Nationalism and Identity

Forewarned is Forearmed

Americans are like children: noisy, curious, unable to keep a secret, not given to subtlety, and prone to misbehave in public. Once one accepts the Americans’ basically adolescent nature, the rest of their culture falls into place, and what at first seemed thoughtless and silly appears charming and energetic.

Visitors may be overwhelmed by the sheer exuberant friendliness of Americans, especially in the central and southern parts of the country. Sit next to an American on an airplane and he will immediately address you by your first name, ask “So – how do you like it in the States?”, explain his recent divorce in intimate detail, invite you home for dinner, offer to lend you money and wrap you in a warm hug on parting.

This does not necessarily mean he will remember your name the next day. Americans are friendly because they just can’t help it; they like to be neighbourly and want to be liked. However, a wise traveller realises that a few happy moments with an American do not translate into a permanent commitment of any kind. Indeed, permanent commitments are what Americans fear the most. This is a nation whose most fundamental social relationship is the casual acquaintance.

How They See Themselves

As befits a nation originally settled by misfits, convicts, adventurers, and religious fanatics (a demographic mix that has changed hardly at all in 400 years), the United States retains a strong flavour of intransigent non-cooperation. Americans are proud to be American – it’s the
best country in the world – but each individual will explain that he, personally, is not like other Americans. He is better. Americans are proud to be different from each other, and from the world. The only visual difference between Americans and other nationalities is that Americans are taller and have straightened teeth.

There’s no such thing as a plain American, anyway. Every American is a hyphenated American. The original ‘melting pot’ has crystallised out into a zillion ethnic splinters: Croatian-Americans, Irish-Americans, Japanese-Americans, Mexican-Americans, and so on. A typical American might introduce him or herself as Patrick Ng, Octavio Rosenberg, or Ilse-Marie Nugumbwele.

“An American will say “I’m Polish” or “I’m Italian” because his great-grandparents were born in Poland or Italy. It doesn’t matter that he speaks not a word of any language besides English and has never been farther east than New York City or farther west than Chicago. He knows how to make kolaches (if he’s Polish) or cannelloni (if he’s Italian), and that’s what counts.

A spirit of rugged individualism pervades virtually every aspect of American life. Americans’ heroes are outlaws, like wild west gunfighter Jesse James, or entrepreneurs, like Sam Walton, founder of the Wal-Mart chain of supermarkets. Their ogres are totalitarians of every stripe, including communists, presidents of major corporations, law officers and politicians. Every American worker has fantasies of one day going into business for himself. Individualism extends even to matters domestic: nearly one-third of American households consist of only one person.

How They See Others

Only 20% of Americans own passports. They don’t need them. An American can travel for a week and still be on home turf. The fact that everyone who lives within 3,000 miles of an American is also an American gives the average citizen a seriously provincial point of view. Because Americans visit foreign countries relatively seldom*, they assume that people all over the world are just like themselves, except for not speaking English or having decent showers.

Some Americans believe that foreigners really do speak English (they study it in school, you know), but refuse to do so out of prejudice. The delusion that ‘they’re just like us except for their language, food, and clothing’ comes from the reality that nearly all Americans descend from foreign immigrants. Thus people in other countries aren’t really aliens, they’re just potential Americans, or rather, potential hyphenated Americans.

Special Friends

Americans have a special relationship with Canadians, with whom they share the world’s longest undefended border. In fact, most Americans aren’t fully aware that Canada is a separate sovereign nation. Canadians look and talk like Americans, and the Toronto Blue Jays won the World Series baseball championship. Any champion baseball team must be from the United States, no matter what its supporters think.

Europe is not very well differentiated in the American mind. American travellers on guided tours happily swing through five countries in seven days, returning home with the vague notion that the Eiffel Tower is somewhere in the neighbourhood of the Tower of Pisa – which, by American standards, it is. The distance from London to Istanbul is less than the distance between Pittsburgh and Phoenix and only two-thirds the mileage from Maine to Miami.

* Canada doesn’t count.
Americans feel sentimental about England. They import much of their decent literature and most of their better television programmes from Britain, and anyone over 50 worships the country that produced the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. There's also the Royal Family element: lacking a domestic equivalent, Americans lap up the latest imported blue-blooded scandals. Royal weddings attract huge American audiences, who sigh at the glorious un-American pomp of it all.

By contrast, the Japanese are distrusted because they are everything the Americans are not: group-oriented, sexist, conformist and ethnically monotonous. The fact that a great many Japanese are richer than they are doesn't bother them at all.

What is more, Americans believe themselves to be the only nation that is truly capable of winning. They are always being called in at the last minute to bail some backwater nation out of the soup. Having God on your side in a fight is good. Having the United States on your side is better. To an American, they're the same thing.

Once the battle is over and negotiations begin, however, Americans change from warriors into wimps. As humourist Will Rogers put it, “America never lost a war and never won a conference in our lives. I believe that we could, without any degree of egotism, single-handedly lick any nation in the world. But we can't confer with Costa Rica and come home with our shirts on.”

The Feel-Good Factor

Winning is important to Americans because it makes them feel good, and good is the American thing to feel. Americans spend thousands of dollars on books, drugs, and various forms of psychotherapy in order to feel good. The most widely prescribed psychiatric drug in the country is an anti-depressant. Americans attend therapy groups, participate in self-discovery retreats, experience ‘primal scream therapy’ and ‘rebirth’, and so forth. (Much of this activity takes place in California, the feel-good state.)

The American reaction to any kind of adversity or crisis is to look at the bright side, whether or not there is one, and if possible accentuate the positive. “If life hands you lemons, make lemonade”, they will chirp as they examine the smashed wreck of their car or the earthquake-ravaged ruin of their house; “I always hated that kitchen.”

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