

The Great Simplification

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[00:00:00] Good morning. Today's piece is a wide boundary look at the United States on its 250th birthday. And right now, with the political temperature where it is, both domestically and internationally, I suspect, I know, a reflection like this one, is likely to trip a lot of people's gut reactions about the moral status of the United States.

[00:00:25] In fact, some of you may already be sorting me into for America or against her. So here's my ask with this pre-intro intro. As you listen to this video, please suspend those beliefs for just a moment and situate this conversation about one of the world's current superpowers in the broader context of our cultural future and our shared more than human predicament.

[00:00:55] I am sure there will be at least a few statements in this video that you disagree with, but I hope the larger conversation that I'm trying to start, this holiday weekend, but these past four years carries through, and that you also see the value in this despite any tensions that might arise. I love this country, and I love the wider world, and that is exactly why I'm willing to look at it honestly.

[00:01:23] Here's the Frankly.

[00:01:34] It is the 4th of July, and if you live in the USA like I do, somewhere near you there is probably a cookout. Burgers on the grill, a cooler of cold beer, kids running around with sparklers, a flag, an American flag on the porch. This weekend, and the nighttime sky over almost every town in this country will fill with fireworks for a 250-year birthday milestone.

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[00:02:09] I love this country. I was born here. I have benefited from the largesse, the beauty, the opportunities, and the stability it has provided. But today, as I regularly do on this channel, I wanna take a wide-boundary view of the United States of America, knowing that the wide-boundary view of a birthday party is not always the toast that everyone wants to hear.

[00:02:35] But I deeply care about the future of this nation and the broader world, and so I feel that these hard truths are something we need to shine a light on. So happy birthday, USA. Let's talk about today's party. 250 candles, and we congratulate ourselves on our long history. China has been China for 5,000 years.

[00:03:03] Rome, ran for 1,000. We're 250, a toddler who just learned to walk and is confident he invented it. There is an age when a birthday stops being about the cake. When you're little, it's all presents and candles and how big you got, the little pen marks climbing the bathroom door. And then looking back, you realize that one year, not realizing it at the time, it turns into something else.

[00:03:39] It starts being about whether you grew up and what kind of adult you turned into. For a nation, maybe 250 is that age. So that's the real reflection I have in mind for today. Not how big did we get, but did we grow up? Have we fulfilled our potential to embody and assert that all people possess unalienable rights, including life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?

[00:04:11] Or did that somehow morph to degrading the web of life, convenience, and the pursuit of dopamine? Today, there is laughter and novelty and excitement, but there's also a cloud over our party. Our feel-good conversations largely ignore the main things that have made our celebration possible. The grill is hydrocarbons, the lighter fluid, the propane, the charcoal, all of it, ancient sunlight.

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[00:04:45] The burgers came in on a diesel truck. the fireworks that go up tonight, made from gunpowder and burst in colors made from metals somebody mined and shipped across an ocean. Even the cake, if you follow it all the way back, is pretty much made from oil. We are an energy-blind culture, though maybe the scramble now that's playing out over the world's last cheap hydrocarbons is starting to wake some people up.

[00:05:14] We still tell ourselves that our abundance came from our freedom and our work ethic and our genius. And yes, we did work hard and built really awesome things, but mostly we happen to be sitting on the largest natural inheritance any human peoples ever stumbled onto, and that fact is still missing from our barbecue conversations.

[00:05:41] The United States has burned more oil and fossil fuels than any country in history, and we measure that in muscle power. A single barrel of oil holds something like five years of human labor, which means we've had hundreds of billions of invisible workers laboring on our behalf. The insidious truth is that over our 250 years, we went from real human slaves to fossil ones.

[00:06:14] The stories of freedom for all and the American dream underneath all the money and the technology was not too indirectly an accident of geology. The cake was always mostly made of oil And it's been one hell of a party, 250 years of engines and lights and growth and shopping and more, almost every year a little more than the year before.

[00:06:45] But a trust fund is not a paycheck. We have been spending down this inheritance, drawing down Earth's resources and filling up its sinks, and calling it income. We've found and burned most of the oil, the milkshake that has been fueling our nation, increasingly using technology to widen the straw to suck up more and more faster and faster, and we're happy because we still have plenty to drink, but now quite a bit closer to that slurping sound.

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[00:07:24] The enabling factor that's allowed us to never grow up is built into the oldest American story that there is. We were raised on the frontier, driven by the story of manifest destiny, always more room over the next hill, somewhere new to grow when the first place got used up. Westward expansion, then the suburbs, then credit, turbo boost, then the internet, then large language models, and now Mars.

[00:07:58] A people who always had one more frontier have never had to face real limits, and thus maybe never had to grow up. But every party that runs all night has that one moment, very late, when the music is still going and the drinks are still flowing, and you notice the light in the windows has turned gray.

[00:08:24] Morning is coming, and the costs of the night before become apparent. The first thing you see in that gray light is something you can never quite make out when you're the drunkest at the party. The other guests, our neighbors, other citizens, the living world beyond and within our cities and towns. We're not the only ones at this party or in the yard outside.

[00:08:54] We just happen to be the ones who think it's for us. So how is the rest of life doing while we celebrate? There is now a long, careful count of the world's wildlife populations, and the global number is grim, down about seventy-five percent since 1970. Across the whole planet, wild populations have fallen by nearly three-quarters in a single human lifetime, and even that number is now five years old.

[00:09:26] That is the fastest emptying of the living world since the last great extinction, the one that took out the dinosaurs. The bison we nearly erased, the passenger pigeons we finished off, those were merely the loud, early casualties. The quieter ones are still going. The insects disappearing, the birds going silent field by field, the world getting lonelier in a way most of us never look up long enough to notice.

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[00:10:02] So underneath this birthday is a harder truth. Everything on our table was drawn from theirs. The cake made of oil, the fire hose of ancient sunlight, the steady climb of more stuff every year, all of it came out of the same living world that is now paying for our party. The other guests and their descendants are the ones picking up the tab.

[00:10:30] We keep score in GDP, but if you strip that word all the way down, it mostly measures how fast we turn the living world into stuff, and then the stuff into smoke and landfill. And we mostly can't see it because we can barely even see past the next quarter, the next election, or even the next 30 seconds of our scrolling.

[00:10:58] The Haudenosaunee, to give one historical example on this same land, made their decisions about how they would land seven generations out. We keep telling ourselves the oldest organizing story in the USA, the self-made individual who needs nobody, when the objective truth is we are the most interdependent creatures that have ever lived, woven into a living world that asks nothing of us and gets taken for granted. We mistook being independent for being grown up, but they were never the same thing.

[00:11:40] Human children on their own connect with nature and float leaves downstream and collect multicolored pebbles and stare with wonder at fish in a lake and such. We've taught, or, our culture has taught our children to ask how to get more. But there's a question modern children in the USA very rarely ask.

[00:12:07] We have to grow up before a different question even occurs to us, not how do I get more, but what is it all for? And underneath all this, it's the question we are most afraid of, the one that belongs to every guest at the table. What are people actually for? An adult is someone who can finally see past themselves to the others at the table and seriously think about these questions, and we have

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been too busy, too distracted, too satiated for two hundred and fifty years to sit still and seriously ask.

[00:12:50] So that's the part of you from some of the other guests' side of the table, the best of times for one species, or at least some percentage of that species, and the worst of times for almost all the rest. Now let me come home to my own country on its birthday, because in this one aspect, the USA has something to be genuinely proud of.

[00:13:13] Remember that global number, wildlife population's down seventy-three percent. Here in North America, they're down only thirty-nine percent. It's still a grave injury, but about half the loss the rest of the world has taken. Some of that is luck, and lower population density, but a lot of it was our choice, our collective choice.

[00:13:35] We set aside more wild country than almost any nation on Earth. Yellowstone was the first national park anywhere before any other country thought to even do such a thing. There's of course an asterisk on this recent data because we did much of our killing early before anyone was counting. But the living land we still have, the relatively intact, still-breathing country of functioning ecosystems is real.

[00:14:05] And of all the loud arrivals at life's party, this one, at its best, had the surplus and the sense to leave some room for the other guest. That's something we should be proud of, and it's a category of greatness the cake and fireworks version in our media rarely points out. It's not the only one. This is a country that has torn up its own origin story and written a fairer one before.

[00:14:34] We've wrestled with our relationship to slavery. We built something decent out of the wreckage of the Great Depression. For a century, for all our blind spots and the people we left out, we led the world forward in civic ideals

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and in the slow but imperfect experiment of people governing themselves. That capacity to grow and change to meet the current circumstances has not gone away.

[00:15:02] At least I hope it hasn't. But the changes ahead are going to be large. By any honest reckoning, our reach has now exceeded our grip, and the conflicts we're tangled now in Asia are at their core fights over energy, and are the kind that can turn existentially dangerous very quickly. We are the richest nation that has ever lived, and we have run up a debt approaching \$40 trillion, which is around 300K per US household.

[00:15:38] And such debt, underneath its nominal measurement in dollars, is ultimately just a claim on future energy, materials, and living systems. So a promise to take even more from the other guests later. If you've followed this channel, you likely have surmised that those promises will never be kept because the cheap energy, and things that would have paid them won't be there to burn.

[00:16:07] We don't get to grow our way out this time. So what would a grownup version of this country look like? Not in detail, of course, just a directional sense. We might start to value and respect wisdom as we do cleverness, and yet we're about to hand over the keys to our cleverest machines without ever having learned the difference.

[00:16:34] It might understand the ancient trap in our minds that the wanting always feels stronger than the having, and that the moment you see the wanting clearly is the moment it starts to loosen its grip. Then you notice that you already have most of what you were actually chasing. We might recall that once the basics are covered, the best things in life were never the materially expensive ones.

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[00:17:04] They're the real conversations and work that matters and a walk in a country that's still wild and intact and people who know and care about you and the like. A grownup version of this country might run more on reciprocity than transactions, giving back as much as it takes from each other and from the land and from the other guests at the table. It would be fully awake, paying attention to what's real and what's coming and what matters.

[00:17:44] None of that, of course, is going to be an easy path, and it is certainly not guaranteed. Empires do end, and most never see it coming. There's no law of physics that says this one reaches 260 years. And we probably don't get to choose our way out. The age of more is ending whether we want it to or not. But what we still get to choose is how we respond, and it could get ugly, every group for itself clawing to keep the old party going for a few years more, or it could be the start of actually growing up. And I think we see the seeds of that already in the ground, in families, in neighborhoods, in towns all over the USA, people relearning how to grow some food, how to fix what breaks, how to lean on the folks next door.

[00:18:41] A new country, in my opinion, comes from those places, not from Washington, D.C., from the neighborhood. I think the next American greatness was never going to be based on more. More was the former greatness, and it's had its century. The grown-up path to greatness, the one that's still on the table, is to be the first big nation to instill wisdom over cleverness, to make a good life on what the sun and the wind and the land actually give, to share the table on purpose, and to show the rest of the family that a great country can, in fact, grow up.

[00:19:27] Contrary to the story we might be told, that's actually a far greater dream than our founding one was. So this weekend, when the skies light up, I invite you to join me in a different kind of celebration. Honor the two hundred and

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fifty years, honor everything good that we made, and the beautiful living land we are blessed to still have, and the other guests we still have room for.

[00:19:53] And maybe feel the gratitude that we too often neglect. And then, when the last firework fades and the smoke is drifting off from the field, notice that light in the windows that has started to turn gray. Blow out the birthday candles, get some sleep, and perhaps some dreams, because there is good and important work waiting in the dawn, and it starts on your own street, paving a path to create a new American way.