think they don't understand our history. Patriotism is at a record-low among Gen Z'ers.

In a recent Gallup poll only 18 percent say they're extremely proud to be American. A decade ago, 85 percent of this age group said they were extremely proud to be Americans.

I know we're not perfect. As all nations on earth, our history is full of horrific mistakes. But the strength of our democracy is that we self-correct, we constantly review and

revise - always a work in progress and we've made huge advances in all realms of society.

And our bedrock is the constitution - the greatest legal document ever written. It's carried us through the centuries, and we remain the most successful democracy in world history.

But some young Americans now describe the authors of the Constitution as "villains" who should be "cancelled". These so-called "villains" were also the Gen Z'ers of their day. In 1776 James Monroe was 18, Alexander Hamilton 21 and James Madison 26 and they built a country that has lasted for centuries - A country that millions of people fight and risk their lives to get into every day.

The Constitution they wrote is what makes our lives good -it's what gives Gen Z'ers the right to complain and cancel these founding fathers .

Where do young Americans imagine is so much better than our country? Maybe I'm pollyannaish, but for all our flaws and failures - I believe we're an honorable nation. where everyone is legally equal, and where you start here does not dictate where you wind up.

That's why this dystopian vision and shame felt by some younger Americans makes me sad and angry.

But more significantly, I believe it is a national security emergency that requires urgent policy and social change.

A divided nation can't succeed. If this trend continues in the coming decades, our greatest adversaries, including China, will exploit our divisions. From my travels I learned that a core strength of U.S. success is our cultural unity and patriotism. It is our superpower.

Unfortunately our universities do not encourage intellectual diversity or debate anymore, and we have a generation that believes the fundamentals of our country are evil. Increased polarization will lessen any chance our already dysfunctional government has of solving our many problems - from education, climate, health reform and so much more.

This is a national crisis on so many levels. Divided we shall fall - politically, economically, socially and militarily.

We need a mandatory national service for young Americans. For decades Democratic and Republican leaders have called for such a program to break down barriers of race, class, income and geography, so young adults get out of their bubbles, learn new perspectives and engage in a positive bonding experience as a team.

Another part of this movement would be to pressure colleges to accept students from every state, and all backgrounds so they can engage in civil discourse and learn different perspectives. Many countries have successful compulsory service programs to bridge divides and unite their citizens.

I returned to Normandy with my teen son's years later to see those white headstones and cliffs, so that my sons could feel the price paid by so many, for the privileges they enjoy each day. They got it.

That day we also saw two elderly men at the cemetery, one in a wheelchair and one walking slowly. They were wearing baseball caps with US army battalion patches. The French guide told us many American veterans only return to these beaches at the end of their lives - no doubt a painful trip- to remember and pay homage to their fallen comrades. One of my sons said to the guide that it was so nice that the French people showed such gratitude to the US for helping save their country. The guide responded. "America did not only save France - your country saved the world."

So maybe it should be obligatory for young Americans to visit Normandy as part of a social program to reverse this destructive trend - for a lesson in American history that may stir national pride and some understanding and appreciation for the work and sacrifices of the Gen Z'ers who came before them.

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Thank you for considering me!