



## Voice of Democracy Essay 1st Place Winner (2019-20) Jessica Schlaudt

### “What Makes America Great”

**America is a safe haven in the turbulent world, and the world knows it.** When immigrants or refugees speak of beginning a new life, “We’re going to America,” they always say. It’s never to Russia, never to the UK, never to Switzerland; it is to America—always America. Thousands from every country in the world pour into our nation each year; victims of famine, war, revolution, unjust social laws, dictators, or Communism, they flee to the one place on earth they know they will be safe: the United States. They know America is stable and thriving; but why is that? What is it that has made us great, so different from any other country? Is it our invincible army? Is it our thriving economy? Is it our premier education system or simply our tourist attractions? In a way, it is all of those things; but not any one individually, because they are all inextricably connected and enabled by a common thread. And it is that thread we must trace to get to the heart of the mystery. What is it? It is freedom.

It is strange, but it seems that those who have the best grasp on this concept are not even American-born: the thousands fleeing to our shores understand the truth of America’s greatness better than we do ourselves. We look at our nation and see our thriving cities, our industries, our economy, and we think this is why we are great. But it is not. We look at our sleek modern schools, our hundreds of colleges, our herds of professors and PhDs, and we think that therein lies the secret. But it does not. We look at our strong army, our dedicated police force, our elite secret agencies, our tight national security—we look at everything around us and credit America’s greatness to it all. But it’s as if we’re too caught up in looking at the leaves and branches to notice the tree trunk, without which the leaves and branches would not exist. The thing that feeds and makes possible our industries, our defense system, our just laws, our thriving economy—everything we are as a nation—is freedom. Pure and simple.

Just as an ordinary tree needs roots to support its trunk and boughs, so the liberty tree must have roots to keep it standing, and many different things play this role in their unique ways. Our founding fathers began it by pinning down the elusive paradox of true freedom: that being limited by law is the surest way to being unlimited in prospects. Without their exceptional grasp of this concept, our Constitution, the envy of the governments of the world, would not exist. And without our Constitution, which keeps the power of the government limited and distributed equally, our freedoms to pursue life, liberty, and happiness would not exist; for as President Woodrow Wilson said, “The history of liberty is a history of the limitation of

governmental power, not the increase of it.” The government our Constitution created is designed to protect the people, to give them freedom to pursue their own enterprises. While the Constitution defends us from internal invasion, our armed forces defend us from external invasion. And they, perhaps, are the most responsible for our present state: for without the courage and devotion of our military, America would have been long swallowed up by grasping tyrants and our precious freedoms would have been lost. We should never underestimate the sacrifice of our soldiers and veterans nor forget to thank them for it. They are the taproot of the liberty tree, and inestimable part of what has made America great.

It is the attractive shade under this liberty tree that draws millions to our nation. They flee to us from other countries—countries that might be called great in their own way. But in each one, something is lacking that is present in America. Russia is a great power, great in force and military might, but why isn’t it thriving in the same way America is? China is great in its way: it dominates the world trade economy by a large margin, but it too falls short of America. Hitler’s Nazi Germany was great in its strength and patriotism, but what became of it? It fell—to the free world. Freedom is the other half of the meaning of greatness in a nation. And without it, that other half is either useless or perverted. Many empires and countries of the past have been great, but until America, none of them reached the full potential of their greatness because they refused their people freedom, too eager for power and too blind to see their error. But the people can do incredible things for their nation if they are left free to do them.

America is great because she is rooted in freedom, a freedom which allows growth and prosperity unprecedented in world history. Freedom is the heart of America and her citizens; it is what stimulates patriotism and attracts millions to our land. Whether it be freedom to work in the vocation of our choosing, freedom to vote for whatever candidate we deem worthy, freedom to travel, or freedom to speak and print our own opinions, we don’t realize just how great our freedom is, or how great it has made our nation. Without it, we would be trapped in yet another failing, corrupt system of power that suppresses the people and stifles growth. We have the freedom to live our lives to the fullest—and a responsibility to do so for the good of our nation and fellow citizens. This is why America is great; for where the people are free is the greatest place on earth.