AP Photo/Robert F. Bukaty

Wood stove and antique dealer Rodney Kimball speaks during an interview in May at his shop in West Bethel, Maine. "America is great but it could be a lot better if the politicians weren't fighting all the time like they are now," he said.

AP Photo/Jay Reeves

Musician "Deacon" John Moore holds his guitar in New Orleans in April. At 74, he remembers a time when America was headed in the right direction, when everything seemed to be coming together.

AP Photo/Robin McDowell

Craig House, 32, stands in front of his home in St. Louis in March. He lives with his grandmother in an area with burned-out buildings and abandoned schools not far from a hip, trendy part of town.

AP Photo/Mike Householder

Mike Poling, 58, tends to cows at his farm in Delphos, Ohio, in April. The agriculture consultant and farmer expects good governance and leadership "and nothing less."

AP Photo/Brennan Linsley

Syrian-American poet Amal Kassir recites her work during a gathering where immigrants from hostile environments spoke about their lives at the YWCA in Boulder, Colo., in April.

AP Photo/Teresa Crawford

Kimberly Jung, 29, poses for a photo in Chicago in May. A veteran of the war in Afghanistan, she believes, ".. greatness is a responsibility.

America: 'Whatever greatness I'm capable of comes from being in this place'

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he will "make America great again." Hillary Clinton counters that America "has never stopped being great." But what does that even mean? And who gets to define greatness? A billionaire businessman, a former secretary of state — or an aging musician in New Orleans?

What about the woman in Illinois who served in the U.S. military in Afghanistan?

Or the industrial worker worried about his job in Alabama?

The Associated Press interviewed a wide range of Americans to get a sense of what they think about the nation's greatness in the twilight of President Barack Obama's eight years in office. The responses were as different as Americans themselves, yet a theme emerged: Compared to other nations, the United States is at least good, probably even great. But there's a lot of work to be done.

"Yes, America is great. It could be a lot better if the politicians weren't fighting each other all the time ...," said Rodney Kimball, a 74-year-old stove dealer in West Bethel, Maine. "The government needs to start doing what's right for the people."

A country divided

America is divided by political party, choice of media, income, gender, race or ethnic group, religious faith (or not), generation, geography and general outlook on the country's future. Pundits have proclaimed the electorate angry and wondered if the nation can ever recover the sense of unity experienced in the immediate aftermath of the Al Qaeda attacks that took place 15 years ago this September.

The current dearth of confidence in the nation's politics and government is striking. Recent polling by the AP and the NORC Center for Public Affairs Research shows just 13 percent of Americans are proud of the 2016 election, and 55 percent feel helpless. Only 10 percent have a great deal of confidence in the overall political system, with 4 percent having a great deal of confidence in Congress, 15 percent in the executive branch, and 24 percent in the Supreme Court. Few Americans see either political party as responsive to ordinary voters.

Although their America is still a land of shining seas, spacious skies and majestic mountains, many express a deep sense of disenchantment and uncertainty in their own lives.

"I think that America as an idea is one of the most beautiful ideas that the world has ever known. I think that American opportunity and ingenuity has built some of the most incredible technologies and innovations today," said Allene Swanson, 22, of Chicago. "And still, when I look around, I see a country that seems like it's crumbling. I see people who are hungry and broke and who are struggling a lot."

For some, real success has always seemed out of reach. The old textile mill across town is a reminder, dark and empty because labor was cheaper in Southeast Asia or Latin America; the manufacturing plant on the outskirts of the city uses steel imported from China.

Employment has rebounded since the great recession, but wages are stagnant. Forget saving for a home — millions work more than one job just to keep food on the table and the lights on. What happened to the American dream?

That's what is being asked in places like inner city St. Louis, home to 32-year-old Craig House. He's lives with his grandmother in a sea of burned-out buildings and abandoned schools not far from a hip, trendy part of town.

"America has always been great, just not for me and my people. For us it's been the worst ever," said House, shaking his head as he takes a long drag off his cigarette. "People come from all over the world, Arabs own this, that. Black man don't own nothing."

Known as "Deacon" in his native New Orleans, 74-year-old guitarist John Moore remembers a time when America was headed in the right direction, when everything seemed to be coming together. It was in the 1960s, when black people like Moore were seeing an end to racial segregation; when women were gaining equality; when politicians were taking a stand to end poverty despite the turmoil of protests over the Vietnam War.

"Those were the best years," said Moore, tears welling in his eyes in the living room-turned-recording studio of his shotgun house. "And then they were destroyed right before my very eyes when they assassinated all of our leaders. Robert Kennedy. John Kennedy. Martin Luther King. Malcolm X. All of our leaders. And, you know, that was the end of hope. We had no more hope."

AP Photo/Robin McDowell

High school student Dana Craig, 15, stands at her locker in River Falls, Wis., in May. Craig says America is a great place built on the idea that everyone should get an equal opportunity, a chance.

More unsettling than uplifting

Hope returned, at least for some, in 2008 when a mixed-race lawyer with a foreign-sounding name won the White House. Obama's election seemed to prove that anyone could accomplish anything in America.

Yet the years that followed have seemed more unsettling than uplifting to many. Today, some people want more from their government. Others just want it to go away as much as possible.

"I expect less government, less regulation," said Russ Madson, 45, a steel industry worker looking for better opportunities in Birmingham, Alabama. "Our country was built by people like the Rockefellers, Edison, Henry Ford — pioneers. And today they couldn't do what they did because of regulation."

But others expect more of government. Agriculture consultant and farmer Mike Poling of Delphos, Ohio, expects good governance and leadership "and nothing less."

"That's what got us to this point and that's what made America great," said Poling, 58. "What made America great is its people. That's what built the country. Our forefathers had the foresight to draft the Constitution, the Bill of Rights that has laid the groundwork for (the) nation carrying on for 200 years and continues to guide us."

Yet American greatness isn't just about words scrawled on yellowed paper and kept in a vault at the National Archives. A veteran of the war in Afghanistan, daughter of immigrants from Hong Kong, 29-year-old Kimberly Jung sees it as something deeper, a challenge to every citizen.

"I believe greatness is a responsibility," said Jung, of Chicago. "It's a dual state of mind in which you know your power or you know what resources you have but also your weaknesses. And you harness that set of strengths and weaknesses to work with a group and form a team and do great things."

That striving for the common good is somehow AWOL in America right now, people say.

"If there was one thing I could change about this country it would be to sit here and get us focused back on the country itself and not on our own self-interest," said Poling, the Ohio farmer. "I think we've lost track of what built this country, and that is the fact we came together as a body of one to build it and make it great."

A sprawling country

In a sprawling country of 319 million people, it's easy for most anyone to tuck themselves away in suburbia, the rural heartland, an urban ghetto or a gentrified neighborhood and see only those things outside the front window or just down the street. People can turn on the echo chamber of cable TV or the internet and forget what high school student Dana Craig says America really is: A great place built on the idea that everyone should get an equal opportunity, a chance.

"Throughout history (I am) not sure we did the best job in keeping up with these principles and reaching those goals in the way that we want to, but I think what defines our greatness is our ability to continue working toward these goals even if we are not necessarily perfect in them," said Craig, 15, of River Falls, Wisconsin.

Whether they opt for Trump, Clinton or someone else this November, Americans say the state of the union isn't good enough. Amal Kassir sees her own future caught up with the chance the country has right now to make itself into something better.

Kassir, a 20-year-old college student in Colorado, was born in Denver to a father from Syria and a mother from America. A poet who also works in her family's Middle Eastern restaurant, Kassir describes her own life as being intertwined with that of the United States.

Is America great? Yes, she says. And it's also her best chance.

"No doubt whatever greatness I'm capable of comes from being in this place," she said.

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