Marius Renn
My America 2006
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America - The Big Picture

I was no newcomer to America: I had traveled abroad from Germany many times before. People over here called me a "USA-addict", and they were right: I was in love with the country that provided me with endless roads of adventure, beautiful landscapes, and all-you-can-eat buffets.

However, as the years went by the world changed quickly, and while I had concluded my last visit to the States on top of the World Trade Center, I knew that my America would be a different one this time around.

My hopes were high, but it was difficult to maintain a positive attitude towards a country, when all news that reaches you from it is negative: War, torture, pollution and corruption, which were once attributed to all of the countries America opposed, now seemed to be coming directly from it. It was disturbing, but I told myself that America is more than just its policies, and tried to keep my image of the country upright.

So when I got accepted for an internship at Google in Mountain View, California, I once again felt like a newcomer to the States, eager and hopeful to find that the news, that had alienated us all from the former role-model, was not giving us the entire picture.

And so it was. I didn't even have to reach the country to fall in love with it again. The Americans on my (heavily delayed) flight were so cheerful, open and friendly, that I was immediately reminded of why this country impressed me so much. Not because of its government and policies, but because of the people. I have traveled to dozens of countries in my life, but nowhere have I met as many inspiring people as in the USA. Could this be the reason for its success in the world? It wouldn't surprise me. My colleagues at Google were extremely ambitious and smart, without being arrogant in any way. It made a great impression on me. In Germany people seem to have a problem believing in themselves, perhaps a left-over of our horrible history. We always seem to settle for less, and our goals are always kept small. I have never heard one of my German supervisors at work say: "We want to be number one!" But at Google I was taught to think big. It was so refreshing to have Americans share visions with you, that a German would immediately put off as too difficult or naive. If I could take home anything, I told myself, it would be the inspiration Americans gave me.

I was eager to meet new friends, and wondered how I would get along with them. Through my work and free-time activities I got the chance to meet a large number of Americans my age. It was a unique experience, as many of them were not at all what I had expected. Actually, I don't remember what picture of the "typical American" I had

in mind, but I do know that it was completely wrong, as I was constantly surprised when I met a new face. Asian, African or Mexican I guessed, but I was usually corrected, "I'm American!", and was given that look when you seem to be blind to the obvious. I have always felt comfortable in an international environment, and America, as the big salad-bowl of the world truly lives up to its name. The young people I met were inspiring, friendly and open. I felt immediately accepted. Sometimes we would indulge into long discussions, and I was amazed of how smart and interested everyone was. Even when rather tough subjects, like America's role in the world or the war in Iraq came up, I found the American youth to be thoughtful, reflective and honest. Not at all the self-righteous image the foreign media likes to make us believe.

Unfortunately I was shocked at how little trust America's older generation put in their young. It seemed that everything that young people could do was forbidden or frowned upon. Even going to a party felt like doing something illegal. I don't know why Americans are so paranoid about the younger generation, especially because I believe the restrictiveness is back-firing: I noticed that a lot of the people my age and younger showed a lack of responsibility, and I experienced large amounts of vandalism, heavy drinking and what felt like a war against the police. However, it didn't surprise me much: How can anyone learn to take responsibility, when everything that requires it is forbidden? This zero-tolerance attitude has led the American youth into a viscous circle, that is now nearly impossible to break. Even I, being 26 years old, was sometimes treated in such a way that I felt like a criminal having to defend himself. It was a frustrating and deeply unsettling experience.

But even these type of things, which were difficult for us foreigners to accept, were compensated by the open ears of our American friends. At one time, when I was having a difficult time understanding things, a friend told me: "I know that some of these things must be shocking to you, and America does have a lot of problems. But when you look at the country as a whole, you might see why it is so great."

And you know what? He was absolutely right. Compared to Europe, America may seem to be in a constant state of chaos. But in this chaos lies America's essence: Its liveliness, its craziness and its greatness.

So now, when I switch on the news, and see another one of those shocking reports from overseas, I lean back and relax. And while a friend may cry out: "My God, that country is crazy!", I nod and smile a bit, thinking: "I know, and that is why I love it."