

# Competitive America<sup>TM</sup>

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## Our Competitors



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## **Our Competitors**

*If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles.*

—Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

Our offshore competitors are “enemies” only in a metaphorical context.

### **Workers**

A woman working in a textile plant in China is not thinking she got a job because an American woman lost hers. She is grateful to have one. She is thinking about making the piece rate, feeding and clothing her children and sending them to school. These are issues concerning workers all over the world. They imply connection instead of competition.

People in every country of the world want the same things we do—opportunities and a better life for themselves and their families. Many live in poverty or at near-poverty levels.

They are equally entitled to seek the rewards of industrialism. People who work hard and study regardless of where they live deserve the chance to upgrade their lives. Half of the world thinks that Americans live like kings and queens. In some ways, they are correct. Chinese visitors to our part of Wisconsin think we live in parks. A visit to China provides insight to this position.

People in other countries have very different cultures and, frequently, very different product requirements. Obviously, they also have different needs, agendas, and interests. It behooves all of us to learn more about the other countries of the world. In fact, surviving in the global economy makes it an imperative. The global economies will eventually drive us to become more cosmopolitan.

It is important to remember Sun Tzu’s warning—know your competitor, know your friends, and know your enemies. It is equally important to fully understand your customers and trade partners. Of greater importance, enterprises must know themselves—what makes them tick and how well they can or should be able to adapt to changing circumstances. It is critical to understand the forces of change from the perspective of both threats and opportunities.

### **Our Competition**

Our competitors are the decision makers in government and industry, neither the workers nor some abstract label like China or India. This takes the focus to the right place. One deadly sin is to underestimate the intelligence and capability of

our competitors simply because they do not speak our language well. Numerous times, executives and managers talk down and simplify their messages to near-childlike quality. Foreign delegations joke about it, often because some members understand English but choose to hide it. Our global competitors are very intelligent, very capable, and know how to use our assumptions against us. That is not being devious; it is being smart—very smart. Any American dealing with business people from other countries should make sure they understand the cultural and social differences. In other words, do their homework. Be assured, representatives from other countries are absolutely doing their research. Most importantly, never underestimate competitors. As a country, we have been doing it for at least two decades.

The second deadly sin is to assume shared agendas. In the white paper on China, it will become clear how divergent agendas can be and how much duplicity is involved. It is remarkable these critical differences are missed or ignored. It is difficult to see the facts when viewed through the dual prisms of greed and opportunism. Both of these are governance issues.

### **Our way of life**

We have been a highly successful and most generous society. Instead of repressing our enemies after World War II, we helped them rebuild, turning them into suppliers and customers. Americans have normally responded very well to disasters in other parts of the world. Following the tsunami in Indonesia, there was a tremendous outpouring of money and goods to victims.

We have the right to fight for the preservation of our way of life. Americans have worked hard to build our country and to obtain the literally unprecedented freedoms that we have. How many countries would allow the type of open criticism we can make of our government? As we will see in the white paper on China, the repression of freedoms continues and boils beneath the surface. For the most part, we ignore this reality and its implications because it interferes with economic opportunities.

Freedom, opportunities, and the quality of life for us, our children, and our grandchildren are in balance. Some elucidation is required on this point. Fundamentalist Islam would take us back to the Dark Ages. Secular law would be repressed, women's rights reversed, and censorship enforced. Basic American freedoms would come to a halt. Iran is an excellent example of this type of civil organization. The Chinese government is also quite capable of brutalizing and repressing its populace.

It is important that we separate the citizens from the government. We have found in our travels that being conscious of the political realities does not have to interfere with thoroughly enjoying the time spent in other cultures, including the diversity found right here in the United States and Canada.

It is worth fighting for our freedoms and economic success. We must look beyond ourselves and provide for a prosperous future. The American dream is still very much alive and very viable. We can make America better by working together to ensure we have a viable and profitable production system.

China holds the greatest risks and opportunities for manufacturers and distributors. While India is competing heavily in the service sector, China is the powerful dragon consuming our industry. To make matters worse, we keep throwing in the fuel.

By Wayne L. Staley  
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