

Why the U.S. is Not the Best Country in the World

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An article of faith in contemporary American politics is that America is the greatest nation in the world. No politician would dispute it, and pundits on the left and right subscribe. For instance, in a 2002 debate on terrorism, William Bennett claimed “We have done more good for more people than any country in the history of the world.” His opponent in the debate, Noam Chomsky, agreed, stating that, “I... live in what I think is the greatest country in the world.”¹ When thinkers as far apart on the political spectrum as Bennett and Chomsky agree, one might suppose that only fools dare to question. Nevertheless, it might be useful to take seriously the cant that we’re #1, and put it to the test. If the U.S. really is the best country in the world, then we ought to be able to prove it. Once we have established that the data shows the U.S. to be the world’s best, our proven credentials can only help promote American objectives and foreign policy. If the data show otherwise, then that is a surprise worth pondering.

Subjective and Objective

To figure out which country is the best, we need to develop a list of criteria or standards to examine. Some potential yardsticks are purely subjective and are therefore of no help in coming up with an objective assessment; we must eliminate those right from the start. There are two sorts of subjective criteria that can bear on which country is most preferable for you.

One subjective matter is your personal tastes. If abbey-style beer plays a big role in your life, then that might tip the balance towards Belgium. If you are a phanatical Phillies phan, then Major League Baseball might be a sufficient draw for the United States. Sun worshippers will prefer countries famed for beaches and a warm climate; skiers might opt for Alpine nations, etc. The other subjective issue is one’s personal situation. If you are a plutocrat, oligarch, or robber baron, you won’t need a country with a strong social safety net and you won’t want their high taxes. If you are impoverished or have serious health problems, then a nation with guaranteed health care and a pension plan will be the ticket. Likewise one’s talents will be a factor; monolingual anglophones are liable to find the U.S., Britain, Ireland, Australia, and New Zealand particularly attractive.

Subjective preferences such as one’s tastes and personal situation must be set aside; otherwise the variables will be far too idiosyncratic to reach any conclusions about the best country to live in. Instead, we must examine what the situation is for the *statistically average* citizen of a country. Furthermore, we need to look at *objective* criteria in evaluating nations—criteria that

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nearly all rational persons would agree are desiderata that a good nation should satisfy. Ultimately what we want is a fairly general list of basic goods that is neutral about any specific form of government, economic structure or specific law. Thomas Jefferson once proposed such a list, declaring it to be self-evident that these are inalienable rights: “Life, Liberty and the pur-

suit of Happiness [and] that to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.” In the Jeffersonian spirit, I propose the following as objective criteria for evaluating nations; these are things that nearly all rational persons would want to maximize.

- Freedom
- Literacy
- Health
- Happiness of citizens
- Standard of living

We shouldn’t expect any nation to be #1 in all of these categories, or, at least, it would be a great surprise. Instead we should look at various means of assessing these different criteria and see which nations consistently appear at the top of the lists. In this way we can triangulate the truth about which country is objectively the best.

With which criteria shall we begin? Jefferson wrote in a letter of 1816, “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be... where the press is free and every man able to read, all is safe.” Following his lead, the first two criteria we will consider are freedom and literacy. These will be used as weed-out standards; that is, a country needs to be tops in freedom and literacy to stay in the running at all. As we will see, this approach narrows things down rather precipitously.

Freedom

Freedom in the present context might plausibly be construed as “the ability to achieve one’s preferences.” In other words, the more you get to do what you want, the freer you are. Obviously, all societies have to limit the freedom of their citizens; being free to steal and kill is not a virtue, of a person or a nation. When freedom is justly abrogated is a complex issue. One suggestion has been that governments may limit the behavior of their citizens on the grounds that prohibiting some forms of free behavior will maximize the overall freedom of the citizenry. Another well-known proposal is that hindering liberty is justified in order to prevent harm to others. Paternalists are ready to limit free choice to prevent harm to oneself; others want limitations to prevent offense to others. It is too big an issue to address here. But let’s say that, *ceteris paribus*, having more freedom is better than having less.

With each of the criteria, the first thing we need to do is to figure out how it might be assessed. One initial stab at measuring freedom would be to examine how much of its population a country imprisons. The more citizens behind bars for exercising their preferences, the less the citizens are able to do what they want, and so the less free they are. Under this measurement the United States fares rather badly, as the U.S. imprisons a higher percentage of its citizens than any country in the world (702 prisoners per 100,000 citizens), and while the U.S. has 5 percent of the world’s population, it has about 25 percent of the world’s prisoners. This extremely counterintuitive result, that the U.S. is less free than all the dictatorships, juntas, and theocracies in the world, suggests that measuring freedom by prison population is somehow skewed. And it is—according to the Federal Bureau of Prisons, 54.7 percent of sentenced prisoners are drug offenders (2002 data).² In other words, U.S. citizens are seriously unfree when it comes to pursuing their drug use preferences, but that may not show very much about other freedoms or even freedom in general. So another measure besides just prison statistics is needed.

Freedom House, a nonpartisan think-tank, ranks countries according to their level of freedom. Using standards intended to conform to the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights, their methodology is to conduct an annual survey “which includes both analytical reports and numerical ratings of countries and select territories, measures freedom by assessing two broad categories: political rights and civil liberties. Political rights enable people to participate freely in the political process. This includes the right to vote and compete for public office and to elect representatives who have a decisive vote on public policies. Civil liberties include the

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freedom to develop opinions, institutions, and personal autonomy without interference from the state.” Each country is assigned a rating for political rights and a rating for civil liberties based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest degree of freedom present and seven the lowest level of freedom. Thus most free countries in the world have a rating of 1/1.

I propose that a necessary condition for being the best country in the world is a 1/1 rating in each of the surveys of the past five years.³ Looking at data from the past few years is important because one wants freedom to be stable—you’d hate to move to a free country only to find that freedom diminishing when the political winds shift. Achieving the top rating for five years is quite a strict standard; no country in Asia, Africa, or South America could meet it, nor could Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the U.K. Countries that were close nearly always failed with respect to civil liberties; somewhat of a cautionary tale. Here are the countries that meet the 1/1 criterion in every survey from 1999 to 2004, alphabetically ordered.

Andorra, Australia, Austria, Bahamas, Barbados, Canada, Cyprus, Denmark, Dominica, Finland, Iceland, Ireland, Kiribati, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Malta, Marshall Islands, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, San Marino, Sweden, Switzerland, Tuvalu, United States. Progress is being made: we’ve narrowed down the best country in the world to 1 of 26.

Literacy

As Jefferson noted, an important component of the good life is some level of education. Education not only enables people to understand the world around them, but also increases their liberty insofar as education frees people from the shackles of superstition and promotes an informed electorate. Certainly the minimum way to measure education is by literacy; one might want finer-grained measures like numeracy or percentage of terminal degrees, but literacy is a good place to start. In the Human Development Report of 2004, the United Nations ranks countries by literacy.⁴ The top tier is those countries with a 99 percent or greater rate of literacy. A further necessary condition for being the best country in the world is being in that tier. Here are the top ranked literate countries that also made the previous list of free countries, in alphabetical order: Australia, Austria, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Ireland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States.

Now we’re getting somewhere. Down to 14 countries! No lexical ordering yet, but there are still three criteria to go. One noteworthy point has emerged already: those who think that

America is the root of all evil will find little solace here—no nation is more free or literate than the United States.

Health

The next criterion to consider is the health of the citizens. An obvious place to look is the life expectancy statistics. However, *healthy* life expectancy is a better measure than mere life expectancy, since it also includes an adjustment for time spent living in poor health. The best country in the world should have not only long-lived citizens, but also relatively healthy citizens. According to the World Health Organization's most recent data, here is the ordering and years in full health that a newborn child can expect to live in our 14 countries:⁵ Sweden 73.3, Switzerland 73.2, Iceland 72.8, Australia 72.6, Norway 72.0, Canada 72.0, Luxembourg 71.5, Austria 71.4, Netherlands 71.2, Finland 71.1, New Zealand 70.8, Ireland 69.8, Denmark 69.8, United States 69.3.

There are many possible reasons why the United States is at the bottom of the charts: perhaps we are a very violent society, or maybe the availability and quality of health care is poor, or we might just be a nation of couch potatoes. Surely the best nation in the world should have first-rate health care and relatively low levels of violence. The popularity of dangerous habits is a different matter though—a nation might be the world's best even if its citizens are addicted to nicotine, cheeseburgers, and TV. Let's look first at the violent death statistics. Violent deaths per 100,000 deaths:⁶ Norway 1.0, Netherlands 1.7, Austria 1.7, New Zealand 2.0, Australia 2.1, Luxembourg 2.2, Ireland 2.5, Iceland 2.6, Canada 2.7, Sweden 4.6, Finland 5.1, Denmark 5.5, Switzerland 7.1, United States 7.9.

Again the United States is at the bottom, eight times as violent as peaceful Norway. But what about health care? The United States might still be the best place to get patched up after a drive-by. A natural place to look is the infant mortality statistics. Presumably babies don't yet have the bad habits of their parents and are less likely to be involved in violence, so their average health ought to be more directly tied to the availability and quality of pre- and post-natal health care. According to the CIA World Factbook (2004 data), here are the number of babies per 1000 live births that fail to survive one year for each of our 14 finalists.⁷ Sweden 2.77; Iceland 3.31; Finland 3.59; Norway 3.73; Switzerland 4.43; Denmark 4.63; Austria 4.68; Australia 4.76; Canada 4.82; Luxembourg 4.88; Netherlands 5.11; Ireland 5.50; New Zealand 5.96; United States 6.63.

Again, the United States is rock bottom. The Swedes live in full health four years longer than we do, and their infant mortality rates are close to two and a half times better than ours. In fact, a Scandinavian country tops all three measures. As Christopher Murray, Director of WHO's Global Programme on Evidence for Health Policy, states, "Basically, you die earlier and spend more

time disabled if you're an American rather than a member of most other advanced countries."⁸ But the show's not over. It could be that, though healthy, people in those countries are an impoverished and suicidal bunch of depressed alcoholics. Let us turn, then, to our next criterion: the overall happiness of the citizens.

Happiness

How might one measure happiness? Probably the best approach is to look at a few different ways to evaluate happiness and see whether the same countries keep rising to the top. One measure is polling. How happy do people say that they are? This should not be viewed as dispositive, though, since it could be that people are happier than they think, or perhaps less happy than they think—their own self-awareness may not be perfect. One objective indicator to look at is the suicide rate. If the citizens are killing themselves with some frequency, then that is evidence that there is a good bit of unhappiness in that society. Another possible measure is alcohol consumption. The idea here is that if there is a lot of drinking among the citizens, then that might belie a pervasive unhappiness that alcohol is being used to address. This approach is complicated by the fact that in Moslem countries alcohol is banned or suppressed, whereas in other countries such as Russia, France, Germany, and Ireland there are national traditions of festive drinking. So alcohol consumption alone is not a definitive guide to happiness—but it ought to count for something.

The first measure to look at is how happy the residents of our 14 countries claim that they are. Ruut Veenhoven at Erasmus University Rotterdam has compiled The World Database of Happiness, part of which ranks nations on the basis of happiness surveys. Averaged over a decade of surveys, here is how people rank their happiness-as-a-whole on a scale of 0–10.⁹ Denmark 8.0, Switzerland 8.0, Iceland 7.8, Ireland 7.8, Canada 7.6, Luxembourg 7.6, Netherlands 7.6, Finland 7.5, Sweden 7.5, New Zealand 7.4, Norway 7.4, United States 7.4, Australia 7.3, Austria 7.0.

Again, a Scandinavian country is at the top here—Denmark, and Nordic Iceland is not far behind. Once again the United States is near the bottom, able to beat out only Australia and Austria. What about other measures of happiness?

Let us turn next to the suicide rates. Here is the number of citizens per 100,000 that kill themselves each year (2003 WHO data).¹⁰ Netherlands 19.3, United States 21.7, Ireland 22.7, Iceland 24.3, Canada 24.6, Australia 26.3, Norway 26.3, Sweden 27.7, Denmark 29.0, New Zealand 30.6, Luxembourg 34.6, Switzerland 36.5, Austria 37.1, Finland 45.5.

The Finns are coming up the big loser on this rating, killing themselves at more than twice the rate of the Dutch, Americans, and Irish. The Scandinavian countries are in middle of the pack, and the US, finally excelling at something, is close to the top. Although we Americans apparently don't consider ourselves

terribly happy, we also don't kill ourselves over it either. But do we drink to assuage our sorrows instead? Here are the alcohol consumption rankings, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.¹¹ The numbers are liters of pure alcohol per adult (15 years+) consumed annually. Norway 5.9, Iceland 6.1, Sweden 6.9, Canada 7.8, United States 8.3, New Zealand 9.2, Finland 9.2, Australia 9.9, Netherlands 10.0, Switzerland 10.8, Denmark 11.2, Austria 11.3, Ireland 14.3, Luxembourg 14.9.

The wealthy Luxembourgers (see the next criterion) are the biggest booze hounds, with the land of Guinness close behind. Surprisingly, snowy countries with long dark winters near the Arctic Circle drink the *least*. The United States fares decently on this measure, coming in 5th, right behind our northern neighbor.

Standard of Living

The final criterion to examine is standard of living. To be the best country in the world, there needs to be not only freedom, literacy, health and happiness, but there should be a certain amount of wealth as well. In a way, wealth also promotes freedom, insofar as it enables people to achieve more of their preferences, although it will not guarantee political freedom. The relationship between wealth and happiness is more complex—wealthier nations tend to be happier than poor ones, but having more money does not directly translate to more happiness.¹² Standard of living, therefore, is an independent means of ranking countries. According to the UN's Human Development Report 2004, here are the rankings for per capita gross domestic production, adjusted to measure purchasing power parity. The numbers are expressed in terms of U.S. dollars:¹³ Luxembourg \$61,190; Norway \$36,600; Ireland \$36,360; United States \$35,750; Denmark \$30,940; Switzerland \$30,010; Iceland \$29,750; Canada \$29,480; Austria \$29,220; Netherlands \$29,100; Australia \$28,260; Finland \$26,190; Sweden \$26,050; New Zealand \$21,740.

This is a starting place, but mean wealth alone won't settle which country is the economically best choice. The average income in New Zealand is about a third of Luxembourg's, but that doesn't mean that a Kiwi moving to Luxembourg is on the road to riches. Perhaps there is an enormous wealth disparity in Luxembourg, so that a few people have all the wealth and everyone else is a hard-scrabbling peasant. Or perhaps there is little economic mobility in Luxembourg, so that a poor immigrant has little chance of making it big. One factor that will tell us something about wealth disparity is the poverty statistics. If we calculate the poverty line as 50 percent of median adjusted disposable household income within a country, then here is the percentage of the population per country below that line:¹⁴ Iceland n/a, New Zealand n/a, Finland 5.4, Luxembourg 6.0, Norway 6.4, Sweden 6.5, Netherlands 7.3, Austria 8.0,

Denmark 9.2, Switzerland 9.3, Ireland 12.3, Canada 12.8, Australia 14.3, United States 17.0.

These statistics tell us that while people in Sweden and Finland don't make as much money as those in the US, they spread the wealth around a whole lot more. The Norwegians not only make more money than we do, but also make sure everyone gets a cut—their poverty rate is nearly a third of ours.

Now, one might argue that even if Americans are neither the richest nor the most economically egalitarian, America is still the land of opportunity. It is a land of Horatio Alger, where babushka-wearing immigrants disembark at Ellis Island, change their names, open a chain of drycleaners and retire in comfort. Unfortunately, this seems to be a myth. Although comprehensive data is unavailable, recent studies indicate that there is limited intergenerational income mobility in the United States. Economist Alan B. Krueger of Princeton writes, "The data challenge the notion that the United States is an exceptionally mobile society. If the United States stands out in comparison with other countries, it is in having a more static distribution of income across generations with fewer opportunities for advancement...only South Africa and Britain have as little mobility across generations as the United States."¹⁵ Economist Gary Solon specifically notes that Canada, Finland, and Sweden are more economically mobile societies than the United States.¹⁶

In the end, what do all these numbers mean? What do our objective criteria say about the best country in the world? Well, pretty clearly, that country is not the United States. We are not the freest nation in the world; many others are as free as we are. We are not the most literate in the world; many others are as literate as we are. And those are the things at which we excel. When it comes to other standards, we are frequently at the bottom of the charts. When compared with our peers, we are the least healthy and the most violent, with apparently the least effective health care system. We generally consider ourselves less happy (although, oddly, we don't commit suicide more frequently). We're not the wealthiest nation, we have more people living in poverty than every member of our peer group, and our personal economic standing is more closely tied to that of our parents than in other countries.

How shall we give a final ranking? No procedure is immune to criticism; the method I selected treats each of our criteria as equally weighted. I used a two-step Borda Count, which means that each country received points on each statistical measure within the three criteria of health, happiness, and standard of living. The country in the best spot received 13 points and the one in the worst spot got zero. This generated an overall ranking within each criterion. Again each country received between 0–13 points for their standings overall in health, happiness, and standard of living. These points were then combined to give a total. If the same country were the world's best on all three measures,

they would have $13+13+13 = 39$ points. Here is the ranking of the best countries in the world. In order to get a sense of ratios, their Borda scores are also listed: Norway 37; Iceland 35; Sweden 30; Netherlands 27; Australia, Luxembourg, Switzerland 24; Canada, Ireland 23; Denmark 22; Austria, Finland 21; United States 19; New Zealand 16.

Norway: fabled land of marauding Vikings, Asgardian deities, and pickled herring. This is the best country in the world.

If you think that statistics can be made to say anything you like, go right ahead: try to make them say that the United States is the world's best. Parse them anyway you want. The United States came out first on precisely zero measures, and cracked the top half on precious few. It will be quite a challenge.

Why Don'cha Move?

A staple of American politics—left or right, incumbent or challenger—is that the United States of America is the greatest country in the world, if not in all of human history. Domestically our goal is simply to become even stronger than we already are, like Mr. Olympia piling on even more plates at the bench press. Our foreign policy is either metastasis or kindness, depending on your view: to spread our system of government and our culture throughout the world. Other nations secretly long to become Just Like Us and hence we, with our can-do spirit of generosity, will help them to do so. All that remains to debate is the means. A war of liberation? Financial inducements? Economic sanctions? CIA assassinations? Or perhaps we merely set a fine example with the arrows of free market capitalism in one claw and the olive branch of civil liberties in the other. But certainly we don't need to look *abroad* for lessons in self-improvement. A politician who made such a suggestion would be tarred as a UN-loving one-worlder bent on sacrificing our sovereignty, feathered as an America-hating Francophile, and run out of town as fast as Clinton's health plan. Nevertheless, national pride and political intransigence notwithstanding, there are a dozen countries objectively superior to the United States.

That may not be enough of a reason to move, though, "love it or leave it" rhetoric aside. As discussed at the beginning of this article, there may be many idiosyncratic reasons for preferring one country to another, based on one's personal socioeconomic situation, or one's own preferences and tastes. Beyond that, though, much of what makes our lives valuable is subjective—our relationships with others, the presence of our friends and family. The web of our moral obligations is bound up with our children and parents, and in general those whom we love. One's nation—imperfect though it may be—provides a sense of rootedness, a shared history that is our backdrop. It is something that we have in common with all those around us, no matter what our socioeconomic status or political views. Expatriates are never

able to wholly shake off this past; Milan Kundera, a score of years living in Paris, constantly revisits Prague in his writings. To break the bonds that tie us to our country is a substantial and drastic measure, and things must be bad indeed to take that step. For most of us, it would take civil war, famine, or severe political oppression to drive us out. Leaving Kazakhstan or Sierra Leone is one thing, but leaving the United States is quite another.

But what is it that the top-ranked countries do better? While making out cause and effect is of course a long argument, here are some factors that the leading countries have in common with each other but not with the United States.

1. High taxes and the spreading of wealth. Despite all the domestic clamor for even more tax cuts, our taxes are already very low compared with our peer nations. The high taxes of these other nations are clearly used to reduce poverty and provide health care, as the United States was last in every health measure and has the highest levels of poverty. Such taxes needn't be a simple matter of taking from the rich and giving to the poor, though. A country could have a severely progressive tax structure that rewards paying employees over executive hoarding of wealth, for instance. The usual arguments against such taxation—that it will reduce economic incentives and thus make people poorer and less happy—are not borne out by the data. We are not the wealthiest nation despite our low taxes. Moreover, the high taxes in other countries don't seem to make those heavily taxed citizens miserable; their self-reported levels of happiness are uniformly higher than ours. Perhaps instead of lower taxes what we really need are higher taxes.

2. Universal health care and gun control. Every nation that outranks us has universal health care for all their citizens, whereas over 43 million Americans lack health insurance at any given time and thereby have little or no access to health care. The access problem unquestionably contributes to our poor infant mortality rates and weak healthy life expectancy. In addition, the United States is much more violent than our peer nations, with eight times as many violent deaths as world-beater Norway. Are we just a short-tempered, trigger-happy people? Maybe. But it is also the case that all the other countries have more restrictive gun ownership laws than the U.S. Americans feel deep in their bones that liberal gun ownership is the only way to prevent a tyrannical government. Yet a dozen nations have figured out how to keep their citizens from shooting each other without sinking into tyranny. We ought to look into what's worked for them.

3. The role of government. The American experiment is premised on the idea that it is the people, working through their representative government, who are supposed to secure the blessings of liberty for ourselves and our posterity. Yet recent presidents and political leaders have lost confidence in a representative government of the people as a way to create a better society, instead

believing, in Reagan's words, that government itself is the problem. They have abdicated their Constitutional responsibility, outsourcing the functions of government to various ideologies. One such ideology is the faith that unbridled capitalism will solve all our problems, and the poor have only themselves to blame for failing to act in their economist-mandated self interest. This faith is not shared by those countries that outrank us.

The other ideology, one that has received limited critical attention, is religion. Although the United States Constitution makes no mention of God, explicitly placing the power and right to govern in the hands of "the people," the government of every nation besting us (with the possible exception of Ireland) is far more secular than ours. For example, the United States is the only non-theocracy in the world that mentions God on our coinage; we alone insist on a loyalty pledge that declares us be "one nation under God." Indeed, it is clear that it would be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for an agnostic to enter into the White House. Leaders such as the born-again President Bush have great personal confidence in the virtues of faith, and so believe that it is a more preferable solution to American social problems than elected representatives. The very secular Northern European states do not address poverty and other ills through voluntary "faith-based initiatives," hoping that the faithful will step up to the plate. Instead they take seriously the notion—as we once did—that it is the people, working collectively through their government, who shoulder the burden for improving the lot of their fellow citizens. And the statistics show that the approach of Northern Europe is far more effective.

The United States is a great country—one of the greatest in the world. But we are crippled by our own myths. To be sure, all nations have foundational myths and parables about the national character taught to their children. One story that we tell ourselves is that we are the land of opportunity, where hard work alone will achieve success, overcoming, well, all the obstacles of disadvantaged youth. Thus we repudiate the decadent aristocracy of Old Europe. Yet in believing this story, we ignore the fact that there is now more social mobility in Old Europe than in the U.S. We tell ourselves that America is a country where anyone can become fabulously rich, and thus we arrange our society to allow a man to receive \$140 million in severance pay for being fired from a job he has had for a year,¹⁷ while allowing 12 million children to languish in poverty. We tell ourselves that the Almighty has appointed us the guardians of the shining city on the hill, and that all those outside our citadel are either eager to scale the wall to join with us as aspiring new Americans, or barbarians determined to destroy civilization. So we are unable to recognize that other peoples have succeeded in finding good ways to live that are different from our own. In short, we believe our own publicity. Yet by doing so the United States prevents itself from becoming what it claims to be: the best country in the world.¹⁸

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Endnotes

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17. Michael Ovitz, fired from the Disney Company in 1996.
18. Thanks to Neil Manson and Neil Strine for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper. Special thanks to Tim Johnson whose curmudgeonly intransigence was the impetus for this project.