Ella Burch Essay

What makes America great? First, let me say that I like the supposition that America is great. The United States of America is a country that should be proud of its heritage, its accomplishments and its promise, and it is certainly worthy of admiration and devotion. We should not wallow in shame over the mistakes we have made. I wince when I witness the collective lament from well-meaning, but misguided Americans who refuse to see the forest of excellence for the trees of missteps. So, what makes America great?

It isn’t just that we are. It is that we represent. We are a country that was formed from ideals-- representative democracy, republicanism, freedom (for and from, depending on the concept), liberty, equality before the law, opportunity to go as far as your industry and talent allow. Our nation was not formed from expediency. We chose to be—not primarily for power or for money--but for the expression of natural rights. America is founded on ideals that are larger than the words we use to express them. These words inspire us, encourage us and compel us to seek improvement. They ask us to be better than human nature would suggest. We need models of perfection. Our Founding Fathers recognized that people and the governments they form are not perfect, but ideals, by definition, are. Democracy, freedom, justice, opportunity—we turn to them still.

What makes America great? People who are willing to live by these concepts make America great. Democracy is messy. Liberty can disintegrate into license. Rights become infringements upon others’ freedoms. It takes a measure of discipline to live in a land that allows you to think and move and grow almost without impediment. Her people and the people of the world agree that America is a nation and a concept that must be maintained, so we argue and we battle, mostly amongst ourselves, while we protect her essential virtue.

What makes America great? In a word, you. Veterans and active servicemen and service women make America great--people who hold these ideals so dear that they are willing to fight to keep us all able to enjoy them. You even accept the responsibility of making these ideals more possible for people in other lands. I thank you.

When I think of the words that shape America, I think of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States. I learned in civics class that we went from an extremely progressive set of governing principles to a more conservative document. When you think about that happening in a span of eleven years, you would have to say we grew up pretty fast, I guess. But in some ways we are always living our adolescence with each new generation of Americans. We have new circumstances. We are always needing to adapt and to strive for that “more perfect union.” We thank God for that compulsion when we consider, for instance, the abolition of slavery and the expansion of voting rights and other changes embodied in the Constitution and in our hearts. And that is part of what makes America great. We never stop trying to be better. I like that. I don’t want to live in the past or in the future. I want to live in the now, and I want to join others who continue to make our great even better.