

# Why America Is So Great

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Exactly two weeks ago I was at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota when, during tests before surgery, I needed to go from one building to another. I should have had my brain examined at the time.

Mayo Clinic actually sprawls over several city blocks in Rochester and long ago they established these underground walkways between the buildings so the thousands of patients wouldn't have to endure the frigid cold. These tunnels are brightly lit and festooned with gorgeous art, but it was mid-morning and very sunny so I made the brilliant decision it would be quicker to use the outside sidewalk.

I only had to go two blocks and, while I knew it was 10 degrees below zero (minus-10), I had a sweater under what up until then had been a warm coat. Being "manly," I figure I can endure anything for just a moment or two. What the bright sunshine failed to disclose was that there was a very steady 30 mph wind tearing across the two-foot piles of snow on those sidewalks.

So by the time I realized what an error I had made by venturing into a wind chill of 30 degrees below zero (minus-30), my pride kept me from turning back and soon I was in the middle of the most intense weather experience of my life. The relentless wind was a wall of sharp daggers, and,

while I evermore hurried, by the time I stumbled through the door my eyelids would not shut.

This story isn't about frozen eyeballs, but instead what I consider the greatest tribute to this country I can recall in years. You see, approximately 70 miles away from my 30 seconds of agony there is right now a small army of American builders doing what I would swear is nigh impossible.

You will remember that last summer, on Aug. 1 to be exact, we were all horrified when the huge bridge crossing the Mississippi River on I-35W collapsed. There were 13 people killed when the bridge, a steel-truss span some 100 feet above the river, fell into the water below.

Now I-35W is an important artery for Minneapolis, carrying almost 150,000 vehicles every day, and the bridge being out immediately created horrible problems. So up steps a collection of American brilliance who claimed, emphatically, they had enough true grit in their saddle bags to have the whole thing built and done by this Christmas Eve.

As you recall my 30-second embrace with Minnesota's brutal climate, allow me to present some astounding figures. The replacement bridge is 504 feet long and almost 200 feet wide. It is being built out of the highest-strength concrete ever used and, to make certain the huge slabs don't ever crack, they are using steel tension cables inside each of these precast pieces to weave a lock-tight grid.

More precisely, there will be over 1,000 miles of this heavy cable holding the 120 concrete pieces together and each piece weighs about 400,000 pounds. Listen, there are 16,000 tons of rebar in

the project and, if you used to play with Tonka trucks as a kid, consider the fact they'll pour 50,000 cubic yards of concrete before all is said and done.

To give you a better idea, a delicious story in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* tells us that 50,000 cubic yards of concrete would build eight miles of two-lane road. That much rebar weighs more than several Navy submarines and not many NFL quarterbacks can throw a football the width of the bridge, much less not one PGA golf pro who could hit a ball that would carry across the bridge.

The trouble comes when you are reminded concrete doesn't cure, or set, under 40 degrees and, in the two weeks I was just in Minnesota, it was never warmer than 30 degrees. So these Americans have figured a way to make these huge "warming houses" out of plastic and canvas that actually roll along a track.

These "houses," literally the size of a big office building, are then pumped full of heated air by huge blowers and furnaces, which then allows the concrete to cure before they are moved along. I am telling you, the whole project is a stirring tribute to American ingenuity and iron-jawed determination.

One more thing, in order for the admittedly-brilliant joint venture of Flatiron-Manson to get the whole thing done in 15 months, they split the crews in much the same way our railroad once drove a golden spike by starting on both ends of the bridge at the same time with the idea of meeting in the middle.

Keep in mind this meeting will occur 100 feet

in the air, a construction feat that hasn't been done very often, but American engineers, armed with the latest American technology and having been taught by the best universities in the world, which are also in America, are constantly doing surveys, checking and double-checking, and swear they'll come within 1/1,000th of a foot on the final day.

Thus far the only surprise – so help me – is that Flatiron-Manson officials now say they underestimated the labor force and the way they produce in the terrible cold. “People who haven't worked with the Minnesota workers are just amazed,” laughed one engineer in a recent article. “It's just incredible.”

Yes, and the entire project is even more incredible. The total cost of the project is \$234 million, which is high until compared with what Hillary Clinton is spending to become a president, and when you realize what the bridge means to the region, the cost is overwhelmed by the fact that in America the start-to-finish is only 15 months when you toss in the nation's never-failing attitude of “want-to.”

I just adore it, but isn't it funny my eyeballs had to freeze open before I could properly see the scope of what I consider the latest example of why there is no other country on the face of this planet like yours and mine.

This piece was published originally in  
*The Chattanooga*, March 5, 2008



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## *Great Mississippi*

*Born every day at Itasca over  
Saint Anthony Falls*

*She rolls through the heart  
of this country.*

*She rolls through the hearts  
of us all.*

*She's the Great Mississippi.  
She's a winding road,*

*Every turn, every bend  
will bring you back again.*

*For a story told.*

*Words and music by Charlie Maguire,  
National Park Service, 1995*