

July 16, 2017; New Insight from Visit to U.S. mainland

On June 1st, my family departed Guam for a month-long trip to the U.S. mainland. This was my longest stateside visit in 33 years. Our travels took us to Washington D.C., Virginia, Maine, and Oregon. Because this trip was longer than usual, we were able to set a more relaxed pace. As a result, I soon began to make observations that I had missed in past, shorter stateside trips. Four observations in particular stand out in my mind.

First and foremost was the growing racial diversity in America. Our first stop was Manassas, Virginia, to visit with two of my sisters. Thirty years ago their neighborhood was predominately white. Today, many of their neighbors are Hispanic. Northern Virginia and Washington D.C. have become an ethnic melting pot. Wherever we went, I was amazed at the shift in the racial make-up of the residents, workers, and visitors alike. Even in Maine, a traditional bastion of white America, ethnic diversity is on the rise. At two of our hotels, *all* the workers were originally from Jamaica.

Over the past 50 years, almost 59 million immigrants have made America their home. Today, 14% of Americans were born in another country, compared to just 5% in 1965. By the year 2055, non-Hispanic whites will lose their majority status, and for the first time in our history, the U.S. will not have a racial or ethnic majority.

Although events over the last few years have highlighted the lingering racial tensions in the U.S., I was encouraged by the obvious signs that racial barriers are slowly breaking down. I noted a growing number of inter-racial relationships and families. Also, social gatherings in restaurants, and other entertainment venues, frequently included racially diverse friends and acquaintances, especially among the younger generations. All in all, I felt optimistic that the U.S. will meet the challenges brought about by growing racial diversity.

In contrast, after a month in the States, I felt pessimistic about Americans' overall physical wellbeing. To be blunt, I was blown away by how many Americans are overweight – significantly more than there were 35 years ago. This observation began immediately upon entering the plane. Numerous passengers were bulging over the armrest, invading their neighbor's space. While shopping and touring in all the places we visited, I saw a staggering number of obese people, sometimes including all members of a family. This dangerous health risk, that can result in higher incidents of diabetes and heart disease, plagues young and old alike.

Again, statistics support my observations. In 1980, about 19% of American children were either obese or overweight. Today, nearly 30% of children under the age of 20 fall into this category. The statistics for adults are much worse. In 1984, 50% of adult males and 32% of adult women were either overweight or obese. By 2014, these numbers had increased to 72% and 62%, respectively. With meal

portions increasing and the popular definition of what constitutes obesity wavering, there is little reason to believe that this disturbing trend is going to be reversed any time soon.

Another of my observations was based on my sense of smell rather than my sense of sight. My nose led me to the conclusion that the incidence of marijuana usage is definitely on the rise in the States. I note that I made these observations primarily in Washington D.C. and Oregon. Both of these locales legalized recreational marijuana in 2014. Although users aren't supposed to smoke in public, numerous individuals were smoking in plain sight. Not since the 1970's had I witnessed so many people openly indulging. For reasons I can't quite identify, the growing trend toward the legalization of marijuana makes me nervous.

Finally, as we flew from Portland, Maine to Portland, Oregon, I was struck by the sheer size of the U.S. For over five hours we crossed rivers, plains, mountains and deserts. Small towns and massive cities, separated by vast swaths of land, dotted the passing landscape.

Obviously, the nation's borders haven't expanded but my perception of its size has drastically changed. No doubt this is due to the fact that I've lived on a 28 by 8 mile island for 40 years. I consider a drive from Yigo to Merizo a long commute. I don't think about Guam's relative small size until I venture off island.

Guam's small population and size present unique political problems for the island as we attempt to have our voices heard. Through the gracious assistance of Del. Madeleine Bordallo, we toured the White House and the Capitol while visiting Washington D.C. I could sense the push and pull of political wrangling with every step of our tour. I have a new appreciation for the political realities facing Guam politicians who attempt to raise our needs and concerns to the President and Congress. The roar emitted by the other 330 million Americans easily drowns out Guam's mere 175 thousand voices. And the needs of our 210 square mile island are often undermined by the clout of 50 states that together stretch 3,000 miles from the Pacific to the Atlantic oceans.

Traveling is always entertaining and educational. This most recent trip taught me that travel also impacts perceptions and, over time, provides a better perspective on national changes and trends. As a result, I'm already looking forward to my next trip.